

Groton Daily Independent

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“IF LAUGHTER
CANNOT SOLVE YOUR
PROBLEMS, IT WILL
DEFINITELY DISSOLVE
YOUR PROBLEMS, SO
THAT YOU CAN THINK
CLEARLY WHAT TO DO
ABOUT THEM.”
-DR. MADAN KATARIA

Tonight on GDILIVE.COM Varsity Volleyball Action Groton Area at Ipswich Around 7:15 p.m.

GDI Subscribers (that's you) have free access to the livestream. The link is on the left hand side of the black bar when you are logged in.



OPEN: Recycling Trailer in Groton

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

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Aberdeen Christian fends off Groton Area

Groton Area's volleyball team suffered its first defeat of the season as Aberdeen Christian posted a 3-0 win over the Tigers.

The first set was tied at one before the Knights took over and cruised to a 25-14 win. Sydney Leicht led the Tigers in that set with three kills while Aspen Johnson had two kills, Madeline Flihs had a kill and a block and Anna Fjeldheim and Elizabeth Flihs each had an ace serve.

The second saw the Knights with a commanding lead in the middle. The set was tied five times at the beginning with the lead changing hands twice. Then Aberdeen Christian went on a run and took an 18-10 lead. Groton battled its way back and tied the game at 22 and taking the lead, 23-22. The game was tied three more times before the Knights pulled off the win in extra points, 27-25. In that set, Johnson had three kills and a block, Fjeldheim had three kills, Madeline Flihs had two ace serves and a block, Leicht had a kill and block and Elizabeth Flihs and Megan Flihs each had a kill.

The third set was close all the way to the end with the game being tied 13 times and the lead changing hands seven times before the Knights won the game, 25-22. Leicht had two kills, a block and two ace serves, Madeline Flihs had two kills, Fjeldheim had two kills and an ace serve and Megan Flihs and Johnson each had a kill.

Groton Area finished with 13 ace serves, 28 kills, 26 sets, 76 digs and three blocks. Aberdeen Christian had 10 ace serves, 36 kills, 29 sets, 47 digs and 10 blocks.

Madeline Flihs led the Tigers in ace serves with four, Johnson led the Tigers in kills with eight, Elizabeth Flihs had all 26 sets and Flihs led the Tigers in blocks with two. Alyssa Thaler had 25 digs while Leicht had 20 and Allyssa Locke had 13.

For the Knights, Grace Kaiser had two ace serves, Mary Fits had 12 kills, Kaylee Block 26 assists, Joy Rohrbach had 14 digs and Mallory Miller had four blocks.

Allied Climate Professionals, Milbrandt Enterprises and Bary Keith at Harr Motors were sponsors for the varsity match on GDILIVE.COM.

Groton Area won the junior varsity match, 25-15 and 25-21. Emma Schinkel had three kills and four ace serves, Lydia Meier had two kills and six ace serves, Carly Guthmiller and Laila Roberts each had three ace serves, Faith Traphagen and Hollie Frost each had three kills, Anna Fjeldheim had a kill and an ace serve and Marlee Tollifson had a kill. Tami and Rich Zimney were the sponsors for the JV match on GDILIVE.COM.

The seventh graders lost to the Knights, 25-23, 25-17 and 15-9.

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Week THREE Soccer Coaches Poll

Boys AA

1. Sioux Falls Jefferson
2. Aberdeen Central
3. Rapid City Stevens
- T4. Sioux Falls Washington
- T4. Yankton

Receiving Votes: SF Lincoln, Spearfish, Brookings, Huron, Pierre T.F. Riggs, RC Central

Girls AA

1. Aberdeen Central
2. Rapid City Stevens
3. Sioux Falls Lincoln
4. Harrisburg
5. Pierre T.F. Riggs

Receiving Votes: RC Central, SF Roosevelt, Brandon Valley, Yankton, Spearfish, O'Gorman

Boys A

1. Sioux Falls Christian
2. Tea Area
3. Belle Fourche
4. St. Thomas More
5. Vermillion

Receiving Votes: James Valley Christian, Hot Springs, Groton Area

Girls A

1. West Central
2. Sioux Falls Christian
3. Tea Area
4. Groton Area
5. Vermillion

Receiving Votes: Dakota Valley, Garretson, St. Thomas More

Zebra Mussels Found In Lake Mitchell

Pierre, S.D. – The South Dakota Department of Game, Fish and Parks (GFP) has confirmed the presence of adult zebra mussels in Lake Mitchell in Davison County.

Lake Mitchell is now considered infested with zebra mussels.

"We received an image of a possible zebra mussel that had been found in Lake Mitchell," said Aquatic Section Chief, John Lott. "We had GFP staff investigate the lake and that was when they confirmed the presence of adult zebra mussels."

"This is another reminder that all boaters and water users need to make sure they are practicing 'clean, drain, dry' every time they are on the water," Lott said.

Clean watercraft and trailers of all aquatic plants and mud.

Drain all water by removing all drains, plugs, bailers, or valves that retain water. Be sure to completely drain your lower unit of any water by lowering completely.

Dry all equipment that has made contact with the water before it's next use.

Completely draining a boat is the first step in making sure invasive species are not transferred to other waters.

For more information on zebra mussels, other aquatic invasive species, and how to properly decontaminate your watercraft, visit sdleastwanted.sd.gov

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Community Events

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

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

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National Gas Price Average Drops on the Week, but Could See Temporary Spikes Following Hurricane Ida

August 30, 2021—The national gas price average decreased by two cents as of Sunday, the cheapest price since early July, but was back up a penny to \$3.15 Monday morning following Hurricane Ida. The storm has left more than one million people in Louisiana and Mississippi without power and likely taken about 13% of U.S. refining capacity offline. There were nine oil refineries in Ida's path; at least four were believed to have shut down operations ahead of the storm.

South Dakota Gas Prices

Today \$3.15 ~ Yesterday \$3.15 ~ Last week \$3.16 ~ Last month \$3.14 ~ Last year \$2.15

"Until the power is restored, it's too early to know the full impact of any damage Ida caused on the oil and gas industry, but motorists regionally can expect price fluctuations leading into Labor Day weekend," said Marilyn Buskohl, AAA spokesperson. "Typically, a category 4 storm could mean three plus weeks before refineries are back to normal operations, while offshore production is more likely to resume this week."

As a precautionary measure, Colonial Pipeline announced on Sunday that they shut down two main lines that run from Houston, TX, to Greensboro, NC. The company added that following an infrastructure inspection after the storm, the pipeline would be back to full service. Gas prices nationally, especially in the southeast and east coast, will see minimal impact at the pump if the pipeline is down for a matter of hours versus days.

Since Friday, Louisiana's gas price average increased from \$2.81 to \$2.83. The increase is expected as a storm like this can cause an increase in demand, due to panic buying, leading up to the storm. However, we are likely to see a dramatic reduction in demand post-hurricane as people stay home due to power outages and road closures.

AAA's thoughts are with all of those impacted by this devastating storm. For members in the impacted areas requesting AAA services, please note that due to the dangerous conditions caused by the hurricane, only emergency services may be provided if available resources can perform them safely. Otherwise, any services will be delayed until conditions improve. If it's an emergency situation, members should contact 911.

AAA will continue to monitor the latest oil and gas developments resulting from Ida and provide updates, especially on the re-opening of the Colonial Pipeline.

Quick Stats

The nation's top 10 largest weekly changes: Michigan (-6 cents), North Dakota (-5 cents), Illinois (+3 cents), Indiana (-3 cents), Texas (-3 cents), Florida (-3 cents), Kentucky (-3 cents), Utah (-3 cents), Missouri (-2 cents) and Nevada (-2 cents).

The nation's top 10 least expensive markets: Mississippi (\$2.78), Texas (\$2.78), Alabama (\$2.81), Missouri (\$2.82), Kentucky (\$2.83), Louisiana (\$2.83), Arkansas (\$2.84), South Carolina (\$2.84), Tennessee (\$2.85) and Oklahoma (\$2.86).

Oil Market Dynamics

At the close of Friday's formal trading session, WTI increased by \$1.32 to settle at \$68.74. Crude prices increased as production ramped down ahead of Hurricane Ida making landfall. As the storm continues, over 95% of oil production in the Gulf Coast region remains shuttered. In addition, the federal Bureau of Safety and Environmental Enforcement reports that 288 out of 560 manned offshore platforms have been evacuated; all 11 of the non-dynamically positioned rigs have been evacuated; and 10 of the 15 dynamically positioned rigs have moved out of the storm's path as a precaution. For this week, crude prices will likely increase, at least temporarily, in response to reduced supply. However, as the storm clears and damage is assessed, production will gradually return to normal operations and help to stabilize prices as supply increases.

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SDFBCA Week 2 Coaches Poll - Results

11AAA
1) Harrisburg (15) 78 1-0
2) Brandon Valley (2) 61 1-0
3) Roosevelt, 40 0-0
4) Sioux Falls O'Gorman, 24 0-0
5) Sioux Falls Jefferson, 21 1-0
Others: Sioux Falls Lincoln, 11: Sioux Falls Washington, 7

9A Team Points Record
1 DeSmet (17) 96 2-0
2 Howard (3) 55 2-0
3 Wolsey-Wessington 55 0-1
4 Herreid/Selby Area (1) 46 2-0
5 Wall (1) 46 2-0
Other: Warner 10, Castlewood 9, Kimball/White Lake 7

11AA
1) Pierre TF Riggs (11) 62 0-1
2) Tea Area (7) 56 1-0
3) Yankton 31 1-0
4) Aberdeen Central, 24 1-0
5) Brookings 21 0-1
Others: Mitchell, 11: Watertown, 8

9B Team Points Record
1 Harding County/Bison (6) 62 1-1
2 Sully Buttes (6) 60 2-0
3 Gayville-Volin (2) 47 1-0
4 Faulkton Area(1) 39 1-1
5 Hitchcock-Tulare 24 2-0
Other: Dell Rapids St. Mary 20, Avon (1) 13

11A
1) Canton (17) 86 1-0
2) Madison, 61 1-0
3) Lennox (1) 54 1-0
4) SF Christian (1) 44 1-0
5) Tri-Valley (1) 32 1-0
Others: Milbank 16, West Central 11, Dell Rapids 9

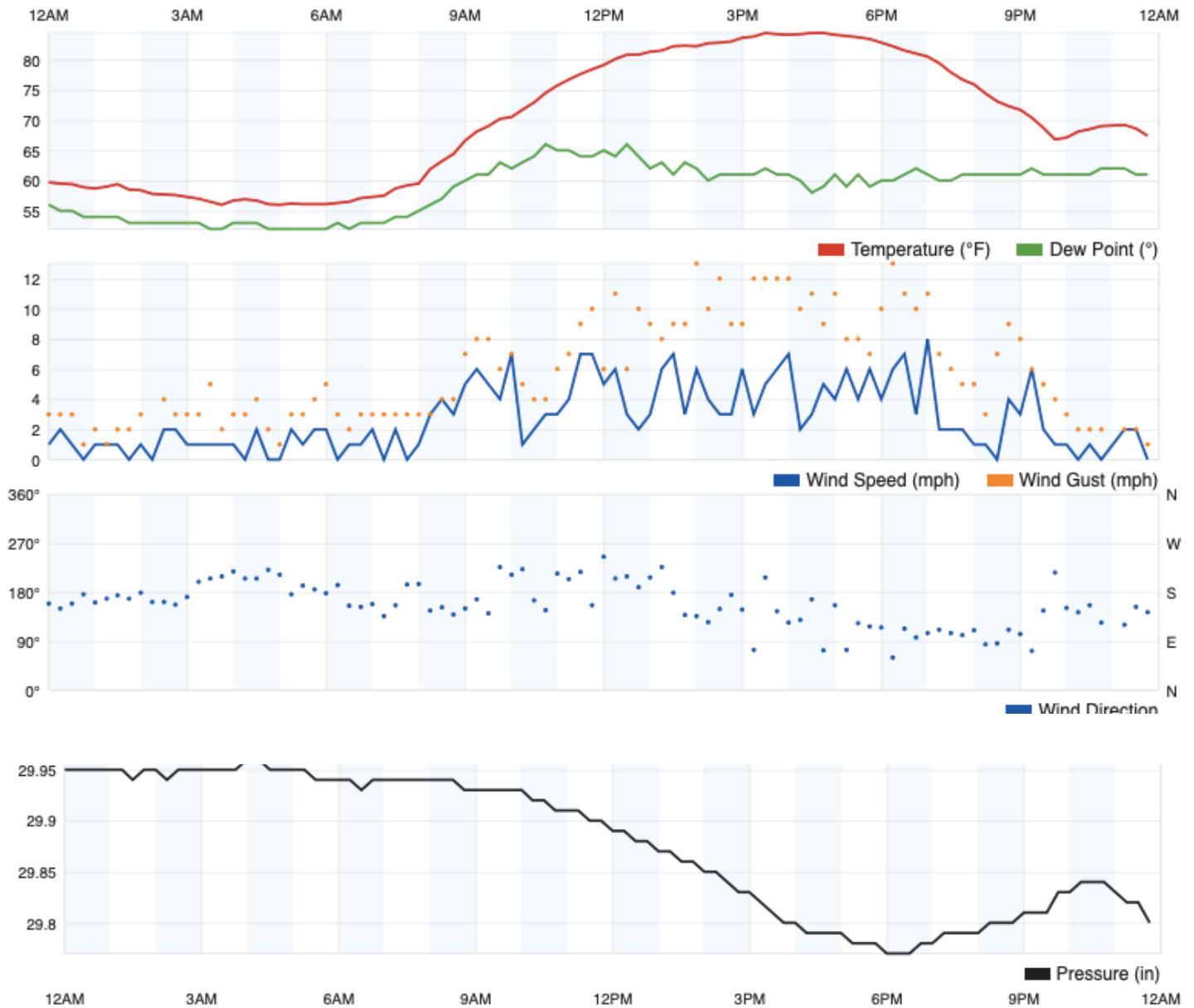
11B
1) Winner (11) 70 2-0
2) Bridgewater-Emery/Ethan (6) 68 1-1
3) Sioux Valley 54 1-1
4) Elk Point Jefferson 31 1-0
5) McCook Central/Montrose 28 2-0
5) W/WS/SC, 28 0-1
Others: Aberdeen Roncalli 17

9AA Team Points Record
1 Platte-Geddes (21) 119 2-0
2 Canistota/Freeman 54 1-1
3 Hanson (1) 48 1-0
4 Chester Area 31 2-0
5 Florence-Henry (1) 21 2-0
Other: Timber Lake (1) 18, Garretson 18, Leola/Frederick Area 16, Hamlin 10,

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Yesterday's Groton Weather Graphs







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Today	Tonight	Wednesday	Wednesday Night	Thursday
				
Sunny	Mostly Clear	Mostly Sunny	T-storms Likely	T-storms
High: 84 °F	Low: 60 °F	High: 83 °F	Low: 64 °F	High: 74 °F

Showers & Storms Wed Night – Thu

Probability of Precipitation ↓	Today	Wednesday	Thursday	Friday
				
	78 to 84°	79 to 87°	71 to 81°	74 to 82°
	Breezy southeasterly winds across central SD	Humid, breezy, mild. Overnight storms could be strong to severe	Numerous showers and storms with appreciable rainfall	Seasonable temps, mostly dry
	6am 9am 12pm 3pm 6pm 9pm	12am 3am 6am 9am 12pm 3pm 6pm 9pm	12am 3am 6am 9am 12pm 3pm 6pm 9pm	12am 3am 6am 9am 12pm
Mobridge	4 2 2 2 1 1	3 3 3 3 18 18 52 52	70 70 70 56 56 30 30 13	13 6 11 11 20
Pierre	6 0 0 0 1 1	3 3 3 2 14 14 48 48	70 70 70 64 64 34 34 18	18 9 14 14 20
Miller	8 2 0 1 3 3	4 4 4 1 8 8 40 40	61 61 78 78 78 58 58 27	27 15 15 8 12
Aberdeen	8 1 1 2 2 2	4 4 4 3 8 8 47 47	73 73 79 79 79 63 63 27	27 14 14 7 9
Watertown	11 3 1 0 3 3	6 6 6 3 5 5 31 31	54 54 73 73 82 82 82 49	49 27 27 11 11
Sisseton	8 3 2 1 2 2	4 4 4 3 9 9 36 36	66 66 85 85 85 83 83 45	45 22 22 10 10

 National Weather Service Aberdeen, SD

  Updated: 8/31/2021 5:13 AM Central

While dry today and much of Wednesday, breezy southerly winds will transport moisture northward and set the stage for another round of widespread showers and storms by Wednesday night into Thursday. Temperatures will be close to average most days through the weekend.

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Today in Weather History

August 31, 1977: High winds accompanying thunderstorms moved across the southern part of Brown County during the early morning hours. A barn was destroyed three miles west of Warner. Many trees were damaged in the Stratford area. A large, empty fuel tank, southeast of Watertown was folded inward by strong winds. High wind damage was also reported in Faulk and Day Counties.

August 31, 2013: Thunderstorms produced numerous reports of large hail and damaging winds in and near Sioux Falls on the evening of August 31st. Large hail broke windows and damaged many vehicles, as well as siding and roofs on the west side of Sioux Falls. One automobile dealer with a large temporary outdoor display reported four thousand cars were damaged. Estimated property damage was listed at four million dollars. Thunderstorm winds also destroyed several businesses, including a large retail store which was also struck by lightning. The large store lost part of its roof, while the stockroom of the same store and its contents were also damaged. A canopy type tent was destroyed, and a 20-foot retaining wall was blown down. The winds caused extensive tree damage, including several trees blown down, one of which blocked a major intersection when it fell.

1886: A magnitude 7.3 earthquake shook Charleston, South Carolina around 9:50 pm on this day. This earthquake is the most damaging quake to occur in the southeast United States. This earthquake caused 60 deaths and between 5 to 6 million dollars in damage to over 2,000 buildings in the southeastern United States.

1922: An incredible hailstorm occurred near West Chester, PA dropped so much hail that fields were covered with up to two feet of drifted hail the next day.

1915 - The temperature at Bartlesville, OK, dipped to 38 degrees to establish a state record for the month of August. (The Weather Channel)

1954 - Hurricane Carol swept across eastern New England killing sixty persons and causing 450 million dollars damage. It was the first of three hurricanes to affect New England that year. (David Ludlum)

1971 - The low of 84 degrees and high of 108 degrees at Death Valley, CA, were the coolest of the month. The average daily high was 115.7 degrees that August, and the average daily low was 93.4 degrees. (The Weather Channel)

1984 - Lightning ignited several forest fires in Montana, one of which burned through 100,000 acres of timber and grassland. (The Weather Channel)

1987 - Eight cities in Washington and Oregon reported record high temperatures for the date, including Eugene OR and Portland OR with afternoon highs of 102 degrees. The high of 102 degrees at Portland smashed their previous record for the date by twelve degrees. Frost was reported in South Dakota. Aberdeen SD established a record for the month of August with a morning low of 32 degrees, and Britton SD dipped to 31 degrees. (The National Weather Summary)

1988 - August ended on a relatively mild and tranquil note for most of the nation. Forest fires in the northwestern U.S. scorched 180,000 acres of land during the last week of August. (The National Weather Summary)

1989 - Thunderstorms developing along a stationary front spread severe weather from Minnesota to Indiana through the course of the day and night. Thunderstorms in Minnesota produced baseball size hail near Saint Michael and Hutchinson, and drenched Moose Lake with nine inches of rain in six hours. Tucson AZ hit 100 degrees for a record 79th time in the year, surpassing a record established the previous year. (The National Weather Summary) (Storm Data)

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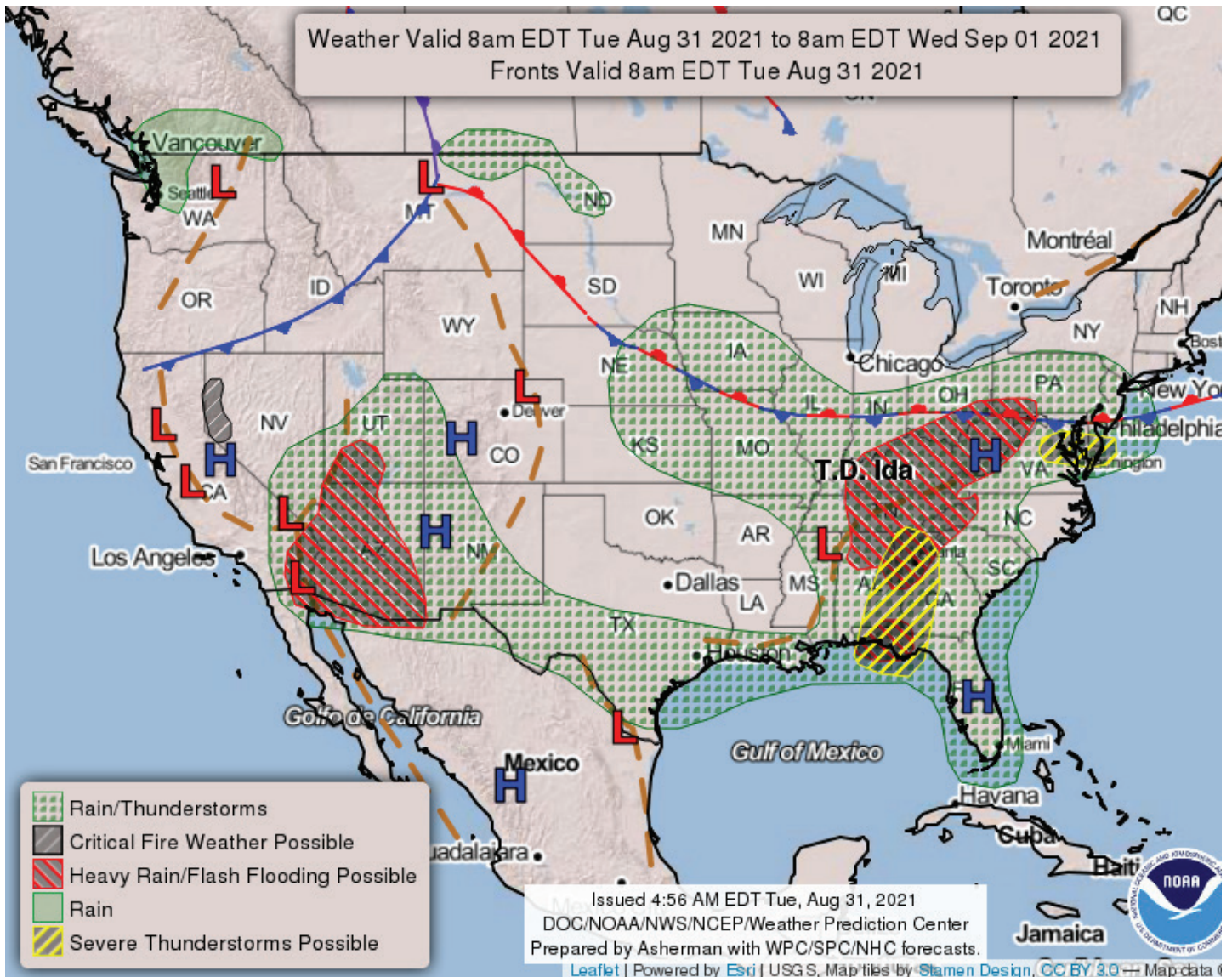
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Yesterday's Groton Weather

High Temp: 84.4 °F at 4:30 PM
Low Temp: 56.0 °F at 5:00 AM
Wind: 13 mph at 2:00 PM
Precip: 0.00

Today's Info

Record High: 98° in 1921
Record Low: 62° in 1951
Average High: 80°F
Average Low: 53°F
Average Precip in Aug.: 2.24
Precip to date in Aug.: 5.87
Average Precip to date: 16.34
Precip Year to Date: 13.14
Sunset Tonight: 8:13 p.m.
Sunrise Tomorrow: 6:53 a.m.



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"DAILY PLANNING GUIDE"

Nearly all of us have some method for planning our daily activities. With no plan to follow, our time will likely be wasted and our days meaningless. Often, however, our carefully detailed plans can be completely disrupted by an emergency or unexpected demand. In Psalm 92, however, we find a simple way to open and close each day and bring God's presence into our lives.

The Psalmist suggests that we begin the day with a "proclamation" - we are to "proclaim the love of God." If we begin each day by proclaiming the love that God has for us, it will remind us that we are safe and secure in His love and that nothing or no one can destroy us. Then, as the day unfolds and when the unexpected occurs and things seem upside down, we can know that He is holding us close to Himself and that He will protect us from that which might harm us. It is in His love that we are safe and secure. As Paul wrote, "Nothing can separate us from the love of God which is in Christ Jesus our Lord." It is His love that keeps us close to Him and no one or nothing can break this bond that comes from Him.

As we end each day, we are advised to praise God for His faithfulness. Indeed, by His grace He has brought us through another day and He has proven Himself to be trustworthy. Even when tragedy strikes or the light of His presence is dim, we have the assurance that He is with us.

If "things" look bad today, we can always look back at our "yesterdays" and see God at work in our lives and praise Him for His trustworthiness and faithfulness.

Prayer: Thank You, Father, for all You have done for us. May we always be aware of Your love and faithfulness. In Jesus' Name, Amen.

Scripture For Today: Psalm 92:2 proclaiming your love in the morning and your faithfulness at night,

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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

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News from the Associated Press

Monday's Scores

By The Associated Press

PREP VOLLEYBALL=

Aberdeen Christian def. Groton Area, 25-14, 27-25, 25-22

Arlington def. Estelline/Hendricks, 25-27, 25-9, 25-18, 25-8

Wolsey-Wessington def. Warner, 25-16, 25-20, 21-25, 23-25, 15-11

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

SD Lottery

By The Associated Press undefined

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

Mega Millions

Estimated jackpot: \$306 million

Powerball

18-27-42-43-47, Powerball: 13

(eighteen, twenty-seven, forty-two, forty-three, forty-seven; Powerball: thirteen)

Estimated jackpot: \$332 million

South Dakota Prep Polls

By The Associated Press \ \

The South Dakota Prep Media Football Poll is listed below, ranking the top-five teams, the team's record, points received, and last week's rank. First-place votes are listed in parentheses.

Class 11AAA

Record	Pts	Pvs		
1. Harrisburg (16)	1-0	88	1	
2. Brandon Valley	1-0	74	2	
3. Roosevelt	0-0	51	3	
4. O'Gorman	0-0	32	4	
5. Jefferson	1-0	20	5	

Receiving Votes: Lincoln 4, Washington 1.

Class 11AA

Record	Pts	Pvs		
1. Tea Area (5)	1-0	71	4	
(tie) Yankton (6)	1-0	71	3	
3. Pierre (7)	0-1	68	1	
4. Watertown	1-0	29	5	
5. Brookings	0-1	16	2	

Others receiving votes: Aberdeen Central 14, Mitchell 1.

1. Canton (16)	1-0	88	1	
2. Madison (1)	1-0	70	3	
3. Dell Rapids	0-1	47	2	
4. SF Christian	1-0	23	RV	
5. Lennox	1-0	13	NR	
6. West Central	0-1	13	4	

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Others receiving votes: Tri-Valley 7, Milbank 6, Dakota Valley 3.

