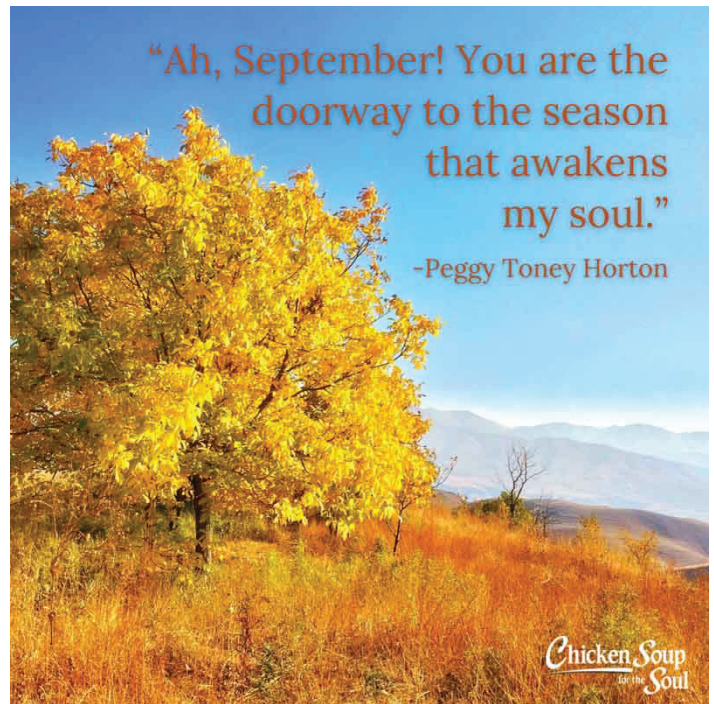


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Flihs places fourth at Aberdeen golf meet

Brevin Flihs placed fourth at the Aberdeen Golf Meet held Tuesday. Flihs shot a 72, just three shots behind the winner from Watertown, Jake Olson, 69. Carter Simon shot a 95, Logan Pearson a 96, Cole Simon a 96, Jackson Cogley a 97 and Tate Larson a 102. Groton Area placed fifth in a field nine teams.



OPEN: Recycling Trailer in Groton

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

Ipswich outlasts Groton Area, 3-1 in close sets

Groton Area's volleyball team dropped a 3-1 match to Ipswich Tuesday night in Ipswich.

Groton Area won the first set, 25-23. That set was tied seven times and there were five lead changes with the last tie at 23. Groton Area scored the last two points for the win. Anna Fjeldheim had two ace serves, Elizabeth Fliehs and Sydney Leicht each had a kill, Madeline Fliehs and Aspen Johnson each had two kills and Allyssa Locke had two ace serves.

Groton Area had a 3-0 start in the second set, but then quickly fell behind as Ipswich went on to win, 25-13. Elizabeth Fliehs had an ace serve, Sydney Leicht had two kills, Madeline Fliehs had three kills and Aspen Johnson had a kill in that set.

The third set featured being tied eight times with the lead changing hands three times as Ipswich maintained the upper hand throughout the set. Groton had trailed by one, 18-17, but Ipswich then scored the last seven points for the 25-17 win. Anna Fjeldheim had an ace serve and a kill, Sydney Leicht had three kills and an ace serve, Madeline Fliehs had two kills and an ace serve, Locke had an ace serve, Johnson had kill and a block and Maddie Bjerke had a kill.

The fourth set was very intense with Groton Area needing the win to force a fifth set. Both teams used two time-outs during that set. The set was tied a dozen times and there were four lead changes. Groton Area had a 24-22 edge, but Ipswich would score four unanswered points to win the set, 26-24. Fjeldheim had a kill, an ace serve and a block; Elizabeth Fliehs had two ace serves, Leicht and Emma Schinkel each had a kill, Madeline Fliehs had two kills and three ace serves and Johnson had two kills.

Groton Area had 13 kills for the match while Ipswich had 10. Groton Area had 22 sets with Elizabeth Fliehs having 15 and Locke four while Ipswich had 20 sets with Quincy Olivier having 19. Ipswich led in kills, 32-24, with Gracie Lange having 14 for Ipswich and Madeline Fliehs having eight and Leicht seven for Groton Area. Johnson had five of the team's blocks with Fjeldheim and Leicht each having one. Ipswich had three blocks.

Groton Area won the junior varsity match, 25-20 and 25-13. Groton Area also won the eight grade match, 2-0.

Groton Area, now 1-2, will travel to Webster next Tuesday.

- Paul Kosel

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

Another horrid milestone: We've hit 39 million reported cases; this ticker is moving entirely too fast—not really slowing either. Here's the history:

April 28, 2020 – 1 million – 98 days
June 11 – 2 million – 44 days
July 8 – 3 million – 27 days
July 23 – 4 million – 15 days
August 9 – 5 million – 17 days
August 31 – 6 million – 22 days
September 24 – 7 million – 24 days
October 15 – 8 million – 21 days
October 29 – 9 million – 14 days
November 8 – 10 million – 10 days
November 15 – 11 million – 7 days
November 21 – 12 million – 6 days
November 27 – 13 million – 6 days
December 3 – 14 million – 6 days
December 7 – 15 million – 4 days
December 12 – 16 million – 5 days
December 17 – 17 million – 5 days
December 21 – 18 million – 4 days
December 26 – 19 million – 5 days
December 31 – 20 million – 5 days
January 5 – 21 million – 5 days
January 9 – 22 million – 4 days
January 13 – 23 million – 4 days
January 18 – 24 million – 5 days
January 23 – 25 million – 5 days
January 30 – 26 million – 7 days
February 7 – 27 million – 8 days
February 19 – 28 million – 12 days
March 7 – 29 million – 16 days
March 24 – 30 million – 17 days
April 8 – 31 million – 15 days
April 24 – 32 million – 16 days
May 18 – 33 million – 23 days
July 16 – 34 million – 59 days
July 31 – 35 million – 15 days
August 11 – 36 million – 11 days
August 17 – 37 million – 6 days
August 23 – 38 million – 6 days
August 30 – 39 million – 7 days

We really need to stop that; but I don't see enough in the way of signs we're willing. At midday today, the seven-day new-case average was 158,946

and continuing to rise. We've seen a 23 percent increase in per capita new-case rates over two weeks. Most experts don't expect us to peak until mid-October; that's a long way off. I am, however, seeing encouraging signs more school districts are rethinking their lax approach to transmission mitigation; if that continues, it would be a significant help in bringing new-case numbers down over the coming weeks. I am reporting on a study to that effect below.

Hospitalizations have continued to increase, drastically in some places, until our daily average topped 100,000 on Sunday night. We're now at 100,663 hospitalized. The only time during the pandemic it has been higher was at the height of last winter's spike before most of us had access to a vaccine. That's about a 500 percent increase in two months, most of that in the South where low vaccination rates and resistance to public health measures continue to exact a toll. Louisiana and Florida have set records; Arkansas and Mississippi are approaching 90 percent of their earlier peaks; and Washington, Oregon, and Alabama are above 75 percent of their peaks. Twenty percent of ICUs in the country have been at or over 95 percent full this month. There are serious stresses on the system in more and more locations with hospitals having to ship patients farther and farther away from home as they fill up. The patients are younger—a recurring theme everywhere; so while seniors are still the majority of the hospitalized, the gap between them and younger people is narrowing fast. Numbers of children, people in their 20s, and people in their 30s who are hospitalized are soaring. States with the biggest problems are all states with below-average vaccination rates—no exceptions.

All of those problems have worsened in the wake of the Category 4 hurricane that made landfall in Louisiana over the weekend—not exactly what I had on my getting-over-the-pandemic checklist. Generally hospitals in the path of a hurricane discharge all

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the patients they can before the storm comes; but with ICU patients on ventilators and no nearby hospitals who could take them, that wasn't really a great option this time. In southern Mississippi, hospitals have been diverting critical patients to more northern hospitals. After the storm moved on, hospitals with serious damage or generator failures are moving patients out because ventilators require power to run and ventilators are all that are keeping some patients alive. Those with limited fuel for generators are receiving emergency deliveries as that becomes possible. I expect oxygen shortages are going to become more of an issue as the days wear on. Testing and vaccination sites have closed down temporarily before and after the storm. There are going to be additional challenges as evacuees in public shelters find it difficult to distance themselves from others; I would expect an increase in new cases in a week or so. Let's hope power is restored and repairs are effected quickly.

And deaths are rising fastest of all putting us at an average of 1348 per day, a number that has shown a 91 percent increase over the past 14 days to a total today of 639,081. Dr. Anthony Fauci, director of the National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases, said on CNN Sunday that we can look for another 100,000 deaths by December if we don't pick up our vaccination rates. That would put us very near three-quarters of a million Americans claimed by this virus. For the first year of the pandemic, we didn't have the means to prevent deaths; that we now do and choose not to employ those means is tragic. The EU has removed the US from its safe travel list. Can't say that I blame them; we're a mess.

I hate to beat a dead horse, but Florida really is the poster child for how to get it wrong. This is the only state in really deep trouble where vaccination rates are not terrible. They're 21st among states for vaccination rate—below average, but well out of the basement. Their problem is that they haven't done much else. A few days ago, I suggested we can't vaccinate our way out of this thing if that's all we're doing, and Florida is a case in point. Morgues are filling up; residents are reducing water usage due to oxygen shortages, they're leading the nation in deaths. Interestingly, deaths from all causes, not only from Covid-19, are increased, perhaps a reflection of the overwhelmed health system. They've scaled back on their reporting, so it's difficult to track—and difficult for authorities to make good decisions absent solid and timely data. The population skews old, a group which is less likely to have a robust response to prior infection; so it's possible they were more vulnerable. There is a surge in infections among the young and middle-aged, and these folks are dying too. The state is wide open to tourism, one of its mainstays, and people have come, packing themselves together indoors in the summer heat. There are few to no restrictions or regulations on crowd size, indoor capacity, masking, distancing. I am concerned about Floridians, and I am also concerned other states with a similar risk pattern will follow. We're not out of this yet, but we're not learning from experience either.

We've discussed several times whether the B.1.617.2 or Delta variant, first identified in India, actually is causing more severe disease or is simply more transmissible. There is unwelcome news on that front from a UK study by Public Health England and the University of Cambridge published Friday in the *Lancet Infectious Diseases*. The study looked at 8682 patients infected with Delta and 34,656 infected with B.1.1.1.7 or Alpha, first identified in the UK, 74 percent of whom were unvaccinated, diagnosed between March 29 and May 23, 2021, and showed that Delta was associated with a 2.26 times greater chance of hospitalization within 14 days as compared with Alpha. This comports with separate work done in Scotland that showed pretty much the same thing. Additionally, those infected with Delta were younger than those infected with Alpha. That would seem to indicate the Delta variant is, indeed, causing more severe disease. Not great news. Better news is that there were insufficient numbers of vaccinated individuals hospitalized to enable statistical comparison of the variants in that subgroup—more evidence for those who still need it that the vaccines are doing their job.

Turns out it matters what schools do by way of mitigating transmission. The CDC reported on Friday on a May, 2021, outbreak in a Marin County, California, school where masking was required. One unvaccinated

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teacher with symptoms she had mistakenly attributed to allergy, but were actually Delta-variant-caused Covid-19, removed her mask temporarily in order to read to students and ended up infecting 12 of the 24 students in the room who then, according to later contact tracing, went on to infect six students in other classes, at least eight family members, and additional people in the community. The students were all too young to be vaccinated. The pattern of spread in the classroom mapped to the seating chart: The entire front row was infected, 60 percent in Row 2, and 28 percent of the back 3 rows. Good rule of thumb: If the teacher's not wearing a mask, sit in back. The good news is no one became severely ill, and all recovered. On the other hand, Los Angeles County, which has taken a very proactive approach to mitigating spread in its schools, took a look at cases in schools from September to March and found a lower case rate in the school than in the community at large during that period. Case rates were 3.4 times lower in school children than in the community. In discussing these findings and how easy it is to undermine efforts to protect children, Dr. Rochelle Walensky, director of the CDC, said in a White House briefing, "We know what to do to protect our kids in school. We have the tools." Of course, that means we have to actually use those tools.

A CDC-funded report was posted on a pre-print server (which means it has not yet been peer-reviewed). The work was done by a modeling team at the University of North Carolina and North Carolina State University and looked at transmission in schools under various conditions using an extended Susceptible-Infected-Recovered computational model to estimate the number of new infections that could be expected to occur in a semester in a given student population. They looked at the effects of masking, routine testing, and quarantining; they also looked at student populations with varying degrees of immunity going into the school year, whether due to natural infection or vaccination, based on CDC reports of vaccination and prior infection levels in the various age groups. The assumption was that 0.5% of students were infected on Day 1 and one additional infected student entered the population each week of the semester. The assumption is that the R_e (effective reproduction number) of the virus in the population is 4, lower than almost every estimate for the Delta variant.

The math is pretty complicated, but the results are not. In this scenario, without testing and masking, more than 75 percent of susceptible students were infected within three months irrespective of the other parameters. Universal masking reduces the reproduction number to $R_e=2$, which effectively halves transmission, reduces infections by 26 to 78 percent, and random testing of half the population biweekly reduces them by another 50 percent. Self-quarantine among exposed students may further reduce infections. In addition to the direct effects of infection on infected individuals and families, the no-intervention approach is projected to increase school absences by 50 percent as well.

That makes pretty clear what needs to happen to keep schools open, kids in attendance, and a community healthy. It does not help us to know how to persuade folks to take heed. I suspect we're going to have a lot of school closings in coming weeks, a lot of kids' educations damaged, and a lot of fallout in the near and long term.

I read another paper, a meta-analysis of 87 studies of 1,249,163 household contacts of infected patients in 30 countries. Meta-analysis is a sophisticated analytical method that involves gathering multiple scientific studies that address the same question, using statistical methods to derive what's called a pooled estimate that accounts for the error found in the individual studies. It gives us a way to compare results from the various studies and look for patterns in the results. This one looked at contact age, sex, ethnicity, comorbidities, and relationship, as well as index case (patient) age, sex, symptom status, presence of fever, and presence of cough. It also accounted for number of contacts, study location, and variant. Findings were that for cases from July, 2020, to March, 2021, the estimated household secondary attack rate (SAR – the rate of infection in contacts) for the B.1.1.7 or Alpha variant first identified in the UK was 24.5 percent. It also suggested that a single dose of a Covid-19 vaccine might reduce the risk of house-

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hold transmission by as much as 50 percent. This household SAR was an increase from a similar project that looked at cases through October, 2020, almost certainly the result of the less transmissible original wild-type virus and D614G variant, which came in at 16.6 percent. Be interesting to see how that might change when we consider Delta. I expect it will be higher still, likely quite a lot higher.

We continue to see new variants of this virus turning up. That is not necessarily a bad—or good—thing; more variants simply complicate the original picture we evaluate as we go along. A recent one of these is called C.1.2; it doesn't have a Greek-letter name because it is not yet a variant of interest. It has only turned up in around 100 cases worldwide, but it is important to recognize that many cases are never sequenced so that the true number isn't really known. It's safe to say it's probably not very common at this time. The earliest cases showed up in May in South Africa. Some of its mutations have given other variants increased transmissibility or the ability to evade immune responses. So far, because we don't yet know how its particular mutations will work together—either to make it more dangerous or to weaken it, we don't yet have a handle on what this is going to mean; more mutations is not necessarily worse—sometimes one cancels out another. Researchers with the National Institute for Communicable Diseases in South Africa, in a paper posted online in pre-print (which means it is not yet peer-reviewed), say, "Of greater concern is the accumulation of additional mutations which are also likely to impact neutralization sensitivity or furin cleavage and therefore replicative fitness [success at replicating in a host]," describing the lineage as a "concerning constellation of mutations." We had an extensive and sort of dense discussion of the rule of furin cleavage on viral characteristics way back in April, 2020, in my Update #42 posted April 6 at <https://www.facebook.com/marie.schwabmiller/posts/3487224904627224>; check this out if you're interested. They add, "We are currently assessing the impact of this variant on antibody neutralization following SARS-CoV-2 infection or vaccination against SARS-CoV-2 in South Africa." Maria van Kerkhove, technical lead on Covid-19 for the WHO said on Twitter, "At this time, C.1.2 does not appear to be rising in circulation." We'll wait with them for data.

There is another fairly new variant which has turned up in Israel, currently called AY3. It is mentioned as "possibly more transmissible and deadly," but I find this sort of description early on is difficult to assess. It appears to be a further-mutated strain of Delta which could, as mentioned above, be worse—or not. Sixteen cases have been identified in Israel, most in international travelers and a few locally-acquired. Dr. Asher Shalman, Israel's Health Ministry Department of International Relations Director, told a Knesset committee he believes it originated in South America. I don't know his credentials and don't know what information he holds, so I'm not sure how reliable this evaluation is; but it seems reasonable to presume he is operating from some scientific basis. We may or may not be hearing more of this, depending how matters progress. I'll be watching for it.

We have another monoclonal antibody therapy available in some states again. You will recall that monoclonals are lab-made antibodies in a highly purified form that very specifically target the virus. The therapeutic in question, made by Eli Lilly, is a cocktail of two monoclonals, bamlanivimab and etesevimab, which was first granted EUA back in February, then taken out of distribution in June when it became clear it was not showing efficacy against then-prevalent variants, B.1.351 or Beta, first identified in South Africa, and P.1 or Gamma, first identified in Brazil. Because of its continuing inactivity against those variants, use will remain paused in states where their combined frequency is five percent or greater, which means there are 22 states where distribution will resume. Unfortunately, these do not include the states with the highest new-case rates at the moments; but this should ease the strain on the supplies of other therapeutics if we can shift some use to the Lilly treatment.

The CDC's Advisory Committee on Immunization Practices (ACIP) met on Monday to look at vaccination data. What they saw was pretty good evidence our currently-authorized vaccines were providing solid protection against severe disease through last month, which covers the time period when Delta became

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our dominant variant according to data presented by CDC scientist, Dr. Sara Oliver, and drawn from Covid-Net, a hospital surveillance system. In those up to 75 and over, effectiveness at preventing hospitalization remained 94 percent and higher; in the older age group, it had declined last month, although it was still over 80 percent. Protection against infection and mild disease did decline, according to Dr. Oliver, likely due to a combination of Delta and waning immunity over time.

She also indicated that studies continue regarding the safety and effectiveness of booster doses. There's pretty hot debate in scientific circles whether we actually need boosters yet. A report from the Technion-Israel Institute of Technology (Israel) posted Monday (but, I do not believe, peer-reviewed yet) indicates a third dose of an mRNA vaccine substantially reduces the risk for infection starting 12 days after the dose. Looking at health records for some 1.1 million people, findings were that the third dose reduces risk of infection by a factor of 11.4. The risk of severe disease was decreased by 15.5-fold. We want to remember that this reduction in risk is not as compared with an unvaccinated population, but represents a further reduction in risk in an already-vaccinated population. The analysis finds that the third dose "is highly effective in reducing the risk of both confirmed infection and severe illness," and its conclusions state, "In conjunction with safety reports, this study demonstrates the effectiveness of a third vaccine dose in both reducing transmission and severe disease and indicates the great potential of curtailing the Delta variant resurgence by administering booster shots."

Additionally, I've seen the argument made that a third dose should not be considered a booster, but part of normal vaccination. There have been two approaches to this line of thinking. One is a pretty straightforward assertion that, like many other vaccines, two doses are insufficient to induce the most robust response and that these should be three-dose vaccines from the start. This isn't terribly out of the ordinary; many current vaccines for other diseases routinely involve more than two doses. The other line of argument says that two doses might be sufficient if they are given on a more delayed schedule, but that the three- or four-week interval used for them during this pandemic in the interest of getting as much protection out to the population as quickly as possible is really too short for inducing the optimal response. There is plenty of evidence the response is much stronger when there is a longer—up to 12-week—interval between doses. While we didn't have the luxury of waiting that long to get a second dose into folks at this time, perhaps in the future when we are not in an emergency situation, that dosing schedule would very likely produce a far more protective response with just two doses. We're going to have to defer to the experts on this and just wait around to see how this plays out. For now, we are where we are and have to proceed from there.

The Committee voted to recommend the Pfizer/BioNTech vaccine for Americans 16 and older, really just a formality to adjust to the Biologics License recently granted by the FDA. They also looked at the evidence both mRNA vaccines create a very small risk of myocarditis and pericarditis, inflammation of the heart muscle and the membrane around the heart respectively, particularly in young men. This effect, which is acknowledged to be associated with vaccination, is temporary and nearly always mild. There have been no deaths associated with it. It is also rare: For a million second doses given to 12- to 39-year-olds, 14 to 20 cases of this effect were seen above background rates. When compared with the rate of these same heart problems caused by severe Covid-19 and the number of severe infections the vaccines can reasonably be expected to prevent, the Committee concluded that the benefits still significantly outweigh the risks, even in the highest-risk age group for the complication. ACIP will meet next month to review additional data from this month on vaccine safety and effectiveness, as well as the need for boosters.

And that wraps things up for today. Be well, and we'll talk again in a few days.