Class 11B

Record	Pts	Pvs		
1. Winner (18)	2-0	90	1	
2. Sioux Valley	1-1	62	3	
3. Bridgewater-Emery-ET	1-1	58	2	
4. Aberdeen Roncalli	2-0	23	RV	
(tie) Elk Point-Jeff	1-0	23	5	

Receiving votes: Woonsocket-Wess. Springs/Sanborn Central 12, Clark/Willow Lake 1, McCook Central/Montrose 1.

Class 9AA

Record	Pts	Pvs		
1. Platte-Geddes (18)	2-0	90	1	
2. Canistota-Freeman	1-1	68	2	
3. Hanson	1-0	52	3	
4. Garretson	1-0	30	5	
5. Timber Lake	2-0	14	RV	

Others receiving votes: Chester Area 7, Hamlin 4, Florence/Henry 3, Parkston 1, Viborg-Hurley 1.

Class 9A

Record	Pts	Pvs		
1. DeSmet (18)	2-0	90	1	
2. Howard	2-0	66	2	
3. Wolsey-Wessington	0-1	43	3	
4. Herreid-Selby Area	2-0	38	4	
5. Wall	2-0	25	5	

Others receiving votes: Castlewood 4, Kimball/White Lake 2, Kadoka Area 1, Warner 1.

Class 9B

Record	Pts	Pvs		
1. Sully Buttes (11)	2-0	80	4	
2. Harding Co. (4)	1-1	54	1	
3. Gayville-Volin	1-0	40	5	
4. Faulkton Area	1-1	39	2	
5. Dell Rapids St. Mary	1-1	23	RV	

Others receiving votes: Hitchcock-Tulare 20, Avon 9, Alcester-Hudson 5.<

20 states sue over Biden admin school, work LGBT protections

By JONATHAN MATTISE Associated Press

NASHVILLE, Tenn. (AP) — Attorneys general from 20 states sued President Joe Biden's administration Monday seeking to halt directives that extend federal sex discrimination protections to LGBTQ people, ranging from transgender girls participating in school sports to the use of school and workplace bathrooms that align with a person's gender identity.

Tennessee Attorney General Herbert Slatery filed the lawsuit in U.S. District Court in Knoxville, arguing that legal interpretations by the U.S. Department of Education and the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission are based on a faulty view of U.S. Supreme Court case law.

The Supreme Court ruled in June 2020 that a landmark civil rights law, under a provision called Title VII, protects gay, lesbian and transgender people from discrimination in employment.

This June, the Department of Education said discrimination based on a student's sexual orientation or gender identity will be treated as a violation of Title IX, the 1972 federal law that protects against sex discrimination in education. A legal analysis by the department concluded there is "no persuasive or well-

founded basis" to treat education differently than employment.

Also in June, the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission released guidance about what could constitute discrimination against LGBTQ people and advised the public about how to file a complaint.

With its guidance, the Biden administration in part took a stand against laws and proposals in a growing number of states that aim to forbid transgender girls from participating on female sports teams. The state attorneys general contend that the authority over such policies "properly belongs to Congress, the States, and the people."

"The guidance purports to resolve highly controversial and localized issues such as whether employers and schools may maintain sex-separated showers and locker rooms, whether schools must allow biological males to compete on female athletic teams, and whether individuals may be compelled to use another person's preferred pronouns," the lawsuit states. "But the agencies have no authority to resolve those sensitive questions, let alone to do so by executive fiat without providing any opportunity for public participation."

Joining Tennessee in the lawsuit are Alabama, Alaska, Arizona, Arkansas, Georgia, Idaho, Indiana, Kansas, Kentucky, Louisiana, Mississippi, Missouri, Montana, Nebraska, Ohio, Oklahoma, South Carolina, South Dakota and West Virginia.

The lawsuit asks a judge for a number of declarations about Title IX in schools and Title VII in the workplace: that they don't prohibit schools and employers from having showers, locker rooms, bathrooms and other living facilities separated by "biological sex"; that they do not require employers, school employees or students to use a transgender person's preferred pronouns; that they do not prohibit having school sports teams separated by "biological sex"; and that they do not prohibit workplace dress codes based on "biological sex."

The education policy carries the possibility of federal sanctions against schools and colleges that fail to protect gay and transgender students.

The Department of Justice on Monday did not immediately respond to a request for comment on the lawsuit.

The education directive reversed President Donald Trump-era policies that removed civil rights protections for transgender students. In 2017, the Trump administration lifted President Barack Obama-era guidance allowing transgender students to use bathrooms and locker rooms that match their gender identities.

At the time, then-Education Secretary Betsy DeVos said the issue was "best solved at the state and local level" and the earlier guidance led to a spike in lawsuits seeking clarification.

The new action does not reinstate the Obama-era policy but instead clarifies that the Education Department's Office for Civil Rights will investigate complaints of discrimination involving gay or transgender students. If the department finds evidence of discrimination based on sexual orientation or gender identity, it will pursue a resolution to "address the specific compliance concerns or violations."

The federal agencies noted that the workplace and education guidance documents do not carry the force of law. The state attorneys general argued they are at risk of the federal government enforcing the guidance, threatening their states' sovereign authority, causing significant liability and putting their federal education funding at risk.

In June, the Department of Justice filed statements of interest in lawsuits that seek to overturn new laws in two states. In West Virginia, a law prohibits transgender athletes from competing in female sports. Arkansas became the first state to ban gender confirming treatments or surgery for transgender youth.

Man faces manslaughter charge in death of Rapid City teen

RAPID CITY, S.D. (AP) — A man accused of killing a Rapid City teen was charged Monday with first-degree manslaughter.

Nathaniel Gray Eagle, 19, of Rapid City, is being held without bond in the shooting death of 16-year-old McKenzie Garreaux at an apartment complex on Friday morning. Police said a gun believed to be used in the shooting was located near the apartment.

The probable cause affidavit in the case has been sealed by the court, the Rapid City Journal reported.

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Records show Gray Eagle was previously charged on July 2 for a misdemeanor count of obstruction. He was released July 6 on a personal recognizance bond and then failed to appear back in court on July 16.

Garreaux died at a Rapid City hospital after receiving treatment for injuries sustained in the shooting. She had been reported missing by the Pennington County Sheriff's Office on Aug. 20.

It wasn't clear if Gray Eagle had an attorney.

South Dakota lawmakers start speedy redistricting process

By STEPHEN GROVES Associated Press

SIOUX FALLS, S.D. (AP) — South Dakota lawmakers tasked with redrawing the state's political boundaries set a framework Monday that will allow them to speed through the once-in-a-decade process on a tight schedule this year.

The two committees responsible for drawing the new legislative districts began their work in earnest Monday after the U.S. Census Bureau released detailed data earlier this month. Lawmakers only have about 10 weeks to propose districts before a special session of the Legislature convenes Nov. 8. The Census Bureau's data was delayed due to the coronavirus pandemic.

"We're in for a very compact and a very intense schedule over the next two months to get all this accomplished," Republican Sen. Jim Bolin told the committees, which met jointly Monday.

Republican lawmakers cited the shortened process in setting two parameters that will guide their work: Keeping new legislative districts between a lower threshold of 24,066 residents and an upper threshold of 26,600 people, and restricting access to the Legislature's map-drawing software to committee members only.

Legislative research staff said they were worried their work would get bogged down if the general public was allowed to propose maps through its software and pointed out that people could create their own map proposals through other open-source applications.

Rep. Ryan Cwach, who is one of just two Democrats on the committees and the only one in attendance Monday, opposed both moves by the committee.

"My goal here is to draw good districts and fair districts," he told lawmakers, adding that he wanted more time to dig into the data before setting the population threshold guidelines.

Democrats hold about 10% of legislative seats, so proportionately, the redistricting committee is in line with the Legislature's makeup. However, areas with large Native American populations — which in recent years have often sent Democrats to the Statehouse — present one of the largest redistricting challenges.

Federal law requires that racial minorities receive adequate representation in legislative boundaries. Republican lawmakers have said they will focus on areas encompassing tribal reservations and plan to hold public input sessions near the Rosebud and Pine Ridge Indian Reservations.

But O.J. Semans, a Native American voting rights advocate, told the committee it was already not doing enough groundwork to ensure Native American voices are heard. He and other voting rights advocates have pushed the committees to hold the meetings on reservation land and initiate meetings with tribal governments.

"As currently planned, the schedule is not accessible to most rural Native residents," he said in a statement. "It is crucial that the committee hold hearings on reservations themselves, not simply in the communities that neighbor reservations."

Lawmakers will hold a series of public input sessions across the state in October.

Besides focusing on areas with a large proportion of Native Americans, the state's two largest cities — Sioux Falls and Rapid City — are also expected to present a challenge to the committee. Those areas grew the most over the last decade, meaning legislative representation should shift in their direction.

Lawmakers are planning to carve out pieces of the map covering Sioux Falls and Rapid City so they can focus on drawing districts there. But Republicans were split on how quickly to move forward with that action. Some argued they needed more time to study data so they could determine the best boundaries to draw around the cities. They decided to wait until next month to move forward with those plans.

Weather service confirms tornado caused damage in Lennox

LENNOX, S.D. (AP) — A storm survey team from the National Weather Service in Sioux Falls has confirmed it was a tornado that caused damage in and around Lennox during the weekend.

The weather service tweeted the brief tornado struck about 4:40 p.m. Saturday and traveled nearly 2 miles with winds of 95 mph, making it an F1 twister.

Trees were knocked down, and the Lincoln County Sheriff's Office said it received multiple reports of Interstate 29 being covered with debris and vehicles in the ditch. Two semis were blown over on the interstate near mile marker 66, according to its Facebook post.

Lincoln County Emergency Manager Harrold Timmerman says the school building roof was damaged in Lennox, a town of about 2,500 people located 20 miles southwest of Sioux Falls. No injuries have been reported.

Power in Lennox was out for at least two hours after the storm, the Argus Leader reported.

No stranger to plagues, Venice opens film fest with caution

By NICOLE WINFIELD Associated Press

VENICE (AP) — Visitors to Venice could be forgiven for not realizing that beyond the majesty of St. Mark's Square and the romance of gondola rides lies a city that helped provide a baseline of what the world knows today about containing pandemics.

It was here that the term "quarantine" was coined, after merchant ships arriving in the 15th-century Venetian Republic were moored for 40 days ("quaranta giorni" in Italian) to see if their crews were afflicted with the plague. It was here that the first isolated pestilence hospital was built on a solitary island in the lagoon, a precursor to today's COVID-19 isolation wards. And it was in Venice that 16th-century doctors donned beak-nosed masks filled with aromatic herbs to cleanse the air they breathed when treating the sick — an attempt at self-protection that today is the favored choice for Venetian Carnival costumes.

Venice's central place in the history of battling pandemics provides a relevant backdrop to this year's Venice Film Festival, which opens Wednesday with the premiere of Pedro Almodovar's in-competition film "Parallel Mothers." Almodovar developed the project during Spain's 2020 coronavirus lockdown, one of the harshest in the West.

In a pre-opening screening Tuesday, Italian director Andre Segre presents a short documentary shot last year showing how Venice organizers coped with COVID-19 to stage the first and only in-person international film festival during the first year of the outbreak, a limited affair that nevertheless showed it could be done. Cannes came back to life this year after skipping 2020, and other big festivals went largely virtual after the pandemic erupted.

The scenes in Segre's film — shocking then, normal now — feature half-full theaters for Hollywood premieres, masked movie stars, cleaners in hazmat suits and the "blink, blink, blink" of remote thermometers taking temperatures at festival checkpoints.

Similar precautions are planned for this year, with a huge barricade once again sealing off public access to the red carpet and limited chances for fans to catch VIP water taxi arrivals on the Lido. More than 10 testing stations have been set up for staff and festival-goers, who must show proof of a negative test, vaccination or having recently recovered from COVID-19 to enter screenings. Masks are required indoors.

In other words, the Venice show is going on — other premieres at the world's oldest film festival include the debut of Denis Villeneuve's "Dune" and Kristen Stewart as Princess Diana in "Spencer" — even as Italy copes with new infections driven by the highly contagious delta variant.

For Venice, though, it's really nothing new.

"The history of Venice is a history that teaches us how our city, first among European capitals, understood ahead of time how to manage viruses," said Simone Venturini, Venice's tourism chief. "These recurrences are studied and recalled even more today because the Venetian model is a model that paradoxically is

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still used.”

Beginning with the first confirmed plague to strike Venice — the 1348 outbreak that killed at least a third of its population — the city put in place containment measures even without understanding epidemiologically how it spread, said Fabio Zampieri, a history of medicine professor at the University of Padua Medical School.

Based on the belief that “bad air” was to blame for what became known as the Black Death, Venetian authorities closed churches and restaurants, canceled religious processions and ordered a thorough cleaning of homes and public venues, Zampieri said.

During the pestilence that erupted in 1423, Venice’s senate decided to lock down the whole city, prohibiting entry of people from suspected plague-ridden places and punishing locals who gave sick foreigners shelter with six months in jail, he said. A year later, Venice opened the first “lazzaretto,” a hospital on an isolated island in the Venetian lagoon dedicated exclusively to plague victims.

That concept would transform years later into a proper quarantine, an isolated place for people merely suspected of carrying the plague — crews of merchant ships — to wait out 40 days of surveillance while their cargo was disinfected, he said.

During the 1575-1577 plague, doctors increasingly used the beak-nosed masks filled with aromatic herbs to try to protect themselves from the sick, still not realizing that the plague was carried mostly by bacteria-infected fleas on rats, not “bad air.”

“It was still a crucial experience for the history of medicine, the history of health care and the history of managing infectious diseases,” Zampieri said.

After the 1630 pestilence again wiped out around a third of the population, weary Venetians gave thanks to the Virgin Mary that even more lives weren’t taken: They built the Santa Maria della Salute (St. Mary of Health) church across the Grand Canal from St. Mark’s Square, one of the city’s most visible and iconic images.

The central location of the huge, white octagonal domed basilica at the tip of Venice’s custom’s port was entirely intentional, to show the city’s gratitude that it had once again survived and rebounded from the pestilence, said art historian Silvia Marchiori, curator of the Venice Patriarchate’s Manfrediniana museum.

“When you arrived in Venice, you arrived from the sea, not land, so you had to notice this great temple that was built in white Istrian stone to attract attention,” she said.

To this day, Venetians venerate an icon of the Madonna in the basilica during one of the city’s main religious festivals on Nov. 21, a day dedicated to offering prayers for good health, she said.

Whether by prayer, public health policy or discipline, Venice as a whole fared relatively well during its latest pandemic. The city took the extraordinary decision in February 2020 — when coronavirus was just beginning to be detected in northern Italy — to cancel its famous Carnival. It stayed locked down during the worst of the pandemic, watching as neighboring Lombardy and even parts of the surrounding Veneto region got slammed with infections and deaths in one of Europe’s worst-hit countries.

Venice has been rewarded with a steady return of visitors this spring and summer, just in time for celebrations marking the 1,600th anniversary of the founding of the city, the film festival, sailing regattas and star-studded fashion shows by Valentino and Dolce & Gabbana.

It’s all part of Venice’s efforts to attract visitors who stay, spend and appreciate the city’s history and artistry, rather than day-trippers who take a gondola ride down the Grand Canal and call it a day, said tourism chief Venturini.

“These are the pillars on which we’re building a post-COVID tourism,” he said.

Follow all AP stories on the coronavirus pandemic at <https://apnews.com/hub/coronavirus-pandemic>.

As US military leaves Kabul, many Americans, Afghans remain

By LOLITA C. BALDOR and MATTHEW LEE Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — As the final five U.S. military transport aircraft lifted off out of Afghanistan, they

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left behind up to 200 Americans and thousands of desperate Afghans who couldn't get out and now must rely on the Taliban to allow their departure.

Secretary of State Antony Blinken said the U.S. will continue to try to get Americans and Afghans out of the country, and will work with Afghanistan's neighbors to secure their departure either over land or by charter flight once the Kabul airport reopens.

"We have no illusion that any of this will be easy, or rapid," said Blinken, adding that the total number of Americans who are in Afghanistan and still want to leave may be closer to 100.

Speaking shortly after the Pentagon announced the completion of the U.S. military pullout Monday, Blinken said the U.S. Embassy in Kabul will remain shuttered and vacant for the foreseeable future. American diplomats, he said, will be based in Doha, Qatar.

"We will continue our relentless efforts to help Americans, foreign nationals and Afghans leave Afghanistan if they choose," Blinken said in an address from the State Department. "Our commitment to them holds no deadline."

Marine Gen. Frank McKenzie, head of U.S. Central Command, told reporters the U.S. military was able to get as many as 1,500 Afghans out in the final hours of the American evacuation mission. But now it will be up to the State Department working with the Taliban to get any more people out.

McKenzie said there were no citizens left stranded at the airport and none were on the final few military flights out. He said the U.S. military maintained the ability to get Americans out right up until just before the end, but "none of them made it to the airport."

"There's a lot of heartbreak associated with this departure," said McKenzie. "We did not get everybody out that we wanted to get out. But I think if we'd stayed another 10 days we wouldn't have gotten everybody out that we wanted to get out."

McKenzie and other officials painted a vivid picture of the final hours U.S. troops were on the ground, and the preparations they took to ensure that the Taliban and Islamic State group militants did not get functioning U.S. military weapons systems and other equipment.

The terror threat remains a major problem in Afghanistan, with at least 2,000 "hard core" members of the Islamic State group who remain in the country, including many released from prisons as the Taliban swept to control.

Underscoring the ongoing security threats, the weapon systems used just hours earlier to counter IS rockets launched toward the airport were kept operational until "the very last minute" as the final U.S. military aircraft flew out, officials said. One of the last things U.S. troops did was to make the so-called C-RAMS (Counter Rocket, Artillery and Mortar System) inoperable.

McKenzie said they "demilitarized" the system so it can never be used again. Officials said troops did not blow up equipment in order to ensure they left the airport workable for future flights, once those begin again. In addition, McKenzie said the U.S. also disabled 27 Humvees and 73 aircraft so they can never be used again.

Throughout the day, as the final C-17 transport planes prepared to take off, McKenzie said the U.S. kept "overwhelming U.S. airpower overhead" to deal with potential IS threats.

Back at the Pentagon, Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin and Gen. Mark Milley, chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, watched the final 90 minutes of the military departure in real time from an operations center in the basement.

According to a U.S. official, they sat in hushed silence as they watched troops make last-minute runway checks, make the key defense systems inoperable and climb aboard the C-17s. The official said you could hear a pin drop as the last aircraft lifted off, and leaders around the room breathed sighs of relief. Later, Austin phoned Maj. Gen. Christopher Donahue, commander of the 82nd Airborne Division, who was coordinating the evacuation. Donahue and acting U.S. ambassador to Afghanistan Ross Wilson were the last to board the final plane that left Kabul.

Officials spoke on condition of anonymity to provide details of military operations.

"Simply because we have left, that doesn't mean the opportunities for both Americans that are in Af-

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ghanistan that want to leave and Afghans who want to leave, they will not be denied that opportunity," said McKenzie.

The military left some equipment for the Taliban in order to run the airport, including two firetrucks, some front-end loaders and aircraft staircases.

Blinken said the U.S. will work with Turkey and Qatar to help them get the Kabul airport up and running again.

"This would enable a small number of daily charter flights, which is a key for anyone who wants to depart from Afghanistan moving forward," he said.

California fire approaches Lake Tahoe after mass evacuation

By SAM METZ and JANIE HAR Associated Press/Report for America

SOUTH LAKE TAHOE, Calif. (AP) — A ferocious wildfire swept toward Lake Tahoe on Tuesday just hours after roads were clogged with fleeing cars when the entire California resort city of South Lake Tahoe was ordered to evacuate and communities just across the state line in Nevada were warned to get ready to leave.

The popular vacation haven normally filled with tens of thousands of summer tourists emptied out Monday as the massive Caldor Fire rapidly expanded. Vehicles loaded with bikes and camping gear and hauling boats were in gridlock traffic, stalled in hazy, brown air that smelled like a campfire. Police and other emergency vehicles whizzed by.

"It's more out of control than I thought," evacuee Glen Naasz said of the fire that by late Monday had been pushed by strong winds across California highways 50 and 89, burning mountain cabins as it swept down slopes into the Tahoe Basin.

Additional strike teams arrived just after dark and many of the new firefighters were immediately dispatched to protect homes in the Christmas Valley area about 10 miles (16 kilometers) from South Lake Tahoe, said fire spokesman Dominic Polito.

"We're flooding the area with resources," he said. "Wherever there are structures, there are firefighters on the ground."

Ken Breslin was stuck in bumper-to-bumper traffic less than a mile (1.6 kilometers) from his home in the city of 22,000, with only a quarter-tank of gas in his Ford Escape. His son begged him to leave Sunday night, but he shrugged him off, certain that if an evacuation order came, it would be later in the week.

"Before, it was, 'No worries ... it's not going to crest. It's not gonna come down the hill. There's 3,500 firefighters, all those bulldozers and all the air support,'" he said. "Until this morning, I didn't think there was a chance it could come into this area. Now, it's very real."

As flames churned toward South Lake Tahoe, residents just over the state line in Douglas County, Nevada were under evacuation warnings.

Monday's fresh evacuation orders, unheard of in the city, came a day after communities several miles south of the lake were abruptly ordered to leave as the fire raged nearby. South Lake Tahoe's main medical facility, Barton Memorial Hospital, proactively evacuated dozens of patients, and the El Dorado Sheriff's Office transferred inmates to a neighboring jail.

"There is fire activity happening in California that we have never seen before. The critical thing for the public to know is evacuate early," said Chief Thom Porter, director of the California Department of Forestry and Fire Protection, or Cal Fire. "For the rest of you in California: Every acre can and will burn someday in this state."

The threat of fire is so widespread that the U.S. Forest Service announced Monday that all national forests in California would be closed until Sept. 17.

"We do not take this decision lightly but this is the best choice for public safety," Regional Forester Jennifer Eberlien said.

Overnight, the already massive Caldor Fire grew 7 miles (11 kilometers) in direction in one area northeast of Highway 50 and more than 8 miles (13 miles) in another, Cal Fire officials said.

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More than 15,000 firefighters were battling dozens of California blazes, including crews from Utah, Washington, Wisconsin and West Virginia, said Mark Ghilarducci, director of California's Office of Emergency Services. About 250 active-duty soldiers were being trained in Washington state to help with the arduous work of clearing forest debris by hand.

Crews from Louisiana, however, had to return to that state because of Hurricane Ida, "another major catastrophic event taking place in the country and is a pull on resources throughout the United States," he said.

Porter said that only twice in California history have blazes burned from one side of the Sierra Nevada to the other, both this month, with the Caldor and Dixie fires. The Dixie, the second-largest wildfire in state history at 1,205 square miles (3,121 square kilometers) about 65 miles (105 kilometers) north of the Lake Tahoe-area blaze, prompted new evacuation orders and warnings Monday.

The Lake Tahoe area in the Sierra Nevada mountains is usually a year-round recreational paradise offering beaches, water sports, hiking, ski resorts and golfing. South Lake Tahoe, at the lake's southern end, bustles with outdoor activities, and with casinos available in bordering Stateline, Nevada.

On weekends, the city's population can easily triple and on holiday weekends, like the upcoming Labor Day weekend, up to 100,000 people will visit for fun and sun. But South Lake Tahoe City Mayor Tamara Wallace said they've been telling people for days to stay away because of poor air from wildfires.

She said she thought the Caldor Fire would stay farther away. Fires in the past did not spread so rapidly near the tourist city.

"It's just yet another example of how wildfires have changed over the years," she said as she gathered treasures passed from her deceased parent and her husband's while they prepared to leave.

The last two wildfires that ripped through populated areas near Tahoe were the Angora Fire that destroyed more than 200 homes in 2007 and the Gondola Fire in 2002 that ignited near a chairlift at Heavenly Mountain Resort.

Since then, the dead trees have accumulated and the region has coped with serious droughts, Wallace said. Climate change has made the West much warmer and drier in the past 30 years and will continue to make weather more extreme and wildfires more frequent and destructive, scientists say.

Wallace said traffic was crawling Monday, but praised the evacuation as orderly because residents heeded officials' orders. Authorities have also been more aggressive in recent years, issuing warnings and orders sooner so people have more time to flee.

Not everyone agreed as fierce winds kicked up dust and debris and drivers sat in gridlock. The California Highway Patrol added "quite a bit of additional personnel" to help guide a chaotic evacuation from South Lake Tahoe, as huge traffic jams slowed the evacuation of vehicles, CHP Assistant Commissioner Ryan Okashima said. Congestion had eased by Monday afternoon.

South Lake Tahoe resident John Larson said the evacuation probably went as smoothly as possible, considering how swiftly flames moved into the area.

"The fuel went so fast and it climbed the ridge so quick," Larson said of the fire after settling into an evacuation center at a park in Carson City, Nevada. Red Cross volunteers set up the facility with 50 cots after another evacuation center in nearby Gardnerville reached capacity.

The fire destroyed multiple homes Sunday along Highway 50, one of the main routes to the lake's south end. It also roared through the Sierra-at-Tahoe ski resort, demolishing some buildings but leaving the main buildings at the base intact. Crews used snow-making machines to douse the ground.

Cabins burned near the unincorporated community of Echo Lake, where Tom Fashinell has operated Echo Chalet with his wife since 1984. The summer-only resort offers cabin rentals, but was ordered to close early for the season by the U.S. Forest Service due to ongoing wildfires.

Fashinell said he was glued to the local TV news. "We're watching to see whether the building survives," he said.

The Caldor Fire has scorched nearly 292 square miles (756 square kilometers) since breaking out Aug. 14. After the weekend's fierce burning, containment dropped from 19% to 15%. More than 600 structures

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have been destroyed, and at least 20,000 more were threatened. Gov. Steve Sisolak on Monday declared a state of emergency in Nevada, citing "the anticipation" that the wildfire in the Lake Tahoe area in California would burn across the state line into the Silver State.

The National Weather Service warned of dangerous fire conditions and winds through Wednesday.

Diane Kinney, who has lived in the city since the 1970s, said this is the first time her neighborhood has been ordered to evacuate. She and her husband were packing up keepsakes, jewelry and insurance papers shortly after noon. They had to leave their 1964 Chevelle, but she hopes it stays safe.

"Everybody wants to live in Lake Tahoe. There are definitely advantages of being in the mountains, being with these beautiful pine trees," she said. "But we definitely have to get out now."

Har reported from San Francisco. AP writers Jocelyn Gecker and Olga R. Rodriguez in San Francisco; Noah Berger in South Lake Tahoe; Christopher Weber and John Antczak in Los Angeles; and Ken Ritter in Las Vegas contributed to this report.

Thousands face weeks without power in Ida's aftermath

BY REBECCA SANTANA and JAY REEVES Associated Press

NEW ORLEANS (AP) — Louisiana communities battered by Hurricane Ida faced a new danger as they began the massive task of clearing debris and repairing damage from the storm: the possibility of weeks without power in the stifling, late-summer heat.

Ida ravaged the region's power grid, leaving the entire city of New Orleans and hundreds of thousands of other Louisiana residents in the dark with no clear timeline on when power would return. Some areas outside New Orleans also suffered major flooding and structure damage.

"There are certainly more questions than answers. I can't tell you when the power is going to be restored. I can't tell you when all the debris is going to be cleaned up and repairs made," Louisiana Gov. John Bel Edwards told a news conference Monday. "But what I can tell you is we are going to work hard every day to deliver as much assistance as we can."

President Joe Biden met virtually on Monday with Edwards and Mississippi Gov. Tate Reeves along with mayors from cities and parishes most impacted by Hurricane Ida to receive an update on the storm's impacts, and to discuss how the Federal Government can provide assistance.

"We are closely coordinating with state and local officials every step of the way," Biden said.

Two people were killed and at least 10 others were injured after a roadway collapsed in Mississippi on Monday night. WDSU-TV reported that the Mississippi Highway Patrol, emergency personnel and rescue teams responded to Highway 26 in George County, about 60 miles (96 kilometers) northeast of Biloxi, to find both the east and westbound lanes collapsed, troopers confirmed.

Seven cars were involved and cranes will be needed to get the cars out of the hole, Cpl. Cal Robertson with the Mississippi Highway Patrol said.

Rescuers in boats, helicopters and high-water trucks brought hundreds of people trapped by floodwaters to safety Monday, and they planned to eventually go door to door in hard hit areas to make sure everyone got out OK. Power crews also rushed into the state.

The governor said 25,000 utility workers were on the ground in Louisiana to help restore electricity, with more on the way.

Still, his office described damage to the power grid as "catastrophic," and power officials said it could be weeks before electricity is restored in some spots.

More than 1 million homes and businesses in Louisiana and Mississippi were left without power as Ida pushed through on Sunday with winds that reached 150 mph (240 kph). The wind speed tied it for the fifth-strongest hurricane ever to hit the mainland. By late Monday, the storm had been downgraded to a tropical depression with winds of up to 35 mph (56 kph), though forecasters still warned of heavy rain and a flood threat for parts of the Tennessee and Ohio valleys.

The storm was blamed for at least two deaths — a motorist who drowned in New Orleans and a person

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hit by a falling tree outside Baton Rouge.

Pamela Mitchell said Monday she was thinking about leaving New Orleans until power returned, but her 14-year-old daughter, Michelle, was determined to stay and was preparing to clean out the fridge and put perishables in an ice chest.

Mitchell had already spent a hot and frightening night at home while Ida's winds shrieked, and she thought the family could tough it out.

"We went a week before, with Zeta," she said, recalling an outage during the hurricane that hit the city last fall.

Other residents of the city were relying on generators — or neighbors who had them. Hank Fanberg said both of his neighbors had offered him access to their generators. He also had a plan for food.

"I have a gas grill and charcoal grill," he said.

The hurricane blew ashore on the 16th anniversary of Katrina, the 2005 storm that breached New Orleans' levees, devastated the city and was blamed for 1,800 deaths.

This time, New Orleans escaped the catastrophic flooding some had feared. But city officials still urged people who evacuated to stay away for at least a couple of days because of the lack of power and fuel.

The U.S. Environmental Protection Agency issued emergency fuel waivers for Louisiana and Mississippi, effective immediately, on Monday night. It will end on Sept. 16.

Some places were also dealing with water problems. Eighteen water systems were out, impacting more than 312,000 people, and an additional 14 systems affecting another 329,000 people were under boil water advisories, Edwards said Monday.

The hurricane twisted and collapsed a giant tower that carries key transmission lines over the Mississippi River to the New Orleans area, causing widespread outages, Entergy and local authorities said. The power company said more than 2,000 miles of transmission lines were out of service, along with 216 substations. The tower had survived Katrina.

The storm also flattened utility poles, toppled trees onto power lines and caused transformers to explode.

In Mississippi's southwestern corner, entire neighborhoods were surrounded by floodwaters, and many roads were impassable. Several tornadoes were reported, including a suspected twister in Saraland, Alabama, that ripped part of the roof off a motel and flipped an 18-wheeler, injuring the driver, according to the National Weather Service.

Reeves reported from LaPlace, Louisiana. Associated Press writers Janet McConnaughey and Kevin McGill in New Orleans; Melinda Deslatte in Baton Rouge; Sudhin Thanawala in Atlanta; and Jeffrey Collins in Columbia, South Carolina, contributed to this report.

Last troops exit Afghanistan, ending America's longest war

By ROBERT BURNS and LOLITA C. BALDOR Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — The United States has completed its withdrawal from Afghanistan, ending America's longest war and closing a chapter in military history likely to be remembered for colossal failures, unfulfilled promises and a frantic final exit that cost the lives of more than 180 Afghans and 13 U.S. service members, some barely older than the war.

Hours ahead of President Joe Biden's Tuesday deadline for shutting down a final airlift, and thus ending the U.S. war, Air Force transport planes carried a remaining contingent of troops from Kabul airport late Monday. Thousands of troops had spent a harrowing two weeks protecting the airlift of tens of thousands of Afghans, Americans and others seeking to escape a country once again ruled by Taliban militants.

In announcing the completion of the evacuation and war effort. Gen. Frank McKenzie, head of U.S. Central Command, said the last planes took off from Kabul airport at 3:29 p.m. Washington time, or one minute before midnight in Kabul. He said a number of American citizens, likely numbering in "the very low hundreds," were left behind, and that he believes they will still be able to leave the country.

Secretary of State Antony Blinken put the number of Americans left behind at under 200, "likely closer

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to 100," and said the State Department would keep working to get them out. He praised the military-led evacuation as heroic and historic and said the U.S. diplomatic presence would shift to Doha, Qatar.

Biden said military commanders unanimously favored ending the airlift, not extending it. He said he asked Blinken to coordinate with international partners in holding the Taliban to their promise of safe passage for Americans and others who want to leave in the days ahead.

The airport had become a U.S.-controlled island, a last stand in a 20-year war that claimed more than 2,400 American lives.

The closing hours of the evacuation were marked by extraordinary drama. American troops faced the daunting task of getting final evacuees onto planes while also getting themselves and some of their equipment out, even as they monitored repeated threats — and at least two actual attacks — by the Islamic State group's Afghanistan affiliate. A suicide bombing on Aug. 26 killed 13 American service members and some 169 Afghans. More died in various incidents during the airport evacuation.

The final pullout fulfilled Biden's pledge to end what he called a "forever war" that began in response to the attacks of Sept. 11, 2001, that killed nearly 3,000 people in New York, Washington and rural Pennsylvania. His decision, announced in April, reflected a national weariness of the Afghanistan conflict. Now he faces criticism at home and abroad, not so much for ending the war as for his handling of a final evacuation that unfolded in chaos and raised doubts about U.S. credibility.

The U.S. war effort at times seemed to grind on with no endgame in mind, little hope for victory and minimal care by Congress for the way tens of billions of dollars were spent for two decades. The human cost piled up — tens of thousands of Americans injured in addition to the dead.

More than 1,100 troops from coalition countries and more than 100,000 Afghan forces and civilians died, according to Brown University's Costs of War project.

In Biden's view the war could have ended 10 years ago with the U.S. killing of Osama bin Laden, whose al-Qaida extremist network planned and executed the 9/11 plot from an Afghanistan sanctuary. Al-Qaida has been vastly diminished, preventing it thus far from again attacking the United States.

Congressional committees, whose interest in the war waned over the years, are expected to hold public hearings on what went wrong in the final months of the U.S. withdrawal. Why, for example, did the administration not begin earlier the evacuation of American citizens as well as Afghans who had helped the U.S. war effort and felt vulnerable to retribution by the Taliban?

It was not supposed to end this way. The administration's plan, after declaring its intention to withdraw all combat troops, was to keep the U.S. Embassy in Kabul open, protected by a force of about 650 U.S. troops, including a contingent that would secure the airport along with partner countries. Washington planned to give the now-defunct Afghan government billions more to prop up its army.

Biden now faces doubts about his plan to prevent al-Qaida from regenerating in Afghanistan and of suppressing threats posed by other extremist groups such as the Islamic State group's Afghanistan affiliate. The Taliban are enemies of the Islamic State group but retain links to a diminished al-Qaida.

The final U.S. exit included the withdrawal of its diplomats, although the State Department has left open the possibility of resuming some level of diplomacy with the Taliban depending on how they conduct themselves in establishing a government and adhering to international pleas for the protection of human rights.

The speed with which the Taliban captured Kabul on Aug. 15 caught the Biden administration by surprise. It forced the U.S. to empty its embassy and frantically accelerate an evacuation effort that featured an extraordinary airlift executed mainly by the U.S. Air Force, with American ground forces protecting the airfield. The airlift began in such chaos that a number of Afghans died on the airfield, including at least one who attempted to cling to the airframe of a C-17 transport plane as it sped down the runway.

By the evacuation's conclusion, well over 100,000 people, mostly Afghans, had been flown to safety. The dangers of carrying out such a mission came into tragic focus last week when the suicide bomber struck outside an airport gate.

Speaking shortly after that attack, Biden stuck to his view that ending the war was the right move. He said it was past time for the United States to focus on threats emanating from elsewhere in the world.

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"Ladies and gentlemen," he said, "it was time to end a 20-year war."

The war's start was an echo of a promise President George W. Bush made while standing atop of the rubble in New York City three days after hijacked airliners slammed into the twin towers of the World Trade Center.

"The people who knocked these buildings down will hear all of us soon!" he declared through a bullhorn.

Less than a month later, on Oct. 7, Bush launched the war. The Taliban's forces were overwhelmed and Kabul fell in a matter of weeks. A U.S.-installed government led by Hamid Karzai took over and bin Laden and his al-Qaida cohort escaped across the border into Pakistan.

The initial plan was to extinguish bin Laden's al-Qaida, which had used Afghanistan as a staging base for its attack on the United States. The grander ambition was to fight a "Global War on Terrorism" based on the belief that military force could somehow defeat Islamic extremism. Afghanistan was but the first round of that fight. Bush chose to make Iraq the next, invading in 2003 and getting mired in an even deadlier conflict that made Afghanistan a secondary priority until Barack Obama assumed the White House in 2009 and later that year decided to escalate in Afghanistan.

Obama pushed U.S. troop levels to 100,000, but the war dragged on though bin Laden was killed in Pakistan in 2011.

When Donald Trump entered the White House in 2017 he wanted to withdraw from Afghanistan but was persuaded not only to stay but to add several thousand U.S. troops and escalate attacks on the Taliban. Two years later his administration was looking for a deal with the Taliban, and in February 2020 the two sides signed an agreement that called for a complete U.S. withdrawal by May 2021. In exchange, the Taliban made a number of promises including a pledge not to attack U.S. troops.

Biden weighed advice from members of his national security team who argued for retaining the 2,500 troops who were in Afghanistan by the time he took office in January. But in mid-April he announced his decision to fully withdraw.

The Taliban pushed an offensive that by early August toppled key cities, including provincial capitals. The Afghan army largely collapsed, sometimes surrendering rather than taking a final stand, and shortly after President Ashraf Ghani fled the capital, the Taliban rolled into Kabul and assumed control on Aug. 15.

Some parts of the country modernized during the U.S. war years, and life for many Afghans, especially women and girls, improved measurably. But Afghanistan remains a tragedy, poor, unstable and with many of its people fearing a return to the brutality the country endured when the Taliban ruled from 1996 to 2001.

The U.S. failures were numerous. It degraded but never defeated the Taliban and ultimately failed to build an Afghan military that could hold off the insurgents, despite \$83 billion in U.S. spending to train and equip the army.

Analysis: War is over but not Biden's Afghanistan challenges

By AAMER MADHANI and ZEKE MILLER Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — With the final stream of U.S. cargo planes soaring over the peaks of the Hindu Kush, President Joe Biden fulfilled a campaign promise to end America's longest war, one it could not win.

But as the war ended with a chaotic, bloody evacuation that left stranded hundreds of U.S. citizens and thousands of Afghans who had aided the American war effort, the president kept notably out of sight. He left it to a senior military commander and his secretary of state to tell Americans about the final moments of a conflict that ended in resounding American defeat.

Biden, for his part, issued a written statement praising U.S. troops who oversaw the airlift of more than 120,000 Afghans, U.S. citizens and allies for their "unmatched courage, professionalism, and resolve." He said he would have more to say on Tuesday.

"Now, our 20-year military presence in Afghanistan has ended," Biden said in his statement.

The muted reaction was informed by a tough reality: The war may be over, but Biden's Afghanistan problem is not.

The president still faces daunting challenges born of the hasty end of the war, including how to help

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extract as many as 200 Americans and thousands of Afghans left behind, the resettlement of tens of thousands of refugees who were able to flee, and coming congressional scrutiny over how, despite increasingly fraught warnings, the administration was caught flat-footed by the rapid collapse of the Afghan government.

Through the withdrawal, Biden showed himself willing to endure what his advisers hope will be short-term pain for resisting bipartisan and international pressure to extend his Aug. 31 deadline for ending the American military evacuation effort. For more than a decade, Biden has believed in the futility of the conflict and maintained that the routing of Afghanistan's military by the Taliban was a delayed, if unwelcome, vindication.

Turning the page on Afghanistan is a crucial foreign policy objective for Biden, who repeatedly has made the case for redirecting American attention toward growing challenges posed by adversaries China and Russia — and for shifting America's counterterrorism focus to areas with more potent threats.

But in his effort to end the war and reset U.S. priorities, Biden may have also undercut a central premise of his 2020 White House campaign: a promise to usher in an era of greater empathy and collaboration with allies in America's foreign policy after four years of President Donald Trump's "America first" approach.

"For someone who made his name as an empathetic leader, he's appeared ... as quite rational, even cold-hearted, in his pursuit of this goal" to end the war, said Jason Lyall, an associate professor of government at Dartmouth College.

Allies — including lawmakers from Britain, France, and Germany — chafed at Biden's insistence on holding fast to the Aug. 31 deadline as they struggled to evacuate their citizens and Afghan allies. Armin Laschet, the leading conservative candidate to succeed Angela Merkel as Germany's chancellor, called it the "biggest debacle that NATO has suffered since its founding."

At home, Republican lawmakers have called for an investigation into the Biden administration's handling of the evacuation, and even Democrats have backed inquiries into what went wrong in the fateful last months of the occupation.

And at the same time, the massive suicide bombing in the final days of the evacuation that killed 13 U.S. troops and more than 180 Afghans is raising fresh concern about Afghanistan again becoming a breeding ground for terrorists.

Biden blamed his predecessor, Trump, for tying his hands. He repeatedly reminded people that he had inherited an agreement the Republican administration made with the Taliban to withdraw U.S. forces by May of this year. Reneging on the deal, Biden argued, would have put U.S. troops — who before Thursday had gone since February 2020 without a combat fatality in the war — in the Taliban's crosshairs once again.

The Democratic president's advisers also complained that the now-ousted Afghan government led by Ashraf Ghani was resistant to finding a political compromise with the Taliban and made strategic blunders by spreading largely feckless Afghan security forces too thinly.

Republicans — and even a few Democratic allies — have offered withering criticism of the administration's handling of the evacuation, an issue that the GOP is looking to weaponize against Biden.

House Minority Leader Kevin McCarthy, R-Calif., said Monday the withdrawal date set by Biden was a political one designed for a photo op. Absent from McCarthy's criticism was any mention that it was Trump's White House that had brokered the deal to end the war.

"There was a moment in time that had this president listened to his military, there would still be terrorist prisoners inside Bagram, we would be getting every single American out, the military would not have left before the Americans," McCarthy said. "Every crisis he has faced so far in this administration he has failed."

It remains to be seen if criticism of Biden's handling of Afghanistan will resonate with voters. An Associated Press-NORC poll conducted earlier in August found that about 6 in 10 Americans said the war there was not worth fighting.

An ABC News/Ipsos poll conducted Aug. 27-28 found about 6 in 10 Americans disapproving of Biden's handling of the situation in Afghanistan. That poll also found most said the U.S. should remain in Afghanistan until all Americans and Afghans who aided the U.S. had been evacuated. The poll did not ask whether people approved of withdrawal more generally.

After backing the 2001 U.S. invasion, Biden became a skeptic of U.S. nation-building efforts and harbored

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deep doubts about the Afghan government's ability to develop the capacity to sustain itself.

His opposition to the 2009 "surge" of U.S. troops deployed to Afghanistan when he was vice president put him on the losing side of conflicts with the defense establishment and within the Obama administration. Biden, in recent weeks, told aides that he viewed his counsel against expanding the American involvement more than a decade ago to be one of his proudest moments in public life.

But his tendency to speak in absolutes didn't help his cause.

In July, Biden pushed back at concerns that a Taliban takeover of the country would be inevitable. Weeks later, the group toppled the Afghan government.

The president also expressed confidence that Americans would not see images reminiscent of the U.S. evacuation from Vietnam at the end of that war in 1975, when photos of helicopters evacuating people from the roof of the U.S. Embassy in Saigon became gripping symbols of U.S. failure.

In fact, they saw images of desperate Afghans swarming the Kabul airport — at least one falling to his death after clinging to a departing U.S. aircraft.

Biden told ABC News' George Stephanopoulos during an Aug. 18 interview that the U.S. military objective in Afghanistan was to get "everyone" out, including Americans and Afghan allies and their families. He pledged American forces would stay until they accomplished that mission.

But Secretary of State Antony Blinken said Monday that there was "a small number of Americans, under 200, likely closer to 100, who remain in Afghanistan and still want to leave."

The swift military evacuation now yields to a murkier diplomatic operation to press the Taliban to allow Americans and their allies to depart peacefully by other means.

Biden believes he has some leverage over the Taliban, former U.S. enemies turned into pragmatic partners, as Afghanistan faces an economic crisis with the freezing of most foreign aid. But U.S. commanders say the situation in Afghanistan could become even more chaotic in the coming weeks and months.

EDITOR'S NOTE — Aamer Madhani has covered the White House for The Associated Press since 2019. Zeke Miller has covered the White House since 2012.

Associated Press writers Calvin Woodward, Kevin Freking and Emily Swanson contributed to this report.

Taliban declare victory from Kabul airport, promise security

By KATHY GANNON and TAMEEM AKHGAR Associated Press

KABUL, Afghanistan (AP) — The Taliban triumphantly marched into Kabul's international airport on Tuesday, hours after the final U.S. troop withdrawal that ended America's longest war. Standing on the tarmac, Taliban leaders pledged to secure the country, quickly reopen the airport and grant amnesty to former opponents.

In a show of control, turbaned Taliban leaders were flanked by the insurgents' elite Badri unit as they walked across the tarmac. The commandos in camouflage uniforms proudly posed for photos.

Getting the airport running again is just one of the sizeable challenges the Taliban face in governing a nation of 38 million people that for two decades had survived on billions of dollars in foreign aid.

"Afghanistan is finally free," Hekmatullah Wasiq, a top Taliban official, told The Associated Press on the tarmac. "The military and civilian side (of the airport) are with us and in control. Hopefully, we will be announcing our Cabinet. Everything is peaceful. Everything is safe."

Wasiq also urged people to return to work and reiterated the Taliban pledge offering a general amnesty. "People have to be patient," he said. "Slowly we will get everything back to normal. It will take time."

Just hours earlier, the U.S. military had wrapped up its largest airlift of non-combatants in history.

On Tuesday morning, signs of the chaos of recent days were still visible. In the terminal, rifled luggage and clothes were strewn across the ground, alongside wads of documents. Concertina wire stills separated areas while overturned cars and parked vehicles blocked routes around the civilian airport — a sign of measures taken to protect against possible suicide car bombers entering the facility.

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Vehicles carrying the Taliban raced back and forth along the Hamid Karzai International Airport's sole runway on the military side of the airfield. Before dawn broke, heavily armed Taliban fighters walked through hangars, passing some of the seven CH-46 helicopters the State Department used in its evacuations before rendering them unusable.

Taliban spokesman Zabihullah Mujahid addressed the gathered members of the Badri unit. "I hope you be very cautious in dealing with the nation," he said. "Our nation has suffered war and invasion and the people do not have more tolerance."

At the end of his remarks, the Badri fighters shouted: "God is the greatest!"

In an interview with Afghan state television, Mujahid also discussed restarting operations at the airport, which remains a key way out for those wanting to leave the country.

"Our technical team will be checking the technical and logistical needs of the airport," he said. "If we are able to fix everything on our own, then we won't need any help. If there is need for technical or logistics help to repair the destruction, then we might ask help from Qatar or Turkey."

He didn't elaborate on what was destroyed.

Marine Gen. Frank McKenzie, the head of U.S. military's Central Command, earlier said troops disabled 27 Humvees and 73 aircraft so they cannot be used again. He said troops did not blow up equipment needed for eventually restarting airport operations.

The airport had seen chaotic and deadly scenes since the Taliban blitzed across Afghanistan and took Kabul on Aug. 15. Thousands of Afghans besieged the airport, some falling to their death after desperately hanging onto the side of an American C-17 military cargo jet. Last week, an Islamic State suicide attack at an airport gate killed at least 169 Afghans and 13 U.S. service members.

During the evacuation, U.S. forces helped evacuate over 120,000 U.S. citizens, foreigners and Afghans, according to the White House. Coalition forces also evacuated their citizens and Afghans. But for all who got out, foreign nations and the U.S. acknowledged they didn't evacuate all who wanted to go.

On Tuesday, after a night that saw the Taliban fire triumphantly into the air, guards now blearily on duty kept out the curious and those still somehow hoping to catch a flight out.

"After 20 years we have defeated the Americans," said Mohammad Islam, a Taliban guard at the airport from Logar province, cradling a Kalashnikov rifle. "They have left and now our country is free."

"It's clear what we want. We want Shariah (Islamic law), peace and stability," he added.

Zalmay Khalilzad, the U.S. special representative who oversaw America's talks with the Taliban, wrote on Twitter that "Afghans face a moment of decision & opportunity" after the withdrawal.

"Their country's future is in their hands. They will choose their path in full sovereignty," he wrote. "This is the chance to bring their war to an end as well."

But the Taliban face what could be a series of major crises as they fully take over the government. The majority of the billions of dollars Afghanistan holds in foreign reserves is now frozen in America, pressuring its now-depreciating Afghani currency. Banks have implemented withdrawal controls, fearing runs on their deposits in the uncertainty. Civil servants across the country say they haven't received their salary in months.

Abdul Maqsood, a traffic police officer for the past 10 years on duty near the airport, said he hadn't paid for the past four months.

"We keep coming to work but we are not getting paid," he said.

Medical equipment remains in short supply, while thousands who fled the Taliban's advance remain living in squalid conditions. A major drought also has cut into the country's food supplies, making its imports even more important and raising the risk of people going hungry.

Also in question are the rights of women, who faced oppression under the Taliban's earlier rule.

Schools have reopened, and on Tuesday morning dozens of elementary school students headed to schools in a neighborhood near the airport. The Taliban have ordered schools to be segregated but it is often not enforced for younger children.

"I am not afraid of the Taliban," said Masooda, a fifth-grade student.

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

Displaced by Ida: Low on funds, family of 7 looks for refuge

By LEAH WILLINGHAM Associated Press/Report for America

For Shelly Savoie, time is running out at the Motel 6 in Bossier City, Louisiana. So are diapers and dollars.

Savoie and her family of six fled their home in a New Orleans suburb on the West Bank of the Mississippi river as powerful Hurricane Ida hit the region, knocking out power for thousands, destroying homes and flooding streets. But the immediate relief she felt at having been able to escape the storm's destruction has given way to numerous anxieties.

Savoie's biggest concern is that she will run out of money. She thought she would only have to stay in a hotel for about three nights. Now she's discovered that widespread power outages across the state — including in Jefferson Parish, where she lives — might not be resolved for weeks. She also found out that the ceiling of her home partially caved in when Ida passed through and that tree limbs fell on the house and across her yard.

"I'm on edge, definitely," Savoie told The Associated Press on Monday in Facebook messages written during a break from making calls to the Red Cross. "I'm trying to stay calm, especially around the kids."

It's not easy. Savoie is afraid she could lose her job: The phone agent for two major retail stores left her computer at home when she rushed out with her 2-year-old twin daughters; her 11-year-old son; her 17-year-old daughter and the daughter's 18-year-old boyfriend; and the young couple's 6-month-old son.

"If I'm unable to work after so long, they let you go," she said.

While displaced, Savoie's 17-year-old, Ressa, is missing school, where she is studying forensic science. Ressa's boyfriend, Timothy, is also missing school, where he is working to get his HVAC license, as well as his job working nights at a supermarket.

Thousands of people with the resources to do so fled before Ida — one of the most powerful hurricanes ever to strike the U.S. — roared ashore in Louisiana on Sunday. But many without the funds for gas or a hotel room were left behind.

Savoie, 39, said she tried to plan ahead to get herself, the babies and the three teenagers out of harm's way. She booked a room at Motel 6 three days ahead of time, and they all loaded into her small SUV on Saturday with just a few outfits apiece and some cash, "thinking we would return quickly after."

With limited resources, staying at a hotel for much longer is not really an option. Savoie said she's also going to run out of diapers soon.

Savoie said she applied for assistance for her family through the Federal Emergency Management Agency on Monday, but had not heard back. She was able to finally get through to the Red Cross after multiple calls and an hour on hold, but was told the agency could only help her if she made it to a shelter.

Staying at a shelter is something Savoie is trying desperately to avoid at a time when the delta variant of the coronavirus is raging through Louisiana, a state with one of the highest rates of new virus cases per capita and one of the lowest vaccination rates in the U.S.

"Shelters are not COVID-safe," she said. "I'd rather sleep in my car."

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

EXPLAINER: Around Tahoe, special places await a fire's fate

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By TOM VERDIN Associated Press

SACRAMENTO, Calif. (AP) — As the winds returned this week, the Caldor Fire roared over the Sierra crest and bore down on the southern end of Lake Tahoe. Perhaps more than with other wildfires in the Western U.S., this one resonates the world over. Tahoe is an international destination, a glorious wedding backdrop, a sparkling jewel in John Muir's Range of Light.

The postcard photos of Emerald Bay are as iconic as those of another famous California landmark, the Golden Gate Bridge.

But Tahoe, and the granite ridges and forests and rivers around it, is more than that. To millions of Northern Californians, the region is as familiar as the backyard — less than two hours from the Sacramento metro area and its 2.3 million people and another hour (depending on traffic) from the San Francisco Bay Area.

In a typical summer, the wide path of destruction already cut by the Caldor Fire through the Eldorado National Forest would be filled with day hikers, backpackers, campers, kayakers and paddle boarders. Vacation cabins along the South Fork of the American River, many of which are now reduced to ash, would be filled with families from Sacramento, the Bay Area and beyond. Similar cabins that fill the woods on the outskirts of South Lake Tahoe await their fate amid the red flag warnings of the coming days.

Because the region means so much to so many, the Caldor Fire has captured the attention of Californians and others with a special connection to the region like no other in recent memory.

WHERE HAS THE FIRE ALREADY BURNED

The immediate danger is to South Lake Tahoe, the city of 22,000 that straddles the border between California and Nevada and is in the Caldor Fire's path.

Before its run over the Sierra at Echo Summit, the fire had already destroyed hundreds of homes where it originated in the Sierra foothills and churned through tens of thousands of thickly forested acres along the Highway 50 corridor, one of the two main routes between Sacramento and Lake Tahoe.

The news here is not all bad. Over the weekend, before the Caldor Fire began its run toward Tahoe, fire crews prevented major damage to Sierra-at-Tahoe Ski Resort. Unpretentious and comparatively affordable, it's beloved for its "certified unserious" vibe and lower-cost season passes that have made it popular for parents who want to teach their kids to ski or snowboard without having to pay college tuition-like prices.