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Community Events

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

Original water tower comes down

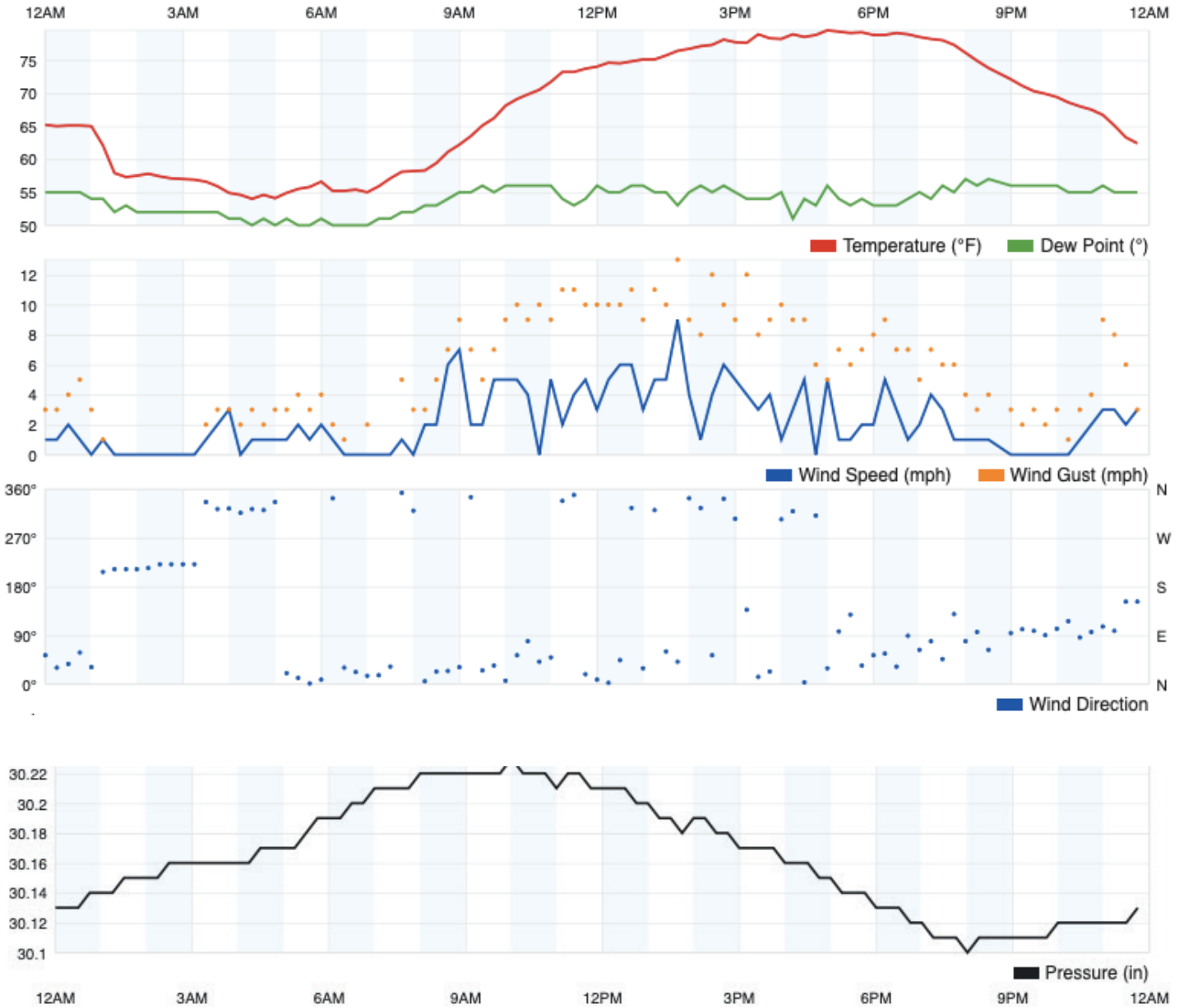
After serving the Groton community for 100 years, the city's original water tower was turned into scrap metal on Tuesday as crews dismantled the tower. Work started at 7 a.m. and by 2:30 p.m., it was all gone.



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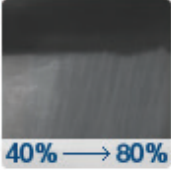
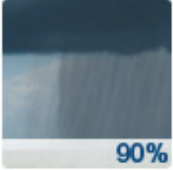


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Yesterday's Groton Weather Graphs



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Today	Tonight	Thursday	Thursday Night	Friday
				
Increasing Clouds	40% → 80% Chance Showers then Showers	90% Showers	40% Chance Showers	Partly Sunny
High: 83 °F	Low: 62 °F	High: 72 °F	Low: 56 °F	High: 73 °F

Severe T-Storms Possible Today

WHAT

Scattered severe t-storms possible with large hail, damaging winds and heavy rain

WHERE

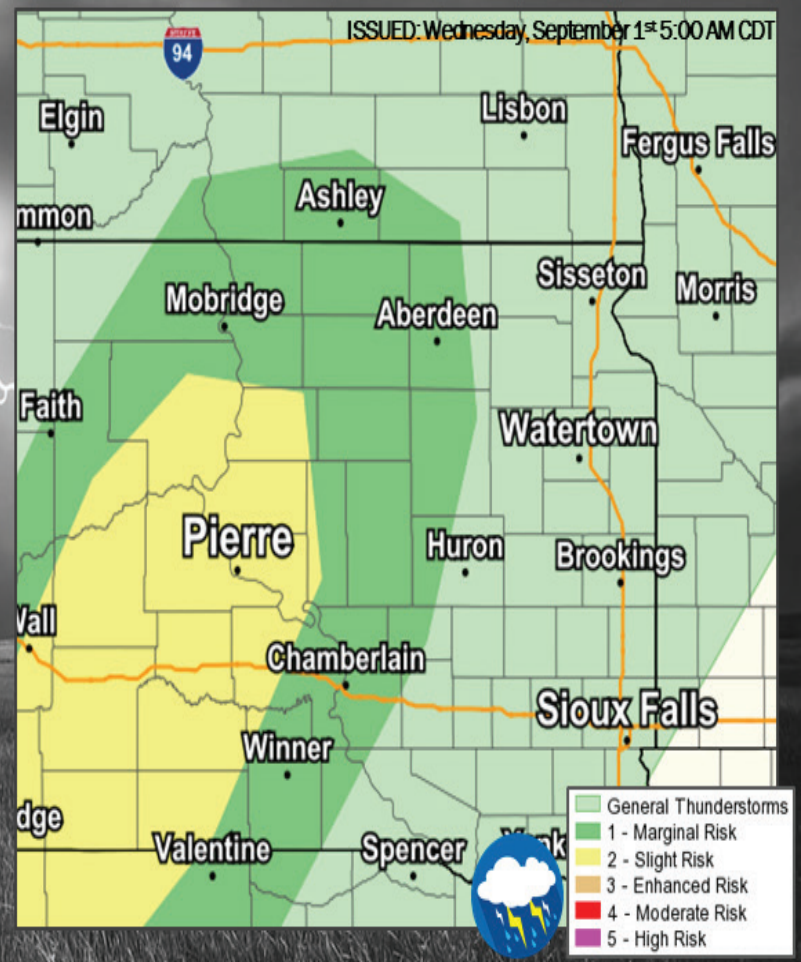
Much of central South Dakota including Gettysburg, Pierre and Murdo

WHEN

This late afternoon into the evening. The highest risk period is from 5 pm – midnight

ACTION

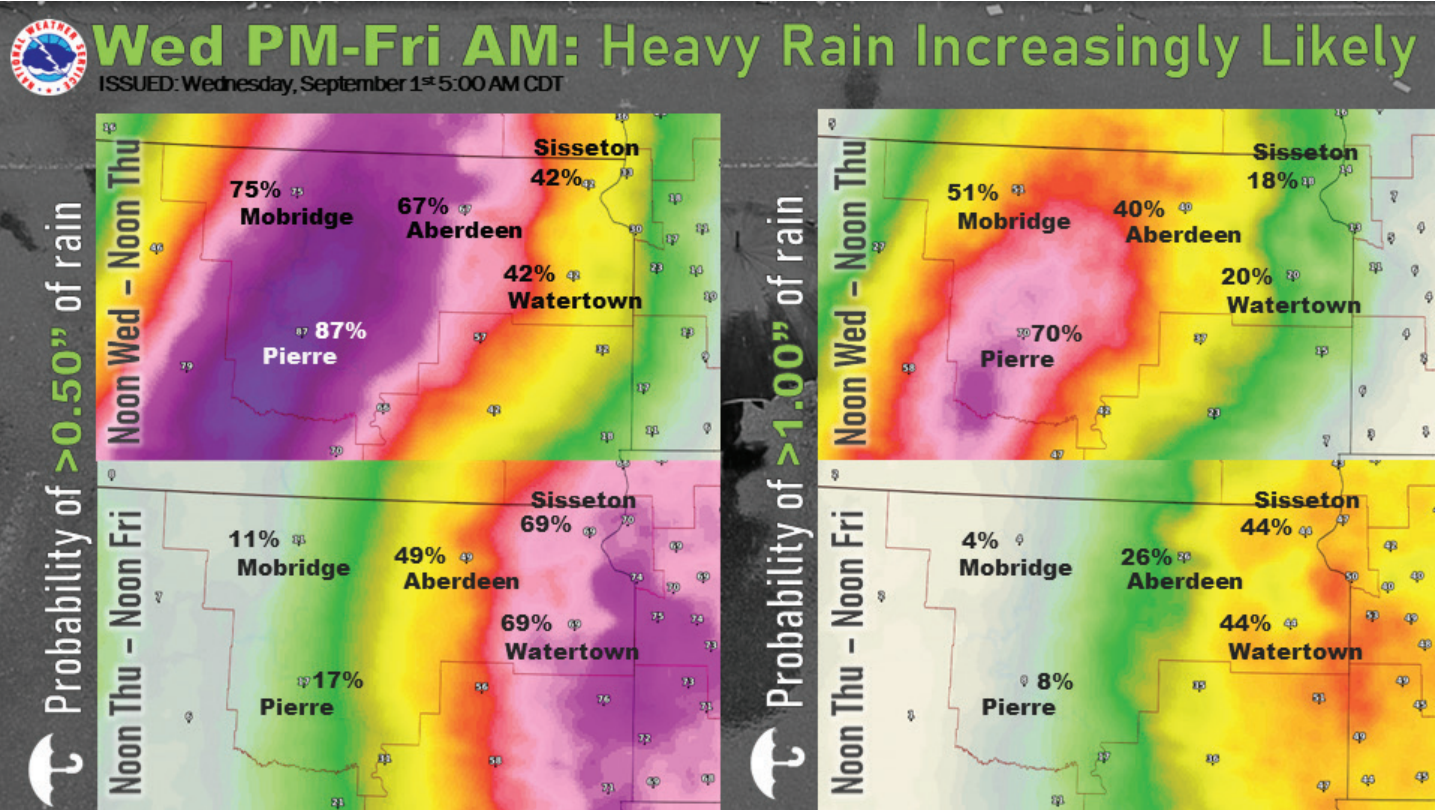
Monitor the weather and have a plan of action in case storms threaten your area



Scattered thunderstorms are expected to develop late this afternoon into this evening across central South Dakota, and they may become strong to severe as they track to the northeast. Thunderstorms will continue through the overnight, gradually shifting east with a slow-moving system, though the severe potential will diminish.

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A slow-moving system will trigger showers and thunderstorms late this afternoon through Friday morning across the area. Rainfall totals will be in the 1-3" range for many, with locally higher amounts and localized flooding possible.

Meteorological Autumn Begins Wednesday

Meteorological Autumn
Sept - Oct - Nov

Astronomical Autumn
Sept 22nd - Dec 20th

Meteorological fall begins on Sept 1st, which is on Wednesday this year. Meteorological fall lasts through the months of Sept, Oct and Nov. Astronomical fall begins on the autumnal equinox, and ends at the winter solstice. #sdwx #mnwx

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Today in Weather History

September 1, 1990: Several severe thunderstorms in northwest South Dakota dropped from penny to softball size hail during the afternoon and early evening hours. The hail caused a good deal of structural damage to houses and farm buildings. The largest hailstone of 4 inches in diameter was reported at Sorum in Perkins County. There was also a wind gust to 86 mph measured at Buffalo during a severe thunderstorm.

September 1, 2010: A couple of weak tornadoes touched down briefly in the late evening west of Tulare with no damage occurring.

1859: One of the largest geomagnetic storms on record occurred on this day in 1859. Click [HERE](#) for more information from NASA.

1862: The Battle of Ox Hill (or Chantilly) is also known as the only major Civil War battle to have been fought during a storm. "A severe thunderstorm erupted, resulting in limited visibility and an increased dependence on the bayonet, as the rain soaked the ammunition of the infantry and made it useless." From Taylor, Paul. *He Hath Loosed the Fateful Lightning: The Battle of Ox Hill (Chantilly), September 1, 1862.*

1869: Cleveland Abbe issued the first Weather Bulletin for the city of Cincinnati, Ohio. It contained a few observations telegraphed from distant observers and the "probabilities" for the next day. The bulletin was written by hand.

1894: The Great Hinckley Fire, which burned an area of at least 200,000 acres or perhaps more than 250,000 acres including the town of Hinckley, Minnesota occurred on this day. The official death count was 418 though the actual number of fatalities was likely higher.

1897 - Hailstone drifts six feet deep were reported in Washington County, IA. (The Weather Channel)

1914 - The town of Bloomington, MI, was deluged with 9.78 inches of rain in 24 hours to establish a state record. (31st-1st) (The Weather Channel)

1928: Leslie Gray from the Weather Bureau in San Francisco was the first weather forecaster to be deployed to a wildfire.

1952: A cold front brought damaging winds to Fort Worth, Texas, including the Carswell Air Force Base where thirty-five B-36 planes received damage. The anemometer indicated 90 mph winds before being smashed by debris.

1955 - The temperature at Los Angeles, CA, soared to an all-time high of 110 degrees during an eight day string of 100 degree weather. (David Ludlum)

1961: An F4 tornado traveled through parts of Butler and Bremer Counties in Iowa. Unfortunately, there is limited information in the Storm Data entry about this event. Per Thomas Grazulis in *Significant Tornadoes*, the tornado began NW of Dumont and ended NE of Horton. Several farms along the path were "leveled". It was reported at one farm that fruit jars were "sucked out of the basement" after the house was swept away. There were 7 injuries reported with this event and zero fatalities.

1974: Lt. Judy Neuffer became the first female to fly a Hurricane Hunter aircraft through the eye of a hurricane.

1979 - A home in Centerville TN was hit by lightning and totally destroyed. It marked the third time that the house had been hit by lightning since being built in 1970. (The Weather Channel)

1987 - Cool Canadian air invaded the Midwest. Six cities reported record low temperatures for the date, including Indianapolis IN with a reading of 44 degrees. Hot weather continued in the northwestern U.S. Five cities reported record high temperatures for the date, including Hanover WA, where the mercury soared to 106 degrees. (The National Weather Summary)

1988 - Thunderstorms produced heavy rain in the Upper Mississippi Valley. Ely, MN, was drenched with three inches of rain in two hours, and pelted with one inch hail. The heavy rain flooded streets and basements, and the high water pressure which resulted blew the covers off manholes. (The National Weather Summary)(Storm Data)

2017: The temperature at Downtown San Francisco reached 106° setting their all-time record high. The previous record was 103° on June 14th, 2000.

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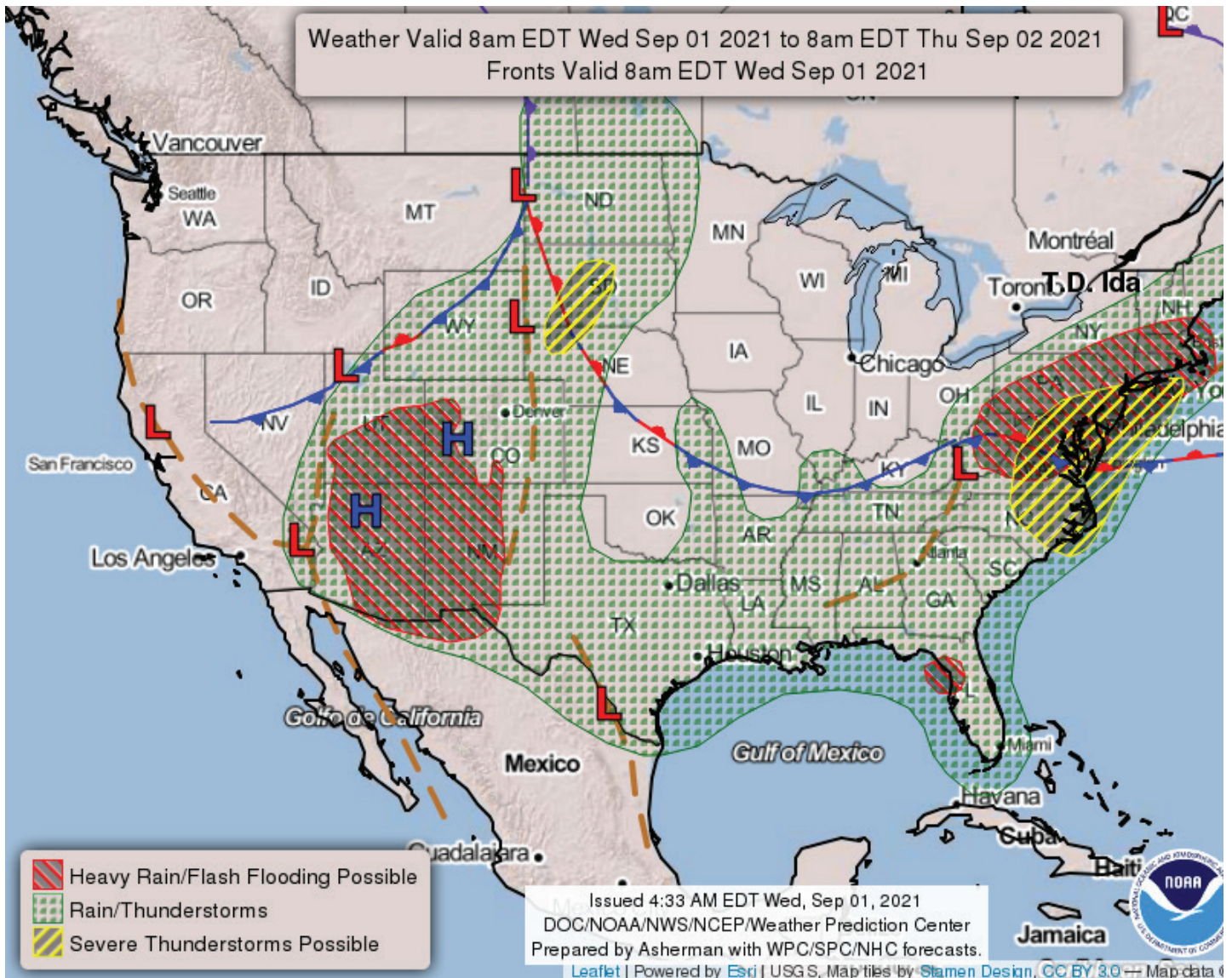
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Yesterday's Groton Weather

High Temp: 79.5 °F at 5:00 PM
Low Temp: 54.0 °F at 4:30 AM
Wind: 13 mph at 1:45 PM
Precip: 0.00

Today's Info

Record High: 102° in 1970
Record Low: 58° in 1977
Average High: 80°F
Average Low: 52°F
Average Precip in Sept.: 0.07
Precip to date in Sept.: 0.00
Average Precip to date: 16.41
Precip Year to Date: 13.14
Sunset Tonight: 8:11 p.m.
Sunrise Tomorrow: 6:54 a.m.



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FLOURISH LIKE A PALM TREE

The word "righteous" in Scripture carries with it the idea of meeting God's standards of doing what is right in the sight of God - being obedient to Him and being just and fair to others. If the "righteous are to flourish like palm trees" as the psalmist states, what does that mean?

1. Palm trees grow straight up - always looking upward to heaven for light and nourishment. Likewise, the Christian looks to God to find His will for their life.

2. Each and every part of a palm tree is useful. The leaves not only provide shelter from the elements, but the tree itself has many nourishing and medicinal qualities. The Christian is expected to give life and hope and nourishment to others.

3. Palm trees are not affected by drought. A palm tree is not affected by the weather and can survive nearly every surface injury. The Christian rooted in Christ draws his strength and well-being from God.

4. The palm tree is an evergreen tree because it draws its life flow within its being, keeping it fresh.

5. The palm tree cannot be grafted into any other tree because it has its own unique identity. Christians have one Master and cannot be grafted to any other identity.

6. Palm trees are an emblem of victory. This was seen when Jesus entered triumphantly into Jerusalem.

7. Palm trees always show a place where water can be found. Christians find their "living water" in Christ who can quench their thirst and the thirst of others

Prayer: We ask, Father, that every part of our lives will be useful in sharing Your grace and mercy to others. May we become as palm trees are! In Jesus' Name, Amen.

Scripture For Today: The man who is right and good will grow like the palm tree. He will grow like a tall tree in Lebanon. Psalm 92:12

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2021 Community Events

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

News from the Associated Press

Tuesday's Scores

By The Associated Press

PREP VOLLEYBALL=

Aberdeen Roncalli def. Miller, 25-14, 25-22, 22-25, 25-27, 15-12
Arlington def. Colman-Egan, 25-15, 25-21, 25-13
Avon def. Parkston, 23-25, 17-25, 28-26, 26-24, 17-15
Baltic def. Beresford, 25-13, 25-16, 25-22
Bon Homme def. Andes Central/Dakota Christian, 25-15, 25-22, 25-18
Bridgewater-Emery def. Howard, 25-15, 25-9, 25-12
Britton-Hecla def. Tri-State, 25-15, 26-24, 25-21
Canton def. Madison, 25-17, 25-22, 23-25, 25-23
Castlewood def. Elkton-Lake Benton, 25-9, 25-19, 23-25, 25-22
Chester def. McCook Central/Montrose, 25-13, 23-25, 25-10, 25-21
Corsica/Stickney def. Freeman Academy/Marion, 25-6, 25-10, 25-9
Crow Creek def. Colome, 25-13, 20-25, 25-14, 25-18
Dakota Valley def. Tri-Valley, 25-13, 25-16, 25-7
Dell Rapids St. Mary def. Oldham-Ramona/Rutland, 25-22, 14-25, 25-21, 25-16
Dell Rapids def. Elk Point-Jefferson, 29-27, 25-23, 19-25, 25-22
Deubrook def. Lake Preston, 25-21, 25-23, 25-9
Deuel def. Milbank, 23-25, 25-16, 20-25, 25-18, 15-12
Douglas def. Custer, 25-19, 25-18, 17-25, 25-20
Faith def. Bison, 25-23, 25-22, 25-22
Florence/Henry def. Flandreau, 23-25, 25-11, 25-15, 31-33, 15-13
Freeman def. Irene-Wakonda, 25-19, 25-20, 21-25, 25-22
Hamlin def. Great Plains Lutheran, 25-12, 34-32, 25-12
Harrisburg def. Yankton, 25-13, 14-25, 19-25, 27-25, 16-14
Highmore-Harrold def. James Valley Christian, 26-24, 23-26, 25-15, 16-25, 15-13
Hill City def. Spearfish, 25-19, 25-13, 25-14
Hills-Beaver Creek, Minn. def. Viborg-Hurley, 22-25, 25-19, 25-18, 15-25, 15-13
Hot Springs def. Lead-Deadwood, 3-0
Ipswich def. Groton Area, 23-25, 25-13, 25-17, 26-24
Kimball/White Lake def. Ethan, 23-25, 25-15, 23-25, 25-18, 15-8
Lakota Tech def. Crazy Horse, 25-6, 25-7, 25-6
Langford def. Leola/Frederick, 23-25, 25-23, 25-12, 12-25, 15-9
Lennox def. Vermillion, 25-20, 25-14, 21-25, 25-22
Mobridge-Pollock def. Herreid/Selby Area, 25-11, 25-20, 25-18
Mt. Vernon/Plankinton def. Wagner, 25-19, 25-21, 18-25, 25-13
New England, N.D. def. Harding County, 25-22, 18-25, 25-19, 19-25, 18-16
North Central Co-Op def. South Border, N.D., 25-10, 25-15, 25-19
Platte-Geddes def. Todd County, 25-9, 25-12, 25-15
Rapid City Christian def. Alliance, Neb., 18-25, 25-22, 21-25, 25-22, 15-13
Rapid City Stevens def. Rapid City Central, 28-26, 25-11, 25-17
Red Cloud def. Little Wound, 25-19, 25-18, 25-19
Redfield def. Hitchcock-Tulare, 25-12, 25-20, 14-25, 25-19
Sanborn Central/Woonsocket def. Hanson, 25-15, 25-16, 25-20
Scotland def. Alcester-Hudson, 3-0

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Sioux Falls O’Gorman def. Brandon Valley, 25-11, 25-17, 25-16
Sioux Falls Roosevelt def. Sioux Falls Jefferson, 25-19, 25-21, 25-17
Sioux Falls Washington def. Sioux Falls Lincoln, 23-25, 22-25, 25-21, 25-23, 16-14
Sioux Valley def. Parker, 19-25, 26-24, 25-21, 28-26
St. Thomas More def. Sturgis Brown, 25-21, 25-18, 26-24
Stanley County def. Chamberlain, 24-26, 25-18, 25-19, 25-18
Sunshine Bible Academy def. Mitchell Christian, 25-18, 25-10, 25-23
Tea Area def. West Central, 25-16, 25-12, 25-19
Tripp-Delmont/Armour def. Menno, 25-13, 25-21, 25-15
Wall def. Jones County, 25-22, 19-25, 25-15, 19-25, 15-6
Warner def. Webster, 25-13, 25-17, 25-9
Wessington Springs def. Iroquois, 25-15, 22-25, 25-17, 25-12
White River def. Lyman, 25-14, 25-10, 25-7
Wilmot def. Waubay/Summit, 25-18, 22-25, 25-23, 25-15
Winner def. Burke, 18-25, 25-17, 25-15, 23-25, 15-9
POSTPONEMENTS AND CANCELLATIONS=
Cheyenne-Eagle Butte def. Timber Lake, ccd.

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 Tuesday:

Mega Millions

08-14-31-58-68, Mega Ball: 15, Megaplier: 3

(eight, fourteen, thirty-one, fifty-eight, sixty-eight; Mega Ball: fifteen; Megaplier: three)

Estimated jackpot: \$306 million

Powerball

Estimated jackpot: \$345 million

Tea party 2.0? Conservatives get organized in school battles

By THOMAS BEAUMONT and STEPHEN GROVES Associated Press

MEQUON, Wis. (AP) — A loose network of conservative groups with ties to major Republican donors and party-aligned think tanks is quietly lending firepower to local activists engaged in culture war fights in schools across the country.

While they are drawn by the anger of parents opposed to school policies on racial history or COVID-19 protocols like mask mandates, the groups are often run by political operatives and lawyers standing ready to amplify local disputes.

In a wealthy Milwaukee suburb, a law firm heavily financed by a conservative foundation that has fought climate change mitigation and that has ties to former President Donald Trump’s efforts to overturn the 2020 election helped parents seeking to recall Mequon-Thiensville school board members, chiefly over the board’s hiring of a diversity consultant. A new national advocacy group, Parents Defending Education, promoted the Wisconsin parents’ tactics as a model.

In Loudoun County, Virginia, a Justice Department spokesperson in the Trump administration rallied parents in a recall effort sparked by opposition to a district racial equity program. In Brownsburg, Indiana, a leader of a national network of parents opposed to anti-racist school programs helped a mother obtain a lawyer when the district’s superintendent blocked her from following his Twitter account.

This growing support network highlights the energy and resources being poured into the cauldron of political debate in the nation’s schools. Republicans hope the efforts lay the groundwork for a comeback

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in congressional elections next year. Some see the burst of local organizing on the right as reminiscent of a movement that helped power the GOP takeover of the House 10 years ago.

"It seems very tea party-ish to me," said Dan Lennington, a lawyer with the conservative Wisconsin Institute for Law and Liberty, which has offered free legal advice to several parent groups pursuing or weighing school board recalls, including the one in Mequon. "These are ingredients for having an impact on future elections."

Lennington's group is funded in part by the Bradley Foundation, a Milwaukee-based nonprofit that supports conservative causes. The foundation's secretary, GOP lawyer Cleta Mitchell, advised Trump as he sought to overturn the 2020 election results and has since worked to push for tighter state voting laws.

Like the tea party movement, the groups have been labeled "astroturf" by some opponents — activism manufactured by powerful interests to look like grassroots organizing.

"Outsiders are tapping into some genuine concerns, but the framing of the issues are largely regularized by national groups," said Jeffrey Henig, a professor at Teachers College at Columbia University, who has written on the nationalization of education.

But the advocates and their outside backup argue they're harnessing real outrage and working to counter the disproportionate influence of liberal groups in schools.

"There's a misconception out there that this is part of some national right-wing agenda," said Amber Schroeder, a 39-year-old parent of four who is helping lead the Mequon recall. "We're the ones pushing back on our own here against an extreme liberal agenda by the teachers union."

The political tracking website Ballotpedia counts about 30 active school board recall efforts nationwide. Some are focused chiefly on disputes over anti-racism training and education in schools, often labeled critical race theory. Others were prompted by debates over school policies on transgender students and pandemic public health measures.

Local parent activists are quick to claim credit for that work, and the outside groups offering legal help, research, organizing tools and media training are often reluctant to discuss their role.

Among those is Parents Defending Education, an Arlington, Virginia-based group formed in January and dedicated to "fighting indoctrination in the classroom." It provides templates for requesting public records, a guide to parent rights, organizing strategies and talking points.

"We created Parents Defending Education because we believe our children deserve to learn how to think at school — not what to think," its president, Nicole Neily, wrote in an email to The Associated Press.

Neily stated the group is "not involved in any recall efforts, in Mequon or elsewhere." But the group's website does promote the Mequon activists' campaign. As part of its national database of parent "incident reports," the group highlights Mequon's case by posting, as a guide for others, the Freedom of Information Act request that parents filed.

Neily declined to name Parents Defending Education's funding sources. As a tax-exempt organization, the group is not required to make its donors public. Neily has worked in senior positions for conservative groups including the Independent Women's Forum and Cato Institute, according to the group's website.

Another newly influential group is No Left Turn in Education, an organization that has ballooned to 78 chapters in more than 25 states since it was founded last year by Elana Fishbein.

Since December, Fishbein has secured free legal representation for parents fighting curriculum battles with school districts. Most of those lawyers are affiliated with firms similar to Lennington's, including the Liberty Justice Center and Pacific Legal Foundation, which also receive funding from the Bradley Foundation, as well as prominent GOP donor Dick Uihlein, a shipping supply billionaire.

A Uihlein spokesperson declined to comment. Messages left with the Bradley Foundation weren't returned.

Fishbein says the journey from local mom to nationally recognized conservative activist was swift.

"A year ago, I had a handful of moms in my suburban Philadelphia living room," Fishbein said. "Three weeks later, I was on Tucker Carlson, and within a week, I had more than a million visitors to my Facebook page."

Fishbein and leaders of similar groups say they believe conservative activism in schools has exploded as

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parents have taken a closer look at their children's schoolwork during remote learning.

"Now this whole problem of radical indoctrination is adding to their agenda," Fishbein said. "This is a very big fight."

It's a fight likely to help Republicans in congressional elections next year, said Ian Prior, a former Justice Department official who is now the executive director of a conservative organization called Fight for Schools, which is working to recall board members in Loudoun County.

"You're going to need a team. You're going to need a command staff. You're going to need what I call the army of moms," he said at a conservative conference in Texas in July.

That could include Schroeder, who describes her previous political activity beyond voting as "zero."

Frustrated chiefly by the district's \$42,000 contract last year with Milwaukee diversity consultant Blaguesmith, Schroeder got in touch with Scarlett Johnson, a 46-year-old fellow Mequon mother who had researched strategies for challenging school boards on No Left Turn's website.

"All the critical race theory buzzwords were present," Johnson noted, referring to the online Blaguesmith seminars she watched. "I think it would be bad to backslide into a more race-conscious, race-focused society."

When Mequon police asked parents collecting signatures at the city park to remove their sign, Schroeder reached out to Lennington, who wrote a letter to the city arguing for the group's right to assemble.

The letter, offered at no charge, was a small service but allowed parents to return to the park.

It also provided an opening for Lennington, who lobbies at the state Capitol, to invite Johnson and Schroeder to testify at a legislative hearing in Madison for legislation to require school districts to make all curriculum public.

The Latest: S Korea tops 1,000 cases for 57th straight day

By The Associated Press undefined

SEOUL, South Korea — South Korea has reported more than 2,000 new coronavirus cases, approaching a daily record set last month just a day after officials cautiously expressed hope that infections may slow.

The 2,025 cases reported Wednesday marked the 57th consecutive day of at least 1,000 cases, and there are concerns transmissions could worsen as the country approaches its biggest holiday of the year.

Officials are wrestling with a slow vaccine rollout and an erosion in public vigilance despite the toughest social distancing rules short of a lockdown in Seoul and other large population centers, where private social gatherings of three or more people are banned after 6 p.m.

There are concerns the virus could spread more quickly during this month's Chuseok holidays, the Korean version of Thanksgiving where millions of people usually travel across the country to meet relatives.

MORE ON THE PANDEMIC:

- Pennsylvania to require masks in all K-12 schools, childcare facilities
- Idaho governor calls in help amid surge in COVID-19 patients
- Mormon vaccine push ratchets up, dividing faith's members
- No stranger to plagues, Venice opens film festival with caution

— Find more AP coverage at <https://apnews.com/hub/coronavirus-pandemic> and <https://apnews.com/hub/coronavirus-vaccine>

HERE'S WHAT ELSE IS HAPPENING:

MELBOURNE, Australia — Australia's Victoria state is reporting its first COVID-19 deaths this year, and the government concedes that the infection numbers of the delta variant of the coronavirus will continue to rise.

The state reported two deaths Wednesday, the first since last Oct. 18. Neighboring New South Wales reported four deaths, bringing the death toll from a delta variant outbreak that started in June to 102.

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Victoria and New South Wales are both locked down and are now counting on getting their residents vaccinated to contain the outbreak.

With 120 new infections reported Wednesday, Victoria Premier Daniel Andrews said: "We will not see these case numbers go down. They are going to go up."

New South Wales reported 1,116 infections in the latest 24-hour period.

RICHLAND, Wash. — Workers at the Hanford nuclear reservation in eastern Washington state who do not provide proof of a coronavirus vaccination will be required to be tested at least weekly to be allowed on the site.

The Tri-City Herald reports that the policy announced Monday covers about 11,000 Department of Energy, contractor and subcontractor workers. Many workers could be required to comply by mid-September.

Also under the new policy, visitors with business at the site will have to provide proof of vaccination or a negative virus test from within the previous three days.

The Hanford site was used to produce two-thirds of the plutonium for the nation's nuclear weapons program during World War II and the Cold War. About \$2.5 billion is now spent every year on cleanup of the contaminated site.

ATLANTA — More Georgians are being diagnosed with coronavirus infections than ever before. The rolling seven-day average for positive tests rose to 9,641 per day Tuesday, topping the previous high of 9,635 set back on Jan. 11.

Officials say the rapid spread among children is a new aspect of the pandemic. Public Health Commissioner Kathleen Toomey said Monday that cases have skyrocketed since schools opened in early August.

Toomey says that "we're seeing a significant number of cases among school-aged children, and the number of cases has nearly quadrupled over the last couple of weeks, with the sharpest increase — the highest number of cases — in children aged 11 to 17."

She says public health officials tracked more than 170 outbreaks statewide last week, the highest number since the pandemic began. More than half were in schools.

HILO, Hawaii — The largest hospital on the Big Island of Hawaii is operating at about 120% of capacity amid a surge in COVID-19 cases.

The Hawaii Tribune-Herald reports that Hilo Medical Center has 38 patients being treated for the disease that can be caused by the coronavirus, including 10 in the intensive care unit.

A hospital spokeswoman says that as the largest hospital on the island, it can't divert patients.

She says it has a plan for everyone who comes for care. Last week, the hospital opened a 16-bed overflow unit in its extended care facility.

The hospital says it's constantly assessing its campus for locations in which to care for patients.

ANCHORAGE, Alaska -- An increase in hospitalizations of COVID-19 patients is further straining Alaska's hospital system. One health official calls it a "very serious crisis" and worries what the next few weeks will bring.

The state health department reported that hospitals had a record 152 COVID-19 patients Tuesday, surpassing previous highs in December.

Jared Kosin of the Alaska State Hospital and Nursing Home Association told the Anchorage Daily News that the latest increase in coronavirus infections has shown little sign of slowing.

As of Tuesday, 771 of the state's 1,200 hospital beds were filled. Out of 174 intensive care beds, all but 26 were taken.

MINNEAPOLIS — Minnesota officials are reopening four free coronavirus testing sites as circulation of the highly contagious delta variant renews demand for testing.

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The reopened locations include sites in St. Paul and Bloomington, augmenting existing metro area sites in Brooklyn Park and at the Minneapolis-St. Paul International Airport. Outside the metro area, locations in St. Cloud and Mankato are expected to resume testing this week.

The increase in testing locations comes as virus cases continue to grow across the state and hospitals near full capacity, with both intensive care unit beds and overall hospital beds more than 90% occupied.

SIOUX FALLS, S.D. — South Dakota Gov. Kristi Noem has activated nine soldiers from the state National Guard to help with coronavirus testing in the western part of the state amid a surge of infections.

Over the past two weeks, the average number of infections has tripled statewide. Johns Hopkins University researchers say that one in every 570 South Dakotans has tested positive in the past week. The western part of the state has been the hardest hit by the virus. Meade County, which hosted the Sturgis Motorcycle Rally earlier this month, leads the state in new cases per capita.

BOISE, Idaho — Idaho Gov. Brad Little is calling in 220 medical workers available through federal programs and mobilizing 150 Idaho National Guard soldiers to deal with a surge in unvaccinated COVID-19 patients who are overwhelming the state's hospitals.

The Republican governor said Tuesday the moves are a last-ditch effort to avoid activating for the first time statewide crisis standards of care that could force medical professionals to decide who lives and who dies.

The last week has seen about 1,000 newly confirmed COVID-19 cases per day, most of them unvaccinated. Little says only four intensive care unit beds were available in the entire state on Tuesday.

LANSING, Mich. — A federal judge has blocked Western Michigan University from enforcing a COVID-19 vaccine requirement on four female soccer players, ruling they are likely to prevail on claims it violates their constitutional religious rights.

District Judge Paul Maloney in Grand Rapids issued the temporary restraining order on the day of the school's deadline for athletes to get an initial shot or be unable to practice or compete. He said while the university had not had an opportunity to respond to the lawsuit, "WMU's vaccination requirement for student athletes is not justified by a compelling interest and is not narrowly tailored."

He scheduled a hearing concerning a temporary injunction on Sept. 9.

Unlike at other Michigan universities, Western's vaccine requirement does not extend to all students and employees, though the unvaccinated do have to undergo weekly coronavirus testing. The four athletes said they were denied religious exemptions to play without getting a dose.

The Kalamazoo-based school says it does not comment on ongoing litigation.

SALT LAKE CITY — Utah Gov. Spencer Cox cast doubt on the efficacy of mask-wearing Tuesday as health leaders made some of their most impassioned pleas yet for state residents to mask up and get vaccinated.

Cox said his administration is encouraging people to wear masks but said it is unclear whether they are effective against the highly contagious delta variant of the coronavirus.

"Masks are not as effective as most of the pro-mask crowd are arguing," Cox said. "We know that they're just not."

Cox's comments contradicted earlier statements at the news conference from the state epidemiologist and state hospital leaders who made emotional pleas for vaccinations and universal masking.

Under a new state law, school mask mandates this school year are now banned, though students can wear face coverings if they or their parents choose.

HELENA, Mont. — Montana Gov. Greg Gianforte announced on Tuesday a rule encouraging schools to give parents final say on whether children should wear masks in schools, after several large school districts in the state implemented mask requirements for all students.

Gianforte made the announcement after the U.S. Department of Education opened on Monday civil rights investigations into five states that have banned or limited mask requirements in schools, saying the policies

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could amount to discrimination against students with disabilities or health conditions.

The rule says schools should consider "parental concerns" when adopting mask mandates and should provide parents the ability opt out of health-related mandates for a wide array of reasons including physical and mental health, developmental needs, religious beliefs and moral convictions.

BOISE, Idaho — Idaho Gov. Brad Little is calling in 220 medical workers available through federal programs and mobilizing 150 Idaho National Guard soldiers to deal with a surge in unvaccinated COVID-19 patients overwhelming the state's hospitals.

The Republican governor says the moves are a last-ditch effort to avoid activating for the first time statewide crisis standards of care that could force medical professionals to decide who lives and who dies.

The last week registered about 1,000 new confirmed cases per day, mostly unvaccinated. Little says only four intensive care unit beds were available in the entire state on Tuesday.

The workers include a 20-person U.S. Department of Defense medical response team deployed to northern Idaho, where vaccination rates are among the lowest in the state.

JACKSON, Miss. — Republican Sen. Roger Wicker of Mississippi says he has fully recovered from COVID-19.

The 70-year-old Wicker says he's looking forward to traveling in Mississippi this week. He's one of three senators who announced Aug. 19 that they had tested positive for the coronavirus. The others were 77-year-old independent Angus King of Maine and 69-year-old Democrat John Hickenlooper of Colorado. All three had been vaccinated.

Hickenlooper said Friday he had a mild case. King says Tuesday he has recovered, although he didn't feel great during the worst of his illness.

HONOLULU — Health care officials in Hawaii are concerned about a shortage of oxygen amid the coronavirus surge.

The Honolulu Star-Advertiser reports hospital officials are canceling nonemergency procedures that require oxygen to conserve supplies. Hilton Raethel, president and CEO of the trade group Healthcare Association of Hawaii, says there is a global shortage of oxygen containers needed for transport to the islands.

Hawaii's two liquid oxygen plants have switched to producing medical gas only. Raethel says mainland tank orders are backlogged for months. Hawaii Pacific Health, which oversees several hospitals in the state, directed staff to cancel elective procedures that require oxygen.

HARRISBURG, Pa. — Gov. Tom Wolf announced masks will be required in all Pennsylvania K-12 schools starting on Sept. 7.

The masking order will apply to private as well as public schools and to child care facilities.

Pennsylvania's two statewide teachers' unions had urged K-12 schools to require masks in school buildings, citing the more contagious delta variant of the coronavirus. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention recommends masks in schools for students, staff and teachers.

Wolf is taking action amid a statewide resurgence of coronavirus that's filling hospital beds just as students return to class.

Pennsylvania is averaging more than 3,200 confirmed daily infections -- 20 times the number in early July. More than 1,700 people are hospitalized with COVID-19, up sevenfold since last month. Deaths have doubled in two weeks to about 20 per day.

OMAHA, Neb. — The number of coronavirus cases in Nebraska has nearly doubled over the past two weeks with the highly contagious delta variant.

Nebraska reported 5,006 new cases for the week ending Friday, according to an Omaha World-Herald analysis of data from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. That's up from 3,755 the previous week and nearly double the 2,668 cases recorded the week before.

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The seven-day rolling average of daily new cases in Nebraska has risen in the past two weeks from 190 new cases per day on Aug. 15 to 715 on Sunday.