Fire crews also saved Camp Sacramento, a 100-year-old family camp run by the city on Forest Service land just down the highway from the ski resort. Families have come every summer for two, three, even four generations to the old school camp (a cabin with an electrical outlet is considered a luxury). It's where kids line up to ring the camp bell before meal time and then gather in age groups as Minnows, Chipmunks or Marmots for tie dye, archery, the Puppy Love hike.

Farther up Highway 50, near the top of Echo Summit, is the Echo Chalet, a cluster of summer cabins dating to the 1940s that was in the path of the flames before being evacuated. It's perhaps best known for providing a water taxi across Twin Lake to a trailhead into the Desolation Wilderness, a popular backcountry of granite and lakes that was shaped by glaciers and now is being tested by fire.

WHAT IS SOUTH LAKE TAHOE

South shore is a split screen. On one, the high-rise casinos of the Nevada side and their gambling crowds. On New Year's Eve, at least pre-pandemic, they gave one heck of a street party. Heavenly Resort straddles both states and is renowned for its powder skiing, iconic lake views and — perhaps because of proximity — party atmosphere.

But South Lake Tahoe has another side. Most of the year-round residents would not consider themselves glitzy or glamorous. They are casinos workers, wait staff, bar tenders, ski instructors, construction workers, Forest Service or state park employees.

The median household income of roughly \$49,000 is just 65% of the statewide median. Rents and home prices have soared during the pandemic, squeezing the working class and middle-income residents who make up the bulk of the town's population. Besides the tourists, these are the evacuees who have packed up and fled as the Caldor Fire threatens.

WHAT REMAINS IN THE FIRE'S PATH

Like the monstrous Dixie Fire that ignited before it, the Caldor Fire continues to confound and outpace a

massive firefighting force. It already has taken an unusual path by burning up to and over the Sierra crest. As it burns ever closer to South Lake Tahoe, it threatens to consume landmarks, campgrounds, summer cabins and places cherished by generations of visitors.

Fallen Leaf Lake, another cerulean postcard, is home to a Forest Service campground (upgraded with yurts), cabins and a summer conference center for Stanford University. Camp Richardson is a lakeshore stretch of cabins and tents (and an ice cream parlor that may be the most popular in Tahoe) that traces its earliest days as a resort to the turn of the last century and is a summer tradition for thousands. At Emerald Bay, if the fire gets that far, is Vikingsholm, a replica of a Scandinavian castle that has survived for nearly a century and now is part of a state park. As if in defiance of California's ever-worsening wildfire season, it has a traditional sod roof.

If the Caldor Fire were to reach Emerald Bay, it would first have to tear through one of the most popular hiking trails in all of Tahoe — the Eagle Falls Trail. In non-drought years, snowmelt tumbles down from the Sierra crest and eventually cascades over boulders just above Emerald Bay, providing a strikingly sublime photo for tourists from around the world each summer.

This summer, that postcard picture is one of smoke and fire and fear. The Range of Light has burst into a range of flame, and so far there is no stopping it.

Ida inundates areas around New Orleans while sparing city

By JAY REEVES Associated Press

LAPLACE, La. (AP) — Debbie Greco and her family cowered on a stairway landing as Hurricane Ida sent 4 feet (1.2 meters) of muddy water rushing into her home in LaPlace along the west side of Lake Pontchartrain.

She and her son had safely rescued her elderly parents from their home down the street Sunday. But now they prayed the roof would not collapse on all of them.

"God blessed us that we all survived," she said Monday after they were rescued by boat.

While New Orleans largely escaped catastrophic flooding during the storm, LaPlace and other nearby communities were not so lucky.

In LaPlace, Ida tore roofs off homes and flooded entire subdivisions. Residents retreated to their second floors or attics and took to social media to plead for boat rescues as the water rose.

That assistance came on Monday, when rescue trucks and boats on trailers took people to safety. Other residents got to dry ground by wading through knee-deep water carrying pets and other belongings.

Dozens of people pulled pieces of chimneys, gutters and other parts of their homes to the curb.

"My dreams are destroyed," said John Vincent, 65, another LaPlace resident. "I mean, at my age I've got to start all over."

New Orleans' levee system — overhauled at a cost of billions of dollars after Hurricane Katrina breached it — held up against Ida's rampage. Ida struck on the 16th anniversary of Katrina, which devastated the city and was blamed for 1,800 deaths in 2005.

But in LaPlace, work only recently began on a long-awaited levee project that isn't expected to be completed until 2024.

The working-class city of close to 30,000 people sits between the Mississippi River and Lake Pontchartrain, a 640-square mile (1,658-square kilometer) estuary. It's part of a stretch of communities along the river between metro New Orleans and Baton Rouge that is home to major chemical companies and refineries.

Flooding also devastated the community of Crown Point about 17 miles (27km) south of New Orleans, where rescue crews deployed high-water trucks and swamp boats. Wayne Templet got friends and pets in the area to safety in his truck and said the storm was "adding stress to an already stressful life."

In Lafitte, a small community south of Crown Point, even homes on stilts were flooded and residents had to use boats to navigate the submerged streets and retrieve their belongings. And in Houma, a city of about 30,000 people southwest of New Orleans, Ida's winds had stripped the roofs off of businesses, apartment complexes and single-family homes.

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Louisiana Gov. John Bel Edwards said Monday the Louisiana National Guard alone rescued 191 people across St. John the Baptist, Jefferson and Orleans parishes by boat, helicopter and high-water vehicle. The state would soon transition to a door-to-door search of the hardest-hit areas to determine whether anyone needs assistance, he said.

Many homes that did not flood or suffer other damage were still without electricity, and officials warned it could be weeks before the power grid is repaired.

More than 1 million customers in Louisiana and Mississippi — including all of New Orleans — were left in the dark. Eighteen water systems were also out, impacting more than 312,000 people, and an additional 14 systems affecting another 329,000 people were under boil water advisories, Edwards said.

He urged evacuees not to try to return home, citing the widespread power outages, road closures and other dangerous conditions.

"There are an awful lot of unknowns right now. There are certainly more questions than answers," he said. "I can't tell you when power is going to be restored. I can't tell you when all the debris is going to be cleaned up and repairs made and so forth."

Ida's 150 mph (230 kph) winds tied it for the fifth-strongest hurricane ever to hit the mainland.

Some residents vowed to rebuild after the storm, but Greco and her father, Fred Carmouche, said they are tired of the constant hurricane fears on the Gulf Coast.

"When I rebuild this I'm out of here. I'm done with Louisiana," Carmouche, 85, said.

Associated Press reporters Stacey Plaisance in Crown Point, David J. Phillip in Lafitte, Kevin McGill in New Orleans and Sudhin Thanawala in Atlanta contributed to this report.

Cuomo legal woes continue, could cost public at least \$9.5M

By MARINA VILLENEUVE Associated Press

ALBANY, N.Y. (AP) — Resigning from office probably didn't end former Gov. Andrew Cuomo's legal problems, and no matter what happens next, taxpayers are likely to wind up with a hefty bill.

The state has already agreed to pay up to \$9.5 million to lawyers representing and investigating Cuomo and his administration over sexual harassment allegations and other matters, according to The Associated Press' review of available contracts.

That figure — which represents the maximum amount that could be spent, not actual bills submitted so far — includes up to \$5 million for lawyers who have represented Cuomo's office, up to \$3.5 million for lawyers hired by the state attorney general to investigate sexual harassment allegations against the Democrat, and at least \$1 million in bills for lawyers hired by the legislature as part of an impeachment investigation. It doesn't include the legal fees of Cuomo's private attorney, Rita Glavin, whose bills are being paid by his campaign committee.

Cuomo's successor, Gov. Kathy Hochul, can decide whether the state will continue to pay lawyers to defend the former governor and his administration going forward.

Cuomo, a Democrat, and his administration face the possibility of civil lawsuits from women who have accused him of sexual harassment. The Albany sheriff is investigating a groping allegation. The state attorney general is looking into Cuomo's use of state employees to help with a book he wrote. Federal prosecutors are investigating his administration's handling of nursing home death data. He's also facing a state ethics commission inquiry.

"We will be reviewing all legal contracts and making appropriate decisions on the need for legal representation and whether to continue any contracts," Hochul's spokesperson, Haley Viccaro, said.

Cuomo resigned from office following an investigation overseen by Attorney General Letitia James that concluded he sexually harassed 11 women. Cuomo — who denies touching anyone inappropriately or intending to make suggestive comments — accused the women of exaggerating or misinterpreting his behavior.

At least one woman, Lindsey Boylan, has said she intends to sue the ex-governor "and his co-conspirators"

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over their conduct. The investigation found Cuomo aides retaliated against Boylan. The former senior aide testified Cuomo touched her waist, legs and back, made inappropriate comments calling her attractive, suggested they play strip poker on a plane, and once gave her an unwanted kiss on the lips.

Other suits seem likely.

An attorney for another accuser, Charlotte Bennett, who said Cuomo asked questions about her personal life that led her to believe he was pursuing a sexual relationship with her, suggested the state has an obligation to compensate the women in order to avoid "costly and lengthy" litigation.

"I believe if there is going to be any kind of appropriate conclusion to this, it has to be to make the victims of his misconduct whole," Debra Katz, attorney for former Cuomo aide Charlotte Bennett, said.

If Cuomo or the state is sued over his alleged conduct, the public could wind up covering legal fees and any settlement — normally, individuals sued over their conduct as state employees are defended on the state's dime.

Cuomo, however, could also face individual liability if a court concludes he did something wrong.

As governor, he signed a law that obligates state employees who commit sexual harassment on the job to reimburse the state for any judgements paid out because of their wrongdoing.

The attorney general's office may play a role in deciding whether to cover Cuomo's legal fees, said Andrew Celli, who was a former civil rights bureau chief in the office under then-Attorney General Eliot Spitzer.

"Whatever he does in his next life, he needs to be able to pay those lawyers and direct them and it's going to be expensive and time-consuming," Celli said.

Cuomo could also potentially dip into his \$18 million campaign war chest to pay legal costs, including a judgment.

"If a private person sues him and it relates to his public office or his previous campaigns, then he can use campaign funds to pay lawyers," veteran elections lawyer Jerry Goldfeder, former Special Counsel for Public Integrity to then-Attorney General Cuomo, said.

If Cuomo winds up facing criminal charges over a groping allegation made by a former aide, he would likely have to pay for his own defense lawyer. But under state law, he could seek reimbursement from the state if he were to be acquitted on the grounds that the allegations had to do with his job.

That's what happened after former state Senate Majority Leader Joseph Bruno's acquittal in a fraud trial. The state reimbursed Bruno for \$2.4 million in legal fees that were originally paid for by his campaign.

Osaka wins US Open return, hopes to 'believe more in myself'

By HOWARD FENDRICH AP Tennis Writer

NEW YORK (AP) — Here's the realization Naomi Osaka came to, gradually and only recently: If other people think a lot of her, she probably should, too.

"Hearing a little kid telling me that I'm their favorite player or I'm a role model, instinctively the first thought in my mind is, like, 'Why?'" Osaka explained as Monday turned to Tuesday after a successful start to her U.S. Open title defense. "I feel like I have to sort of embrace more ... the honor that they're telling me that, and I should believe more in myself. I feel like if you don't believe in yourself, then other people won't believe in yourself."

During her return to Grand Slam action after a mental health break — an at-times-dominant 6-4, 6-1 victory over 87th-ranked Marie Bouzkova of the Czech Republic — Osaka heard the high-pitched voice of one such "little kid" in Arthur Ashe Stadium.

When the match ended, Osaka went over with a little gift: one of the Olympic pins athletes collect.

With a bit of self-deprecation, Osaka noted that she didn't stick around at the Tokyo Games long enough to trade away all of those mini-souvenirs (a native of host country Japan, she was granted the honor of lighting the cauldron at the opening ceremony, then lost her third-round match).

The Summer Olympics marked her first competition anywhere since May 30 at the French Open.

That day, Osaka skipped her mandatory news conference after her first-round victory in Paris, drawing a \$15,000 fine and a warning from the heads of the Slams that she could face a suspension. She responded

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by pulling out of Roland Garros, explaining that she feels anxiety when speaking to the media and has dealt with depression for years. Osaka then sat out Wimbledon, too.

The 23-year-old is clearly introspective and thoughtful, someone who is getting more and more used to sharing her innermost ideas with the rest of the world. In a social media post Sunday about ruminations on self-worth, Osaka wrote that she's "gonna try to celebrate myself and my accomplishments more, I think we all should" and that she "can't burden myself with (others') expectations anymore."

On Monday, she entered Ashe with her usual first-round Slam jitters, but not because of any sense of pressure to win, Osaka said afterward.

Instead, it was based on a desire to play well, especially for the loud and appreciative full house that was there a year after she won the title in a nearly empty arena because spectators were banned then amid the coronavirus pandemic.

"I tell people that I'm a perfectionist. I think for me, something that's less than perfection, even though it might be something great, is a disappointment. I don't really think that's a healthy way of thinking, so something that I really wanted to change," said the third-seeded Osaka, who next faces 145th-ranked Olga Danilovic.

"In this tournament I just want to be happy with knowing that I did my best and knowing that even though I didn't play perfect, I was able to win a match in two sets. ... It's more like a life thing," she continued. "Like, I hope I can keep this mindset throughout my life going forward."

Maybe she wasn't perfect against Bouzkova, who is now 1-11 in Slam matches. After all, the score was 4-all in the early going. From there, though, Osaka reeled off eight of the last nine games.

Helped by a serve that reached 120 mph, she saved all eight break points she faced and accumulated a 34-10 edge in total winners.

"Last year, when we didn't have a crowd, I know it felt quite lonely for me," she said with a smile during her on-court interview. "I'm glad to see little kids in the audience — and, of course, grown-ups, too."

Osaka improved to 55-14 in matches at the majors, including 22-3 at the U.S. Open as she tries to become the first woman with consecutive trophies in New York since Serena Williams collected her third in a row in 2014.

Osaka beat Williams in the chaotic 2018 final in Ashe. She also has won hard-court major titles at the Australian Open in 2019 and this February.

"I've played a lot of matches on this court," Osaka told the Ashe fans. "Definitely, I feel really comfortable here."

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

Mormon vaccine push ratchets up, dividing faith's members

By SOPHIA EPPOLITO Associated Press/Report for America

SALT LAKE CITY (AP) — After more than a year of attending church virtually, Monique Allen has struggled to explain to her asthmatic daughter why people from their congregation of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints don't wear masks. Allen said she's taught her daughter that wearing a mask is Christlike, but now she worries her child feels like an outcast.

Church leaders recently issued their strongest statement yet urging people to "limit the spread" by getting COVID-19 vaccines and wearing masks, but Allen said she fears it's still not enough to convince the many families in her congregation who refuse to wear masks and have succumbed to anti-vaccine misinformation.

Members of the faith widely known as the Mormon church remain deeply divided on vaccines and mask-wearing despite consistent guidance from church leaders as the highly contagious delta variant of the coronavirus spreads.

About 65% of Latter-day Saints who responded to a recent survey said they were vaccine acceptors, meaning they've gotten at least one dose or plan to soon. Another 15% identified as hesitant, and 19% said they would not get the vaccine, according to the survey this summer from the Public Religion Research

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Institute, a polling organization based in Washington, and Interfaith Youth Core.

The survey found 79% of white Catholics and 56% of white Evangelical Protestants identified as vaccine acceptors.

Allen, a church member living in Wisconsin, is among a contingent who fear fellow members who refuse to get vaccinated are allowing their political views to supersede their loyalty to a faith that largely prioritizes unity and obedience.

The message she's shared with her 8-year-old daughter is that "of course Christ would wear a mask, of course he would get vaccinated because he's a loving person," she said. "And that's the only way you can take care of people these days is doing these simple things."

Other church members are upset that their leaders aren't letting them exercise their own decision-making about vaccines and masks. The Utah-based religion of 16 million members worldwide is one of many faiths grappling with how best to navigate the pandemic's lingering effects.

Divisions on masking and vaccinations in the Latter-day Saint faith appear to be tracking along political lines, with conservative members being more hesitant, said Patrick Mason, associate professor of religion at Utah State University. Mason said the church's divide is indicative of a larger pattern in the United States of political ideologies shaping people's religious commitments.

"The common perception of Mormons and Mormonism is that when church leaders speak, church members listen and do what they're told," said Mason. "This has revealed sometimes how conditional that loyalty can be."

The Latter-day Saint faith was one of the first to respond to the COVID-19 pandemic. In March 2020, church leaders suspended all church gatherings and closed temples. The church has also held three consecutive major conferences remotely since the pandemic began. The twice-yearly conference usually brings about 100,000 people to Salt Lake City over two days.

Many faith leaders have spoken in support of vaccinations, including Church President Russell M. Nelson, a former cardiologist who got the vaccine in January and encouraged members to follow his example.

Church-owned Brigham Young University in Utah has asked students to report their vaccination status but is not requiring vaccinations. Masks are required in classrooms and any indoor spaces where social distancing isn't possible.

The church is also requiring U.S. missionaries serving in foreign countries to be vaccinated.

Regarding masks at services, top church officials have said it's up to bishops to encourage people to follow local public health guidelines.

In mid-August, they went so far as to release a statement calling on members to get the vaccine, which they described as "safe and effective."

Among other denominations in the U.S., faith leaders have varied widely in how they address the issues of vaccinations and mask wearing. To a large extent, there has been vocal support for getting vaccinated — including from top leadership of conservative bodies such as the Southern Baptist Convention and the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops.

However, some Catholic prelates and evangelical pastors have been sharply critical of the the vaccine campaign and masking mandates, and others have shied away from addressing those issues for fear of angering some congregation members.

An August AP-NORC poll found that among white evangelicals, 51% are at least somewhat confident in the vaccines to be effective against variants, compared with 73% of Catholics, 66% of white mainline Protestants such as Presbyterians and Lutherans, 65% of nonwhite Protestants and 67% of the religiously unaffiliated.

Some Latter-day Saints have accused those who promote anti-vaccine rhetoric of apostasy, a term that is associated with wickedness and describes when individuals turn away from church principles.

Kristen Chevrier, co-founder of a Utah-based health freedom group that has advocated against vaccines, said the church should not be involved in health choices, and she worries people are being discriminated against based on their vaccine status.

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Chevrier, who is a member of the faith, said she rejects the idea that people who are anti-vaccine are apostates. She cited the church's history of encouraging members to seek their own personal revelations with God.

"How can we say that there's a blanket statement that applies to everyone regardless of their personal revelation," said Chevrier, who's based in American Fork, about 30 miles (50 kilometers) south of Salt Lake City.

Many members have voiced concerns on social media that pro-mask and pro-vaccine sentiments aren't shared by all regional church leadership, with some describing their experiences as "bishop roulette."

Unmasked bishops at an Idaho church read the statement from top church officials to the congregation, but only a few chose to start wearing masks.

One member, Marie Johnson, said she has been disappointed that so many in her community have heeded misinformation on social media rather than church leadership's continued calls for vaccination.

"You can find something on the internet to support any position you want to take," said Johnson. "Why would you choose the side that doesn't include your faith leader?"

But some churches began resuming masking practices even before the leaders' statement.

One Salt Lake City church has been encouraging vulnerable people to participate in meetings virtually and sent a message to congregants in early August recommending that everyone wear masks and get the vaccine.

"Our faith leaders have been so consistent from the very beginning," said Søren Simonsen, of Salt Lake City. "And to hear people say, 'This is a hoax, it doesn't matter, it's not affecting us,' when millions of people have died, it's heartbreaking."

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

California moves slowly on water projects amid drought

By ADAM BEAM Associated Press

SITES, Calif. (AP) — In 2014, in the middle of a severe drought that would test California's complex water storage system like never before, voters told the state to borrow \$7.5 billion and use part of it to build projects to stockpile more water.

Seven years later, that drought has come and gone, replaced by an even hotter and drier one that is draining the state's reservoirs at an alarming rate. But none of the more than half-dozen water storage projects scheduled to receive that money have been built.

The largest project by far is a proposed lake in Northern California, which would be the state's first new reservoir of significant size in more than 40 years. People have talked about building the Sites Reservoir since the 1950s. But the cost, plus shifting political priorities, stopped it from happening.

Now, a major drought gripping the western United States has put the project back in the spotlight. It's slated to get \$836 million in taxpayer money to help cover its \$3.9 billion price tag if project officials can meet a deadline by year's end. The Biden administration recently committed \$80 million to the reservoir, the largest appropriation of any water storage scheduled to receive funding next year.

And the project could get some of the \$1.15 billion included in an infrastructure bill that has passed the U.S. Senate.

Still, the delay has frustrated some lawmakers, who view it as a wasted opportunity now that the state is preparing to cut off water to thousands of farmers in the Central Valley because of a shortage.

"The longer you don't build, the more expensive it gets," said Republican state Sen. Brian Dahle, whose rural Northern California district includes farmers.

Storage was once the centerpiece of California's water management strategy, highlighted by a building bonanza in the mid-20th century of a number of dams and reservoirs. But in the more than 40 years since California last opened a major new reservoir, the politics and policy have shifted toward a more

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environmental focus that has caused tension between urban and rural legislators and the communities they represent.

The voter-approved bond in 2014 was supposed to jump-start a number of long-delayed storage projects. But some experts say the delays aren't surprising, given the complexities and environmental hazards that come with building new water projects.

"We have about 1,500 reservoirs in California. If you assume people are smart — which they kind of are most of the time — they will have built reservoirs at the 1,500 best reservoir sites already," said Jay Lund, co-director of the Center for Watershed Sciences at the University of California-Davis. "What you have left over is more expensive sites that give you less water."

California's Mediterranean climate means it gets most of its rain and snow in the winter and spring, followed by hot, dry summers and falls that see rivers and streams dry up. The largest of California's reservoirs are operated by the state and federal governments, although neither has built a new one since the 1979 New Melones Lake near Sonora, about 50 miles (80 kilometers) northwest of Yosemite National Park.

That could change with the Sites Reservoir project, which would flood what's left of the town of Sites, located in a valley amid California's coast range mountains.

The town's roots go back to the 1850s, when John Sites, a German immigrant, settled there. At its peak in the late 1800s and early 1900s, it was known for a sandstone quarry that provided building materials throughout the state, including the iconic Ferry Building in San Francisco.

But when the quarry closed shortly after World War I, the town slowly dwindled. Fire destroyed many of the buildings, leaving behind about 10 houses on unirrigated land that can only be used for agriculture during the rainy season. Officials would have to eventually buy those properties from residents to build the reservoir. With only two ways in and out of the valley, it's an ideal spot to flood and turn into a massive lake to store water.

But unlike most California reservoirs, Sites would not be connected to a river or stream. Instead, operators would have to pump water from the Sacramento River whenever it has extra to give. The idea is to take advantage of wet years like 2018, when California got so much rain and snow in the Sierra Nevada mountains that reservoirs were filled beyond capacity.

"We're really redefining how water is developed in California," said Jerry Brown, executive director of the Sites Project Authority, who has no relation to the former governor of the same name.

Pumping the water is expensive, which, along with concern from environmental groups, is one reason the reservoir has been talked about for more than 60 years but never built. Many environmental groups argue the reservoir would do more harm than good because they say operators would have to pull way more water than is environmentally safe from the Sacramento River to make the project feasible.

"Fundamentally, it is a deadbeat dam, a pretty marginal project, or else it would have been built years ago," said Ron Stork, a senior policy advocate for Friends of the River, an environmental advocacy group.

Gov. Gavin Newsom's administration, which included the Sites Reservoir in its water plan, sees the reservoir as a way to prepare for a future impacted by climate change. California's reservoir system is designed to capture water from melted snow in the mountains. But climate change could mean less snow and more rain, which the state is not as equipped to capture.

"We are going to start swinging to more extremes, (a) dry, deep drought or big flood," said Karla Nemeth, director of the California Department of Water Resources. "I do think there is some value to those kinds of projects."

It will cost \$3.9 billion to build the Sites Reservoir, and that's after project leaders made it smaller to shave about \$1 billion off the price tag. Most of the money will come from customers who will buy the water, the federal government and bank loans. California taxpayers have pledged about \$836 million to the project from a bond voters approved in 2014.

But to use that money, project leaders have to meet a deadline by the end of the year to show the idea is feasible.

"I'm absolutely confident," Brown said. "It's going to be close, but it's going to make it." ____

Follow AP's complete drought coverage: <https://apnews.com/hub/droughts>.

Last troops exit Afghanistan, ending America's longest war

By ROBERT BURNS and LOLITA C. BALDOR Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — The United States completed its withdrawal from Afghanistan late Monday, ending America's longest war and closing a chapter in military history likely to be remembered for colossal failures, unfulfilled promises and a frantic final exit that cost the lives of more than 180 Afghans and 13 U.S. service members, some barely older than the war.

Hours ahead of President Joe Biden's Tuesday deadline for shutting down a final airlift, and thus ending the U.S. war, Air Force transport planes carried a remaining contingent of troops from Kabul airport. Thousands of troops had spent a harrowing two weeks protecting the airlift of tens of thousands of Afghans, Americans and others seeking to escape a country once again ruled by Taliban militants.

In announcing the completion of the evacuation and war effort. Gen. Frank McKenzie, head of U.S. Central Command, said the last planes took off from Kabul airport at 3:29 p.m. Washington time, or one minute before midnight in Kabul. He said a number of American citizens, likely numbering in "the very low hundreds," were left behind, and that he believes they will still be able to leave the country.

Secretary of State Antony Blinken put the number of Americans left behind at under 200, "likely closer to 100," and said the State Department would keep working to get them out. He praised the military-led evacuation as heroic and historic and said the U.S. diplomatic presence would shift to Doha, Qatar.

Biden said military commanders unanimously favored ending the airlift, not extending it. He said he asked Blinken to coordinate with international partners in holding the Taliban to their promise of safe passage for Americans and others who want to leave in the days ahead.

The airport had become a U.S.-controlled island, a last stand in a 20-year war that claimed more than 2,400 American lives.

The closing hours of the evacuation were marked by extraordinary drama. American troops faced the daunting task of getting final evacuees onto planes while also getting themselves and some of their equipment out, even as they monitored repeated threats — and at least two actual attacks — by the Islamic State group's Afghanistan affiliate. A suicide bombing on Aug. 26 killed 13 American service members and some 169 Afghans. More died in various incidents during the airport evacuation.

The final pullout fulfilled Biden's pledge to end what he called a "forever war" that began in response to the attacks of Sept. 11, 2001, that killed nearly 3,000 people in New York, Washington and rural Pennsylvania. His decision, announced in April, reflected a national weariness of the Afghanistan conflict. Now he faces criticism at home and abroad, not so much for ending the war as for his handling of a final evacuation that unfolded in chaos and raised doubts about U.S. credibility.

The U.S. war effort at times seemed to grind on with no endgame in mind, little hope for victory and minimal care by Congress for the way tens of billions of dollars were spent for two decades. The human cost piled up — tens of thousands of Americans injured in addition to the dead.

More than 1,100 troops from coalition countries and more than 100,000 Afghan forces and civilians died, according to Brown University's Costs of War project.

In Biden's view the war could have ended 10 years ago with the U.S. killing of Osama bin Laden, whose al-Qaida extremist network planned and executed the 9/11 plot from an Afghanistan sanctuary. Al-Qaida has been vastly diminished, preventing it thus far from again attacking the United States.