Tuesday's Scores

By The Associated Press

PREP FOOTBALL=

Dakota Bowl=

Sioux Falls O'Gorman 14, Sioux Falls Roosevelt 12

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

South Dakota National Guard deployed for COVID-19 reponse

SIoux FALLS, S.D. (AP) — South Dakota Gov. Kristi Noem said Tuesday she has activated nine soldiers from the state National Guard to help with COVID-19 testing in the western part of the state amid a surge of infections.

"This past week, I had conversations with all three South Dakota hospital systems and asked them what they needed as cases start to rise again," she said in a statement. "Monument asked for the National Guard to assist them in their testing efforts, and we are happy to help."

Over the past two weeks, the average number of infections has tripled statewide. The western part of the state has been the hardest hit, with Meade County, which hosted the Sturgis Motorcycle Rally earlier this month, leading the state in new cases per capita. The Department of Health reported last week that it had traced 63 cases among rallygoers.

Meanwhile, COVID-19 hospitalizations statewide reached 216 — the largest number since January. Two deaths were also reported Tuesday, bringing the total death toll of people with COVID-19 in the state to 2,069. The health department said that Pennington County had more than twice as many new COVID-19 cases in the last day than any other county in the state.

Noem activated the National Guard last year to prepare field hospitals for a surge in patients, but the hospitals were not utilized.

South Dakota AG got speeding ticket days before crash trial

By STEPHEN GROVES Associated Press

SIoux FALLS, S.D. (AP) — South Dakota's attorney general was ticketed for going 57 in a 35 mph zone last week, just days before he pleaded no contest to traffic charges for a car crash that killed a pedestrian last year.

Jason Ravensborg, the state's top law enforcement officer, received a ticket late Sunday, Aug. 22 in Hughes County, where he lives. He was charged with "Speeding on Other Roadways" — a second-degree misdemeanor — and fined \$177.50. Dakota News Now first reported the ticket. Ravensborg has not paid the fine or admitted guilt.

On Thursday, the Republican attorney general pleaded no contest to a pair of second-degree misdemeanors for a crash last year that killed Joseph Boever, who walking on a rural highway. He avoided jail time but had to pay over \$4,500 in fees.

Circuit Judge John Brown tried to order Ravensborg to "do a significant public service event" in each of the next five years near the date of Boever's death. Ravensborg's attorney, Tim Rensch, objected to that order, arguing that the punishment timeline exceeded the maximum 30-day jail sentence allowed by law. Rensch said he heard from the judge Tuesday that extended public service would not be a part of Ravensborg's punishment, South Dakota Public Broadcasting reported.

Ravensborg was not charged with speeding in the fatal crash. Prosecutors said he was going two miles over the 65 mph speed limit at the time of impact, but they decided that didn't justify a traffic charge.

Instead, they charged him with making an illegal lane change, using a phone while driving and careless driving. Prosecutors dropped the charge of careless driving as part of the plea deal.

Before the crash last year, Ravensborg had accumulated eight traffic tickets over seven years, including six speeding tickets in different counties. However, he was not in danger of losing his driver's license.

The attorney general's chief of staff, Tim Bormann, declined to comment on the ticket, saying it was a personal matter for Ravensborg. Mike Deaver, who has been acting as Ravensborg's spokesman, did not immediately respond to a request for comment.

Prosecutors said Ravensborg was on his phone roughly one minute before last year's crash, but phone records showed it was locked at the moment of impact. Ravensborg told investigators that the last thing he remembered before the crash was turning off the radio and looking down at his speedometer.

Gov. Kristi Noem has renewed pressure to force the attorney general from office, even as he has repeatedly defended his job performance. After the trial concluded last week, she said she would hand over the crash investigation file to the House speaker to consider impeachment charges.

Rep. Will Mortensen, a freshman Republican legislator from Hughes County, had introduced impeachment proceedings in February. But impeachment quickly stalled in the House, and lawmakers said they would revisit the matter after the trial concluded. Mortensen said lawmakers were still considering whether to move forward with impeachment.

"I continue to be hopeful that the attorney general will step down," he said.

Kansas leans heavily on transfer help as Leipold era begins

By DAVE SKRETTA AP Sports Writer

LAWRENCE, Kan. (AP) — There is never a good time to make a coaching change in college football, but the downtrodden Kansas program was forced into perhaps the most inconvenient of all: a month after national signing day, just as spring practices began.

That's when coach Les Miles, engulfed in controversy dating to his days at LSU, was forced out along with the man who hired him, athletic director Jeff Long. And by the time new AD Travis Goff pried Lance Leipold away from Buffalo, the Jayhawks were already looking forward to summer workouts and the eventual start of fall camp.

The timing of it all forced Leipold, the long-time small-college coach, to get creative in rebuilding his roster.

Not surprisingly, the transfer portal played a big role.

Now, most of the 12 transfers from Division I schools who arrived in Lawrence between last season and this season could see the field when the Jayhawks open the season against South Dakota on Friday night at Memorial Stadium.

"When the lights go on and the ball is kicked off, we'll truly get a baseline of where we're at — what we've done in our time here and where we need to go," Leipold said this week. "There's I guess still unknowns, seeing how guys produce in game situations. How we handle adversity, how we handle success. I want to see us playing hard and giving good effort no matter what the score is. We're going to compete hard no matter who is on the field."

It helps that Leipold knows well some of them already. Half of those 12 transfers from college football's top division came from Buffalo, choosing to follow their coach halfway across the country to rebuild a bottom-dwelling program. All appeared on the initial two-deep released Monday.

Trevor Wilson is one of the starting wide receivers after catching 16 passes for 319 yards and three scores while playing all seven games last season. Mike Novitsky is slated to start at center after starting every game at the position last season, helping to block for an offense that was second nationally in rushing. And right tackle Michael Ford Jr. is listed as co-starter after redshirting his freshman season with the bulls.

"That was one of the big things," Novitsky said of following his coach to Kansas, "but another big thing is I want to make a change here. I want to be part of something special. We have a great group of guys that want to be better. They attack every day and they want to win, and I want to be part of it. I want

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to be part of the change.”

Among the backups are defensive tackles Eddie Wilson and Ronald McGee and linebacker Rich Miller.

“What helps us is they’ve been part of Coach Leipold’s coaching,” Kansas defensive line coach Kwahn Drake said. “They’ve actually been kind of leaders, helping guys understand the checks and calls and systems.”

The six newcomers from Buffalo are joined by North Texas quarterback Jason Bean, who is in the running to start the season-opener against the Coyotes; Notre Dame offensive guard Colin Grunhard, the son of former Kansas City Chiefs offensive lineman Tim Grunhard; and Jeremy Webb, who spent time at Virginia Tech before playing at Missouri State last season.

That makes nine of the 12 transfers from Division I schools on the two-deep heading into the opener, with Texas Tech wide receiver Kevin Terry, Michigan linebacker Cornell Wheeler and Virginia Tech defensive end Zion DeBose the others.

Most of them are coming from successful programs, too. The Bulls were 6-1 playing an all-MAC schedule last season, Notre Dame went 10-2 and spent most of last season ranked in the top five and North Texas — with Bean leading the way at quarterback — wound up facing Appalachian State in the Myrtle Beach Bowl.

The Jayhawks? They were winless last season and haven’t won more than three games in a season since 2009.

“The work ethic of our guys has been very impressive, their willingness to take change,” Leipold said. “Our practice style has been different from what they’re used to. But they’ve embraced the whole day of camp and we haven’t had any issues of people being where they’re supposed to be and doing what they’re supposed to do. That’s a good sign.”

In Ida’s aftermath, no quick relief in sight for Louisiana

By KEVIN MCGILL, CHEVEL JOHNSON and MELINDA DESLATTE Associated Press

NEW ORLEANS (AP) — Louisiana residents still reeling from flooding and damage caused by Hurricane Ida scrambled for food, gas, water and relief from the sweltering heat as thousands of line workers toiled to restore electricity and officials vowed to set up more sites where people could get free meals and cool off.

There was a glimmer of hope early Wednesday when power company Entergy announced its crews had turned “power on for some customers in Eastern New Orleans.” Still, power and water outages affected hundreds of thousands of people, many of them with no way to get immediate relief.

“I don’t have a car. I don’t have no choice but to stay,” said Charles Harris, 58, as he looked for a place to eat Tuesday in a New Orleans’ neighborhood where Ida snapped utility poles and brought down power lines two days earlier.

Harris had no access to a generator and said the heat was starting to wear him down. New Orleans and the rest of the region were under a heat advisory, with forecasters saying the combination of high temperatures and humidity could make it feel like 106 degrees Fahrenheit (41 degrees Celsius) on Wednesday.

New Orleans officials announced seven places around the city where people could get a meal and sit in air conditioning. The city was also using 70 transit buses as cooling sites and will have drive-thru food, water and ice distribution locations set up on Wednesday, Mayor LaToya Cantrell said. Louisiana Gov. John Bel Edwards said state officials also were working to set up distribution locations in other areas around the state.

Cantrell ordered a nighttime curfew Tuesday, calling it an effort to prevent crime after Hurricane Ida left the entire city without power. Police Chief Shaun Ferguson said there had been some arrests for stealing.

Though some lights were back on Wednesday, Entergy didn’t immediately say how many homes and business had electricity restored. A company statement said reconnecting all of New Orleans “will still take time given the significant damage” to the city’s power grid.

The company said it was looking to first restore power to “critical infrastructure” such as hospitals, nursing homes and first responders.

Cantrell acknowledged there would be frustration in the days ahead.

“We know it’s hot. We know we do not have any power, and that continues to be a priority,” she told a

news conference.

The New Orleans airport, closed since the storm hit, planned to reopen Wednesday for "very limited" flights, an airport statement said. Only American Airlines had flights scheduled Wednesday, but officials "hope for more normal operations later in the week," it said.

Edwards on Tuesday surveyed damage from the storm, which caused massive flooding and structure damage in Houma, LaPlace and other communities outside New Orleans.

The barrier island of Grand Isle, which bore Ida's full fury, is "uninhabitable," with every building damaged, Jefferson Parish President Cynthia Lee Sheng told a news conference. There are also numerous breaks in the levee system and a strong odor of natural gas, she said.

The number of deaths from the hurricane climbed to at least four in Louisiana and Mississippi, including two people killed Monday night when seven vehicles plunged into a 20-foot-deep (6-meter-deep) hole near Lucedale, Mississippi, where a highway had collapsed after torrential rains.

Among the crash victims was Kent Brown, a "well-liked," 49-year-old father of two, his brother Keith Brown said in a telephone interview on Tuesday. Keith Brown said his brother was in construction but had been out of work for a while. He didn't know where his brother was headed when the crash happened.

Edwards said he expects the death toll to rise.

More than 1 million homes and businesses in Louisiana and Mississippi were left without power when Ida slammed the electric grid on Sunday with its 150 mph (240 kph) winds, toppling a major transmission tower and knocking out thousands of miles of lines and hundreds of substations.

An estimated 25,000-plus utility workers labored to restore electricity, but officials said it could take weeks.

Kisha Brown, a medical receptionist who rode out the storm with her two daughters at her apartment, was among hundreds of people who turned to one of the sites in New Orleans distributing free meals. She lost her power and said her food supply was dwindling. But her other major concern was the heat.

"My last resort would probably be to go to the hospital," she said. "They'll let me in if I show my ID."

Other residents relied on generators, raising concerns about carbon monoxide poisoning. Our Lady of the Lake hospital in Baton Rouge had already treated more than a dozen people for carbon monoxide poisoning by late Tuesday afternoon, spokesman Ryan Cross said.

Elsewhere in New Orleans, drivers lined up for roughly a quarter-mile, waiting to get into a Costco that was one of the few spots in the city with gasoline. At other gas stations, motorists occasionally pulled up to the pumps, saw the handles covered in plastic bags and drove off.

About 30 miles (48 kilometers) northwest of the city in LaPlace, Enola Vappie and her sons sat in her carport hoping to catch a breeze as the temperature inside her damaged home crept up without power to run air conditioning.

The 78-year-old Vappie was one of about 441,000 people across the state to lose water after floodwaters and power outages crippled treatment plants. But she was already thinking about what she'll do when it comes back.

"I can't wait to have a good bubble bath," she said. "I might live in that tub."

A sound bite reexamined: 'Pandemic of the unvaccinated'

By RICARDO ALONSO-ZALDIVAR Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — This summer's coronavirus resurgence has been labeled a "pandemic of the unvaccinated" by government officials from President Joe Biden on down.

The sound bite captures the glaring reality that unvaccinated people overwhelmingly account for new cases and serious infections, with a recent study of government data showing that hospitalization rates among unvaccinated adults were 17 times higher than among those fully vaccinated.

But the term doesn't appear to be changing hearts and minds among unvaccinated people. And it doesn't tell the whole story, with some breakthrough infections occurring among the fully vaccinated. That's led health officials to recommend a return to masks and a round of booster shots.

"It is true that the unvaccinated are the biggest driver, but we mustn't forget that the vaccinated are part

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of it as well, in part because of the delta variant," said Dr. Eric Topol, professor of molecular medicine at Scripps Research in La Jolla, California. "The pandemic clearly involves all people, not just the unvaccinated."

Topol points to Louisiana, where data from the state suggest that nearly 10% of hospitalized patients are vaccinated.

Branding it "a pandemic of the unvaccinated" could have the unintended consequence of stigmatizing the unvaccinated, he added. "We should not partition them as the exclusive problem," Topol said.

Instead officials should call out vaccine disinformation, said Dr. Peter Hotez, dean of the National School of Tropical Medicine at Baylor College of Medicine in Houston. A sketchy stream of dubious arguments continues to undermine public confidence.

"We can say that the virus has reemerged in the southern United States, primarily among unvaccinated people, but it doesn't mean we have to blame the unvaccinated," Hotez said. "The people we have to target are the purveyors of disinformation, and we have to recognize that the unvaccinated themselves are victims of disinformation."

Surgeon General Vivek Murthy has tried to call attention to the damage done by misinformation and disinformation. But for many vaccine opposition has become ingrained.

A poll from The Associated Press-NORC Center for Public Affairs Research in July found that 45% of adults who had not yet received a vaccine said they definitely would not get it, and 35% probably would not. Nearly 2 in 3 (64%) unvaccinated adults said they had little to no confidence the shots are effective against mutations like the delta variant, although public health data show vaccination dramatically reduces the risk of serious illness, hospitalization and death. Just 3% of unvaccinated adults said they would definitely get vaccinated.

Calling it a "pandemic of the unvaccinated" is "just provocative," said Robert Blendon, who follows public opinion on health care at the Harvard T.H. Chan School of Public Health. "The unvaccinated have an opposition toward Washington, and the more you stir the opposition, the more it convinces them 'I'm not going to give in to those people,'" Blendon said.

Yet top officials don't seem to be ready to let go of a favored catchphrase.

"As I've said before, the pandemic of the unvaccinated is a tragedy that is preventable," Biden declared in a recent remarks on his administration's COVID-19 response.

"We're now in a pandemic of the unvaccinated, and the way to end this pandemic is more vaccinations," said White House coronavirus coordinator Jeff Zients, opening a media briefing days ago.

The term caught on before breakthrough infections among vaccinated people became a worry.

During a mid-July media briefing, Dr. Rochelle Walensky, director of the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, underscored the troubling rise in cases and hospitalizations, saying "there is a clear message that is coming through: This is becoming a pandemic of the unvaccinated."

Neither the CDC nor the White House would comment on whether that sound bite should now be retired, or amended.

Until very recently, Biden's handling of the pandemic was seen as a solid strength. But the August edition of the AP-NORC poll found flashing warnings for the president. Approval of his COVID-19 response fell by 12 percentage points from July, down from 66% to 54%. It was the lowest COVID-19 approval rating for Biden, and the first time that his approval number on the pandemic was basically the same as his overall performance rating.

Among independents, there was a nearly 30 percentage point drop in approval.

Democratic pollster Geoff Garin, who tracks health care issues, says he sees no intent to divide in the Biden administration's "pandemic of the unvaccinated" rhetoric. "I think the very clear intention is to tell unvaccinated Americans that they are the ones that are at risk," he said.

But a mutating virus can outrun the smartest sound bites. "When you have a dynamic and fast-changing situation like this, it creates really significant challenges for communicators, who have to both maintain their credibility while staying ahead of the story," said Garin.

Republican pollster Bill McInturff, who collaborates with Garin's firm on some major polls, said, "Calling it a

'pandemic of the unvaccinated' is certainly not going to increase the compliance among the unvaccinated." In a pandemic no one is an island, suggests Dr. Leana Wen, a former Baltimore health commissioner and commentator on public health issues.

"We don't live in communities where the vaccinated can separate themselves from the unvaccinated, because we are dealing with a highly contagious virus and there is a spillover effect," she said. "That gets lost when we are just saying it's a 'pandemic of the unvaccinated.'"

Post-Trump, Ukraine's leader to push Biden for US support

By LYNN BERRY and ERIC TUCKER Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — The Ukrainian leader who found himself ensnarled in Donald Trump's first impeachment comes to Washington on Wednesday to see a new U.S. president, seeking increased military aid and backing for his country's bid for NATO membership.

The White House says the meeting between President Joe Biden and President Volodymyr Zelenskyy is aimed at showing support for Ukraine's sovereignty in the face of Russia's seizure of Crimea and backing of armed separatists in the country's east. Biden also intends to encourage Zelenskyy's efforts to tackle corruption and reassure him that the U.S. will help protect Ukraine's energy security.

In advance of the sit-down, the Biden administration said it was committing up to \$60 million in new military aid to Ukraine. The administration said in a notification to Congress that the aid package for Ukraine was necessary because of a "major increase in Russian military activity along its border" and because of mortar attacks, cease-fire violations and other provocations.

Zelenskyy is expected to bring up Washington's decision not to block the construction of the Nord Stream 2 pipeline, which would carry Russian natural gas directly to Germany, bypassing Ukraine. The pipeline is vehemently opposed by Ukraine and Poland as well as both Republicans and Democrats in Congress, with Zelenskyy describing it as a powerful geopolitical weapon for Russia.

The White House meeting was postponed two days while Biden and his national security team were consumed by the American military withdrawal from Afghanistan. The withdrawal, which concluded Monday, left behind many Afghans who had worked with the Americans and their allies and who now fear Taliban rule. This led to criticism that the U.S. was less than a reliable international partner, something Biden may be eager to counter.

Zelenskyy, a television actor new to politics, took office in May 2019 anxious to firm up his country's relationship with the United States. Instead, he almost immediately found himself under pressure from Trump envoys and soon Trump himself, who in the phone call that led to his first impeachment asked Zelenskyy to "do us a favor."

In that now famous July 2019 call, Trump asked Zelenskyy to announce an investigation into Biden and his son Hunter, who had served on the board of a Ukrainian energy company.

Trump's European Union envoy, Gordon Sondland, later told impeachment investigators that Trump and his lawyer Rudy Giuliani explicitly sought a "quid pro quo" in which an Oval Office visit would be contingent on Zelenskyy announcing the politically charged investigation Trump wanted.

"Was there a 'quid pro quo?'" Sondland asked. "With regard to the requested White House call and White House meeting, the answer is yes."

Besides the coveted invitation to the White House, Sondland also said it was his understanding that Trump was holding up nearly \$400 million in military aid until Ukraine announced the investigation.

The allegations that Trump withheld congressionally approved military aid while seeking Ukraine's help for his reelection campaign formed the basis of the the first impeachment case against him. Trump was acquitted by the Senate. The Oval Office meeting with Zelenskyy never happened.

With Biden, Zelenskyy now has a president with a long history of involvement in Ukraine, one who has supported its determination to break free from Russia, shore up its young democracy and be more fully welcomed into the Western club.

As vice president, Biden was the Obama administration's point person on Ukraine and pushed for tougher

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action against corruption. He once boasted of his success in getting Ukraine to fire its top prosecutor, who had blocked some corruption investigations. Trump later twisted this by insisting, wrongly, that Biden had done so to protect his son and the energy company on whose board he served.

Zelenskyy is the latest Ukrainian president to promise to tackle systemic corruption and then struggle once in office. On Wednesday, Biden will want assurances that Zelenskyy remains committed to following through on a range of reforms, a senior U.S. administration official said.

Zelenskyy also is looking for new economic and military assistance as Ukraine faces a hostile Russia on its eastern border. And he has said he wants a clear statement from Biden on whether he supports eventual NATO membership for Ukraine. NATO members are wary given Ukraine's simmering conflict with Russia.

The \$60 million security package will include more Javelin anti-tank missiles, which Kyiv sees as critical to defending against the Russia-backed separatists who have rolled through eastern Ukraine. The U.S. has overall committed more than \$400 million in military aid this year.

The official, who briefed reporters before the meeting on the condition of anonymity, would not say whether Biden would support Ukraine's NATO aspirations, noting only that the U.S. believes that Ukraine has more work to do to reform its defense sector and the U.S. remains supportive of Ukraine's efforts.

Biden and Zelenskyy will have "significant" discussions on the status of Ukraine's various reforms and what still needs to be done, the official said. This includes steps to protect the independence of the anti-corruption agency, legislation on human rights and other efforts to strengthen democracy. The U.S. will be looking for "concrete results," the official said.

Nord Stream 2, the pipeline being built under the Baltic Sea, also will be on the agenda. By allowing Russia to bypass Ukraine, it could potentially deprive Ukraine of the billions of dollars in transit fees it now earns for pumping Russian gas to Europe.

While the U.S. also opposes the new pipeline, worried that it would give Russia too much power over European energy supplies, Biden agreed in July not to penalize the German company overseeing the project. Under the terms of the deal, the U.S. and Germany committed to counter any Russian attempt to use the pipeline as a political weapon and to support Ukraine by funding alternative energy and development projects.

Biden will discuss with Zelenskyy ways to improve corporate governance at state-owned energy companies and attract more foreign investment to help Ukraine achieve energy independence and meet clean energy goals, the senior administration official said. The two leaders also will discuss plans for protecting Ukraine's energy security once Nord Stream 2 becomes operational, the official said.

Russian President Vladimir Putin published a lengthy essay in July defending his statement that Russians and Ukrainians are "one people" and accusing the West of working methodically to destroy Ukraine's historic links to Russia and turn it into a bulwark against Moscow. "I am convinced that the true sovereignty of Ukraine is possible only in partnership with Russia," Putin concluded.

Alexander Vershbow, a former NATO deputy secretary general and U.S. ambassador to Russia, argues that ensuring Putin doesn't succeed is essential to the security of the United States and its European allies.

"That is why Ukraine's fight for freedom is our fight as well. For if Putin does succeed, Ukraine will not be the last victim of Russian aggression," Vershbow wrote last week in a piece for the Atlantic Council, a Washington-based think tank.

UN: Weather disasters soar in numbers, cost, but deaths fall

By SETH BORENSTEIN and JAMEY KEATEN Associated Press

GENEVA (AP) — Weather disasters are striking the world four to five times more often and causing seven times more damage than in the 1970s, the United Nations weather agency reports.

But these disasters are killing far fewer people. In the 1970s and 1980s, they killed an average of about 170 people a day worldwide. In the 2010s, that dropped to about 40 per day, the World Meteorological Organization said in a report Wednesday that looks at more than 11,000 weather disasters in the past half-century.

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The report comes during a disaster-filled summer globally, including deadly floods in Germany and a heat wave in the Mediterranean, and with the United States simultaneously struck by powerful Hurricane Ida and an onslaught of drought-worsened wildfires.

"The good news is that we have been able to minimize the amount of casualties once we have started having growing amount of disasters: heatwaves, flooding events, drought, and especially ... intense tropical storms like Ida, which has been hitting recently Louisiana and Mississippi in the United States," Petteri Taalas, WMO's secretary-general, told a news conference.

"But the bad news is that the economic losses have been growing very rapidly and this growth is supposed to continue," he added. "We are going to see more climatic extremes because of climate change, and these negative trends in climate will continue for the coming decades."

In the 1970s, the world averaged about 711 weather disasters a year, but from 2000 to 2009 that was up to 3,536 a year or nearly 10 a day, according to the report, which used data from the Centre for Research on the Epidemiology of Disasters in Belgium. The average number of yearly disasters dropped a bit in the 2010s to 3,165, the report said.

Most death and damage during 50 years of weather disasters came from storms, flooding and drought.

More than 90% of the more than 2 million deaths are in what the U.N. considers developing nations, while nearly 60% of the economic damage occurred in richer countries.

In the 1970s, weather disasters cost about \$175 billion globally, when adjusted to 2019 dollars, the U.N. found. That increased to \$1.38 trillion for the period from 2010 to 2019.

What's driving the destruction is that more people are moving into dangerous areas as climate change is making weather disasters stronger and more frequent, U.N. disaster and weather officials said. Meanwhile, experts said, better weather warnings and preparedness are lessening the death toll.

Susan Cutter, director of the Hazards and Vulnerability Research Institute at the University of South Carolina, noted progress in learning to live with risk and protecting ourselves.

"On the other hand, we're still making stupid decisions about where we're putting our infrastructure," she said. "But it's OK. We're not losing lives, we're just losing stuff."

Samantha Montano, an emergency management professor at the Massachusetts Maritime Academy and author of the book "Disasterology," said she worries that death tolls may stop decreasing because of the increase in extreme weather from climate change especially hitting poorer nations.

"The disparity in which countries have had the resources to dedicate to minimizing disaster deaths is of huge concern," particularly due to climate change," she said. "Deaths decreasing in recent decades does not mean that they will continue to do so unless we continue to invest in these efforts."

Hurricane Ida is a good example of heavy damage and what will probably be less loss of life than past major hurricanes, Cutter said. This year, she added, weather disasters "seem to be coming every couple weeks," with Ida, U.S. wildfires and floods in Germany, China and Tennessee.

The five most expensive weather disasters since 1970 were all storms in the United States, topped by 2005's Hurricane Katrina. The five deadliest weather disasters were in Africa and Asia — topped by the Ethiopian drought and famine in the mid 1980s and Cyclone Bhola in Bangladesh in 1970.

Biden defends departure from 'forever war,' praises airlift

By AAMER MADHANI and KEVIN FREKING Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — A defensive President Joe Biden called the U.S. airlift to extract more than 120,000 Americans, Afghans and other allies from Afghanistan to end a 20-year war an "extraordinary success," though more than 100 Americans and thousands of others were left behind.

Twenty-four hours after the last American C-17 cargo plane roared off from Kabul, Biden spoke to the nation and vigorously defended his decision to end America's longest war and withdraw all U.S. troops ahead of an Aug. 31 deadline.

"I was not going to extend this forever war," Biden declared Tuesday from the White House. "And I was not going to extend a forever exit."

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Biden has faced tough questions about the way the U.S. went about leaving Afghanistan — a chaotic evacuation with spasms of violence, including a suicide bombing last week that killed 13 American service members and 169 Afghans.

He is under heavy criticism, particularly from Republicans, for his handling of the evacuation. But he said it was inevitable that the final departure from two decades of war, first negotiated with the Taliban for May 1 by former President Donald Trump, would have been difficult, with likely violence, no matter when it was planned and conducted.

"To those asking for a third decade of war in Afghanistan, I ask, 'What is the vital national interest?'" Biden said. He added, "I simply do not believe that the safety and security of America is enhanced by continuing to deploy thousands of American troops and spending billions of dollars in Afghanistan."

Asked after the speech about Biden sounding angry at some criticism, White House press secretary Jen Psaki said the president had simply offered his "forceful assessment."

Biden scoffed at Republicans — and some Democrats — who contend the U.S. would have been better served maintaining a small military footprint in Afghanistan. Before Thursday's attack, the U.S. military had not suffered a combat casualty since February 2020 — around the time the Trump administration brokered its deal with the Taliban to end the war by May of this year.

Biden said breaking the Trump deal would have restarted a shooting war. He said those who favor remaining at war also fail to recognize the weight of deployment, with a scourge of PTSD, financial struggles, divorce and other problems for U.S. troops.

"When I hear that we could've, should've continued the so-called low-grade effort in Afghanistan at low risk to our service members, at low cost, I don't think enough people understand how much we've asked of the 1% of this country to put that uniform on," Biden said.

Besides all the questions at home, Biden is also adjusting to a new relationship with the Taliban, the Islamist militant group the U.S. toppled after the Sept. 11, 2001, attacks in America, and that is now once again in power in Afghanistan.

Biden has tasked Secretary of State Antony Blinken to coordinate with international partners to hold the Taliban to their promise of safe passage for Americans and others who want to leave in the days ahead.

"We don't take them by their word alone, but by their actions," Biden said. "We have leverage to make sure those commitments are met."

Biden also pushed back against criticism that he fell short of his pledge to get all Americans out of the country ahead of the U.S. military withdrawal. He said many of the Americans left behind are dual citizens, some with deep family roots that are complicating their ability to leave Afghanistan.

"The bottom line: 90% of Americans in Afghanistan who wanted to leave were able to leave," Biden said. "For those remaining Americans, there is no deadline. We remain committed to get them out, if they want to come out."

Biden repeated his argument that ending the Afghanistan war was a crucial step for recalibrating American foreign policy toward growing challenges posed by China and Russia — and counterterrorism concerns that pose a more potent threat to the U.S.

"There's nothing China or Russia would rather have, want more in this competition, than the United States to be bogged down another decade in Afghanistan," he said

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. The president lamented an estimated \$2 trillion of taxpayer money that was spent fighting the war.

"What have we lost as a consequence in terms of opportunities?" Biden asked.

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.

House Minority Leader Kevin McCarthy, R-Calif., on Tuesday described the Biden administration's handling of the evacuation as "probably the biggest failure in American government on a military stage in my

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lifetime" and promised that Republicans would press the White House for answers.

Meanwhile, the Senate met briefly Tuesday, with Vice President Kamala Harris presiding over the chamber, to pass by unanimous consent a bill that increases spending for temporary assistance to U.S. citizens and their dependents returning from another country because of illness, war or other crisis. Biden quickly signed the legislation, which raises funding for the program from \$1 million to \$10 million.

A group of Republican lawmakers gathered on the House floor Tuesday morning and participated in a moment of silence for the 13 service members who were killed in the suicide bomber attack.

They also sought a House vote on legislation from Rep. Mike Gallagher, R-Wis., which among other things would require the administration to submit a report on how many Americans remain in Afghanistan as well as the number of Afghans who had applied for a category of visas reserved for those employed by or on behalf of the U.S. government.

The GOP lawmakers objected as Rep. Debbie Dingell, D-Mich., gaveled the House into adjournment. They then gathered for a press conference to denounce the administration.

For many U.S. commanders and troops who served in Afghanistan, it was a day of mixed emotions.

"All of us are conflicted with feelings of pain and anger, sorrow and sadness, combined with pride and resilience," said Gen. Mark Milley, chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff. He commanded troops in Afghanistan earlier in his career. "But one thing I am certain of, for any soldier, sailor, airman or Marine and their families, your service mattered. It was not in vain."

Strong winds push California wildfire closer to Lake Tahoe

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

SOUTH LAKE TAHOE, Calif. (AP) — Flames raced across treetops and through drought-stricken vegetation as firefighters scrambled Wednesday to keep a growing California wildfire from reaching a resort city at the southern tip of Lake Tahoe after evacuation orders were expanded to neighboring Nevada.

Thick smoke from the Caldor Fire enveloped the city of South Lake Tahoe, which was all but deserted during a summer week usually bustling with tourists.

The National Weather Service warned that critical weather conditions through Wednesday could include extremely low humidity, dry fuel and gusts up to 30 mph (48 kph).

"With those winds, as it ran through the forest it created what's called an active crown fire run, where the fire actually goes from treetop to treetop," said Stephen Vollmer, a fire behavior analyst for the California Department of Forestry and Fire Protection.

He said embers were being cast up to a mile out in front of the fire, creating new ignition points, including in some parts of the dense forest that haven't burned since 1940 or before.

The blaze was 3 miles (5 kilometers) outside of South Lake Tahoe by Tuesday afternoon, Cal Fire Battalion Chief Henry Herrera told KGO-TV.

A day earlier, roughly 22,000 residents jammed the city's main artery for hours after they were ordered to leave as the fire advanced.

South Lake Tahoe city officials said only a handful of residents defied Monday's evacuation order. But nearly everyone worried Tuesday about what the fire would do next.

Tom O'Connell and his wife, Linda, awaited the fate of their home while anchored on their sailboat in Ventura Harbor. The two-bedroom they've owned for 40 years survived the Angora Fire that destroyed about 250 houses in 2007. They didn't know if they'd be lucky again.

"You worry about the things you can have some control over," O'Connell said. "We've no control over this."

Pushed by strong winds, the Caldor Fire crossed two major highways and swept down slopes into the Tahoe Basin, where firefighters working in steep terrain were protecting remote cabins.

Cal Fire Division Chief Erich Schwab said some homes burned, but it was too early to know how many.

"The fire burned through there extremely fast, extremely hot. And we did the best that we could," he said Tuesday night.

Thick smoke prevented air firefighting operations periodically last week. But since then, nearly two dozen

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helicopters and three air tankers dumped thousands of gallons of water and retardant on the fire, fire spokesman Dominic Polito said.

As flames moved toward the Heavenly ski resort on the California-Nevada border, officials turned on the mountain's snow-making machines. Cal Fire Battalion Chief Jed Gaines told KPIX-TV that spraying the slopes with water was "increasing the humidity level, it's getting everything wet" so that if the fire starts climbing "it's able to slow it down."

The Lake Tahoe area is usually a year-round recreational paradise offering beaches, water sports, hiking, ski resorts and golfing. South Lake Tahoe bustles with outdoor activities while just across the state border in Stateline, Nevada tourists can gamble at major casinos.

But on Tuesday, only a few dozen tourists remained on the casino floor of the Montbleu Resort, Casino and Spa. The state board that controls gaming said that casino regulators were monitoring operations at the four largest gambling properties in the city.

Hotels are housing evacuees, fire crews and other emergency personnel. In all, Harrah's, Harveys Lake Tahoe Casino, the Hard Rock and Montbleu Resort have more than 2,200 hotel rooms.

Nevada Gov. Steve Sisolak urged residents to be prepared, saying there was no timeline for when evacuations might be ordered. At a news conference in Carson City, he noted that ash was falling on him even though the fire was about 20 miles (32 kilometers) away.

"I'm standing here and I'm getting all ash particulates on my jacket, even," the governor said. "This is serious, folks."

Hours later, residents in parts of Douglas County under an evacuation warning were ordered to leave, although casinos were excluded.

At the Douglas County Community & Senior Center in Gardnerville, people had their temperature checked before entering a gymnasium of cots set up by the Red Cross. Outside, evacuees who had stayed in tents sorted through ramen noodles and plastic bags of clothes and keepsakes.

South Lake Tahoe resident Lorie Major was at the grocery store when she got the alert on her phone. "I had to tell myself: 'OK, Lorie: Get it together. It's time to go,'" she said.

She put on headphones, turned on the Grateful Dead's "Fire on the Mountain" and walked home to an empty apartment complex already vacated by neighbors. She and her mini Australian shepherd, Koda, took a 20-mile (32-kilometer) taxi ride from her South Lake Tahoe apartment to a hotel in Minden, Nevada.

A firefighter injured while battling the Caldor Fire last weekend was expected to be hospitalized for a month after undergoing skin grafting surgery. Richard Gerety III of Patterson, California suffered third-degree burns over 20% of his body, the Modesto Bee reported. Despite the very active fire year, there have not been many injuries or deaths among firefighters or residents.

More than 15,000 firefighters were battling dozens of California blazes, with help from out of state crews. 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.

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.

Crews are battling the Dixie, the second-largest wildfire in state history at 1,281 square miles (3,317 square kilometers). The weeks-old fire was burning about 65 miles (105 kilometers) north of the Lake Tahoe-area blaze and prompting new evacuation orders and warnings this week.

The Caldor Fire has scorched nearly 312 square miles (808 square kilometers) since breaking out Aug. 14. It was 18% contained.

More than 600 structures have been destroyed, and at least 33,000 more were threatened.

At the evacuation center in Gardnerville, Joe Gillespie said he, his girlfriend and her son left their home in Meyers south of South Lake Tahoe on Sunday, bringing clothes, picture frames and collectibles like Hot Wheels toys from the 1960s that Gillespie's mother gave him.

Gillespie, a mechanic at Sierra-at-Tahoe Resort, said that unlike the northern shore of Lake Tahoe, which is dotted with mansions and second homes, the area currently under threat houses blue-collar workers who make their living at the casinos and ski resorts that make the area so popular.

The Sierra-at-Tahoe Resort is beloved for its unpretentious and comparatively affordable winter prices. It turns 75 this year, he said.

"It sounds like we won't be opening because of the fire," he said.

Hezbollah hammered with criticism amid Lebanon's crises

By BASSEM MROUE Associated Press

BEIRUT (AP) — Driving back to base after firing rockets toward Israeli positions from a border area last month, a group of Hezbollah fighters was accosted by angry villagers who smashed their vehicles' windshields and held them up briefly.

It was a rare incident of defiance that suggested many in Lebanon would not tolerate provocations by the powerful group that risk triggering a new war with Israel.

As Lebanon sinks deeper into poverty, many Lebanese are more openly criticizing Iran-backed Hezbollah. They blame the group — along with the ruling class — for the devastating, multiple crises plaguing the country, including a dramatic currency crash and severe shortages in medicine and fuel.

"Hezbollah is facing its most consequential challenge in maintaining control over the Lebanese system and what is called the 'protective environment of the resistance' against Israel," said Joe Macaron, a Washington-based Middle East analyst.

The incident along the border and other confrontations — including a deadly shooting at the funeral of a Hezbollah fighter and rare indirect criticism by the country's top Christian religious leader — have left the group on the defensive.

The anger has spread in recent months, even in Hezbollah strongholds where many have protested electricity cuts and fuel shortages as well as the currency crash that has plunged more than half the country's 6 million people into penury.

In its strongholds, predominantly inhabited by Shiite Muslims, it is not uncommon now for people to speak out against the group. They note that Hezbollah is paying salaries in U.S. dollars at a time when most Lebanese get paid in Lebanese currency, which has lost more than 90% of its value in nearly two years.

Protests and scuffles have broken out at gas stations around Lebanon and in some Hezbollah strongholds. In rare shows of defiance, groups of protesters have also closed key roads in those areas south of Beirut and in southern Lebanon.

In recent speeches, Hezbollah leader Sayyed Hassan Nasrallah has appeared angry, blaming the shortages on what he describes as an undeclared Western siege. The chaos in Lebanon, he said, is being instigated from a "black room" inside the U.S. Embassy.

Critics say that rather than push for reform, Hezbollah has stood by its political allies who resist change. They say the group is increasingly pulling Lebanon into Iran's orbit by doing its bidding, and that U.S. sanctions against Iran and Hezbollah have made things harder.

Where Hezbollah was once considered an almost sacred, untouchable force fighting for a noble cause — the fight against the Israeli enemy — it is now seen by many simply as part of the corrupt political clique responsible for the country's epic meltdown. Still, when it comes to fighting Israel, the group enjoys unwavering backing within its base of support.

Often criticized for operating as a state within a state, Hezbollah has tried to ease the effects of the crisis on its supporters in similar fashion.

While the government has been working for months to issue ration cards to poor families, Hezbollah has been well ahead. It has issued two such cards to poor families living in Hezbollah bastions, one called Sajjad after the name of a Shiite imam, and a second called Nour, or light, for its fighters and employees of its institutions who number about 80,000.

"We will serve you with our eyelashes," is Hezbollah's slogan to serve the extremely poor in its communities — a Lebanese term meaning they are ready to sacrifice anything to help others.

The tens of thousands carrying Sajjad cards not only can buy highly subsidized products from dozens of shops spread around Lebanon — mostly staples made in Lebanon, Iran and Syria — but can also get

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medical treatment and advice at 48 Hezbollah-run clinics and medical centers around Lebanon.

Nasrallah is also organizing a sea corridor carrying oil from Iran to Lebanon to help alleviate the fuel shortages, with the first tanker believed to be on its way. The move has been praised by Hezbollah's supporters and heavily criticized by its opponents, who say it risks bringing more sanctions on Lebanon.

In the border incident, villagers from the minority Druze sect intercepted Hezbollah fighters on their way back after firing rockets toward a disputed area held by Israel. The villagers briefly detained them and the mobile rocket launcher they used after accusing them of putting them at risk if Israel strikes back.

The fighters and the launcher were then handed over to Lebanese troops, who released them on the same day.

Later, Hezbollah angered many Christians after supporters launched a social media campaign against the head of Lebanon's Maronite Catholic church, the country's largest, accusing him of treason after he criticized the group for firing the rockets on Israeli positions.

The widely feared group has been hammered by accusations from its local opponents. They include silencing its opponents, facilitating smuggling of fuel and other subsidized items to neighboring Syria, and alienating oil-rich Gulf countries like Saudi Arabia, leading them to halt financial assistance because of Hezbollah's dominance of Lebanon.

The most serious charge has been a claim by opponents at home that the group brought in the hundreds of tons of ammonium nitrate that exploded at Beirut's port last year, killing at least 214 people, wounding thousands and destroying parts of the capital.

No direct connection to Hezbollah has emerged, but unsubstantiated theories that tie the group to the stockpile abound. One claim is that Hezbollah imported the chemicals on behalf of the Syrian government, which used them in barrel bombs against rebel-held areas during the neighboring country's 10-year conflict.

"Hezbollah's agencies are active at the port and this is known to security agencies and all Lebanese. Why is Sayyed Hassan Nasrallah above questioning?" asked Samy Gemayel, head of the right-wing Christian Kataeb Party recently.

Hezbollah has repeatedly denied any link to the ammonium nitrate. But Nasrallah further angered families of the victims and other Lebanese recently by criticizing the judge leading the investigation into the blast, suggesting he should be replaced. Nasrallah described Judge Tarek Bitar as "politicized" after he filed charges against some legislators and former Cabinet ministers allied with Hezbollah.

"There is an attempt to satanize Hezbollah and tarnish its image," said Lebanese University political science professor Sadek Naboulsi. The professor, who has ties to the group, accused foreign powers including Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, Israel and the U.S. of seeking to incite internal strife between Lebanon's Shiite and Sunni Muslim communities with the aim of weakening Hezbollah. He added that Hezbollah had overcome such pressures in the past and emerged more powerful.

A serious test for Hezbollah came in early August when a funeral of a militant came under fire by suspected Sunni gunmen on the southern entrance of Beirut. Three Hezbollah supporters were killed and 16 were wounded in the shooting in the town of Khaldeh.

Hezbollah did not retaliate and instead called on Lebanese authorities to investigate the case.

"An increasing number of Lebanese are realizing that the concept of a Lebanese state cannot coexist with a powerful armed militia serving an outside power," wrote Michael Young, editor of Diwan, the blog of the Carnegie Middle East Center.

Macaron said Hezbollah will not be the same after the crisis and will have to adapt to ensure political survival in the long term.

"What they can do at this point is to limit losses as much as possible," he said.