Congressional committees, whose interest in the war waned over the years, are expected to hold public hearings on what went wrong in the final months of the U.S. withdrawal. Why, for example, did the administration not begin earlier the evacuation of American citizens as well as Afghans who had helped the U.S. war effort and felt vulnerable to retribution by the Taliban?

It was not supposed to end this way. The administration's plan, after declaring its intention to withdraw all combat troops, was to keep the U.S. Embassy in Kabul open, protected by a force of about 650 U.S. troops, including a contingent that would secure the airport along with partner countries. Washington planned to give the now-defunct Afghan government billions more to prop up its army.

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Biden now faces doubts about his plan to prevent al-Qaida from regenerating in Afghanistan and of suppressing threats posed by other extremist groups such as the Islamic State group's Afghanistan affiliate. The Taliban are enemies of the Islamic State group but retain links to a diminished al-Qaida.

The final U.S. exit included the withdrawal of its diplomats, although the State Department has left open the possibility of resuming some level of diplomacy with the Taliban depending on how they conduct themselves in establishing a government and adhering to international pleas for the protection of human rights.

The speed with which the Taliban captured Kabul on Aug. 15 caught the Biden administration by surprise. It forced the U.S. to empty its embassy and frantically accelerate an evacuation effort that featured an extraordinary airlift executed mainly by the U.S. Air Force, with American ground forces protecting the airfield. The airlift began in such chaos that a number of Afghans died on the airfield, including at least one who attempted to cling to the airframe of a C-17 transport plane as it sped down the runway.

By the evacuation's conclusion, well over 100,000 people, mostly Afghans, had been flown to safety. The dangers of carrying out such a mission came into tragic focus last week when the suicide bomber struck outside an airport gate.

Speaking shortly after that attack, Biden stuck to his view that ending the war was the right move. He said it was past time for the United States to focus on threats emanating from elsewhere in the world.

"Ladies and gentlemen," he said, "it was time to end a 20-year war."

The war's start was an echo of a promise President George W. Bush made while standing atop of the rubble in New York City three days after hijacked airliners slammed into the twin towers of the World Trade Center.

"The people who knocked these buildings down will hear all of us soon!" he declared through a bullhorn.

Less than a month later, on Oct. 7, Bush launched the war. The Taliban's forces were overwhelmed and Kabul fell in a matter of weeks. A U.S.-installed government led by Hamid Karzai took over and bin Laden and his al-Qaida cohort escaped across the border into Pakistan.

The initial plan was to extinguish bin Laden's al-Qaida, which had used Afghanistan as a staging base for its attack on the United States. The grander ambition was to fight a "Global War on Terrorism" based on the belief that military force could somehow defeat Islamic extremism. Afghanistan was but the first round of that fight. Bush chose to make Iraq the next, invading in 2003 and getting mired in an even deadlier conflict that made Afghanistan a secondary priority until Barack Obama assumed the White House in 2009 and later that year decided to escalate in Afghanistan.

Obama pushed U.S. troop levels to 100,000, but the war dragged on though bin Laden was killed in Pakistan in 2011.

When Donald Trump entered the White House in 2017 he wanted to withdraw from Afghanistan but was persuaded not only to stay but to add several thousand U.S. troops and escalate attacks on the Taliban. Two years later his administration was looking for a deal with the Taliban, and in February 2020 the two sides signed an agreement that called for a complete U.S. withdrawal by May 2021. In exchange, the Taliban made a number of promises including a pledge not to attack U.S. troops.

Biden weighed advice from members of his national security team who argued for retaining the 2,500 troops who were in Afghanistan by the time he took office in January. But in mid-April he announced his decision to fully withdraw.

The Taliban pushed an offensive that by early August toppled key cities, including provincial capitals. The Afghan army largely collapsed, sometimes surrendering rather than taking a final stand, and shortly after President Ashraf Ghani fled the capital, the Taliban rolled into Kabul and assumed control on Aug. 15.

Some parts of the country modernized during the U.S. war years, and life for many Afghans, especially women and girls, improved measurably. But Afghanistan remains a tragedy, poor, unstable and with many of its people fearing a return to the brutality the country endured when the Taliban ruled from 1996 to 2001.

The U.S. failures were numerous. It degraded but never defeated the Taliban and ultimately failed to build an Afghan military that could hold off the insurgents, despite \$83 billion in U.S. spending to train and equip the army.

Democrats set to OK new legislative maps over criticism

By SARA BURNETT Associated Press

CHICAGO (AP) — Illinois Democrats on Tuesday are expected to approve new legislative boundaries over objections from Republicans and some community groups that the process was unnecessarily rushed and maps drawn behind closed doors to keep Democrats in power.

Tuesday's vote is a do-over of maps that majority Democrats approved and Gov. J.B. Pritzker signed earlier this year. Those maps prompted lawsuits from top Illinois Republicans and the Mexican American Legal Defense and Educational Fund, a Latino civil rights organization, who argued they were flawed and unconstitutional because they were based on population estimates from the American Community Survey rather than the 2020 census.

With the release of census data this month, Democratic leaders said the maps would be adjusted and the Illinois Legislature would return to Springfield for another vote. That could ensure Democrats continue to control the map-making process, rather than risk having a judge throw out the maps or allow a bipartisan commission to take over the job — a process that could end with Republicans having the final say.

The new maps, which House and Senate Democrats posted online for the first time Monday afternoon, will be used in elections for the next decade.

Rep. Elizabeth Hernandez, a Democrat from Cicero who leads the House Redistricting Committee, said Monday the new boundaries "better reflect the data we recently received from the U.S. Census and ensure communities are represented by the people of their choice."

Republicans have blasted Democrats, saying hastily called and sparsely attended public hearings held over the past week were a sham because boundaries were already being drawn in a secret, Democrat-controlled process.

Witnesses who testified at those hearings urged Democrats to post proposed maps and give the public as much as 30 days — or more — to weigh in before a vote is taken.

Ami Ghandi, senior counsel for the Chicago Lawyers' Committee for Civil Rights, told members of the redistricting committees it was "unreasonable" to expect voters to provide input without maps to react to. The Rev. Robin Hood, representing Black voters in Chicago, said people felt "disgust" at being left out of the process.

Jay Young, executive director of Common Cause Illinois, said the maps the Legislature will vote on Tuesday "will not be crafted of public input, but of pure politics."

"At each opportunity in this redistricting process, it's as if lawmakers went out of their way to ensure the creation of these maps had as little public input as possible," Young said.

Legislators have historically used census data for redistricting, or the process of redrawing political maps every 10 years to reflect changes in population and ensure, among other things, that districts are roughly equal in population. But with the release of 2020 census data delayed this year because of the pandemic, Democrats opted to use the American Community Survey to meet a June 30 deadline set in the state constitution.

If the Legislature didn't meet that deadline, an eight-member commission would be created with an equal number of Democrat and GOP lawmakers. If that group were unable to approve a map, a ninth member would be picked at random to break the tie.

Republicans are hoping that a federal judge will throw out Democrats' maps and order that process begin.

Illinois Democrats have not yet voted on new congressional district boundaries. The state constitution doesn't set a deadline for those maps to be approved, so legislators opted to wait for the census data before drawing those maps. Illinois is losing a congressional seat, and Democrats are expected to eliminate a GOP-held district.

Wildfire evacuees flood Lake Tahoe roads in rush to flee

By SAM METZ and JANIE HAR Associated Press/Report for America

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SOUTH LAKE TAHOE, Calif. (AP) — A popular vacation haven normally filled with tens of thousands of summer tourists was clogged with fleeing vehicles Monday after the entire resort city of South Lake Tahoe was ordered to leave as a ferocious wildfire raced toward Lake Tahoe, a sparkling gem on the California-Nevada state line.

Vehicles loaded with bikes and camping gear and hauling boats were in gridlock traffic in the city of 22,000, stalled in hazy, brown air that smelled like a campfire. Police and other emergency vehicles whizzed by.

Ken Breslin was stuck in bumper-to-bumper traffic less than a mile (1.6 kilometers) from his home, with only a quarter-tank of gas in his Ford Escape. His son begged him to leave Sunday night, but he shrugged him off, certain that if an evacuation order came, it would be later in the week.

"Before, it was, 'No worries ... it's not going to crest. It's not gonna come down the hill. There's 3,500 firefighters, all those bulldozers and all the air support,'" he said. "Until this morning, I didn't think there was a chance it could come into this area. Now, it's very real."

By Monday night the fire had crossed state highways 50 and 89 and burned mountain cabins as it churned down slopes toward the Tahoe Basin. Flames came within just a few miles of South Lake Tahoe and residents of communities just over the state line in Douglas County, Nevada were warned to get ready to evacuate.

Monday's fresh evacuation orders, unheard of in South Lake Tahoe, came a day after communities several miles south of the lake were abruptly ordered to evacuate as the Caldor Fire raged nearby. The city's main medical facility, Barton Memorial Hospital, proactively evacuated dozens of patients, and the El Dorado Sheriff's Office transferred inmates to a neighboring jail.

"There is fire activity happening in California that we have never seen before. The critical thing for the public to know is evacuate early," said Chief Thom Porter, director of the California Department of Forestry and Fire Protection, or Cal Fire. "For the rest of you in California: Every acre can and will burn someday in this state."

The threat of fire is so widespread that the U.S. Forest Service announced Monday that all national forests in California would be closed until Sept. 17.

"We do not take this decision lightly but this is the best choice for public safety," Regional Forester Jennifer Eberlien said.

Overnight, the already massive Caldor Fire grew 7 miles (11 kilometers) in direction in one area northeast of Highway 50 and more than 8 miles (13 miles) in another, Cal Fire officials said.

More than 15,000 firefighters were battling dozens of California blazes, including crews from Utah, Washington, Wisconsin and West Virginia, said Mark Ghilarducci, director of California's Office of Emergency Services. About 250 active-duty soldiers were being trained in Washington state to help with the arduous work of clearing forest debris by hand.

Crews from Louisiana, however, had to return to that state because of Hurricane Ida, "another major catastrophic event taking place in the country and is a pull on resources throughout the United States," he said.

Porter said that only twice in California history have fires burned from one side of the Sierra Nevada to the other, both this month, with the Caldor and Dixie fires. The Dixie, the second-largest wildfire in state history at 1,205 square miles (3,121 square kilometers) about 65 miles (105 kilometers) north of the Lake Tahoe-area blaze, prompted new evacuation orders and warnings Monday.

The Lake Tahoe area in the Sierra Nevada mountains is usually a year-round recreational paradise offering beaches, water sports, hiking, ski resorts and golfing. South Lake Tahoe, at the lake's southern end, bustles with outdoor activities, and with casinos available in bordering Stateline, Nevada.

On weekends, the city's population can easily triple and on holiday weekends, like the upcoming Labor Day weekend, up to 100,000 people will visit for fun and sun. But South Lake Tahoe City Mayor Tamara Wallace said they've been telling people for days to stay away due to poor air from wildfires.

She said she thought the Caldor Fire would stay farther away. Fires in the past did not spread so rapidly near the tourist city.

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"It's just yet another example of how wildfires have changed over the years," she said as she gathered treasures passed from her deceased parent and her husband's while they prepared to leave.

The last two wildfires that ripped through populated areas near Tahoe were the Angora Fire that destroyed more than 200 homes in 2007 and the Gondola Fire in 2002 that ignited near a chairlift at Heavenly Mountain Resort.

Since then, the dead trees have accumulated and the region has coped with serious droughts, Wallace said. Climate change has made the West much warmer and drier in the past 30 years and will continue to make weather more extreme and wildfires more frequent and destructive, scientists say.

Wallace said traffic was crawling Monday, but praised the evacuation as orderly because residents heeded officials' orders. Authorities have also been more aggressive in recent years, issuing warnings and orders sooner so people have more time to flee.

Not everyone agreed as fierce winds kicked up dust and debris and drivers sat in gridlock. The California Highway Patrol added "quite a bit of additional personnel" to help guide a chaotic evacuation from South Lake Tahoe, as huge traffic jams slowed the evacuation of vehicles, said CHP Assistant Commissioner Ryan Okashima. Congestion had eased by Monday afternoon.

South Lake Tahoe resident John Larson said the evacuation probably went as smoothly as possible, considering how swiftly flames moved into the area.

"The fuel went so fast and it climbed the ridge so quick," Larson said of the fire after settling into an evacuation center at a park in Carson City, Nevada. Red Cross volunteers set up the facility with 50 cots after another evacuation center in nearby Gardnerville reached capacity.

The fire destroyed multiple homes Sunday along Highway 50, one of the main routes to the lake's south end. It also roared through the Sierra-at-Tahoe ski resort, demolishing some buildings but leaving the main buildings at the base intact. Crews used snow-making machines to douse the ground.

Cabins burned near the unincorporated community of Echo Lake, where Tom Fashinell has operated Echo Chalet with his wife since 1984. The summer-only resort offers cabin rentals, but was ordered to close early for the season by the U.S. Forest Service due to ongoing wildfires.

Fashinell said he was glued to the local TV news. "We're watching to see whether the building survives," he said.

The Caldor Fire has scorched 277 square miles (717 square kilometers) since breaking out Aug. 14. After the weekend's fierce burning, containment dropped from 19% to 14%. More than 600 structures have been destroyed, and at least 20,000 more were threatened. Gov. Steve Sisolak on Monday declared a state of emergency in Nevada, citing "the anticipation" that the wildfire in the Lake Tahoe area in California would burn across the state line into the Silver State.

The National Weather Service warned of dangerous fire conditions and winds through Wednesday.

Diane Kinney, who has lived in the city since the 1970s, said this is the first time her neighborhood has been ordered to evacuate. She and her husband were packing up keepsakes, jewelry and insurance papers shortly after noon. They had to leave their 1964 Chevelle, but she hopes it stays safe.

"Everybody wants to live in Lake Tahoe. There are definitely advantages of being in the mountains, being with these beautiful pine trees," she said. "But we definitely have to get out now."

Har reported from San Francisco. AP writers Jocelyn Gecker and Olga R. Rodriguez in San Francisco; Noah Berger in South Lake Tahoe; Christopher Weber and John Antczak in Los Angeles; and Ken Ritter in Las Vegas contributed to this report.

Hurricane Ida traps Louisianans, shatters the power grid

By REBECCA SANTANA and JAY REEVES Associated Press

NEW ORLEANS (AP) — Rescuers in boats, helicopters and high-water trucks brought hundreds of people trapped by Hurricane Ida's floodwaters to safety Monday and utility repair crews rushed in, after the furious storm swamped the Louisiana coast and ravaged the electrical grid in the stifling, late-summer heat.

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Residents living amid the maze of rivers and bayous along the state's Gulf Coast retreated desperately to their attics or roofs and posted their addresses on social media with instructions for search-and-rescue teams on where to find them.

More than 1 million homes and businesses in Louisiana and Mississippi — including all of New Orleans — were left without power as Ida, one of the most powerful hurricanes ever to hit the U.S. mainland, pushed through on Sunday.

The damage was so extensive that officials warned it could be weeks before the power grid was repaired.

President Joe Biden met virtually on Monday with Louisiana Gov. John Bel Edwards and Mississippi Gov. Tate Reeves along with mayors from cities and parishes most impacted by Hurricane Ida to receive an update on the storm's impacts, and to discuss how the Federal Government can provide assistance.

"We are closely coordinating with State and local officials every step of the way," Biden said.

The administration said more than 3,600 FEMA employees are deployed to Alabama, Florida, Georgia, Louisiana, Mississippi, and Texas. FEMA staged more than 3.4 million meals, millions of liters of water, more than 35,700 tarps, and roughly 200 generators in the region in advance of the storm.

As the storm was downgraded to a tropical depression Monday afternoon and continued to make its way inland with torrential rain, it was blamed for at least two deaths — a motorist who drowned in New Orleans and a person hit by a falling tree outside Baton Rouge.

But with many roads impassable and cellphone service out in places, the full extent of its fury was still coming into focus. Christina Stephens, a spokesperson for Gov. John Bel Edwards, said that given the level of destruction, "We're going to have many more confirmed fatalities."

The governor's office said damage to the power grid appeared "catastrophic" — dispiriting news for those without refrigeration or air conditioning during the dog days of summer, with highs forecast in the mid-80s to near 90 by midweek.

"There are certainly more questions than answers. I can't tell you when the power is going to be restored. I can't tell you when all the debris is going to be cleaned up and repairs made," Edwards told a news conference. "But what I can tell you is we are going to work hard every day to deliver as much assistance as we can."

Local, state and federal rescuers combined to save at least 671 people by Monday afternoon, Edwards said.

In hard-hit LaPlace, squeezed between the Mississippi River and Lake Pontchartrain, rescuers saved people from flooded homes in a near-constant operation.

Debbie Greco, her husband and son rode out the storm in LaPlace with Greco's parents. Water reached a foot up the first-floor windows, then filled the first floor to 4 feet (1.2 meters) deep once the back door was opened. They retreated to the second floor, but then screaming winds collapsed the roof as waves broke in the front yard.

They were finally rescued by boat after waiting in the only dry spot, five people sharing the landing on the stairs.

"When I rebuild this I'm out of here. I'm done with Louisiana," said Greco's father, 85-year-old Fred Carmouche, a lifelong resident.

Elsewhere in LaPlace, people pulled pieces of chimneys, gutters and other parts of their homes to the curb and residents of a mobile home park waded through floodwaters.

The hurricane blew ashore on the 16th anniversary of Katrina, the 2005 storm that breached New Orleans' levees, devastated the city and was blamed for 1,800 deaths.

This time, New Orleans appeared to escape the catastrophic flooding city officials had feared.

Stephanie Blaise returned to her home with her father in New Orleans' Lower Ninth Ward after evacuating. The neighborhood suffered devastating flooding in Katrina, but only lost some shingles in Ida. However, with no idea when electricity would be restored, Blaise didn't plan to stay long.

"We don't need to go through that. I'm going to have to convince him to leave. We got to go somewhere. Can't stay in this heat," she said.

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The city urged people who evacuated to stay away for at least a couple of days because of the lack of power and fuel. "There's not a lot of reasons to come back," said Collin Arnold, chief of emergency preparedness.

Also, 18 water systems serving about 255,000 customers in Louisiana were knocked out of service, the state Health Department said.

Four Louisiana hospitals were damaged and 39 medical facilities were operating on generator power, the Federal Emergency Management Agency said. Officials said they were evacuating scores of patients to other cities.

The governor's office said over 2,200 evacuees were staying in 41 shelters, a number expected to rise as people were rescued or escaped flooded homes. The governor's spokesperson said the state will work to move people to hotels as soon as possible so they can keep their distance from one another.

"This is a COVID nightmare," Stephens said, adding: "We do anticipate that we could see some COVID spikes related to this."

Preliminary measurements showed Slidell, Louisiana, got at least 15.7 inches of rain, while New Orleans received nearly 14 inches, forecasters said. Other parts of Louisiana and Mississippi, Alabama and Florida got 5 to 11 inches.

The Louisiana National Guard said it activated 4,900 Guard personnel and lined up 195 high-water vehicles, 73 rescue boats and 34 helicopters. Local and state agencies were adding hundreds more. Edwards said he decided not to tour hurricane damage by air Monday to add one more aircraft to the effort.

On Grand Isle, the 40 people who stayed on the barrier island through the brunt of the hurricane gave aircraft checking on them Monday a thumbs-up, Jefferson Parish Sheriff Joe Lopinto said.

The road to the island remained impassable and rescuers would try to reach them as soon as they are able, the sheriff said.

The hurricane twisted and collapsed a giant tower that carries key transmission lines over the Mississippi River to the New Orleans area, causing widespread outages, Entergy and local authorities said. The power company said more than 2,000 miles of transmission lines were out of service, along with 216 substations. The tower had survived Katrina.

The storm also flattened utility poles, toppled trees onto power lines and caused transformers to explode.

The governor said 25,000 utility workers were in the state to help restore electricity, with more on the way. "We're going to push Entergy to restore power just as soon as they can," Edwards said.

AT&T said its wireless network in Louisiana was reduced to 60% of normal but was coming back. Many people resorted to using walkie-talkies. The governor's office staff had no working phones. The company sent a mobile tower to the state's emergency preparedness office so it could get some service.

Charchar Chaffold left her home near LaPlace for Alabama after a tree fell on it Sunday. She frantically tried to get in touch via text message with five family members who stayed behind.

She last heard from them Sunday night. They were in the attic after water rushed into their home. "They told me they thought they was going to die. I told them they are not and called for help," she said.

Ida's 150 mph (230 kph) winds tied it for the fifth-strongest hurricane ever to hit the mainland. Its winds were down to 40 mph (64 kph) around midday Monday.

In Mississippi's southwestern corner, entire neighborhoods were surrounded by floodwaters, and many roads were impassable. Several tornadoes were reported, including a suspected twister in Saraland, Alabama, that ripped part of the roof off a motel and flipped an 18-wheeler, injuring the driver, according to the National Weather Service.

Ida was expected to pick up speed Monday night before dumping rain on the Tennessee and Ohio River valleys Tuesday, the Appalachian mountain region Wednesday and the nation's capital on Thursday.

Forecasters said flash flooding and mudslides were possible along Ida's path before it blows out to sea over New England on Friday.

Reeves reported from LaPlace, Louisiana. Associated Press writers Janet McConnaughey and Kevin McGill

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in New Orleans; Melinda Deslatte in Baton Rouge; Michael Biesecker in Washington; Sudhin Thanawala in Atlanta; and Jeffrey Collins in Columbia, South Carolina, contributed to this report.

As US military leaves Kabul, many Americans, Afghans remain

By LOLITA C. BALDOR and MATTHEW LEE Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — As the final five U.S. military transport aircraft lifted off out of Afghanistan Monday, they left behind up to 200 Americans and thousands of desperate Afghans who couldn't get out and now must rely on the Taliban to allow their departure.

Secretary of State Antony Blinken said the U.S. will continue to try to get Americans and Afghans out of the country, and will work with Afghanistan's neighbors to secure their departure either over land or by charter flight once the Kabul airport reopens.

"We have no illusion that any of this will be easy, or rapid," said Blinken, adding that the total number of Americans who are in Afghanistan and still want to leave may be closer to 100.

Speaking shortly after the Pentagon announced the completion of the U.S. military pullout Monday, Blinken said the U.S. Embassy in Kabul will remain shuttered and vacant for the foreseeable future. American diplomats, he said, will be based in Doha, Qatar.

"We will continue our relentless efforts to help Americans, foreign nationals and Afghans leave Afghanistan if they choose," Blinken said in an address from the State Department. "Our commitment to them holds no deadline."

Marine Gen. Frank McKenzie, head of U.S. Central Command, told reporters the U.S. military was able to get as many as 1,500 Afghans out in the final hours of the American evacuation mission. But now it will be up to the State Department working with the Taliban to get any more people out.

McKenzie said there were no citizens left stranded at the airport and none were on the final few military flights out. He said the U.S. military maintained the ability to get Americans out right up until just before the end, but "none of them made it to the airport."

"There's a lot of heartbreak associated with this departure," said McKenzie. "We did not get everybody out that we wanted to get out. But I think if we'd stayed another 10 days we wouldn't have gotten everybody out that we wanted to get out."

McKenzie and other officials painted a vivid picture of the final hours U.S. troops were on the ground, and the preparations they took to ensure that the Taliban and Islamic State group militants did not get functioning U.S. military weapons systems and other equipment.

The terror threat remains a major problem in Afghanistan, with at least 2,000 "hard core" members of the Islamic State group who remain in the country, including many released from prisons as the Taliban swept to control.

Underscoring the ongoing security threats, the weapon systems used just hours earlier to counter IS rockets launched toward the airport were kept operational until "the very last minute" as the final U.S. military aircraft flew out, officials said. One of the last things U.S. troops did was to make the so-called C-RAMS (Counter Rocket, Artillery and Mortar System) inoperable.

McKenzie said they "demilitarized" the system so it can never be used again. Officials said troops did not blow up equipment in order to ensure they left the airport workable for future flights, once those begin again. In addition, McKenzie said the U.S. also disabled 27 Humvees and 73 aircraft so they can never be used again.

Throughout the day, as the final C-17 transport planes prepared to take off, McKenzie said the U.S. kept "overwhelming U.S. airpower overhead" to deal with potential IS threats.

Back at the Pentagon, Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin and Gen. Mark Milley, chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, watched the final 90 minutes of the military departure in real time from an operations center in the basement.

According to a U.S. official, they sat in hushed silence as they watched troops make last-minute runway checks, make the key defense systems inoperable and climb aboard the C-17s. The official said you could

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hear a pin drop as the last aircraft lifted off, and leaders around the room breathed sighs of relief. Later, Austin phoned Maj. Gen. Christopher Donahue, commander of the 82nd Airborne Division, who was coordinating the evacuation. Donahue and acting U.S. ambassador to Afghanistan Ross Wilson were the last to board the final plane that left Kabul.

Officials spoke on condition of anonymity to provide details of military operations.

"Simply because we have left, that doesn't mean the opportunities for both Americans that are in Afghanistan that want to leave and Afghans who want to leave, they will not be denied that opportunity," said McKenzie.

The military left some equipment for the Taliban in order to run the airport, including two firetrucks, some front-end loaders and aircraft staircases.

Blinken said the U.S. will work with Turkey and Qatar to help them get the Kabul airport up and running again.

"This would enable a small number of daily charter flights, which is a key for anyone who wants to depart from Afghanistan moving forward," he said.

EXPLAINER: Hit by Ida, New Orleans faces weeks without power

By MATTHEW DALY Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — Hurricane Ida knocked out all eight transmission lines that deliver power to New Orleans, leaving the entire city without electricity as the powerful storm pushed through on Sunday and early Monday with winds that reached 150 miles per hour. Some of the hardest-hit areas won't see power restored for weeks. A look at what that means for the coastal city and its residents and businesses.

WHAT HAPPENED?

The hurricane blew ashore on the 16th anniversary of Katrina, the 2005 storm that breached New Orleans' levees, devastated the city and was blamed for 1,800 deaths. The office of Louisiana Gov. John Bel Edwards said Ida caused "catastrophic" damage to the power grid, forcing hospitals, businesses and private residents to rely on generators or go without refrigeration or air conditioning even as temperatures soar to close to 90 degrees. Ida was one of the strongest storms to make landfall in Louisiana and retained hurricane status nearly to Mississippi.

Officials in New Orleans and surrounding areas were encouraging people who evacuated ahead of the storm to stay away in the immediate aftermath, because it remains unsafe to return amid downed power lines, flooded homes, snapped trees and other destruction.

WHAT WILL IT TAKE TO GET POWER BACK?

The power company that serves the region said it could be weeks before some hard-hit areas see power restored. The power company, New Orleans-based Entergy, says it is working to provide backup power for water and sewer services, and the city says it is using its own generators at drainage pumping stations, but it's not clear how long those efforts can sustain.

More than 11,000 Entergy workers, supplemented by 25,000 workers from at least 32 states and the District of Columbia, were working to restore power. As officials begin to assess damage, power will be restored in a way that gets service to the greatest number of customers as safely and quickly as possible, Entergy said.

But the company faces a massive challenge. As of early Monday, 216 substations, 207 transmission lines and more than 2,000 miles of transmission lines were out of service, the company said. One transmission tower that spans the Mississippi River and had withstood Hurricane Katrina was felled during Ida, Entergy said.

Road closures, flooding and high winds were affecting crews' ability to reach some areas and could delay power restoration in those communities. Entergy said.