'We'll endure': Ida leaves Gulf town of Houma in tatters

By JAY REEVES Associated Press

HOUMA, La. (AP) — Main Street of this southern Louisiana town resembles a canyon of rubble after Hurricane Ida.

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Metal roofs peeled off buildings cover the sidewalks, and red bricks from a collapsed building mingle with big chunks of broken glass on a corner.

A man cleaning up damage throws a piece of roofing from atop Mardi Gras Hall, a bingo parlor, and it lands with a thud. A block away, broken limbs from giant oaks make it all but impossible to walk across a once shady square.

"It's like a bomb went off and just blew off houses' roofs, flattened trees, snapped them like matchsticks," said Michael Cobb, taking in the destruction Tuesday from his front porch a couple of blocks away.

Cobb's home, built from cypress 120 years ago and painted white with purple trim, survived the storm with only a water leak. Still, seeing Main Street in tatters filled him with sadness.

"It was such a pretty place," he said.

Situated on the Intracoastal Waterway where it crosses Bayou Terrebonne, Houma is a working-class town of 33,000 people who largely make their living off the nearby Gulf of Mexico. Many catch fish, shrimp and oysters. Others build and repair ships and barges or work support jobs for the oil industry.

Founded in 1832, Houma has weathered its share of hurricanes. Hurricane Katrina caused flooding and left the bayou littered with debris when it struck in 2005, precisely 16 years to the day before Ida made landfall.

Ida's eyewall tore through Houma with ferocious winds that reached 150 mph (240 km/h) when the Category 4 storm struck the Louisiana coast Sunday.

The hurricane ripped away the corner of the flatiron-shaped Hancock Whitney Bank building. Across the street, which had been cleared for traffic Tuesday, three walls and the roof of a small bistro were collapsed in a heap.

Cobb's mother-in-law, Elizabeth Courteaux, has lived in the area her whole life and grew up speaking Cajun French. She said the storm was terrifying and the aftermath worrisome. Power could be out for a month, she said, and every tree near her home is down.

"You can't even pass," said Courteaux, 66.

All through town Tuesday, power lines and utility poles hung precariously over streets littered with shingles and lumber ripped from fractured homes.

Near Houma in Raceland, tanker trucks providing drinking water were parked outside the town's small hospital, Ochsner St. Anne. Roofs all around were missing shingles, and wooden fences surrounding homes laid flat on soggy soil.

Power crews have started repairing the power grid around Houma, but no one is expecting a quick fix. People in these parts are used to surviving hurricanes, Cobb said, and Ida won't be any different.

"We'll live," he said. "We'll endure. We'll rebuild. It's what we do."

Texas 6-week abortion ban takes effect, with high court mum

By MARK SHERMAN Associated Press

A Texas law banning most abortions in the state took effect at midnight, but the Supreme Court has yet to act on an emergency appeal to put the law on hold.

If allowed to remain in force, the law would be the most dramatic restriction on abortion rights in the United States since the high court's landmark Roe v. Wade decision legalized abortion across the country in 1973.

The Texas law, signed by Republican Gov. Greg Abbott in May, would prohibit abortions once a fetal heartbeat can be detected, usually around six weeks and before most women even know they're pregnant.

Abortion providers who are asking the Supreme Court to step in said the law would rule out 85% of abortions in Texas and force many clinics to close. Planned Parenthood is among the abortion providers that have stopped scheduling abortions beyond six weeks from conception.

At least 12 other states have enacted bans on abortion early in pregnancy, but all have been blocked from going into effect.

What makes the Texas law different is its unusual enforcement scheme. Rather than have officials

responsible for enforcing the law, private citizens are authorized to sue abortion providers and anyone involved in facilitating abortions. Among other situations, that would include anyone who drives a woman to a clinic to get an abortion. Under the law, anyone who successfully sues another person would be entitled to at least \$10,000.

Abortion opponents who wrote the law also made it difficult to challenge the law in court, in part because it's hard to know whom to sue.

Texas has long had some of the nation's toughest abortion restrictions, including a sweeping law passed in 2013 that the Supreme Court eventually struck down but not before more than half of the state's 40-plus abortion clinics closed.

Lawmakers also are moving forward in an ongoing special session in Texas with proposed new restrictions on medication abortion, a method using pills that accounts for roughly 40% of abortions in the U.S.

Judge set to rule on Purdue Pharma's opioid settlement plan

By GEOFF MULVIHILL Associated Press

A federal bankruptcy judge is expected to rule Wednesday on whether to accept a settlement between OxyContin maker Purdue Pharma, the states and thousands of local governments over an opioid crisis that has killed a half-million Americans over the last two decades.

If Judge Robert Drain confirms the plan, estimated to be valued at \$10 billion, it could cap years of litigation. Members of the Sackler family would give up ownership of the company and pay \$4.5 billion while the company is converted to a new entity with its profits being used to fight the epidemic. Objectors could appeal the ruling.

The next steps become murkier if the judge sides with a handful of holdout states and activists by rejecting the plan. Parties in the case could head back to the drawing board, and long-paused lawsuits against the company and Sackler family members would likely resume.

The most contentious issue in the settlement process is that Sackler family members would receive protection from lawsuits over opioids. They would not receive immunity from criminal charges, though there are no indications any are forthcoming.

The Stamford, Connecticut-based company would become a new entity with its board of directors appointed by government officials. Its profits, along with money from the Sacklers, would be used to fund treatment and education programs, among other efforts, as well as compensate some victims of the crisis. Those who are eligible would be expected to receive payments from \$3,500 to \$48,000.

Under the settlement, public officials would appoint members of the board of the new company that would replace Purdue.

State and local governments came to support the plan overwhelmingly, though many did so grudgingly, as did groups representing those harmed by prescription opioids.

Nine states, Washington, D.C., Seattle and the U.S. Bankruptcy Trustee, which seeks to protect the nation's bankruptcy system, opposed the settlement, largely because of the protections granted to the Sackler family.

Drain has urged the holdouts to negotiate an agreement, warning that drawn-out litigation would delay getting settlement money to victims and the programs needed to address the epidemic. Opioid-linked deaths in the U.S. continue at a record pace last year, hitting 70,000.

As fire nears, some Lake Tahoe residents buck order to flee

By TERENCE CHEA and MICHELLE L. PRICE Associated Press

SOUTH LAKE TAHOE, Calif. (AP) — While most of his neighbors fled South Lake Tahoe as a major wildfire charged closer to town, Tod Johnson stayed put.

The 66-year-old retiree swept up pine needles from the yard and roof of his home Tuesday after spending the night keeping an eye on reports of the advancing flames. The police knew he was there, but told him that when he leaves, he can't come back until it's safe.

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"I promised my kid I'd be out of here as soon as I saw any flames anywhere. And I'm trying to be here to help the firefighters," he said.

After seeing gusty winds in the forecast as the fire moved closer to his Lake Tahoe community, Johnson said he planned to leave Tuesday afternoon to join his girlfriend in Reno, once he had packed up a few precious items to take with him.

While more than 20,000 residents and likely thousands of tourists packed roads leading out of Lake Tahoe on Monday to flee the Caldor Fire closing in on the resort community, a handful of people decided to buck the mandatory evacuation orders and stay behind.

With many emergencies, from wildfires to hurricanes, most people choose to comply with orders to leave. However, there are almost always a few holdouts, and their reasons for staying vary.

As powerful Hurricane Ida bore down on Louisiana over the weekend, some residents said they couldn't afford to leave because they didn't have money for gas or a hotel room.

In the West, where bigger and hotter wildfires rage through the forests each year, more communities find themselves staring down evacuation orders. There are invariably some who decide to stay put, against all advice from government and emergency officials.

The decision to stay behind can complicate firefighters' efforts and leave them scrambling to save lives instead of just property.

The Caldor Fire, which has burned nearly 300 square miles (777 square kilometers) since breaking out Aug. 14 in California, has been moving closer to Nevada's casino-dotted side of Lake Tahoe, prompting mandatory evacuations in small communities and on Monday, the city of South Lake Tahoe.

The city of 22,000 sits on the southern edge of the normally idyllic, deep blue lake that for weeks has been choked by thick smoke and haze as the flames came closer. When Monday's evacuation order was issued, only about 20 of the city's residents refused to evacuate, according to city spokeswoman Lindsey Baker, with most jamming the roads to flee.

Of the few who stayed behind, some said they wanted to stick it out, pack more belongings and guard their property a little longer.

Bill Roberts, said he had planned to leave South Lake Tahoe with everyone else but decided to postpone his trip because he was tired and his back hurt. He then delayed it again when his cat ran off.

"Depending what the wind does, I might become a little more mildly concerned today. But I'm hoping at some point I just nab that cat and be out of here like a shot," he said.

Some locals stayed because they felt they had nowhere else to go, even though officials opened emergency shelters on both sides of the California-Nevada state line.

David Duet, a South Lake Tahoe resident who is homeless, camps in a meadow with half a dozen friends and said they "don't really have anywhere else to go." He dismissed the idea of fleeing to nearby Carson City, saying his group didn't know anyone in the Nevada capital, and declined a ride a stranger offered him Monday.

Duet said he and his friends are checking the internet and radio for updates on the fire and plan to ride bicycles out or catch a ride from someone if it gets really bad.

"No one's stupid enough to stay when the flames are right mounting around the outside of the meadow. So as long as the smoke isn't so bad and the flames aren't real close, we're going to stick it out, you know?" Duet said. "But if not, we'll hightail it out. We'll get out."

The mandatory orders are typically enforced by local sheriff's offices, though it's unclear how often officials enforce the orders with threats of arrest.

In early August, as a wildfire burning further north in California approached the town of Westwood, the local sheriff's office reported it arrested three people who stayed in defiance of an evacuation order, according to the Los Angeles Times. The three people were taken to jail, cited and released.

Officials have not reported any arrests related to the evacuation orders near Lake Tahoe.

Russ Crupi decided to remain to defend his and his neighbors' homes in the mobile home park that he and his wife maintain and manage for a living. While his wife and children evacuated to Reno, he stayed

and arranged sprinklers and tractors around park.

Law enforcement officers came by and took down his name and phone number as he explained he planned to stay and wait.

"I'm worried about what'll be here when people come back. People want to come back to their houses and that's what I'm gonna try to do," he said.

Tonia Rhodes, who works as a server at a local casino, said she was anxious about her husband and upset about his decision to stay behind at their home in Meyers, south of Lake Tahoe, in defiance of an evacuation order.

Rhodes said her husband stayed at the home with four friends to try to defend it from encroaching blazes. They already had to rebuild their home once, after the 2007 Angora Fire tore through the neighborhood.

As she sat at the bar of the MontBleu casino resort in Stateline, waiting to see if it too might fall under an evacuation order, Rhodes said she didn't think she could continue living with the anxiety of the inevitable next fire but couldn't envision herself moving somewhere else.

"I don't want to do this anymore," she said. "I don't even know what to do. Where would I go?"

AP FACT CHECK: Biden skirts broken promise on Afghan exit

By CALVIN WOODWARD and HOPE YEN Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — President Joe Biden glossed over his broken promise to keep U.S. troops in Afghanistan until the last Americans are out and offered the faint assurance — even with the last U.S. planes gone — that it's never too late for U.S. citizens to leave.

"There is no deadline," Biden said Tuesday. But with its forces withdrawn, the U.S. is left with diplomatic persuasion instead of military muscle to get the Taliban extremists who've been fighting the U.S. for 20 years to give remaining Americans safe passage out.

BIDEN: "The bottom line: 90% of Americans in Afghanistan who wanted to leave were able to leave. For those remaining Americans, there is no deadline. We remain committed to get them out, if they want to come out. Secretary of State Blinken is leading the continued diplomatic efforts to ensure safe passage for any American, Afghan partner or foreign national who wants to leave Afghanistan." — White House remarks.

THE FACTS: For the record, Biden vowed that he would get 100% of Americans out before withdrawing forces.

And his suggestions Tuesday that many of the remaining Americans are dual nationals who may be undecided about leaving do not reflect the full reality.

He contended 100 to 200 Americans are still there and have "some intention to leave," adding: "Most of those who remain are dual citizens, longtime residents, but earlier decided to stay because of their family roots in Afghanistan." And White House press secretary Jen Psaki said afterward that Biden is telling those people that if they decide in two weeks that they want to go, "we will get you out."

But those comments may understate the desperation of Americans trapped in Afghanistan. Gen. Frank McKenzie, head of U.S. Central Command, said Monday that Americans tried to get to the Kabul airport for the final evacuations but couldn't. No Americans were on the last five jets to leave.

"We maintained the ability to bring them in up until immediately before departure, but we were not able to bring any Americans out," he said. "That activity ended probably about 12 hours before our exit, although we continue the outreach and would have been prepared to bring them on until the very last minute. But none of them made it to the airport, and were able to be — and were able to be accommodated."

Biden told ABC News unequivocally on Aug. 19 that the U.S. would not leave any Americans stranded.

"Americans understand we're going to try and get it done before Aug. 31," Biden said then. "If we don't, we'll determine at the time, who's left."

And then? "And if there are American citizens left, we're going to stay until we get them all out."

The last U.S. planes took off from the airport Monday night, Aug. 30, one minute before midnight in Kabul.

U.S. officials estimated up to 200 Americans were left behind, along with unknown numbers of Afghans and others who were trying frantically to leave. By then, more than 100,000 people, mostly Afghans, had

been flown to safety in the multinational evacuations.

Now that has become a matter for diplomacy,

U.S. officials said diplomats are in talks with neighboring countries and others to try to arrange non-U.S.-military evacuations for those remaining. Among the options, if the diplomacy works, are potential charter flights from the airport when it re-opens and overland routes.

Black US farmers awaiting billions in promised debt relief

By ROXANA HEGEMAN and ALLEN G. BREED Associated Press

BOYDTON, Va. (AP) — There was a time when Black farms prospered.

Just two generations out of slavery, by 1910 Black farmers had amassed more than 16 million acres of land and made up about 14 percent of farmers. The fruit of their labors fed much of America.

Now, they have fewer than 4.7 million acres. Black farms in the U.S. plummeted from 925,000 to fewer than 36,000, according to the U.S. Department of Agriculture's latest farm census. And only about one in 100 farmers is Black.

What happened?

They were able to overcome the broken promise of "40 acres and a mule" to the newly freed slaves — a military order, later rescinded. But over the last century, they faced one obstacle after another because of their race.

Farmers needed loans to expand, to buy seed, to bridge the time between harvests. But lenders — chief among them, the USDA — often refused to give them money, and often rushed to foreclose. Suppliers and customers undercut them. Laws of inheritance led to the breakup of homesteads.

Now the government wants to make amends by providing billions of dollars in debt forgiveness for farmers of color as part of the pandemic relief package. But a judge has put the money on hold in the face of lawsuits filed by white farmers claiming that the program is unfair — reverse discrimination.

Today's Black farmers and the descendants of Black farmers who struggled and lost their stakes argue that they are the ones who have been the victims of injustice:

The Virginia farmer who barely was able to keep part of his farm when the USDA threatened to sell it at auction. The Kansas man who lost the land his grandparents once homesteaded. The Arkansas farmer who is holding on by a thread, praying the federal aid will come through in time.

It was racism, says farmer John Wesley Boyd Jr. And it still is.

"I think discrimination is still pervasive. I think that it's done in a much subtler way," Boyd says. "I don't think you're going to see many USDA officials spitting on people now or maybe calling them colored, but they aren't lending them any money — the way they lend white farmers."

Steering his John Deere tractor with his left hand, the 55-year-old Boyd clutches a rusty, mud-encrusted horseshoe in his right. Discovered in a field by one of his workers, it's become something of a talisman.

"This horseshoe here probably came off one of the mules," he says as the squeaky-creaky planter carves rows into the rocky soil. "Because that's what Blacks were using. They weren't using no tractors like this, man."

On this blistering summer day, Boyd is sowing his cash crop, soybeans, making passes up and down a rolling 1,000-acre tract along the broad Roanoke River in Virginia. It's one of several parcels he owns, totaling 1,500 acres — some of it land that his ancestors once tilled as slaves.

And now, it's his. Some days, it's hard to believe.

"I'm owning land that many of my forefathers worked when it was scotch free. You know -- slave labor, man," says Boyd, his black cowboy hat casting a shadow over his face. "I'm just trying to make them proud."

Like the other Black farmers, Boyd has encountered prejudice in many ways. An example: Boyd's wife, Kara, a member of the Lumbee Tribe of North Carolina, recalls the time her husband took a load of soybeans to the grain elevator and got a low price for it. Too much trash or moisture in it, he was told.

When Kara Boyd brought in another load from the same field, she got a better price. But when her stepfather, who is white, took a load out of the same field, she recalled that he was told: "Man, these are

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the best beans they'd seen and how many more could he bring them?"

But Boyd's battle with the USDA was epic. It almost wiped him out.

Boyd was just 18 years old when he assumed an existing USDA loan when he bought his first farm in the early 1980s. He says walking into his local USDA office was like a return to the Jim Crow era. Black farmers had supervised accounts and could only get appointments with the local lending officer on a single day of the week, a practice that came to be known as Black Wednesday.

Boyd endured racial slurs. A loan officer once spat tobacco juice on him — he accidentally missed the spit can, the official would claim. Another time, Boyd saw an official tear up his application and throw it in the trash.

In 1996, USDA took just 30 days to foreclose on some of his farmland. Then the department moved to auction off the remaining 110 acres.

Boyd joined other Black farmers at a protest in Washington, tying a mule named 40 Acres to the White House gate. Their demonstration was successful; less than a week later, then-Agriculture Secretary Dan Glickman soon declared a farm foreclosure moratorium. Boyd had just enough time to save his farm.

Documents from a USDA internal review that Boyd provided to The Associated Press show investigators found his operating loan requests were not processed for years, despite explicit instructions from the agency's state director. It also found that his account was improperly referred to a credit bureau as delinquent when it should have been restructured, deepening his financial difficulties.

Boyd recounts how, unlike their white counterparts, Black farmers who fell behind on a payment would see their loans immediately accelerated, no negotiations. They would be given just 30 days to pay the full amount or they were pressured to sign their deed over to USDA under a program which purportedly allowed them to lease and later buy back their land when their financial situation improved.

But that typically didn't happen because USDA's local county committees — comprised mostly of white local farmers — would be given first option on such leases. That's how Boyd says he lost his 46-acre tobacco farm in 1996. It ended up in the hands of a white farmer who was a member of the committee.

These kinds of practices prompted U.S. District Judge Paul Friedman to approve the landmark settlement of the Pigford v. Glickman lawsuit filed by Black farmers in 1999.

The settlement provided about \$1 billion to 15,000 farmers who said USDA unfairly turned them down for loans because of their race between 1981 and 1996. A second round of \$1.25 billion stemming from that lawsuit was approved by the court in 2011 for people who were denied earlier payments because they missed filing deadlines.

"It is up to the Secretary of Agriculture and other responsible officials at the USDA to fulfill its promises, to ensure that this shameful period is never repeated and to bring the USDA into the twenty-first century," the judge wrote.

Though USDA paid more than \$2.4 billion under the Pigford settlements, state taxes eroded recoveries, debt relief was incomplete and reports before Congress show the settlements did not cure the problems faced by minority farmers.

Government lawyers noted in a court filing that between 2006 and 2016, Black farmers were subject to 13% of USDA foreclosures — despite receiving fewer than 3% of direct loans.

Tucked amid the vast plains of Kansas are the remnants of what was once the bustling Black settlement of Nicodemus. It is the most famous of the Midwestern settlements where former slaves known as "exodusters" migrated more than a century ago, hopeful that farming their own land here would help them escape the racism and poverty of the South.

Little remains today of that farming heritage as even the few Black families who were able to hold on to their land now mostly lease their ground out to white farmers. Nicodemus farmers who once tilled hundreds of acres of farmland no longer actively farm, and much of their ground has been lost over the generations.

Just a couple of miles outside the town sit the 200 acres that the grandparents of Theodore Bernard Bates once homesteaded. The Black farmer and his father bought the family homestead in 1970, taking

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a loan from what was then the Production Credit Association of Stockton, Kansas.

USDA's farm loan lending agency refused to even give them an application to fill out, said Bates, one of the original named plaintiffs in the Pigford lawsuit. He received, as he puts it, "not a penny" from that settlement.

"I learned later the reason (USDA) didn't want to give me an application was because they didn't want it hanging in their office that they discriminated against a Black person," Bates says. "They'd be in trouble, see, so they didn't want that in the office. They didn't want that record."

The 1980s were especially tough on the Bates farm. They suffered through a drought one year, a late freeze in another and then a hailstorm that wiped out their wheat crop. Their lender foreclosed.

Three years before his death, the former president of the Production Credit Association swore in a 2012 affidavit that there was a plan to get Bates "out of farming." Elvin D. Keiswetter said in that affidavit that the lender's board decided it would "rather foreclose, even if they lost money" than take Bates' money, regardless if it was paid on the notes.

Keiswetter said that shortly after their lawyer filed the foreclosure petition, Bates came to his office with his parents and his children. Bates owed about \$180,000; he asked whether, if he paid \$100,000, the lender would give him until after harvest, or six months, to pay the balance.

They took his farm machinery first, and then they took the land. Then the sheriff came and cut the lock on his grain storage bins. Bates and his wife watched for hours that night as trucks hauled out thousands of bushels of wheat they had worked hard to harvest.

After they took everything, Bates says the family was forced to go on food stamps to survive. He worked a few odd jobs over the years, including a stint as a corrections officer. Every time they go to Nicodemus now, they drive alongside the edge of their old homestead to look at the land.

"It is just something you can't explain," he says. "It hurts so deep."