"Transmission lines are very fragile in New Orleans," said Logan Atkinson Burke, executive director of the Alliance for Affordable Energy, an advocacy group. The group said in a 2019 report that Entergy's aging transmission and distribution lines, complicated by the coastal region's lakes and wetlands, result in an

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unusual number of outages — even without extreme weather.

ECHOES OF HURRICANES PAST

Ida came ashore 16 years after Katrina and a year after Hurricane Laura wrecked southwest Louisiana, leaving Lake Charles and other communities without power for weeks. Even as Ida was bearing down on New Orleans, marks of Laura's devastation remained evident in blue-tarped roofs, damaged homes and boarded-up businesses that still dot the region.

Laura, which then was the most powerful storm to impact Louisiana since before the Civil War, struck the southwestern parishes on Aug. 27, 2020, as a fierce Category 4 storm. Less than two months later, Hurricane Delta swept into the same area as a Category 2. Historic flooding followed in May.

"These are lessons we have to learn over and over again," said Shelley Welton, an associate professor at the University of South Carolina School of Law who studies climate change and energy law. Whether it's a deadly freeze in Texas, a wildfire in California or a hurricane in Louisiana, "the connective thread is we need to build infrastructure to better withstand stronger storms that we know are coming" as a consequence of climate change, she said.

'CASCADING FAILURES'

Just as the deep-freeze in Texas caused extensive suffering and death from cold, Ida will likely cause extreme suffering from excessive heat, Welton and others said. The storm also was affecting water and sewer service, cell-phone service and even 911 service in what Welton called "cascading failures."

In New Orleans, water and sewer officials said they lost all Entergy power, but teams were working quickly to make up for this with self-generated power sources, as well as backup generators located at drainage pumping stations.

Still, problems were being reported. The New Orleans suburb of Jefferson Parish was estimating it could take at least five days to restore the water system there.

With widespread cell service outages, many people were frantically trying to reach friends and relatives and were unsuccessful. Just because you can't get reach a loved one by phone, "that does not necessarily mean that they are not OK," said Christina Stephens, a spokeswoman for Edwards. "We know that much of this is a communications problem."

AT&T said Monday its wireless network in Louisiana was operating at 85% of normal, describing "significant outages" in New Orleans and Baton Rouge from power supply disruptions, flooding and storm damages. A mobile tower was sent to the governor's emergency preparedness office to help get their phones up and running again.

WILL CONGRESS STEP IN?

Louisiana Sen. Bill Cassidy said the catastrophe is the latest example of why his state — and the nation — need a nearly trillion-dollar infrastructure bill that was already passed by the Senate earlier this month. "New Orleans is now a case in point" of the need to harden the nation's infrastructure and improve resiliency, the Republican told CNBC's "Squawk Box" on Monday.

"If we're going to make our country more resilient to natural disasters, whatever they are, we have to start preparing now," Cassidy said. "We can't look in the rearview mirror and say, 'Well I wish we were prepared.' We've got to start now for next year's hurricane, next year's wildfire, next year's tornado. That infrastructure package is part of that."

The bill provides about \$50 billion to protect against droughts and floods and weatherize utilities and other infrastructure. It also includes about \$60 billion to upgrade the electric grid and build thousands of miles of transmission lines to expand use of renewable energy.

House Speaker Nancy Pelosi has said the House will vote on the bipartisan measure next month.

Associated Press writer Melinda Deslatte in Baton Rouge contributed to this report.

Lithium fuels hopes for revival on California's largest lake

By ELLIOT SPAGAT Associated Press

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CALIPATRIA, Calif. (AP) — Near Southern California's dying Salton Sea, a canopy next to a geothermal power plant covers large containers of salty water left behind after super-hot liquid is drilled from deep underground to run steam turbines. The containers connect to tubes that spit out what looks like dish-water, but it's lithium, a critical component of rechargeable batteries and the newest hope for economic revival in the depressed region.

Demand for electric vehicles has shifted investments into high gear to extract lithium from geothermal brine, salty water that has been overlooked and pumped back underground since the region's first geothermal plant opened in 1982. The mineral-rich byproduct may now be more valuable than the steam used to generate electricity.

California's largest but rapidly shrinking lake is at the forefront of efforts to make the U.S. a major global player in the production of lithium. Despite large deposits of the ultralight metal in the U.S., Nevada has the country's only lithium plant, and U.S. production lags far behind Australia, Chile, Argentina and China.

Decades of environmental ruin have left some residents on the Salton Sea's receding shores indifferent or wary. They have been disappointed before, most recently by solar plants that failed to be the economic engine many hoped.

The Salton Sea formed in 1905 after the Colorado River breached a dike and two years of flooding filled a sizzling basin, earning it the nickname "The Accidental Sea." In the 1950s, the lake thrived as a tourist destination, drawing anglers, boaters and celebrity visitors including Frank Sinatra.

But storms in the 1970s destroyed marinas and resorts. Flooding wrecked many homes in the tiny, former resort town of Bombay Beach, and after the water dried, left an almost apocalyptic atmosphere that has recently attracted artists.

The lake level peaked in 1995 but, with little rain, has since been evaporating faster than Colorado River water seeping downhill through farms can replenish as farmers conserved more water.

Since 2003, the 324-square-mile (839-square-kilometer) lake has shrunk 40 square miles (104 square kilometers), exposing vast lakebed with microscopic wind-blown dust that contributes to poor air quality and asthma.

The sea has been a key stopover for migrating birds. But as the lake has shrunk, the fish population has declined, chasing away about 25% of the more than 400 bird species that populated it five years ago, said Frank Ruiz, Audubon California's Salton Sea program director. Carcasses of oxygen-starved tilapia no longer blanket shores periodically with a stench that could reach Los Angeles because there are so few left.

In Salton City, a town of about 6,000, roads curve along empty lots, a legacy of its first developer who stopped construction in 1960. Street signs with idyllic names like Harbor Drive and Sea Shore Avenue mark a barren landscape of cracked pavement.

Pat Milsop, a 61-year-old retired restaurant owner, hits golf balls across a dry canal. His view is filled with dilapidated docks on bone-dry soil that harbored boats when his mother-in-law bought his house in 2004. He is skeptical that lithium will restore some of the lake's glory.

"Are they going to do something good for the community or just buy up all the land and kick everybody out?" he asks. Nostalgic for livelier days, he plans to move to his farm near Lubbock, Texas.

The lake is at the southern tip of the San Andreas Fault, which has shifting tectonic plates that bring molten material closer to Earth's surface. The only other part of the U.S. known to have more geothermal brine available is on the fault's other end in Northern California.

Rod Colwell, chief executive of Controlled Thermal Resources Ltd., oversees construction of what would be the region's first geothermal power plant in nearly a decade. General Motors Corp. said it invested in the project as it seeks to eliminate tailpipe emissions from light-duty vehicles by 2035.

The lake's southern shores are dotted with small, volcano-like pots of bubbling mud caused by geothermal activity. In 2011, Colwell walked about a mile in the Salton Sea's knee-deep water — all of it now evaporated, with a fine powder below a white, cracked crust.

Lakebed is considered an ideal spot for lithium. The company says it plans to drill down 8000 feet (2,438 meters) for super-hot liquid.

"There is no brine resource like this anywhere on the planet," said Colwell, who relied on years of ex-

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tensive, publicly available reports analyzing the area's soil.

He said the \$520 million plant will start producing lithium in 2024.

Owners of 11 existing geothermal plants around the lake's southern shores are retooling for lithium and possibly other brine minerals instead of building from scratch. Warren Buffett's Berkshire Hathaway Energy Co. has state and federal grants for lithium demonstration projects and says it could begin construction for commercial operations in 2024.

EnergySource LLC opened its geothermal plant in 2012 and its sister company, EnergySource Minerals, has extracted lithium there on a small scale since 2016, said Derek Benson, chief operating officer. It plans to start building a \$500 million addition for mineral extraction by the end of March.

An easily overlooked metal structure faces the plant across a two-lane rural road. Bolted down by tons of concrete, it drills more than 4,000 feet (1,219 meters) underground for steam that allows for electricity to be generated and delivered to the Salt River Project, a utility with 2 million customers in central Arizona.

Before it's pumped back underground, the brine is "borrowed" for a few hours to extract lithium under a nearby canopy, Benson said.

Extracting lithium from geothermal brine has never been done on a commercial scale. There are two dominant production methods: mining for rocks and using cooler brine that bakes under the sun in large ponds for about two years until the water evaporates. The Nevada plant uses evaporation ponds.

San Diego-based EnergySource operates on the former site of Simbol Materials, a heavily hyped company that used geothermal brine and flopped in 2015 after negotiations collapsed over Tesla Inc.'s \$325 million offer to buy it. Business decisions caused the company's demise, according to industry experts and executives affiliated with the latest projects. Technology has since improved, they say, and so have market conditions.

Demand for lithium has soared as more carmakers shift to electric. California has targeted 2035 to achieve zero emissions from all cars and trucks sold in the state. The Biden administration hopes to achieve carbon neutrality by 2050.

"This is the moment where a number of trends, the confluence of them, have finally come together," Benson said.

Detailed environmental impact reviews, required by California law, have not been released. Benson says his company's geothermal brine technology uses much less land and about one-fifth the water of evaporation ponds and emits one-seventh the carbon dioxide of rock-mining.

Unique geochemical characteristics bring risk regardless of technology, said Alexander Grant, principal at research firm Jade Cove Partners.

"It's very easy to fall into this narrative that the technology is not proven, but that is fundamentally not the right way to look at it," said Grant, a Lawrence Berkeley National Laboratory research affiliate. "The fact is that it's hard to build lithium projects."

Smokestacks shooting steam at geothermal power plants are a towering presence amid flat fields of lettuce, melons and alfalfa.

Despite hugely productive land that stocks U.S. supermarkets with winter vegetables, Imperial County has a poverty rate of 22%, among California's highest. El Centro, the county seat, perennially has one of the highest unemployment rates among 389 U.S. metropolitan areas.

Many farmworkers commute daily from Mexicali, Mexico, to pick vegetables in winter and melons in spring. In the summer, snowbirds flee stifling heat and people stay inside, making towns and fields look deserted.

Lithium has generated cautious optimism. EnergySource expects to contribute \$80 million to \$90 million annually to the economy, largely through payroll, taxes and royalties. Controlled Thermal Resources is expected to create 1,400 jobs, according to the Imperial Valley Economic Development Corp.

"How do we end up with this great opportunity before us but at the same time not get burned?" said Luis Olmedo, executive director of Comite Civico del Valle, which advocates for low-income and underserved residents, and a member of the Lithium Valley Commission, a state panel to promote the lake's lithium resources.

The lake depends entirely on Colorado River water gravitating through canals across hundreds of thousands of acres of chemical-laden farms. Amid growth, Arizona demanded its full entitlement of river

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water, forcing California to end its overuse. In 2003, squabbling California agencies settled on shifting large amounts of the state's share to San Diego, meaning less water for Imperial County farms and, by extension, the Salton Sea.

Persistent drought tied to climate change raises the prospect of even less Colorado River water seeping downhill into the lake.

Longtime residents miss when eared grebes, cormorants and white and brown pelicans were more abundant.

"The noise was awesome," said Carlene Ness, 74, who bought a western shore house with her late husband in 1999. "That's what everybody bought for, and we have to fight for it."

In Calipatria, a city of 8,000 closest to the geothermal investments, lithium may be the biggest boon since two state prisons opened in the early 1990s. On a stifling July day, a gas station on the main street was the only establishment with activity.

Ruben Hernandez, 54, has worked for an Imperial Valley landowner since he was 8. He and his wife own a Mexican restaurant in the largely deserted town of Niland. His wife wants to stay, but "there's nothing here, no town," he said.

Lithium project backers who come for breakfast tell him he could eventually be feeding 20 to 30 people and delivering lunches to their plant.

"If they are going to lift this town up, it would be great," Hernandez said.

New Orleans levees pass Ida's test while some suburbs flood

By JANET MCCONNAUGHEY, MICHAEL KUNZELMAN and JEFF AMY Associated Press

NEW ORLEANS (AP) — The levees, floodwalls and floodgates that protect New Orleans held up against Hurricane Ida's fury, passing their toughest test since the federal government spent billions of dollars to upgrade a system that catastrophically failed when Hurricane Katrina struck 16 years ago.

But strengthening the flood protection system in New Orleans couldn't spare some neighboring communities from Ida's destructive storm surge. Many residents of LaPlace, a western suburb where work only recently began on a long-awaited levee project, had to be rescued from rising floodwaters.

Marcie Jacob Hebert evacuated before Ida, but she has no doubt that the storm flooded her LaPlace home based on what she has seen and heard from neighbors. Her house didn't flood in 2005 during Katrina, but it took on nearly 2 feet (60 centimeters) of water during Hurricane Isaac in 2012.

"We haven't had these problems until everybody else's levees worked," said Hebert, 46. "It may not be the only factor, but I sure do think it contributes."

Louisiana State University professor emeritus Craig Colten, who has taught historical geography, said most of the New Orleans levee systems has been in place for decades. He said the flooding in LaPlace can be explained by wind direction, not by any floodwater diverted from New Orleans.

"Isaac was really a minor storm in terms of wind speed, but it did drive water into Lake Pontchartrain to the western edge, toward LaPlace, as this storm did. And that just is going to pile water up where LaPlace is," Colten said. "I haven't seen anything that was done since Katrina that's really going to make a huge difference."

Gov. John Bel Edwards said a preliminary survey of levees across Louisiana showed they did exactly as they intended and held water out.

"We don't believe there is a single levee anywhere now that actually breached or failed. There were a few smaller levees that were overtopped to a degree for a certain period of time," Edwards said.

Two flood protection districts oversee the system in Orleans, Jefferson and St. Bernard parishes. Neither district reported any breaches or overtopping of levees.

"The system performed as designed," said Nicholas Cali, regional director of the Southeast Louisiana Flood Protection Authority-West, which oversees the west bank of Orleans and Jefferson parishes.

The Southeast Louisiana Flood Protection Authority-East, which covers St. Bernard Parish and most of Orleans and Jefferson parishes, also planned to inspect its system Monday but hadn't found any problems,

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according to regional director Kelli Chandler.

Tulane University history professor Andy Horowitz, author of "Katrina: A History, 1915-2015," said it is "unequivocally great news" that the levees held up against Ida's surge. That doesn't mean that a city as vulnerable as New Orleans is safe from flooding "in the face of a changing climate," he added.

"It does not mean that the lesson of Hurricane Ida is that metropolitan New Orleans has adequate hurricane protection. It means it had adequate protection against this storm surge," Horowitz said. "As the system is challenged by stronger and more frequent hurricanes. I think many experts are very concerned about the rather low level of protection that New Orleans has."

A federal judge in New Orleans ruled in 2009 that the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers' failure to properly maintain and operate the Mississippi River-Gulf Outlet was a significant cause of the catastrophic flooding during Katrina. Levee failures near Lake Pontchartrain also flooded New Orleans neighborhoods.

After Katrina, the federal government spent \$14.5 billion on projects designed to enhance protection from storm surge and flooding in New Orleans and surrounding suburbs south of Lake Pontchartrain. 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).

Work recently began on a levee project to protect tens of thousands of residents of LaPlace and other communities outside New Orleans' levee system. That project is not projected to be completed until 2024.

"I'm glad they're building us a levee, but I worry about what happens to the next group further to the west," Hebert said. "The water has got to go somewhere. We can't just keep funneling it from person to person, place to place."

Bernardo Fallas, a spokesperson for Phillips 66, said the company did not immediately have information about whether a reported levee collapse in Plaquemines Parish affected its Alliance Refinery in Belle Chasse. Fallas said the refinery has been shut down since Saturday, ahead of Ida's arrival.

"We will proceed to conduct a post-storm assessment of the refinery when it is safe to do so," Fallas said.

Kunzelman reported from College Park, Maryland. Amy reported from Atlanta. Associated Press writers Michael Biesecker in Washington; Jeffrey Collins in Columbia, South Carolina; and Melinda Deslatte in Baton Rouge contributed to this report.

Taliban celebrate victory as U.S. troops leave Afghanistan

By KATHY GANNON, TAMEEM AKHGAR and JOSEPH KRAUSS Associated Press

KABUL, Afghanistan (AP) — Taliban fighters watched the last U.S. planes disappear into the sky over Afghanistan around midnight Monday and then fired their guns into the air, celebrating victory after a 20-year insurgency that drove the world's most powerful military out of one of the poorest countries.

The departure of the U.S. cargo planes marked the end of a massive airlift in which tens of thousands of people fled Afghanistan, fearful of the return of Taliban rule after the militants took over most of the country and rolled into the capital earlier this month.

"The last five aircraft have left, it's over!" said Hemad Sherzad, a Taliban fighter stationed at Kabul's international airport. "I cannot express my happiness in words. ... Our 20 years of sacrifice worked."

In Washington, Gen. Frank McKenzie, head of U.S. Central Command, announced the completion of America's longest war and the evacuation effort, saying the last planes took off from Kabul airport at 3:29 p.m. EDT — one minute before midnight Monday in Kabul.

"We did not get everybody out that we wanted to get out," he said.

With its last troops gone, the U.S. ended its 20-year war with the Taliban back in power. Many Afghans remain fearful of their rule or of further instability, and there have been sporadic reports of killings and other abuses in areas under Taliban control despite the group's pledges to restore peace and security.

"American soldiers left the Kabul airport, and our nation got its full independence," Taliban spokesman Zabihullah Mujahid said early Tuesday.

The U.S. and its allies invaded Afghanistan shortly after the Sept. 11, 2001, terror attack on the United

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States, which al-Qaida orchestrated while sheltering under Taliban rule. The invasion drove the Taliban from power in a matter of weeks and scattered Osama bin Laden and other top al-Qaida leaders.

The U.S. and its allies launched an ambitious effort to rebuild Afghanistan after decades of war, investing billions of dollars in a Western-style government and security forces. Women, who had been largely confined to their homes under the Taliban's hard-line rule, benefitted from access to education and came to assume prominent roles in public life.

But the Taliban never went away.

In the coming years, as the U.S. focused on another troubled war in Iraq and the Afghan government became mired in corruption, the Taliban regrouped in the countryside and in neighboring Pakistan. In recent years, they seized large parts of rural Afghanistan and carried out near-daily assaults on Afghan security forces.

Eager to end the war, the Trump administration signed a peace deal with the Taliban in February 2020 that paved the way for the withdrawal. President Joe Biden extended the deadline from May to August and continued with the pullout despite the Taliban's rapid blitz across the country earlier this month.

Now the Taliban control all of Afghanistan except for the mountainous Panjshir province, where a few thousand local fighters and remnants of Afghanistan's collapsed security forces have pledged to resist them. The Taliban say they are seeking a peaceful resolution there.

They face much graver challenges now that they govern one of the poorest and most war-ravaged nations on Earth.

In recent days Afghans have lined up outside banks as an economic crisis that predates the Taliban takeover worsens. A string of attacks by the Islamic State extremist group's local affiliate, including a barrage of rockets fired at the airport Monday, shows the security challenges the Taliban face.

On Thursday, an Islamic State suicide attack at an airport gate killed at least 169 Afghans and 13 U.S. service members. The extremist group is far more radical than the Taliban, and the two groups have fought each other before. The Taliban say they will prevent Afghanistan from again being used as a base for terror attacks, a pledge that will likely be tested soon.

McKenzie said the Taliban were "significantly helpful" in enabling the airlift but will have difficulty securing Kabul in the coming days, not least because of the threat they face from IS. He said the Taliban had freed IS fighters from prisons, swelling their ranks to an estimated 2,000.

"Now they are going to be able to reap what they sowed," the American general said.

Many Afghans fear the Taliban themselves, who governed the country under a harsh interpretation of Islamic law from 1996 until 2001. In those years they banned television and music, barred women from attending school or working outside the home, and carried out public executions.

The Taliban have sought to project a more moderate image since the takeover. They say women will be able to attend school and work, and have renounced any revenge attacks on Afghans who worked with the former government, the U.S. or its allies.

Many Afghans are deeply skeptical of such promises, and fear of the Taliban's rule drove tens of thousands to flee the country over the past two weeks. Thousands more waited in vain outside the airport, many of them standing for hours in a sewage canal.

The Kabul international airport had been one of the few ways out. At one point people flooded onto the tarmac and seven fell to their deaths after clinging to a plane that was taking off. Another seven died in a stampede of people outside an airport gate.

The Taliban have said they will allow normal travel, but it is unclear how they will run the airport and which commercial carriers will begin flying in, given security concerns.

Qatar, a close U.S. ally that has long hosted a Taliban political office, has been taking part in negotiations about operations at the airport with Afghan and international parties, mainly the U.S. and Turkey. Qatari Assistant Foreign Minister Lolwa al-Khater said its main priority is restoring regular operations while maintaining security at the airport.

The last known U.S. military operation in Afghanistan came Sunday, when American officials said a drone strike blew up a vehicle carrying IS suicide bombers who were planning to attack the airport.

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But like so much about the Afghanistan war, it may not have gone as planned. Relatives of those killed in Sunday's strike said it killed civilians who had nothing to do with the extremist group.

Najibullah Ismailzada said his brother-in-law, Zemarai Ahmadi, had just arrived home from his job working with a Korean charity. As he drove into the garage, his children came out to greet him, and that is when the missile struck.

"We lost 10 members of our family," Ismailzada said, including six children ranging in age from 2 to 8. He said another relative, Naser Nejrabi, who was a former soldier in the Afghan army and a former interpreter for the U.S. military, also was killed, along with two teenagers.

U.S. officials have acknowledged the reports of civilian casualties without confirming them.

Hours before the withdrawal was complete, White House press secretary Jen Psaki said the U.S. military takes steps to avoid civilian casualties when carrying out targeted strikes.

"Of course, the loss of life from anywhere is horrible, and it impacts families no matter where they're living, in the United States or around the world," she said.

Akhgar reported from Istanbul and Krauss from Jerusalem. Associated Press writers Jon Gambrell and Aya Batrawy in Dubai, United Arab Emirates; Rahim Faiez in Istanbul; Munir Ahmed in Islamabad; Samy Magdy in Cairo; and Robert Burns and Lou Kesten in Washington contributed to this report.

Even as COVID cases rise, US Open, other events welcome fans

By HOWARD FENDRICH AP National Writer

NEW YORK (AP) — Full-throated shouts and hearty applause returned to the U.S. Open tennis tournament Monday, bursts of sound that offered some form of reaction to nearly each and every action. Also back: lengthy lines to get through the gates and to buy something to eat or drink.

A year after spectators were banned entirely from Flushing Meadows because of the coronavirus pandemic, lending a dystopian feel to a normally lively event, 100% capacity is once again being permitted — proof of vaccination needed; no masks required — at this and other sports events.

College football resumed Saturday, with tens of thousands on-hand for such as matchups as Illinois vs. Nebraska or Hawaii vs. UCLA. The NFL is letting its teams sell every ticket for the regular season; its first Sunday is Sept. 12.

Makes it tough to tell there's been a recent surge in COVID-19 cases thanks to the highly contagious delta variant. Ready or not, our fun and games are moving forward, with full stadiums and, in some cases, few protocols.

"Playing without fans here last year was brutal," 2017 U.S. Open champion Sloane Stephens told the crowd at Arthur Ashe Stadium after beating Madison Keys in three sets in a rematch of their all-American final four years ago.

As for Monday's varying degrees of noise, including what she termed "calling out at random times"?

"We missed all of that," Stephens said.

Yes, we all did.

Having an audience there makes it all mean more — to those competing and to those watching, who are more than just part of the scenery.

They're a character in the show.

"After all, that's what we're here for. We try to put on the best performance possible for them," said Lloyd Harris, a South African scheduled to play Tuesday. "For me, the more people I play in front of, the bigger the audience, the better tennis I play."

People in the seats add to the to the soundtrack, as Stephens noted, but also to the pageantry, to the swirl of emotions for everyone involved, providing a human element at a time when that is disappearing in many ways. Just one example: This U.S. Open is the first without a single line judge on any court, just chair umpires assisted by an electronic line-calling system.

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Elsewhere, though, folks were everywhere.

They ordered the Honey Deuce, touted as the U.S. Open's signature cocktail, served for \$20 in a souvenir glass.

They stood along the walkway between Court 13 — where Serbia's Dusan Lajovic defeated France's Benoit Paire — and Court 14 — where Canada's Leylah Fernandez eliminated Croatia's Ana Konjuh.

A particularly boisterous bunch at Court 5 offered support for Argentina's Diego Schwartzman, twice a U.S. Open quarterfinalist.

"The event changed 100 percent. It's a totally different feeling," Schwartzman said, adding that it "also feels a little bit weird" to be at the first Grand Slam tournament in more than 18 months with full capacity.

Every so often, a burst of sound could be heard from one of the 16 courts hosting action.

There's something significant about the shared experience that's simply absent when we're atomized, fragmented, forced to be apart from each other, as we've been lately. Sports, along with other forms of entertainment, offer a measure of escape from day-to-day life.

Perhaps that's why Americans are going to Broadway shows, movie theaters, music concerts. All despite COVID-19 deaths running at more than 1,200 a day nationwide, the highest level since mid-March. New cases per day are averaging over 155,000, returning to where things were in January.

That's why there was a hint of worry on the part of Juan Manuel Gómez, a fan from Guadalajara, Mexico, who watched French Open runner-up Stefanos Tsitsipas practice Monday.

"We know there was risk, but we think it was worth taking," said Gómez, whose wife, Lety, shot video of Tsitsipas with her phone.

Compared to visiting Times Square during their vacation with their two sons, ages 9 and 13, she said, "We feel safe here," knowing spectators needed to show proof of vaccination to get in.

According to guidelines from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, fully vaccinated people don't need to wear a mask in outdoor settings, even among crowds — unless they can't avoid close contact with unvaccinated people. (The vaccination requirement doesn't apply to players, about half of whom have gotten shots.)

Pat James, a 65-year-old retiree from Mendham, New Jersey, who was with her friend and neighbor, Barbara Ruggeri, was thrilled when the U.S. Tennis Association was pushed by the New York mayor's office to add the requirement last week.

"Actually, I didn't have apprehension so much about the COVID as I did about some other issues, like terrorism," James said, after posing for a photo with the Unisphere from the 1964 New York World's Fair that sits not far from one of the Billie Jean King National Tennis Center's main entrances. "I had a little trepidation last night. But we're both vaccinated. When we got into a crowd, we wore our masks. I just wish people would get vaccinated, so this would end."

Even if no one knows when "this" really will end, the hustle and bustle of our lives appears to be on its way back.

Certainly for two weeks in Flushing Meadows, anyway. A far cry from 2020.

"You cannot compare the atmosphere. It's much better. You feel the energy. You feel alive on court," said Simona Halep, a two-time Grand Slam champion who autographed hats and tennis balls thrust at her by front-row fans after a victory over Camila Giorgi at the Grandstand. "So, yeah, hopefully we'll stay like that forever now."

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

GOP's Larry Elder looks for shock win in California recall

By MICHAEL R. BLOOD AP Political Writer

LOS ANGELES (AP) — California's next governor could be a Black conservative who would erase state vaccine and mask mandates, is critical of gun control, disputes the notion of systemic racism in America and opposes the minimum wage because he says it tramples the free market.