Years later, the now 84-year-old Kansas man is still haunted by the memory of Nov. 7, 1986 — the day they went to the federal court hearing in Wichita where the foreclosure was finalized. They got home late that Friday evening and his father, Alvin, asked him, "What you guys get done today?"

"We got foreclosed on," Bates told him.

His father didn't say a word, he recalls.

"I guess he just couldn't stand it to see his family homestead go, you know, and he died that Sunday," Bates says.

The USDA was not responsible for all the misfortunes of Black farmers. Other structural impediments also have taken their toll.

One involves family land that is passed on to several surviving kin without a will, known as "heirs' property." USDA studies show the practice is prevalent among Black people in the South, Appalachian white families, Hispanics in southwestern colonia communities and Native American tribes.

The result: a lack of access to money, because lenders are usually reluctant to extend credit without a clear title to the land. Congress authorized in the 2018 farm bill language that would ease loans to those farmers. But it was not until this year that USDA actually funded a \$67 million heirs relending program to resolve land ownership and succession issues.

Many Black farms have been lost over the decades in what are called partition sales. In the South, particularly, many Black landowners distrusted the local courts, or were barred from them, and failed to leave wills or even record their deeds. Over several generations, a single tract can end up being held in common by dozens or even hundreds of heirs.

In places like coastal Georgia and South Carolina, popular vacation destinations, speculators would track down distant members of these families and buy their interest in the old family farm, which the heir may never have even seen. That outsider can then petition the court to sell the entire tract and divide the money, leaving the entire tract of land to be sold at auction, often at a fraction of its real value.

Paul Bradshaw signed in 2008 a lease that upon his death gave his son, Rod, a 10-year option to farm

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and eventually buy the entire 2,950 acres that the Black farmer had accumulated near Jetmore, Kansas — a move meant to keep the family farm intact for the next generation.

By then, the father and son had already been farming together for decades. Paul Bradshaw, who died two years after signing that lease agreement, had also separately drawn up a will that evenly split the money received for the farm among his eight children, his son says.

Over the years, Rod Bradshaw had made several discrimination complaints against USDA. When his claim seeking debt relief under the Pigford lawsuit was denied, he says he was unable to buy out his sisters' shares.

A bitter family fight ensued after his father's death, and a local judge threw out the lease agreement and split the family farm among the son and his seven sisters. Rod Bradshaw says he ended up with about 350 acres of it that he still farms, while his sisters sold or leased their acres to white farmers.

"If Dad knew what happened, he would be livid," he says.

Bradshaw ended up filing for bankruptcy — something he said he never would have had to do, had it not been for USDA's refusal to give him debt relief under the Pigford settlement and its confiscation of his farm program payments. He filed a federal discrimination lawsuit against USDA in 2004, leading to a bench trial in 2018. He is still waiting for the judge's decision.

Bradshaw — who has more than \$300,000 in direct USDA loans that would qualify for the debt relief — has been unable to obtain any money through pandemic relief benefits open to all farmers.

"I think I am probably going to suffer some setbacks, but I think I can hang on ... depending on what happens," Bradshaw says.

USDA spokeswoman Kate Waters says the agency is committed to rooting out systemic racism and reducing barriers to accessing services. She says the department plans to launch an Equity Commission later this year to identify problems and fix them.

Congress, meanwhile, approved a \$4 billion debt relief program for 16,000 farmers of color in March as part of the \$1.9 trillion COVID-19 stimulus package.

The funding was intended to remedy past discrimination in USDA loan programs, and to provide \$1 billion for outreach and technical assistance for what it calls socially disadvantaged farmers and ranchers — a group that includes not only Black farmers, but also Hispanic, Native American and Asian producers.

White farmers have filed lawsuits in Florida, Wisconsin, Tennessee, Texas, Wyoming, Illinois, and Minnesota. In June, U.S. District Judge Marcia Morales Howard issued a nationwide, preliminary injunction halting the program.

The Texas case is led by Texas Agriculture Commissioner Sid Miller and brought by America First Legal, a nonprofit started this year by Stephen Miller and other senior members of former President Donald Trump's administration.

Sid Miller, who is suing in his personal capacity as a farmer and not on behalf of the state, contends the debt relief is unconstitutional because it excludes white farmers based on their race or ethnicity. He argues USDA no longer discriminates against farmers of color and called the loan forgiveness a "backhanded way" of offering reparations.

"It is just flat wrong," Miller said. "Us Republicans and old white guys, we get accused of being racist all the time, but this is racist by the administration. It couldn't be a plainer case of racist."

But it is clear that minority farmers still suffer disproportionately. As of May 31, 11% of white farmers were delinquent on a government farm loan, compared with 37.9% of Black borrowers, 14.6% of Asian borrowers, 17.4% of American Indian borrowers and 68% of Hispanic borrowers, according to court documents.

For Abraham Carpenter, a 59-year-old Black farmer whose family grows fruits and vegetables near Grady, Arkansas, the injunction means he has to wait and hope for help with about \$200,000 in loans, even as rain has wiped out hundreds of acres of watermelons, turnips, collards and other crops.

"I've seen some really, really tough times, you know, but I've always been able to survive because of God's blessing and his mercy and his grace. And they are still upon us," Carpenter says. "So I am not going

to say I am going to go belly up. I am going to work a little harder and I am going to pray a little harder.”

Vaccinations in rural India increase amid supply concerns

By ANIRUDDHA GHOSAL and RISHABH R. JAIN Associated Press

NEW DELHI (AP) — India has dramatically increased COVID-19 vaccination rates in its vast rural hinterland, where around 65% of the country’s nearly 1.4 billion people live. But supply constraints remain for the world’s largest maker of vaccines and experts say it’s unlikely India will reach its target of vaccinating all adults by the end of the year.

India opened shots for all adults in May. But the campaign faltered in villages due to vaccine hesitancy and misinformation. That started changing in mid-July and of the nearly 120 million shots administered in the past three weeks, around 70% were in India’s villages — up from around half in the initial weeks of May.

Although the increased vaccine acceptance in rural areas is promising, the pandemic is far from done in India: After weeks of steady decline, the 46,000 new infections reported Saturday was its highest in almost two months.

Only about 11% of India’s vast population is fully vaccinated. Half of all adults and about 35% of the total population have received at least one shot. This has left large swathes of people still susceptible to the virus.

Several nations, including the U.S. and Israel, are offering or plan to offer booster shots to people, deepening global vaccine inequity. India was expected to be a pivotal producer of shots to immunize the world but stopped exports after an explosion of infections. And while India had expected to get 1.35 billion shots in the final five months of 2021 to resolve its supply constraints, the question of whether Indian vaccine makers can scale up production to meet India’s needs will have global implications.

“Currently in India, there is more demand than available supply...the supply of vaccines currently in use is lower than the projections made a few months ago. So both of these situations are putting constraints on availability of vaccines in the country,” said Dr. Chandrakant Lahariya, a vaccine policy expert.

India is no stranger to mass immunizations, but this is the first time that shots are being given at this scale, and to adults. Officials have blended strategies that were successful in the past with newer, more localized innovations.

Kamalawati, 65, a retired government accountant who goes by only her first name, lined up for a shot at Nizampur, a village outside New Delhi. She said people initially were concerned there would be harmful side effects but “people are not scared anymore.”

What has worked for her village and others is a contest in which the local government awards a trophy to the village with the most vaccinated people and a plaque declaring the village the winner. Stickers are also pasted on homes where people are fully vaccinated to encourage neighbors to do the same. District administrator Saumya Sharma said the campaign banks on the sense of community and pride residents have in their village. “That this is our village. And we are going to make it No. 1,” she said.

In Juggar, home to several thousand of the over 155 million people who live in rural parts of India’s Uttar Pradesh state, villagers refused the vaccine when health officials first arrived there, paramedic Ravi Sharma said. Only after family members of health workers got their shots in public view did others begin to get the vaccine.

Millions of people from eastern Bihar state, one of India’s least urbanized, migrate to the Middle East for work. With international travel impossible without certificates showing full vaccination, more people are signing up for jobs, said Dr. R.K. Chaudhary, who is in charge of a rural health center in Phulwari Sharif village.

These strategies rest on methods that have worked in past vaccination campaigns. Performers with drums and clad in traditional attire are fanning out to Indian villages to underline the importance of getting the shot. Several states have organized mobile vaccination centers, where shots are given at highly visible places in village squares. The government has also used WhatsApp, which is ubiquitous in India, to help people book appointments for vaccines.

Public health experts say the uptick in rural vaccinations is important because health care systems in villages are fragile. The deadly surge of infections that overwhelmed hospitals earlier this year ripped through rural India and thousands died. Moreover, migrants from villages move to cities for work and until everyone is vaccinated, outbreaks and even the possibility of a dangerous new variant can't be discounted, said Lahariya.

India has the infrastructure to vaccinate up to 10 million people daily, but is averaging between 5 million and 6 million, he said.

So far, nearly 90% of the vaccines administered were the AstraZeneca shots made by the Serum Institute of India. The government hopes to solve the supply constraints that have hamstrung the vaccination effort with new production lines as well as the approval of a new homemade vaccine and another in the pipeline.

India hopes that Bharat Biotech will make around a third of the 1.3 billion shots it needs. The company has struggled so far in scaling up and while a new facility, capable of making 10 million shots monthly, began production last week, the company is looking for international manufacturing partners.

The Russian-made Sputnik V vaccine was given the nod by Indian regulators in April but accounts for less than 1% of total vaccinations. The company has arranged with several Indian vaccine makers to start making shots locally, hopefully by later this month.

India expects 100 million Sputnik V shots and 50 million shots of Indian drugmaker Zydus Cadila's recently greenlit COVID-19 vaccine later this year.

Apart from this, the regulator approved Moderna's COVID-19 vaccine in June and the single-dose Johnson & Johnson shot in August. But it is unclear when they will be administered.

Meanwhile, Moderna and Pfizer have been discussing the signing of indemnity waivers for their vaccines for weeks with India's federal government. Unlike some other countries and the U.N.-backed COVAX initiative, India doesn't have a mechanism in place for people who suffer rare side effects to seek compensation, said Lahariya. He said these discussions were an opportunity to reexamine accountability and create a system where people are protected.

Lahariya warned that even though he expected supply to improve, it was unlikely that India would have enough shots to immunize all adults by the end of the year. "No matter what," he said.

Black women seeing guns as protection from rising crime

By COREY WILLIAMS Associated Press

TAYLOR, Mich. (AP) — Valerie Rupert raised her right arm, slightly shaking and unsure as she aimed at the paper target representing a burglar, a robber or even a rapist.

The 67-year-old Detroit grandmother squeezed the trigger, the echo of her shot blending into the chorus of other blasts by other women off the small gun range walls.

"I was a little nervous, but after I shot a couple of times, I enjoyed it," said Rupert, among 1,000 or so mostly Black women taking part in free weekend gun safety and shooting lessons at two Detroit-area ranges.

Black women like Rupert increasingly are considering gun ownership for personal protection, according to industry experts and gun rights advocates.

Fear of crime, especially as shootings and murders have risen in cities big and small, is one driver of the trend. But a new motivator is the display of public anger in the last 15 months beginning with confrontations in the wake of George Floyd's death in Minneapolis under the knee of police officer Derek Chauvin.

Worries about the anger over COVID-19-related restrictions and the outrage over the outcome of the presidential 2020 election, driven by lies, are contributors, too. In Michigan, that anger led to a plot to kidnap the governor, as well as instances where armed protesters descended on the state Capitol.

In April 2020, hundreds of conservative activists, including some who were openly carrying assault rifles, flocked to the Michigan Capitol in Lansing to denounce Democratic Gov. Gretchen Whitmer's stay-home order. Some demonstrators — mostly white and supporters of President Donald Trump — entered the building carrying guns, which is legal in the statehouse.

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The sight of white men wearing body armor and holding guns at the Capitol still sticks with Rupert. "They went up to the Capitol with all those guns. You need to be ready," she said.

About 8.5 million people in the U.S. bought their first gun in 2020, the National Shooting Sports Foundation says. The trade association for the firearms industry adds that gun purchases by Black men and Black women increased by more than 58% over the first six months of last year.

Gun ownership tends to increase when people lose faith in government and the police, said Daniel Webster, professor of American Health in Violence Prevention at the Bloomberg School of Public Health and director of the Johns Hopkins Center for Gun Violence Prevention and Policy.

"We've seen such an increase in white nationalist violence," Webster said. "Some combination of the lack in faith in police protecting you and hate groups has motivated a lot of Black people to arm up."

Black firearm owners still represent a relatively small portion of the gun-owning population, with 9.3% of gun owners being Black men and 5.4% Black women. Nearly 56% of U.S. gun owners are white men. Over 16% are white women, the Newtown, Connecticut-based National Shooting Sports Foundation says.

Still, 2020 saw "a tectonic shift in gun ownership in America" where there was "a huge increase of African Americans taking ownership of their Second Amendment rights," said Mark Oliva, its director of public affairs.

Beth Alcazar, who is white, got involved with shooting about two decades ago and says it was rare to see a Black woman taking target practice.

"Honestly, not more than one image pops up of seeing a Black woman at the range," said Alcazar, now a certified shooting instructor in the Birmingham, Alabama, area and U.S. Concealed Carry Association associate editor.

"With more involvement in the last five years, I see Black women on almost every occasion I go to the range," she said, adding that it's exciting for women learning how to shoot to see other women, especially women of color.

For many Black women, it's about taking care of themselves, said Lavette Adams, a licensed firearm instructor who participated in the free Detroit-area training sponsored by gun advocacy group Legally Armed In Detroit.

"Crime against women is nothing new. Women protecting themselves, that's new," said Adams, who is Black.

That's the premise behind the training that launched 10 years ago with 50 women attending. Last year, more than 1,900 participated, according to Rick Ector, Legally Armed in Detroit's founder, who says he started it "to bring awareness and training to women who are the favorite preferred targets of bad guys, rapists and killers."

Ameena Jumail, who joined dozens of other women outside Recoil Firearms in Taylor for the training, said she is working to overcome her fear of guns. Jumail, a 30-year-old kindergarten teacher from Detroit, said crime is one reason she came, but she admits that the desire to learn how to use a firearm includes concern over the rise in white nationalism and their open display of firearms in public places.

"During the 2016 election I was worried, also during the 2020 election," Jumail said.

Hopkins' Webster said whatever the reason, it is an open question whether the women who are buying the firearms now are safer.

"Having a loaded firearm with you is going to change your response in a number of situations," he said. "It's going to alter your behavior and perspective."

Fallen tech star Elizabeth Holmes prepares to go on trial

By MICHAEL LIEDTKE AP Technology Writer

Jury selection in the fraud trial of Theranos founder Elizabeth Holmes began Tuesday, casting a spotlight on the fallen Silicon Valley star now facing felony charges alleging she duped elite financial backers, customers and patients into believing that her startup was about to revolutionize medicine.

But the Theranos technology, which promised to run hundreds of medical tests using a single drop of

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blood, never lived up to expectations, and may never have worked at all.

Once a jury is seated, the trial will begin in San Jose, California, with opening arguments scheduled early next week. The trial will revolve around the rise and fall of Theranos, a startup that Holmes launched after dropping out of Stanford University in 2003.

At one point, it looked like Holmes might realize her lofty ambitions of becoming the next Steve Jobs, the Apple co-founder she embraced as a role model. Not that long ago, business magazines hailed the similarities, featuring Holmes in cover stories about her vision and her estimated fortune \$4.5 billion based on her stake in Theranos.

But Theranos — a name derived from the words “therapy” and “diagnosis” — quickly lost steam after revelations that its supposedly breakthrough blood-testing machine, called “Edison,” didn’t work as Holmes had described and produced dangerously inaccurate results in tests run for actual patients.

Holmes now faces the prospect of being remembered more like Bernie Madoff, the once-revered New York financier whose name became synonymous with fraud after he pled guilty to bilking billions of dollars through an illegal Ponzi scheme. If convicted, Holmes, now 37, could be sentenced to as much as 20 years in prison.

Holmes, who was in court Tuesday, has maintained her innocence since the U.S. government charged her in 2018. Her trial was delayed by the pandemic and then a pregnancy that culminated in the recent birth of a son. Some legal observers believe that could make her a more sympathetic figure before the jury.

Jury selection is expected to take several days. Holmes’ saga has received wide attention thanks to a book by a Wall Street Journal investigative reporter whose newspaper stories led to her company’s downfall and an HBO documentary called “The Inventor.” She is also about to become the subject of a TV miniseries called “The Dropout,” starring Amanda Seyfried as Holmes.

More than 200 people were summoned for the jury pool in an effort to seat an impartial panel.

Over the course of the next three months, the trial is expected to provide moments of high drama, featuring a cast of billionaire Theranos investors and influential figures that sat on the company’s board.

Investors who contributed much of the roughly \$900 million that Theranos raised include media magnate Rupert Murdoch, Walmart’s Walton family, the family of former U.S. Education Secretary Becky DeVos and Mexican business mogul Carlos Slim. Theranos’ well-connected board included former U.S. Secretary of State Henry Kissinger, former U.S. Defense Secretary Gen. James Mattis, former U.S. Secretary of State and former U.S. Treasury Secretary George Shultz (now deceased) and former Wells Fargo Bank CEO Richard Kovacevich.

Holmes also may take the witness stand to defend herself, based on court documents filed leading up to the trial. If she does, her lawyers have indicated in recently unsealed filings that she will testify that some of her statements and actions while running Theranos were the result of “intimate partner abuse” inflicted by the company’s chief operating officer and her secret lover, Ramesh “Sunny” Balwani, who is facing multiple fraud charges in a separate trial.

Balwani’s attorney has denied Holmes’ allegations.

High winds threaten to whip up flames approaching Lake Tahoe

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

SOUTH LAKE TAHOE, Calif. (AP) — A day after an explosive wildfire emptied a resort city at the southern tip of Lake Tahoe, a huge firefighting force braced for strong winds Tuesday as some residents in neighboring Nevada were ordered to evacuate.

The city of South Lake Tahoe, usually bustling with summer tourists, was eerily empty and the air thick and hazy with smoke from the Caldor Fire, one of two major fires burning in the same area. On Monday, roughly 22,000 residents jammed the city’s main artery for hours after they were ordered to leave as the fire advanced, chewing up drought-stricken vegetation.

The National Weather Service warned that weather conditions through Wednesday would include low humidity, dry fuel and wind gusts up to 30 mph (48 kph).

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"That's definitely not going to help the firefighting efforts," said Courtney Coats, a spokeswoman for the U.S. Forest Service.

The fire was 3 miles (5 kilometers) outside of South Lake Tahoe, California Department of Forestry and Fire Protection Battalion Chief Henry Herrera told KGO-TV.

South Lake Tahoe city officials said only a handful of residents defied Monday's evacuation order. But nearly everyone worried Tuesday about what the fire would do next.

"It just kind of sucks waiting. I mean, I know it's close down that way," said Russ Crupi, gesturing south from his home in the Heavenly Valley Estates mobile home park, which he and his wife manage for a living. He had arranged sprinklers and tractors around the neighborhood.

"I'm worried about what'll be here when people come back. People want to come back to their houses and that's what I'm going to try to do," he said.

Pushed by strong winds, the Caldor Fire crossed two major highways and burned mountain cabins as it swept down slopes into the Tahoe Basin. Thick smoke prevented air firefighting operations periodically last week. But since then, nearly two dozen helicopters and three air tankers dumped thousands of gallons of water and retardant on the fire, fire spokesman Dominic Polito said Tuesday.

The Lake Tahoe area is usually a year-round recreational paradise offering beaches, water sports, hiking, ski resorts and golfing. South Lake Tahoe bustles with outdoor activities while just across the state border in Stateline, Nevada tourists can gamble at major casinos.

But on Tuesday, only a few dozen tourists remained on the casino floor of the Montbleu Resort, Casino and Spa. The state board that controls gaming said that casino regulators were monitoring operations at the four largest gambling properties in the city.

Hotels are housing evacuees, fire crews and other emergency personnel. In all, Harrah's, Harveys Lake Tahoe Casino, the Hard Rock and Montbleu Resort have more than 2,200 hotel rooms.

Nevada Gov. Steve Sisolak urged residents to be prepared, saying there was no timeline for when evacuations might be ordered. At a news conference in Carson City, he noted that ash was falling on him even though the fire was about 20 miles (32 kilometers) away.

"I'm standing here and I'm getting all ash particulates on my jacket, even," the governor said. "This is serious, folks."

Hours later, residents in parts of Douglas County under an evacuation warning were ordered to leave, although casinos were excluded.

At the Douglas County Community & Senior Center in Gardnerville, people had their temperature checked before entering a gymnasium of cots set up by the Red Cross. Outside, evacuees who had stayed in tents sorted through ramen noodles and plastic bags of clothes and keepsakes.

South Lake Tahoe resident Lorie Major was at the grocery store when she got the alert on her phone. "I had to tell myself: 'OK, Lorie: Get it together. It's time to go,'" she said.

She put on headphones, turned on the Grateful Dead's "Fire on the Mountain" and walked home to an empty apartment complex already vacated by neighbors. She and her mini Australian shepherd, Koda, took a 20-mile (32-kilometer) taxi ride from her South Lake Tahoe apartment to a hotel in Minden, Nevada.

A firefighter injured while battling the Caldor Fire last weekend was expected to be hospitalized for a month after undergoing skin grafting surgery. Richard Gerety III of Patterson, California suffered third-degree burns over 20% of his body, the Modesto Bee reported. Despite the very active fire year, there have not been many injuries or deaths among firefighters or residents.

More than 15,000 firefighters were battling dozens of California blazes, with help from out of state crews. 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.

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.