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The rapid ascent of Republican Larry Elder in the Sept. 14 recall election that could remove Democratic Gov. Gavin Newsom is a striking turn in a state regarded as a Democratic fortress and national showcase for liberal policies on climate change, immigration and health care.

Elder is a talk radio host who Newsom identifies as his biggest threat in an election widely acknowledged as tight. Elder is promising to reverse California's progressive drift that he blames for an unrelenting homeless crisis, high taxes, spiking crime rates and government creep into people's lives and livelihoods — from "anti-science" coronavirus mandates to regulations he says slow-walk housing construction.

There is a saying that the future happens first in California, and Elder's potentially historic victory could have broad implications, coming on the threshold of 2022 elections that will decide control of Congress.

An Elder win would also trigger a power struggle with Sacramento's Democratic state legislative majority over everything from government appointments to how to spend billions of taxpayer dollars.

In California "young families are leaving, the taxes are going up on gasoline and this governor is either incompetent or indifferent," says Elder, who would become the first Black governor of the nation's most populous state. "He's got to go."

In another year, the charismatic Elder's candidacy in heavily Democratic California might be a footnote — the GOP hasn't won a statewide race since 2006 and Democratic voters outnumber Republicans by nearly 2-to-1. Former President Donald Trump lost the state to Joe Biden last year by more than 5 million votes.

But the unusual math that underlies the rare, late-summer recall election could upend the expected.

For years, Republicans have envisioned that a confluence of crises might result in a pendulum swing in leadership in a state that was home to — and voted for — Republican Presidents Richard Nixon and Ronald Reagan.

Mail-in ballots went out in mid-August. They are being returned at a time when COVID again is spiking and many voters are angry and looking for someone to blame.

The recall was driven by weariness over Newsom's whipsaw pandemic rules that closed businesses and schools, but it's buttressed by grievances that range from frustration with sprawling homeless encampments to soaring housing costs.

The GOP's chances rest in the atypical rules of the recall election.

There are two questions on the ballot: First, should Newsom be removed, yes or no? If a majority agrees to oust him, his successor is whoever gets the most votes on the second question. With 46 candidates, the winner could get 25% or less.

It's a rare opportunity for the GOP in a state where Democrats hold every statewide office and dominate the Legislature and congressional delegation. Republicans account for only 24% of registered voters, but the dynamics of the recall have allowed Elder and other conservative candidates to target their campaigns at right-leaning voters who could provide a sufficient winning edge.

Elder quickly overshadowed a field of GOP rivals that include businessman John Cox, state Assemblyman Kevin Kiley, former San Diego mayor Kevin Faulconer and former Olympian and reality TV personality Caitlyn Jenner.

Newsom was successful in keeping prominent Democrats off the ballot, though YouTube personality Kevin Paffrath has emerged as a potential contender within Newsom's party.

At 69, Elder is a latecomer as a first-time candidate and he's far from a household name. However, he's been a celebrity within conservative circles for years through his provocative radio show that for many stations is part of lineup of conservative voices that includes Elder's mentor, Dennis Prager. Elder has a star on the Hollywood Walk of Fame and counts nearly 2 million followers on social media.

The self-styled "Sage of South Central" — a reference to the rough Los Angeles neighborhood where he grew up — is taut with energy that belies his age. When arguing points, he can talk with the rapid-fire certitude of the lawyer that he is — Elder is a 1977 graduate of the University of Michigan Law School, and received an undergraduate degree from Brown University.

Arguably Elder's biggest headline since entering the race July 12 was an unwelcome one — a former fiancée, Alexandra Datig, alleged he was emotionally abusive and showed her a gun during an argument in 2015, a claim Elder denies.

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However, the allegations do not appear to have slowed his campaign's trajectory. He rolled out endorsements last week that included GOP national Committeeman Shawn Steel and former Democratic state Senate leader Gloria Romero, who favors charter schools, as does Elder.

His political views reflect a libertarian mindset that would elicit cringes among progressive voters — he believes government has grown too big, too intrusive, too costly.

He stands opposed to what he sees as government overreach, hence his opposition to sweeping mask mandates and the minimum wage. He's been critical of *Roe v. Wade*, the landmark 1973 U.S. Supreme Court ruling that legalized abortion nationwide, arguing that such restrictions should be left to states.

To Elder, climate change is real but he also warns against a "war on oil and gas" and shifting too quickly into a renewable-energy economy, which he says would cost jobs and fail to keep the lights on.

His views on race often have put him at odds with other Blacks. Elder is critical of the Black Lives Matter movement, and he has called racial quotas a "a crutch and a cop-out." He opposes efforts to "defund" police. In a 1995 interview with *The Orange County Register* he said, "We have to stop bitching and moaning and whining and crying and blaming the white man for everything."

Black Democratic leaders recently held an event to denounce his views on race.

"He may look like us, he may talk like us, but he is not one of us," said Malia Cohen, a member of the California State Board of Equalization, which oversees collection of state taxes.

The embattled Newsom has called Elder "more extreme than Trump in many respects."

From the start, Democrats have sought to link the recall effort to the former president, who is widely unpopular in the state outside his conservative base.

Elder rejects the notion that he's a mirror image of Trump, noting that he's broken with him on trade — Elder disagreed with tariffs and other restrictions imposed by the former president — and also thought Trump erred by cutting Afghanistan troop levels.

Newsom's steady focus on Elder isn't a surprise, says Democratic pollster Ben Tulchin. It allowed the governor to recast the race from a referendum on his own tenure by "putting a face on the alternative."

"Without a clear alternative, it was hard for Gavin and the Democrats to say, 'Oppose the recall,' because it's such an amorphous thing," Tulchin said. "Now, he can hold up Elder to define the race on partisan terms."

With mail-in ballots already being returned, the contest remains heavy with unknowns, including who will bother to vote in an election scheduled in what is normally an off-election year.

Elder might benefit from little-noticed wrinkles in state voting patterns. California has a liberal tilt, but not always.

Voters in 2020 rejected an organized labor-backed attempt to partially dismantle the state's decades-old cap on property taxes, as well as reinstate affirmative action, while Republicans ousted Democrats in four U.S. House seats.

Elder says he considers the race a longshot, given Newsom's ability to raise unlimited funds. But he believes he's the only Republican likely to deliver a stunning surprise next month.

"I don't think anybody can win except for me," he says.

Man testifies against R. Kelly in sex-trafficking trial

By TOM HAYS Associated Press

NEW YORK (AP) — After several days of testimony from women claiming they were groomed and sexually abused by R. Kelly, a man took the witness stand at Kelly's sex-trafficking trial in New York City on Monday to say the R&B star exploited him in the same way when he was a high school student.

The witness, testifying in federal court in Brooklyn without using his real name, told a jury how Kelly lured him to his Chicago-area home in 2007 with false offers of helping him with his fledgling music career.

Kelly asked the alleged victim, then 17, "what I was willing to do for music," the witness said. He replied, "I'll carry your bags. ... Anything you need, I'll be willing to do."

"That's not it. That's not it," he said Kelly responded before asking him if he ever fantasized about having

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sex with men. He described how Kelly then "crawled down on his knees and proceeded to give me oral sex," even though, "I wasn't into it."

Afterward, "he told me to keep between him and me," he said.

In a later episode, Kelly snapped his fingers to summon a naked girl from where she was hiding under a boxing ring to give Kelly and the witness oral sex, the man told the jury.

He kept seeing Kelly after that because "I really wanted to make it in the music industry," he said.

The witness was testifying as part of a cooperation agreement stemming from his guilty plea in a separate case alleging he was part of a botched scheme to bribe a woman to not testify against Kelly. No charges were brought against Kelly related to the scheme.

Kelly, 54, has repeatedly denied accusations that he preyed on victims during a 30-year career highlighted by his 1996 mega hit "I Believe I Can Fly." His lawyers have portrayed his accusers as groupies who are lying about their relationships with him.

Earlier Monday, a woman testified that Kelly sexually assaulted her at age 17 following a performance in Miami in 1994. The witness, also testifying without using her real name, claimed that Kelly's cronies took her and a friend to his dressing room after the show before he pulled down her shorts and forced her to have unprotected sex, she said.

"I was in complete shock," she said. "I didn't know what to say at all. I basically went blank."

Afterward, she and her friend "unlocked the door and ran out of there," she said.

On cross-examination, defense attorney Deveraux Cannick pressed the witness on why, after someone allegedly "raped you," she waited more than two decades to contact law enforcement.

"Because I didn't want to feel more shame and trauma," she said.

Ida topples New Orleans jazz landmark where Armstrong worked

NEW ORLEANS (AP) — A storied New Orleans jazz site where a young Louis Armstrong once worked toppled when Ida blew through Louisiana as one of the most powerful hurricanes to ever hit the U.S.

The Karnofsky Tailor Shop, where a Jewish family employed Armstrong, collapsed Sunday during the storm. Armstrong would play a small tin horn as he worked on the coal and junk wagons, according to the National Park Service.

The business opened downtown in 1913 and had a residence above it where the late jazz legend would often eat meals. The family, who provided Armstrong a "second home," lent him money to buy his first cornet.

"Louis said it was the Karnofskys that instilled the love of singing in his heart," jazz historian and retired photojournalist John McCusker said, according to WWL-TV.

Morris Karnofsky, the family's son and Armstrong's childhood friend, opened the city's first jazz record shop on that same street, according to the park service. Armstrong would visit Morris Music when he returned to New Orleans after moving away.

A cluster of other sites that were integral to jazz's early history in the city were also situated on South Rampart Street.

In 2019, a real estate firm that specializes in historic preservation was under contract to restore a part of the block that included the Karnofsky shop, The Times Picayune/The New Orleans Advocate reported. The company's CEO floated the idea of repurposing the building as a nightclub or jazz lounge.

But when daylight came Monday morning, all that was left was a pile of bricks and other remnants of the historic site.

As districts insist on vaccines, some teachers push back

By GILLIAN FLACCUS and BOBBY CAINA CALVAN Associated Press

PORTLAND, Ore. (AP) — Some of the biggest school systems in the U.S. are taking a hard line with teachers and staff members who are not yet vaccinated against COVID-19: Get a job or lose your job.

Most teachers already are vaccinated, and national teachers' unions have endorsed vaccine mandates,

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but the policies have sparked protests from educators and, in some cases, pushback from local district leaders who fear large numbers of departures.

In Oregon, where school staffers statewide are required to be fully vaccinated by Oct. 18, the board for the 7,500-student district of Redmond last week passed a resolution protesting the mandate and mandatory mask-wearing in schools after "significant" opposition.

"This could do serious damage to the other mandate that we have, which is to provide excellent education to the children and the families of our district," board member Michael Summers said. "We're attempting to speak for people."

Teachers in many school districts with vaccine requirements can opt out as long as they submit to regular testing for the coronavirus, but New York City, Philadelphia, Chicago and St. Louis are among a growing list of places that are limiting exemptions to bona fide medical and religious reasons. Washington and Oregon have adopted similarly strict vaccination policies statewide.

As a new school year begins, governments are taking a harder line on vaccinations to ward off the highly contagious delta variant, which has sent children to hospital intensive care beds in record numbers. Many students are too young to get the vaccine, which is available only to those 12 and over.

"This is to ensure that the children we all cherish are safe, that their families are reassured," New York Mayor Bill de Blasio, a Democrat, said last week.

Underscoring the risks of classroom infections, the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention presented a case study in its weekly report Friday detailing how an unvaccinated teacher in Marin County, California, spread the virus to 22 of the instructor's 24 students at school. The CDC said the teacher sometimes read aloud to the students while unmasked.

Some school staff members who have held off on getting vaccinated say they would leave their jobs before taking the shots.

Marlene Washington, an elementary school teacher in New York City, said as she protested de Blasio's order outside City Hall last week that she is considering retirement after two decades in the classroom. She said she questions the long-term safety of the vaccines.

"I'm still undecided about what to do," said Washington, 62. "But I do know that I'm not taking the vaccine."

Kiara Coleman, a food service worker for Philadelphia schools, said she isn't budging despite uncertainty over the consequences of refusing a vaccine.

"I'll just have to cross that bridge when I find out more details of the mandate. I would hate to throw away all that time I have with the schools," said Coleman, who also has concerns about potential effects of vaccines.

The U.S. Food and Drug Administration last week gave full approval to Pfizer's COVID-19 vaccine, citing months of real-world evidence that serious side effects are extremely rare.

Philadelphia parent Rebecca Smith, who has daughters in the third and sixth grades, said she should not have to worry about school employees making them sick.

"School employees are tasked with caring for some of the most vulnerable members of our society — our children under 12, who right now are the ONLY group who can not get a vaccine to protect themselves," she said in written testimony to the school board.

While teachers unions including the United Federation of Teachers, which represents New York City teachers, have supported the no-opt out rules for vaccines, they also advocate on behalf of dissenting members in negotiations with the city. Some of those talks focus on severance packages for those who leave their jobs and leaves of absences that could allow some teachers to return once the public health crisis passes.

"We will represent them and we will protect their interests. But there is a deep disagreement here," said Randi Weingarten, the president of the American Federation of Teachers, the parent organization of the New York City teachers union.

"At the end of the day, employers have the right to impose these kinds of vaccination policies and they will do that," she said.

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At least 72% of the 75,000 public school teachers in New York City have gotten at least one shot of a vaccine.

Protestors gathered in Olympia, Washington, when Gov. Jay Inslee, a Democrat, announced teachers would have until Oct. 18 to be fully vaccinated or face firing. A protest on Saturday attracted hundreds of state employees, from ferry workers to teachers, who rallied against the vaccine mandate.

Oregon Gov. Kate Brown, a Democrat, moved toward mandatory vaccinations as COVID-19 hospitalizations have surged nearly 1,000% since early July.

About 700 teachers have contacted the Freedom Foundation, a right-wing legal organization that has represented businesses cited for violating COVID-19 restrictions in Oregon and elsewhere.

"We've been telling everybody to make the school fire you," said Jason Dudash, the group's Oregon director. "Don't quit. If they're going to do this, make them do it."

A 675-student district in central Oregon delayed the start of school three weeks until Sept. 20 to deal with the fallout from the vaccine mandate, Culver School District Superintendent Stefanie Garber said in a letter to families.

She said her district will comply but feels state officials are threatening unreasonable penalties, including the possible loss of a district's liability insurance and the revocation of teachers' licenses.

In another small, rural town, a district-sponsored vaccine clinic set up after Brown's vaccine mandate attracted fewer than 10 teachers and there is concern about staffing if some decide to leave rather than get the shots, said Lebanon Community School District Superintendent Bo Yates.

Yates estimated that between 50% and 60% of the teachers and staff in his 4,000-student district are vaccinated. Several dozen teachers and their supporters protested the mandate when it was announced earlier this month.

"In a certain sense, I empathize with them because some of the people that are protesting have been our superstars during this COVID period. They've been the food service workers that have been feeding our community on a nonstop basis or our bus drivers," Yates said. "But we've got to follow the mandates that we're given or we'll be swimming in this sea forever."

In Redmond, Oregon, the school board resolution protesting the vaccine mandate passed on a 3-2 vote. The district will comply with the vaccine mandate as it fights to regain local control of decisions around mask-wearing and vaccines in schools, board members said.

One board member who voted against the resolution, Liz Goodrich, noted COVID-19 is surging in central Oregon and only 57% of eligible residents in Redmond are fully vaccinated.

"To me, local conditions are not good and we have heard over and over," she said, "that the spike of this delta variant is not done."

Calvan reported from New York. Associated Press reporters Claudia Lauer in Philadelphia and Rachel La Corte in Olympia, Washington, contributed to this report.

US flies more evacuees out as withdrawal deadline nears

By LOLITA C. BALDOR and ROBERT BURNS Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — America's 20-year war in Afghanistan entered its final hours Monday with the last Americans seeking to be evacuated and the U.S. military preparing to end its airlift and depart the Taliban-controlled capital.

"Obviously we are reaching the end of our prescribed mission," Maj. Gen. Hank Taylor of the Pentagon's Joint Staff told reporters, adding that details of the final evacuation movements were being kept secret for security reasons.

Speaking at the same news conference, Pentagon spokesman John Kirby said it was not too late for any remaining Americans to get to the Kabul airport for evacuation flights.

"There is still time," Kirby said.

Later, White House press secretary Jen Psaki said "a small number" of Americans were believed to still want to get out of the country. She did not offer an exact number but said about 6,000 had been evacu-

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ated by various means so far. She said some of the remaining Americans had not fully decided whether to leave.

The Islamic State group's Afghanistan affiliate claimed responsibility for targeting the Kabul airport with rockets. The U.S. military reported no American casualties.

The focus of the U.S. evacuation was increasingly on getting the last Americans out. Senior administration officials said Sunday that the United States has the capacity to evacuate the approximately 300 U.S. citizens remaining in Afghanistan who want to leave before President Joe Biden's Tuesday deadline.

"This is the most dangerous time in an already extraordinarily dangerous mission these last couple of days," said America's top diplomat, Secretary of State Antony Blinken.

The steady stream of U.S. military jets taking off and landing at Hamid Karzai International Airport in Afghanistan's capital continued Monday even after rocket fire targeted the airport and rockets hit a nearby neighborhood. U.S. Central Command spokesman Bill Urban said five rockets targeted the airport and a U.S. defensive system on the airfield known as a Counter Rocket, Artillery and Mortar System, or C-RAM, was employed against them. He said there were no U.S. casualties and the airfield continued to operate. Further details were not immediately available. The White House said Biden had been briefed on the rocket attack.

Biden's national security adviser, Jake Sullivan, said Sunday that for those U.S. citizens seeking immediately to leave Afghanistan by the looming deadline, "we have the capacity to have 300 Americans, which is roughly the number we think are remaining, come to the airport and get on planes in the time that is remaining."

The White House said Monday morning that about 1,200 people were evacuated from Kabul over the prior 24 hours aboard 26 U.S. military flights and two allied flights.

Sullivan said the U.S. does not currently plan to have an ongoing embassy presence after the final U.S. troop withdrawal. But he pledged the U.S. "will make sure there is safe passage for any American citizen, any legal permanent resident," after Tuesday, as well as for "those Afghans who helped us." But untold numbers of vulnerable Afghans, fearful of a return to the brutality of pre-2001 Taliban rule, are likely to be left behind.

Blinken said the U.S. was working with other countries in the region to either keep the Kabul airport open after Tuesday or to reopen it "in a timely fashion."

He also said that while the airport is critical, "there are other ways to leave Afghanistan, including by road, and many countries border Afghanistan." The U.S., he said, is "making sure that we have in place all of the necessary tools and means to facilitate the travel for those who seek to leave Afghanistan" after Tuesday.

There also are roughly 280 others who have said they are Americans but who have told the State Department they plan to remain in the country or are undecided. According to the latest totals, about 114,000 people have been evacuated since Aug. 14, including approximately 2,900 on military and coalition flights during the 24 hours ending at 3 a.m. Sunday.

Members of Congress criticized the chaotic and violent evacuation.

"We didn't have to be in this rush-rush circumstance with terrorists breathing down our neck," said Sen. Mitt Romney, R-Utah. "But it's really the responsibility of the prior administration and this administration that has caused this crisis to be upon us and has led to what is without question a humanitarian and foreign policy tragedy."

Senate Republican leader Mitch McConnell of Kentucky said the U.S. policy in Afghanistan, with 2,500 troops on the ground, had been working. "We were, in effect, keeping the lid on, keeping terrorists from reconstituting, and having a light footprint in the country," he said.

U.S. officials said Sunday's American drone strike hit a vehicle carrying multiple Islamic State suicide bombers, causing secondary explosions indicating the presence of a substantial amount of explosive material. A senior U.S. official said the military drone fired a Hellfire missile at a vehicle in a compound between two buildings after people were seen loading explosives into the trunk.

The official said there was an initial explosion caused by the missile, followed by a much larger fireball, believed to be the result of the substantial amount of explosives inside the vehicle. The U.S. believes that

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two Islamic State group individuals who were targeted were killed.

In a statement, U.S. Central Command said it is looking into the reports of civilian casualties that may have been caused by the secondary explosions. An Afghan official said three children were killed in the strike. The officials spoke on the condition of anonymity to discuss military operations.

It was the second airstrike in recent days the U.S. has conducted against the militant group, which claimed responsibility for the suicide bombing Thursday at the Kabul airport gate that killed 13 U.S. service members and scores of Afghans struggling to get out of the country and escape the new Taliban rule. The Pentagon said a U.S. drone mission in eastern Afghanistan killed two members of IS' Afghanistan affiliate early Saturday local time in retaliation for the airport bombing.

In Delaware, Biden met privately with the families of the American troops killed in the suicide attack and solemnly watched as the remains of the fallen returned to U.S. soil from Afghanistan. First lady Jill Biden and many of the top U.S. defense and military leaders joined him on the tarmac at Dover Air Force Base.

The service members were the first killed in Afghanistan since February 2020, the month the Trump administration struck an agreement with the Taliban in which the militant group halted attacks on Americans in exchange for a U.S. agreement to remove all troops and contractors by May 2021. Biden announced in April that the 2,500 to 3,000 troops who remained would be out by September, ending what he has called America's forever war.

Sullivan appeared on CBS' "Face the Nation," CNN's "State of the Union" and "Fox News Sunday." Blinken was interviewed on ABC's "This Week" and NBC's "Meet the Press." McConnell was on Fox and Romney was on CNN.

Associated Press writers Matthew Lee and Hope Yen in Washington, Aamer Madhani at Dover Air Force Base, Delaware, and Kathy Gannon in Kabul, Afghanistan, contributed to this report.

EU takes US off safe travel list; backs travel restrictions

By SAMUEL PETREQUIN Associated Press

BRUSSELS (AP) — The European Union recommended Monday that its 27 nations reinstate restrictions on tourists from the U.S. because of rising coronavirus infections there, but member countries will keep the option of allowing fully vaccinated U.S. travelers in.

The decision by the European Council to remove the U.S. from a safe list of countries for nonessential travel reverses the advice that it gave in June, when the bloc recommended lifting restrictions on all U.S. travelers before the summer tourism season.

The EU's decision reflects growing anxiety that the rampant spread of the virus in the U.S. could jump to Europe at a time when Americans are allowed to travel to the continent. Both the EU and the U.S. have faced rising infections this summer, driven by the more contagious delta variant.

The guidance issued Monday is nonbinding, however. American tourists should expect a mishmash of travel rules across the continent since the EU has no unified COVID-19 tourism policy and national EU governments have the authority to decide whether or how they keep their borders open during the pandemic.

More than 15 million Americans a year visited Europe before the coronavirus crisis, and new travel restrictions could cost European businesses billions in lost travel revenues, especially in tourism-reliant countries like Croatia, which has been surprised by packed beaches and hotels this summer.

"Nonessential travel to the EU from countries or entities not listed (on the safe list) ... is subject to temporary travel restriction," the council said in a statement. "This is without prejudice to the possibility for member states to lift the temporary restriction on nonessential travel to the EU for fully vaccinated travelers."

U.S. travelers would have to be immunized with one of the vaccines approved by the bloc, which includes Pfizer, Moderna, AstraZeneca and Johnson&Johnson.

Possible restrictions on U.S. travelers could include quarantines, further testing requirements upon arrival or even a total ban on all nonessential travel from the U.S.

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In Washington, White House press secretary Jen Psaki stressed Monday that the EU travel restrictions applied to the unvaccinated, adding that "the fastest path to reopening travel is for people to get vaccinated, to mask up and slow the spread of the deadly virus."

Psaki told reporters that the U.S. government is working across federal agencies to develop its own policy for international travel, with the possibility of strengthening testing protocols and potentially ensuring that foreign visitors are fully vaccinated. But she said no final decision has been made yet.

The EU recommendation doesn't apply to Britain, which formally left the EU at the beginning of the year and opened its borders to fully vaccinated travelers from the U.S. earlier this month.

The United States remains on Britain's "amber" travel list, meaning that fully vaccinated adults arriving from the U.S. to the U.K. don't have to self-isolate. A negative COVID-19 test within three days before arriving in the U.K. is required and another negative test is needed two days after arriving.

The EU also removed Israel, Kosovo, Lebanon, Montenegro and North Macedonia from the safe travel list on Monday.

Meanwhile, the United States has yet to reopen its own borders to EU tourists, despite calls from the bloc to do so. Adalbert Jahnz, the European Commission spokesperson for home affairs, said Monday that the EU's executive arm remained in discussions with the Biden administration but so far both sides have failed to find a reciprocal approach.

In addition to the epidemiological criteria used to determine the countries for which restrictions should be lifted, the European Council said that "reciprocity should also be taken into account on a case-by-case basis."

The European Council updates the safe travel list every two weeks, based criteria related to coronavirus infection levels. The threshold for being on the EU safe list is having not more than 75 new COVID-19 cases per 100,000 inhabitants over the last 14 days.

The U.S., meanwhile, is averaging more than 155,000 new coronavirus cases and 1,200 deaths per day, and several U.S. states have more COVID-19 patients in the hospital now than at any other time during the pandemic.

Authorities in Oregon are seeking extra refrigerated trucks because morgues are at capacity and Florida is in a similar situation after a week in which more than 1,700 people died from the virus in the state. Hospitals are desperately running out of staff in several states, and the start of the school year has brought even more fears that the outlook will worsen as millions of unvaccinated students return to their classrooms.

U.S. school districts have been struggling over whether to impose mask mandates, sometimes even suing in states where officials are against such requirements.

Vaccine hesitancy also remains a problem in many locations in the U.S., where 61% of the eligible population is inoculated against the virus. In contrast, Britain has fully vaccinated over 78% of adults and EU countries have inoculated nearly 70% of those over 18.

Follow AP's pandemic coverage at:

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Josh Hoffner in Phoenix, Arizona, Sylvia Hui in London and Joshua Boak in Washington, D.C., contributed to this report.

In Kabul, some fear economic collapse more than Taliban fist

By KATHY GANNON Associated Press

KABUL, Afghanistan (AP) — At a pizzeria in downtown Kabul, the staff and customers alike are anxious about Afghanistan's new Taliban rulers.

Some, however, said they are more worried about economic collapse and being unable to feed their

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families than about having to grow long beards — a practice from the Taliban's previous time in power. Others fear for the future of their children, or were spooked by the panic on display when tens of thousands of foreigners and Afghans fled in a mammoth airlift over the past two weeks.

With full Taliban control about to become a reality with a Tuesday deadline for the final U.S. troop withdrawal from Afghanistan, exit plans are still being hatched.

"I have to run away so I can feed my family," said Mustafa, a waiter at another nearby fast-food place who had come to the pizzeria for tea and a chat with friends among the staff.

Mustafa, who like many in Afghanistan only uses one name, said he has a family of 11 to support and is toying with the idea of seeking work in neighboring Iran. He said his salary has been cut by 75% to less than \$50 a month since the Taliban overran Kabul and business dried up.

Pizzeria owner Mohammad Yaseen said daily sales have plummeted, and that at this pace, he won't be able to cover the rent.

Yaseen has been sifting through old emails, searching for a foreign acquaintance who might help him resettle abroad, "It's not for me I want to leave, but for my children," he said.

Still, there's a sense of a return to business as usual across much of the Afghan capital of more than 5 million people, in sharp contrast to the harrowing scenes at the Kabul airport where thousands surged toward the gates for days, hoping for an opportunity to leave.

In much of Kabul, the usual chaotic traffic is back and markets have opened.

At traffic stops and roundabouts, the same police who served in the Washington-allied government of President Ashraf Ghani are still waving their hands in an often futile attempt to rein in the chaos.

Taliban fighters have taken up positions in front of most government ministries. Some are in camouflage uniforms, while others wear the traditional Afghan dress of baggy pants and long tunic.

Enterprising street vendors have even managed to turn a profit, selling the Taliban's white flag emblazoned with a Quranic verse.

Shah Mohammad makes up to \$15 a day selling various sizes of the flag, weaving his way through traffic and shoving the small flags at passing cars. He also has full-size flags on offer. Previously, he sold cloths for cleaning cars, saying he made about \$4 a day.

At the massive Chaman-e-Hozari Park, scores of young boys played cricket and soccer, a game the Taliban had frowned upon when they ruled from 1996-2001.

Giant murals still adorn giant cement blast walls. The paintings include women holding young children to promote health care, Afghan national flags and even one of a top Taliban leader, Mullah Abdul Ghani Baradar, posing with the U.S. peace envoy Zalmay Khalilzad.

But the financial desperation hangs heavy over the city.

Salaries have gone unpaid. Government ministries that employ hundreds of thousands of people are barely operating, even as the Taliban have urged some to return to work.

Outside the Afghan National Bank, thousands are lined up, five and six abreast, trying to withdraw money. The Taliban have limited weekly withdrawals to \$200.

Noorullah, who has been operating a hole-in-the-wall hardware shop for 11 years, said he hasn't had a single customer since the Taliban arrived Aug. 15. He said he can't pay the rent on his store.

"The banks are closed. All the people who have money are running away from this country," he said. "No one is bringing money here."

Noorullah said he has no chance to leave and isn't certain he would even if he could. He said if the economy picked up, he would stay, even with Taliban in power.

"I was born here," he said. "I lived here all my life. I will die here."

Reflecting on the 20-year U.S. military presence, Noorullah said he was disappointed.

"America did not do a good job here," he said. "They let corruption grow until there was nothing left."

Birds of prey face global decline from habitat loss, poisons

By CHRISTINA LARSON AP Science Writer

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WASHINGTON (AP) — Despite a few high-profile conservation success stories — like the dramatic comeback of bald eagle populations in North America — birds of prey are in decline worldwide.

A new analysis of data from the International Union for the Conservation of Nature and BirdLife International found that 30% of 557 raptor species worldwide are considered near threatened, vulnerable or endangered or critically endangered. Eighteen species are critically endangered, including the Philippine eagle, the hooded vulture and the Annobon scops owl, the researchers found.

Other species are in danger of becoming locally extinct in specific regions, meaning they may no longer play critical roles as top predators in those ecosystems, said Gerardo Ceballos, a bird scientist at the National Autonomous University of Mexico and co-author of the study published Monday in the journal *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences*.

"The golden eagle is the national bird of Mexico, but we have very few golden eagles left in Mexico," he said. A 2016 census estimated only about 100 breeding pairs remain in the country.

Harpy eagles were once widespread throughout southern Mexico and Central and South America, but tree cutting and burning has dramatically shrunk their range.

Of threatened birds of prey that are active mostly during the day — including most hawks, eagles and vultures — 54% were falling in population, the study found. The same was true for 47% of threatened nocturnal raptors, such as owls.

That means "the factors causing the decline have not been remedied" and those species need immediate attention, said Jeff Johnson, a biologist at the University of North Texas, who was not involved in the study.

Globally, the biggest threats to these birds are habitat loss, climate change and toxic substances, said Evan Buechley, a research associate at the Smithsonian Migratory Bird Center and a scientist at nonprofit HawkWatch International who was not involved in the study.

The insecticide DDT thinned egg shells and decimated bald eagle populations in North America, leading to its ban in the U.S. in 1972. But Buechley said other threats remain, including rodent pesticides and the lead in hunters' bullets and shot pellets. Many raptors feed on rodents and dead animals.

The Andean condor is declining due to exposure to pesticides, lead and other toxic substances, said Sergio Lambertucci, a biologist at the National University of Comahue in Argentina.

Widespread use of an anti-inflammatory drug in livestock led to the rapid decline of vultures in South Asia. The birds died after eating carcasses, shrinking the population of some species by 95% in recent decades.

In East Asia, many raptor species are long-distance migrants: They breed in northern China, Mongolia or Russia and travel down the eastern coast of China to spend summers in Southeast Asia or India.

"Certain areas of the coast will see 30 to 40 species during peak migration," said Yang Liu, an ecologist at Sun Yat-Sen University in Guangzhou, who was not involved in the study.

But eastern China is also the most populous and urban part of the country, with steep development pressures. "Sites that are bottlenecks for migration, with thousands of birds passing through, are important to protect," he said.

Of 4,200 sites identified by conservation groups as critical for raptor species globally, most "are unprotected or only partly covered by protected areas," said Stuart Butchart, chief scientist at BirdLife International in the United Kingdom.

A 2018 study in the journal *Biological Conservation* found that 52% of all raptor species worldwide are decreasing in population.

Follow Christina Larson on Twitter: @larsonchristina

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Donations pour in after Marine from Wyoming killed in Kabul

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CASPER, Wyo. (AP) — Donations are pouring in for the widow and unborn child of a U.S. Marine from Wyoming killed in a bombing in Afghanistan.

Rylee McCollum, 20, was among 13 service members killed by a suicide bomb attack Thursday at the Kabul airport. They were providing security as the airport was overwhelmed with people trying to leave the country amid the U.S. withdrawal and Taliban takeover.

McCollum was from Bondurant and expecting his first child in three weeks, according to his family.

Almost \$487,000 had been raised through two online fundraising campaigns, one for the child's future education costs and one for McCollum's widow, as of Sunday.

McCollum was on his first deployment and manning a checkpoint at the airport when the attack happened, the Casper Star-Tribune reported.

McCollum attended Jackson Hole High School and competed as a wrestler. He graduated in 2019 from Summit Innovations School in Jackson.

UN hails end of poisonous leaded gas use in cars worldwide

By FRANK JORDANS Associated Press

BERLIN (AP) — Leaded gasoline has finally reached the end of the road, the U.N. environment office said Monday, after the last country in the world halted the sale of the highly toxic fuel.

Algeria stopped providing leaded gas last month, prompting the U.N. Environment Agency to declare the "official end" of its use in cars, which has been blamed for a wide range of human health problems.

"The successful enforcement of the ban on leaded petrol is a huge milestone for global health and our environment," UNEP's executive director, Inger Andersen, said in a statement.

Petroleum containing tetraethyllead, a form of lead, was first sold almost 100 years ago to increase engine performance. It was widely used for decades until researchers discovered that it could cause heart disease, strokes and brain damage.

UNEP said studies showed leaded gas caused measurable intellectual impairment in children and millions of premature deaths.

"The cost of environmental degradation is real," said Andersen, citing what she described as a "very, very ballpark number" of \$2.45 trillion in damage to the global economy prevented by the ban.

Janet McCabe, deputy administrator of the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, said measurements showed blood lead levels "plummeted, literally, literally plummeted" after the fuel was banned in the United States.

Most rich nations started phasing out the fuel in the 1970s and 1980s, but it was still widely used in low- and middle-income countries until 2002, when the U.N. launched a global campaign to abolish it.

Leaded gas is still used in aviation fuel for small planes, an issue that McCabe said the EPA was working with the Federal Aviation Administration to address.

U.N. Secretary-General Antonio Guterres said the successful abolition of leaded gas, like the ban on ozone-depleting chemicals, showed the impact that international treaties could have on addressing environmental issues.

"We must now turn the same commitment to ending the triple crises of climate disruption, biodiversity loss and pollution," he added.

Follow all developments about environmental issues and climate change at <https://apnews.com/hub/climate-change>

Astronaut gets special ice cream delivery for 50th birthday

By MARCIA DUNN AP Aerospace Writer

CAPE CANAVERAL, Fla. (AP) — A space station astronaut is celebrating her 50th birthday with the coolest present ever — a supply ship bearing ice cream and other treats.

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SpaceX's latest cargo delivery showed up Monday at the International Space Station after a day in transit. Overseeing the automated docking was NASA astronaut Megan McArthur.

"No one's ever sent me a spaceship for my birthday before. I appreciate it," she radioed after the capsule arrived.

Launched Sunday from NASA's Kennedy Space Center, the capsule contains lemons, cherry tomatoes, avocados and ice cream for McArthur and her six crewmates, along with a couple tons of research and other gear.

The shipment arrived just a few days ahead of the first of three spacewalks.

Starting Friday, the two Russians on board will perform back-to-back spacewalks to outfit a new laboratory that arrived in July.

Then a Japanese-French spacewalking duo will venture out Sept. 12 to install a bracket for new solar panels due to arrive next year. That NASA-directed spacewalk should have occurred last week, but was postponed after U.S. spacewalker, Mark Vande Hei, suffered a pinched nerve in his neck. Station managers opted to replace him with French astronaut Thomas Pesquet.

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Qatar emerges as key player in Afghanistan after US pullout

By AYA BATRAWY Associated Press

DUBAI, United Arab Emirates (AP) — Qatar played an outsized role in U.S. efforts to evacuate tens of thousands of people from Afghanistan. Now the tiny Gulf Arab state is being asked to help shape what is next for Afghanistan because of its ties with both Washington and the Taliban, who are in charge in Kabul.

Qatar will be among global heavyweights on Monday when U.S. Secretary of State Antony Blinken hosts a virtual meeting to discuss a coordinated approach for the days ahead, as the U.S. completes its withdrawal from Afghanistan following the Taliban takeover of the country. The meeting will also include Canada, France, Germany, Italy, Japan, the United Kingdom, Turkey, the European Union and NATO.

Qatar is also in talks about providing civilian technical assistance to the Taliban at Kabul's international airport once the U.S. military withdrawal is complete on Tuesday.

Qatar's Foreign Ministry confirmed to The Associated Press it has been taking part in negotiations about the operations of the Kabul airport with Afghan and international parties, mainly the United States and Turkey. Qatar said its main priority is restoring regular operations while preserving safety and security at the airport facilities.

Meanwhile, international U.N. agencies are asking Qatar for help and support in delivering aid to Afghanistan.

Qatar's role was somewhat unexpected. The nation, which shares a land border with Saudi Arabia and a vast underwater gas field in the Persian Gulf with Iran, was supposed to be a transit point for a just a few thousand people airlifted from Afghanistan over a timeline of several months.

After the surprisingly swift Taliban takeover of Kabul on Aug. 15, the United States looked to Qatar to help shoulder the evacuations of tens of thousands in a chaotic and hurried airlift.

In the end, nearly 40% of all evacuees were moved out via Qatar, winning its leadership heaps of praise from Washington. International media outlets also leaned on Qatar for their own staff evacuations. The United States said Saturday that 113,500 people had been evacuated from Afghanistan since Aug. 14. Qatar says a little more than 43,000 had transited through the country.

Qatar's role in the evacuations reflects its position as host of the Middle East's biggest U.S. military base, but also its decision years ago to host the Taliban's political leadership in exile, giving it some sway with the militant group. Qatar also hosted U.S.-Taliban peace talks.

Assistant Qatari Foreign Minister Lolwa al-Khater acknowledged the political gains scored by Qatar in the past weeks, but rebuffed any suggestion that Qatar's efforts were purely strategic.

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"If anyone assumes that it's only about political gains, believe me, there are ways to do PR that are way easier than risking our people there on the ground, way easier than us having sleepless nights literally for the past two weeks, way less complicated than spending our time looking after every kid and every pregnant woman," she told The Associated Press.

For some of the most sensitive rescue efforts in Afghanistan, Qatar conducted the operation with just a few hundred troops and its own military aircraft. Qatar evacuated a girls' boarding school, an all-girls robotics team and journalists working for international media, among others. Qatar's ambassador accompanied convoys of buses through a gauntlet of Taliban checkpoints in Kabul and past various Western military checkpoints at the airport, where massive crowds had gathered, desperate to flee.

In all, al-Khater said Qatar secured passage to the airport for some 3,000 people and airlifted as many as 1,500 after receiving requests from international organizations and vetting their names.

Al-Khater said Qatar was uniquely positioned because of its ability to speak to various parties on the ground and its willingness to escort people through Taliban-controlled Kabul.

"What many people don't realize is that this trip is not a phone call to Taliban," she said. "You have checkpoints by the U.S. side, by the British side, by the NATO side, by the Turkish side ... and we have to juggle with all of these variables and factors."

The Taliban have promised amnesty to all those who remain in Afghanistan. Still, many of those desperate to get out — including civil society activists, those who had worked for Western armies and women afraid to lose hard-won rights — say they do not trust the militants. In addition, other armed groups pose a growing threat. Last week, an attack by an Islamic State suicide bomber killed more than 180 people outside Kabul airport.

The U.S.-led evacuation process has been marred by miscalculation and chaos, and that spilled over to the al-Udeid base in Qatar.

The hangars at al-Udeid were so crammed that the United States halted flights from Kabul for several hours during the peak of evacuation efforts on Aug. 20. Nearby countries, like Bahrain and the United Arab Emirates, accepted several thousand evacuees to alleviate pressure on the American base.

At al-Udeid, Afghan families evacuated by the U.S. waited for hours in poorly ventilated, humid hangars in the middle of the desert with inadequate cooling. A video posted by The Washington Post showed hundreds of evacuees in one such hangar with only one lavatory and people sleeping on the ground.

Qatar built an emergency field hospital, additional shelters and portable washrooms to help plug the gaps. In addition to what the U.S. military is distributing, the Qatari military is handing out 50,000 meals a day, and more still by local charities. Qatar Airways has also provided 10 aircraft to transport evacuees from its capital, Doha, to other countries.

Around 20,000 evacuees remain in Qatar, some expecting to leave in a matter of weeks and others in months to come as they await resettlement elsewhere. Seven Afghan women have delivered babies since their arrival in Qatar.

Qatar is absorbing only a very small number of evacuees, among them a group of female students who will be offered scholarships to continue their education in Doha. Qatar is also hosting some evacuees in furnished apartment facilities built for the FIFA World Cup, which will be played in Doha next year.

The energy-rich nation is a tiny country with a little more than 300,000 citizens, where expatriate foreign workers on temporary visas far outnumber the local population.

The White House says President Joe Biden personally expressed his appreciation to Qatar's 41-year-old Emir Tamim bin Hamad Al Thani by phone and noted that the U.S.-led airlift would not have been possible without Qatar's support facilitating the transfer of thousands of people daily.

It's the kind of positive publicity that millions of dollars spent by Gulf Arab states on lobbying and public relations could scarcely guarantee.

China limits children to 3 hours of online gaming a week

BEIJING (AP) — China is banning children from playing online games for more than three hours a week, the harshest restriction so far on the game industry as Chinese regulators continue cracking down on the technology sector.

Minors in China can only play games between 8 p.m. to 9 p.m. on Fridays, weekends and on public holidays starting Sept. 1, according to a notice from the National Press and Publication Administration.

That limits gaming to three hours a week for most weeks of the year, down from a previous restriction set in 2019 that allowed minors play games for an hour and a half per day and three hours on public holidays.

The new regulation affects some of China's largest technology companies, including gaming giant Tencent, whose Honor of Kings online multiplayer game is hugely popular globally, as well as gaming company NetEase.

Tencent's stock price closed down 0.6% at 465.80 Hong Kong dollars on Monday ahead of the regulator's announcement. Its market capitalization of \$573 billion is down more than \$300 billion from its February peak, a decline equal to more than the total value of Nike Inc. or Pfizer Inc.

New York-listed NetEase's stock was down about 9% at the market's open.

The gaming restrictions are part of an ongoing crackdown on technology companies, amid concerns that technology firms — many of which provide ubiquitous messaging, payments and gaming services — may have an outsized influence on society.

Earlier this month, Tencent said it would limit gaming time for minors to an hour a day and two hours during holidays, as well as ban children under the age of 12 from making in-game purchases.

The company issued the curbs hours after a state-affiliated newspaper criticized the gaming industry and called games "spiritual opium."

Regulators said in Monday's notice that they would strengthen supervision and increase the frequency of inspections of online game companies to ensure that they follow the regulations closely.

Chinese authorities in recent months have targeted e-commerce and online education, and have implemented new regulations to curb anti-competitive behavior after years of rapid growth in the technology sector.

Last month, authorities banned companies that provide tutoring in core school subjects from making a profit, wiping out billions in market value from online education companies such as TAL Education and Gaotu Techedu.

Merkel's would-be heir seeks rebound after election debate

By GEIR MOULSON Associated Press

BERLIN (AP) — Chancellor Angela Merkel's struggling would-be heir on Monday hit back at suggestions that a center-left rival is better qualified for the job after a televised debate four weeks ahead of Germany's election failed to give him a clear breakthrough.

Armin Laschet, the chancellor candidate from Merkel's center-right Union bloc, insisted that he was "not at all" frustrated by a poll following Sunday night's debate. It showed most viewers picking center-left Social Democrat Olaf Scholz as the winner of the event, followed by environmentalist Green contender Annalena Baerbock and then Laschet.

The mass-circulation Bild daily's front page proclaimed it a "clear victory for Scholz on TV" and a "debate debacle for Laschet."

The race for Germany's Sept. 26 parliamentary election, which has been marked by missteps first by Baerbock and then Laschet, is too close to call. Recent polls show Laschet's Union bloc — which long enjoyed a lead — level with or even slightly behind Scholz's long-moribund Social Democrats, with the Greens a few points back.

Merkel, Germany's leader since 2005, chose not to run. She said nearly three years ago that she wouldn't seek a fifth term.

The experienced and unflappable Scholz, the vice chancellor and finance minister in Merkel's outgoing

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coalition government, has seen his personal ratings rise in surveys that suggest many voters aren't impressed with the choices for chancellor that they face.

"Let's let voters decide what they think is chancellor-like," Laschet said when asked at a news conference about the positive reviews of Scholz's performance. "If you want Angela Merkel's politics, you have to get away from this completely state-oriented Social Democratic election program."

"I didn't notice anything along those lines yesterday, and I didn't see him as ... a firework show of ideas," he added.

He once again assailed Scholz for refusing to rule out a coalition with the hard-left opposition Left Party, a possibility that the Union has repeatedly raised as its own ratings sink.

"That's not chancellor-like," Laschet said. "The chancellor would have given a clear answer."

Laschet, the governor of Germany's most populous state, North Rhine-Westphalia, sought to focus Monday on his pledges: no tax raises, modernization, security and more coherence in foreign policy decisions.

He promoted his climate policy, which foresees making Germany "climate-neutral" by 2045 while still preserving industrial jobs, and has been criticized by the Greens as half-hearted.

"We are counting on innovation, on market mechanisms, which from our point of view are more promising than the bans we heard about again yesterday evening from the Social Democrats and Greens," Laschet said.

The Social Democrats declared themselves satisfied with the debate. The party's general secretary, Lars Klingbeil, said Laschet is "fighting for his personal future" and still needs to convince his own party that he should be Germany's next leader.

"We will go at full throttle for 27 days now ... we want Olaf Scholz to become chancellor, and yesterday was an important milestone for that," Klingbeil told n-tv television.

Two more debates follow, on Sept. 12 and 19.

This story corrects the attribution of a quote in the 10th paragraph from Scholz to Laschet.

Some Indonesian students return to schools, at a distance

By NINIEK KARMINI and FADLAN SYAM Associated Press

JAKARTA, Indonesia (AP) — School bells rang in parts of Indonesia's capital for the first time in more than a year on Monday as schools shut by the coronavirus were allowed to begin reopening as cases decline.

A total of 610 schools that passed standards set by the Jakarta Education Agency reopened their doors, though with many precautions still in place.

In-person schooling will be blended with remote learning and gradually increased based on the government's evaluation of the situation. Elementary students will initially attend school three days a week, junior high students four days and high school students five days, all with shortened class periods.

The city administration initially planned to reopen schools in June, but postponed the restart when a wave of infections triggered by the highly contagious delta variant engulfed the country.

"We have passed the peak of the second wave of COVID-19 infections," Jakarta Vice Governor Ahmad Riza Patria said Monday, adding that officials hope to reopen all schools by January.

There are 5,341 schools ranging from elementary to high school in Jakarta, according to government data.

"I feel nervous," said Akila Malawa, a 12-year-old student going to class for the first time in more than a year at Suluh junior high school. "But I'm so happy to see my friends again."

"I hope the coronavirus in Indonesia will end so I can go to school and meet friends every day," said her classmate, Amalwin Harjodisastra.

Schools in several other cities also reopened Monday.

As schools restart, government guidelines have changed many class traditions. Chatting in class is not allowed, facemasks must be worn at all times and no one can leave class for recess. Schools must slash class capacity by 50% by holding classes in two shifts. Teachers must be vaccinated.

The Health Ministry reported 5,436 new infections on Monday, the lowest daily total since June 9. They

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have declined since new cases peaked on July 15, when more than 56,000 were recorded.

Indonesia, the world's fourth most populous country, has recorded more than 4 million cases since the pandemic began. It took 15 months for it to hit 2 million confirmed cases on June 21, and just over nine weeks to hit double that amount last week.

Jakarta, once the country's COVID-19 center, has recorded declines in active and new cases since mid-July, from more than 100,000 active cases to below 8,000 a day and from more than 10,000 new cases per day to below 500.

Patients are no longer being turned away from hospitals as bed occupancy rates have declined in several regions. The Central Jakarta Health Service says the occupancy rate in several Jakarta hospitals is now below 30%.

Restrictions on public activities, which the government credits with helping reduce pressure on hospitals, are being eased in the capital. Authorities have reopened malls, places of worship and outdoor sporting venues since mid-August with capacity limits, and people must show they've been vaccinated.

Last month, Indonesia began vaccinating those aged between 12 and 18.

Indonesia began immunizations earlier than many other countries in Southeast Asia. It aims to inoculate more than 208 million of its 270 million people by March 2022. So far, authorities have fully vaccinated only 35.3 million people and partially vaccinated 26.9 million others.

Today in History

By The Associated Press undefined

Today in History

Today is Tuesday, Aug. 31, the 243rd day of 2021. There are 122 days left in the year.

Today's Highlight in History:

On Aug. 31, 1980, Poland's Solidarity labor movement was born with an agreement signed in Gdansk (guh-DANSK') that ended a 17-day-old strike.

On this date:

In 1886, an earthquake with an estimated magnitude of 7.3 devastated Charleston, South Carolina, killing at least 60 people, according to the U.S. Geological Survey.

In 1939, the first issue of Marvel Comics, featuring the Human Torch, was published by Timely Publications in New York.

In 1972, at the Munich (MYOO'-nik) Summer Olympics, American swimmer Mark Spitz won his fourth and fifth gold medals in the 100-meter butterfly and 800-meter freestyle relay; Soviet gymnast Olga Korbut won gold medals in floor exercise and the balance beam.

In 1986, 82 people were killed when an Aeromexico jetliner and a small private plane collided over Ceritos, California. The Soviet passenger ship Admiral Nakhimov collided with a merchant vessel in the Black Sea, causing both to sink; up to 448 people reportedly died.

In 1992, white separatist Randy Weaver surrendered to authorities in Naples, Idaho, ending an 11-day siege by federal agents that had claimed the lives of Weaver's wife, son and a deputy U.S. marshal. (Weaver was acquitted of murder and all other charges in connection with the confrontation; he was convicted of failing to appear for trial on firearms charges and was sentenced to 18 months in prison but given credit for 14 months he'd already served.)

In 1994, the Irish Republican Army declared a cease-fire. Russia officially ended its military presence in the former East Germany and the Baltics after half a century.

In 1996, three adults and four children drowned when their vehicle rolled into John D. Long Lake in Union, South Carolina; they had gone to see a monument to the sons of Susan Smith, who had drowned the two boys in Oct. 1994.

In 1997, Prince Charles brought Princess Diana home for the last time, escorting the body of his former wife to a Britain that was shocked, grief-stricken and angered by her death in a Paris traffic accident earlier that day.

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In 2005, New Orleans Mayor Ray Nagin reported "a significant number of dead bodies in the water" following Hurricane Katrina; Nagin ordered virtually the entire police force to abandon search-and-rescue efforts and to instead stop increasingly hostile thieves.

In 2010, President Barack Obama ended the U.S. combat mission in Iraq, declaring no victory after seven years of bloodshed and telling those divided over the war in his country and around the world: "It is time to turn the page."

In 2018, Aretha Franklin, the "Queen of Soul," was laid to rest after an eight-hour funeral at a Detroit church, where guests included Bill and Hillary Clinton, the Rev. Jesse Jackson, Stevie Wonder and Smokey Robinson.

In 2019, a gunman carried out a shooting rampage that stretched ten miles between the Texas communities of Midland and Odessa, leaving seven people dead before police killed the gunman outside a movie theater in Odessa.

Ten years ago: The Wartime Contracting Commission issued a report saying the U.S. had lost billions of dollars to waste and fraud in Iraq and Afghanistan and stood to repeat that in future wars without big changes in how the government awarded and managed contracts for battlefield support and reconstruction projects.

Five years ago: On Mexican soil for the first time as the Republican presidential nominee, a firm but measured Donald Trump defended the right of the United States to build a massive border wall along its southern flank, standing up for the centerpiece of his immigration plan during a joint press conference with Mexican President Enrique Pena Nieto. The first commercial flight between the United States and Cuba in more than a half century, a JetBlue Airbus A320, landed in the central city of Santa Clara, re-establishing regular air service severed at the height of the Cold War. Brazil's Senate voted to remove President Dilma Rousseff from office. (Rousseff was accused of breaking fiscal laws in her management of the federal budget.)

One year ago: At a rally in Pittsburgh, Democrat Joe Biden resoundingly condemned violent protesters and called for their prosecution; he accused President Donald Trump of causing the divisions that had ignited the violence. Trump reiterated that he blamed radical troublemakers who he said were stirred up and backed by Biden. The U.S. Open, the first Grand Slam tennis event in nearly six months, began in New York with no fans in attendance because of the pandemic. The family of John Thompson announced that the former Georgetown University basketball coach had died at the age of 78; he was the first Black coach to lead a team to the NCAA men's championship. Police in Rwanda announced the arrest on terrorism charges of Paul Rusesabagina, who'd been portrayed in the film "Hotel Rwanda" as a hero who saved the lives of more than 1,200 people from the country's 1994 genocide. The Federal Aviation Administration said it had granted Amazon approval to deliver packages by drones; Amazon said it was still testing and flying the drones.

Today's Birthdays: Rock musician Jerry Allison (Buddy Holly and the Crickets) is 82. Actor Jack Thompson is 81. Violinist Itzhak Perlman is 76. Singer Van Morrison is 76. Rock musician Rudolf Schenker (The Scorpions) is 73. Actor Richard Gere is 72. Actor Stephen Henderson is 72. Olympic gold medal track and field athlete Edwin Moses is 66. Rock singer Glenn Tilbrook (Squeeze) is 64. Rock musician Gina Schock (The Go-Go's) is 64. Singer Tony DeFranco (The DeFranco Family) is 62. R&B musician Larry Waddell (Mint Condition) is 58. Actor Jaime P. Gomez is 56. Rock musician Jeff Russo (Tonic) is 52. Singer-composer Deborah Gibson is 51. Actor Zack Ward is 51. Golfer Padraig (PAH'-drig) Harrington is 50. Actor Chris Tucker is 49. Actor Sara Ramirez is 46. R&B singer Tamara (Trina & Tamara) is 44.