Crews are battling the Dixie, the second-largest wildfire in state history at 1,260 square miles (3,267 square kilometers). The weeks-old fire was burning about 65 miles (105 kilometers) north of the Lake

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Tahoe-area blaze and prompting new evacuation orders and warnings this week.

The Caldor Fire has scorched nearly 312 square miles (808 square kilometers) since breaking out Aug. 14. It was 18% contained.

More than 600 structures have been destroyed, and at least 33,000 more were threatened.

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.

At the evacuation center in Gardnerville, Joe Gillespie said he, his girlfriend and her son left their home in Meyers south of South Lake Tahoe on Sunday, bringing clothes, picture frames and collectibles like Hot Wheels toys from the 1960s that Gillespie's mother gave him.

Gillespie, a mechanic at Sierra-at-Tahoe Resort, said that unlike the northern shore of Lake Tahoe, which is dotted with mansions and second homes, the area currently under threat houses blue-collar workers who make their living at the casinos and ski resorts that make the area so popular.

The Sierra-at-Tahoe Resort is beloved for its unpretentious and comparatively affordable winter prices. It turns 75 this year, he said.

"It sounds like we won't be opening because of the fire," he said.

Ida's sweltering aftermath: No power, no water, no gasoline

By KEVIN MCGILL, CHEVEL JOHNSON and MELINDA DESLATTE Associated Press

NEW ORLEANS (AP) — Hundreds of thousands of Louisianans sweltered in the aftermath of Hurricane Ida on Tuesday with no electricity, no tap water, precious little gasoline and no clear idea of when things might improve.

Long lines that wrapped around the block formed at the few gas stations that had fuel and generator power to pump it. People cleared rotting food out of refrigerators. Neighbors shared generators and borrowed buckets of swimming pool water to bathe or to flush toilets.

"We have a lot of work ahead of us and no one is under the illusion that this is going to be a short process," Gov. John Bel Edwards said as the cleanup and rebuilding began across the soggy region in the oppressive late-summer heat.

New Orleans officials announced seven places around the city where people could get a meal and sit in air conditioning. The city was also using 70 transit buses as cooling sites and will have drive-thru food, water and ice distribution locations set up on Wednesday, Mayor LaToya Cantrell said. Edwards said state officials also were working to set up distribution locations in other areas.

Cantrell ordered a nighttime curfew Tuesday, calling it an effort to prevent crime after Hurricane Ida devastated the power system and left the city in darkness. Police Chief Shaun Ferguson said there had been some arrests for stealing.

The mayor also said she expects the main power company Entergy to be able to provide some electricity to the city by Wednesday evening, but stressed that doesn't mean a quick citywide restoration. Entergy was looking at two options to "begin powering critical infrastructure in the area such as hospitals, nursing homes and first responders," the company said in a news release.

Cantrell acknowledged frustration in the days ahead.

"We know it's hot. We know we do not have any power, and that continues to be a priority," she told a news conference.

More than 1 million homes and businesses in Louisiana and Mississippi — including all of New Orleans — were left without power when Ida slammed the electric grid on Sunday with its 150 mph (240 kph) winds, toppling a major transmission tower and knocking out thousands of miles of lines and hundreds of substations.

An estimated 25,000-plus utility workers labored to restore electricity, but officials said it could take weeks.

With water treatment plants overwhelmed by floodwaters or crippled by power outages, some places were also facing shortages of drinking water. About 441,000 people in 17 parishes had no water, and an

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additional 319,000 were under boil-water advisories, federal officials said.

The number of deaths climbed to at least four in Louisiana and Mississippi, including two people killed Monday night when seven vehicles plunged into a 20-foot-deep (6-meter-deep) hole near Lucedale, Mississippi, where a highway had collapsed after torrential rains.

Among the crash victims was Kent Brown, a "well-liked," 49-year-old father of two, his brother Keith Brown said in a telephone interview on Tuesday. Keith Brown said his brother was in construction but had been out of work for a while. He didn't know where his brother was headed when the crash happened.

Edwards said he expects the death toll to rise.

In Slidell, crews searched for a 71-year-old man who was attacked by an alligator that tore off his arm as he walked through Ida's floodwaters. His wife pulled him to the steps of the home and paddled away to get help, but when she returned, he was gone, authorities said.

On Grand Isle, the barrier island that bore the full force of Ida's winds, Police Chief Scooter Resweber said he was "amazed that no one was killed or even seriously injured."

About half of the properties on the island of about 1,400 people were heavily damaged or destroyed, and the main roadway was nearly completely covered in sand brought in from the tidal surge.

"I've ridden out other hurricanes: Hurricane Isaac, Katrina, Gustav, Ike. ... This is the worst," Resweber said.

In New Orleans, drivers lined up for roughly a quarter-mile, waiting to get into a Costco that was one of the few spots in the city with gasoline. At other gas stations, motorists occasionally pulled up to the pumps, saw the handles covered in plastic bags and drove off.

Renell Debose spent a week suffering in the New Orleans Superdome after 2005's Hurricane Katrina, which killed 1,800 people and left the city nearly uninhabitable. She said she is willing to give it a few days without electricity, but no more than that.

"I love my city. I'm built for this. But I can't make it without any air conditioning," she said.

Michael Pinkrah used his dwindling fuel to find food. He cradled his 3-week-old son in the back seat of an SUV and his 2-year-old daughter played in the front seat as his wife stood in a long line in the sweltering heat to get into one of the few grocery stores open in the city.

Pinkrah said he and his wife thought about evacuating but couldn't find a hotel room. They found out about the open store through social media. But even that link was tenuous.

"We can't charge our electronic devices to keep in contact with people. And without that, all of the communication just fails," he said.

In hard-hit Houma, the dismal reality of life without air conditioning, refrigeration or other more basic supplies began to sink in.

"Our desperate need right now is tarps, gasoline for generators, food, water," pastor Chad Ducote said. He said a church group from Mississippi arrived with food and supplies, and neighbors came to his pool to scoop up buckets of water.

"The people down here are just doing what they can. They don't have anything," he said.

Adding to the misery was the steamy weather. A heat advisory was issued for New Orleans and the rest of the region, with forecasters saying the combination of high temperatures and humidity could make it feel like 105 degrees Fahrenheit (41 degrees Celsius) on Tuesday and 106 on Wednesday.

Cynthia Andrews couldn't go back to her New Orleans home if she wanted to. She was in a wheelchair, tethered by a power cord to the generator system running the elevators and hallway lights at the Le Meridien hotel.

When the power went out Sunday, the machine that helps Andrews breathe after a lung collapse in 2018 stopped working. The hotel let her stay in the lobby, giving her a cot after she spent nearly a whole night in her wheelchair.

"It was so scary, but as long as this thing keeps running, I'll be OK," she said.

Afghanistan's arc from 9/11 to today: Once hopeful, now sad

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By KATHY GANNON Associated Press

KABUL, Afghanistan (AP) — It was Nov. 13, 2001. The sun had just begun to rise over the Hindu Kush Mountains when the Taliban disappeared from Kabul, the battered capital of Afghanistan.

The bodies of foreign Arabs who had stayed behind were mutilated and bloodied. They had been found and killed by advancing Afghans of another faction who were brought to the city by a blistering U.S.-led campaign that drove the Taliban from power.

America was still reeling from the horrific terrorist attacks of two months earlier, when planes flown by al-Qaida terrorists crashed into three iconic buildings and a Pennsylvania field, killing nearly 3,000 people.

The perpetrators and their leader, Osama bin Laden, were somewhere in Afghanistan, sheltered by the Taliban.

The mission: Find him. Bring him to justice.

Right then, Afghanistan — two decades of disorder behind it, two decades more just ahead — was suspended in an in-between moment. The recent pages of its book were already filled with so much heartbreak, but for the first time in a while, some blank pages full of potential sat just ahead. Nothing was certain, but much seemed possible.

Against that backdrop, Afghans understood the mission against bin Laden to mean a chance to secure their future — a future as murky on that day as it is today. In those post-2001 months and years, they believed in the power of “the foreigners.”

From hundreds of years ago right up to the jumbled chaos of recent days as the United States pulled out of its air base and then the capital, the word “foreigner” has meant many things in the Afghan context, from invaders to would-be colonizers.

But in November 2001, in a mostly ruined Afghan capital where rutted roads were filled with bicycles and beat-up yellow taxis, it meant hope.

Torek Farhadi joined scores of educated and trained Afghan expatriates who returned to their homeland in 2002 after the Taliban were gone. He wanted to be part of the new Afghanistan that the U.S.-led invasion promised.

“I found the people relieved fresh and full on energy to start anew,” the economist said from his home in Geneva, as he watched the Taliban’s return to power last month. He remembered, too, the “smart young women” he encountered who had lost huge chunks of their educations to Taliban repression between 1996 and 2001.

The arrival of the U.S.-led coalition weeks after the Sept. 11 attacks ended a repressive, religiously radical regime that had more in common with the sixth century than the 21st.

Mullah Mohammad Omar, the reclusive one-eyed leader of the Taliban, had brought the village to the city. The strict edicts he taught at his one-room mud madrassa, or religious school, became law. Girls were denied education. Women were confined to their homes or, when in public, inside the all-encompassing burqa. Men were told to wear beards. Television was banned, as was all music but religious chants.

When the Taliban fled and the new, post 9/11 leader, Hamid Karzai, entered the sprawling presidential palace, he discovered the Taliban had left their mark. The grand piano had been gutted; only the elegant shell remained. The insides had been removed — seemingly out of fear that a piano key might be accidentally pressed and music made.

Wall-to-wall hand-painted miniature murals had been defaced; Taliban who believed images of living things were a crime against Islam went to every tiny bird and blotted out its face with a black marker.

In those first years, George W. Bush’s defense secretary, Donald Rumsfeld, vowed there would be no nation-building. The running of the country was handed to Washington’s Afghan allies, many of whom had destroyed Kabul with their bitter feuding when they last ruled. Under their corruption, the country devolved into a collection of fiefdoms that enriched local warlords and led to the Taliban’s rise.

Ethnic Pashtuns, the majority group that had made up the backbone of the country, were suddenly disenfranchised. In 2002, the deputy police chief of Zabul, a southern province that was once a Taliban stronghold, sent 2,000 young Pashtun men to Kabul to join the Afghan national army. They were teased

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and mocked; the deputy chief said all but four ended up joining the Taliban.

Giant posters of slain anti-Taliban fighter Ahmad Shah Massoud — an ethnic Tajik warlord who was assassinated on Sept. 9, 2001 — were plastered on official vehicles and inside the Defense Ministry. The first defense minister, Mohammad Fahim, a Massoud lieutenant, deepened the divisions by institutionalizing ethnic discrimination.

The Afghan military that would collapse in the wake of Taliban advances in 2021 began existence with its recruits often more loyal to a warlord than the army itself. Training was barely eight weeks for new, generally uneducated men. Building the Afghan army was often likened to repairing an aircraft midflight.

So across Afghanistan, quickly and understandably, it started: The defeated Taliban began to re-emerge. And it kept getting worse.

By 2012, just two years before the U.S. and NATO handed over the operational end of the war to Afghanistan's government, the Afghan army was barely competent and filled with fighters angry at what they considered poor treatment by their foreign trainers. Soldiers wore boots with holes because a shoddy contractor, paid millions by corrupt officials, had delivered substandard equipment. At an army outpost in the deadly east, helmets were so scarce that five soldiers took turns wearing one.

And U.S. trainers? They were no longer attending training sessions where live ammunition was being used. They feared the weapons might be turned on them.

The return last month of the Taliban, with their long beards and flowing traditional turbans, has created widespread fear among young people in Afghanistan's cities — places where urban girls wearing headscarves have felt free to mingle in coffee shops and on the street. Young men wearing Western dress who dream of even greater freedoms have been part of the airport chaos that greeted the start of evacuation flights.

A country of 36 million, Afghanistan is filled with conservative people, many of whom live in the countryside. But even they do not adhere to the strict interpretation of Islam that the Taliban imposed when last they ruled.

The Taliban leaders, many of whom are linked to the previous regime, including the movement's co-founder Mullah Abdul Ghani Baradar, promise a different Taliban this time. Once camera shy and reclusive, many have made regular appearances on the diplomatic stage. They say women can work, attend school and participate in public life.

Who believes them is another matter entirely. The new generation is filled with nervous young people who grew up on stories that were the stuff of nightmares.

Some older Afghans, who worry that an already depressed economy will only get worse, note that the Taliban's last rule was marked by strong security. Under those Taliban, justice was swift and harsh. Convicted thieves had their hands cut off. Murderers were publicly executed. The punishments and the trials were carried out publicly in a stadium filled with thousands — barbaric scenes that still generate fear.

The Taliban's rule was not marked by attacks on women, but rather relentless repression that denied them a public space. And despite orders that they should be accompanied by men, women often traveled by themselves. But the traditional all-covering burqa, an ancient dress that left only a gauzy patch through which to see, came to symbolize Taliban repression.

Even as the world watched in shock at the quick demise of the Afghan army and government over the past weeks, the signs of Afghanistan's post-9/11 decay had long been evident.

Twenty years and billions of dollars in investment after 9/11, Afghanistan was considered one of the worst places in the world to be a woman in 2020 and in 2019, according to the Georgetown Institute for Women Peace and Security. In 2018, in a Gallup poll offered a scale of one to 10 to determine how respondents judged their chances for a better future five years down the road, Afghans averaged 2.3. Gallup called it a "new low for any country in any year."

And two-thirds of those respondents were 35 years old or younger — the very young Afghans who, this month, are anxiously wondering what might be coming next.

When Afghans still believed that searching for peace could make a difference, there was something

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called the High Peace Council. A few years ago, one of its members wondered how U.S. and NATO forces — which at their peak numbered 150,000 and fought alongside hundreds of thousands of Afghan troops — couldn't vanquish tens of thousands of Taliban.

"Either they did not want to, or they could not do it," Mohammed Ismail Qasimyar said. "They have made a hell, not a paradise, for us."

In the first years after 9/11, U.S. money arrived in Kabul in suitcases. There were no working banks at the time — and no oversight of the billions pouring into the country. Most of it passed through the hands of U.S.-allied warlords whose corruption had led to the Taliban's rise in the 1990s.

American generals were often used by their Afghan allies to exact revenge. Mohabullah, an Afghan who had left the Taliban to return home to the central province of Ghazni, once laughed as he recounted how easily fooled the Americans were by their Afghan partners. He recalled how a gas station owner was turned in to U.S. forces as a Taliban — to settle a feud.

American forces often unwittingly found themselves enmeshed in such local rivalries during those early months and years when they were utterly dependent on their warlord allies. In 2002, one U.S. general had to rely entirely on former warlords for information about prominent al-Qaida figures who were on the move.

For those who have watched Afghanistan for years, the scenes of throngs of mostly young men hanging from departing aircraft at Kabul's airport last month seemed an indictment of the two decades of efforts and the billions of dollars spent. For many of those men, the desperation to depart was less about fear for their life — and more about finding a new one.

And, say some Afghans, no wonder.

"Kleptocrats and warlords found their way in the corridors of power. They were rich, they became filthy rich and took the entire governance system hostage to their interests," says Farhadi, the economist. "People lost faith," he says. "Even the soldiers didn't fight for their corrupt leadership."

Still, Farhadi, a former adviser to the International Monetary Fund and a former economist at the World Bank, said he'd return to his homeland under the Taliban — to help them find a way to operate in the 21st century.

So much has changed from 9/11-era Afghanistan. Bin Laden is dead and gone, slain by U.S. forces in Pakistan in 2011. Kabul is a city that many returning Taliban no longer recognize. The repercussions of the past few weeks will be with the U.S. government for a while. And with that hope of November 2001 long consigned to Afghanistan's history and heartbreak, Farhadi has advice for his country's once and newest rulers.

"Keep a sharp eye on corruption. Create a level playing field for corruption free business. Let the women join the workforce; it will help households boost their finances. Call on the diaspora to come back, invest and help build the country. Avoid driving the country into isolation. It is the people who will end up paying the price of sanctions."

Police chief: Ida hit Louisiana town harder than Katrina did

By GERALD HERBERT Associated Press

GRAND ISLE, La. (AP) — Hurricane Ida caused mass devastation on Grand Isle, a Louisiana town on a narrow barrier island that bore the full power of the Category 4 storm Sunday.

About half of the properties in the town of about 1,400 were either heavily damaged or destroyed. Some of the homes were missing roofs or walls, while others had been reduced to piles of debris.

The main roadway on Tuesday was nearly completely covered in sand that had been brought in by the tidal surge. All of the utility poles were either leaning or had crashed down.

Grand Isle Police Chief Scooter Resweber rode out the storm with his fellow officers inside the police station Sunday. Ida made landfall just to the west with a wind gust recorded at 172 mph (277 kph) and seawater swamped the island.

"I had all the police officers move into the building for safety, and then all hell broke loose," Resweber told a reporter for The Associated Press who reached the town via helicopter. "Roofs started to come

apart. We could see buildings flying to pieces across the street from us. It's something that you just don't want to ever see again.

"When the roof started to come apart and the building trembled, we all got scared. We're grown men but you do have fear in you, no matter what job you're in, and we felt it."

Cynthia Lee Sheng, president of Jefferson Parish, where Grand Isle is located, described the island as "uninhabitable." She said every building was damaged to some extent, there are numerous breaks in the levee system, and a strong odor of natural gas persists, "so that is not good."

Resweber and other officers ventured out early Monday to assess the damage — the police chief's home was among the hundreds destroyed — as well as to check on the nearly 100 residents who had decided to stay behind. He said many residents regretted that decision, although no one was seriously hurt.

"I've ridden out other hurricanes — Hurricane Isaac, Katrina, Gustav, Ike — and this is no comparison whatsoever. This is the worst. ... It's just amazing that no one (here) was killed or even seriously injured."

Biden defends departure from 'forever war,' praises airlift

By AAMER MADHANI and KEVIN FREKING Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — A defensive President Joe Biden on Tuesday called the U.S. airlift to extract more than 120,000 Americans, Afghans and other allies from Afghanistan to end a 20-year war an "extraordinary success," though more than 100 Americans and thousands of others were left behind.

Twenty-four hours after the last American C-17 cargo plane roared off from Kabul, Biden spoke to the nation and vigorously defended his decision to end America's longest war and withdraw all U.S. troops ahead of an Aug. 31 deadline.

"I was not going to extend this forever war," Biden declared from the White House. "And I was not going to extend a forever exit."

Biden has faced tough questions about the way the U.S. went about leaving Afghanistan — a chaotic evacuation with spasms of violence, including a suicide bombing last week that killed 13 American service members and 169 Afghans.

He is under heavy criticism, particularly from Republicans, for his handling of the evacuation. But he said it was inevitable that the final departure from two decades of war, first negotiated with the Taliban for May 1 by former President Donald Trump, would have been difficult, with likely violence, no matter when it was planned and conducted.

"To those asking for a third decade of war in Afghanistan, I ask, 'What is the vital national interest?'" Biden said. He added, "I simply do not believe that the safety and security of America is enhanced by continuing to deploy thousands of American troops and spending billions of dollars in Afghanistan."

Asked after the speech about Biden sounding angry at some criticism, White House press secretary Jen Psaki said the president had simply offered his "forceful assessment."

Biden scoffed at Republicans — and some Democrats — who contend the U.S. would have been better served maintaining a small military footprint in Afghanistan. Before Thursday's attack, the U.S. military had not suffered a combat casualty since February 2020 — around the time the Trump administration brokered its deal with the Taliban to end the war by May of this year.

Biden said breaking the Trump deal would have restarted a shooting war. He said those who favor remaining at war also fail to recognize the weight of deployment, with a scourge of PTSD, financial struggles, divorce and other problems for U.S. troops.

"When I hear that we could've, should've continued the so-called low-grade effort in Afghanistan at low risk to our service members, at low cost, I don't think enough people understand how much we've asked of the 1% of this country to put that uniform on," Biden said.

In addition to all the questions at home, Biden is also adjusting to a new relationship with the Taliban, the Islamist militant group the U.S. toppled after the Sept. 11, 2001, attacks in America, and that is now once again in power in Afghanistan.

Biden has tasked Secretary of State Antony Blinken to coordinate with international partners to hold the

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Taliban to their promise of safe passage for Americans and others who want to leave in the days ahead. "We don't take them by their word alone, but by their actions," Biden said. "We have leverage to make sure those commitments are met."

Biden also pushed back against criticism that he fell short of his pledge to get all Americans out of the country ahead of the U.S. military withdrawal. He said many of the Americans left behind are dual citizens, some with deep family roots that are complicating their ability to leave Afghanistan.

"The bottom line: 90% of Americans in Afghanistan who wanted to leave were able to leave," Biden said. "For those remaining Americans, there is no deadline. We remain committed to get them out, if they want to come out."

Biden repeated his argument that ending the Afghanistan war was a crucial step for recalibrating American foreign policy toward growing challenges posed by China and Russia — and counterterrorism concerns that pose a more potent threat to the U.S.

"There's nothing China or Russia would rather have, want more in this competition, than the United States to be bogged down another decade in Afghanistan," he said

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. The president lamented an estimated \$2 trillion of taxpayer money that was spent fighting the war.

"What have we lost as a consequence in terms of opportunities?" Biden asked.

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.

House Minority Leader Kevin McCarthy, R-Calif., on Tuesday described the Biden administration's handling of the evacuation as "probably the biggest failure in American government on a military stage in my lifetime" and promised that Republicans would press the White House for answers.

Meanwhile, the Senate met briefly Tuesday, with Vice President Kamala Harris presiding over the chamber, to pass by unanimous consent a bill that increases spending for temporary assistance to U.S. citizens and their dependents returning from another country because of illness, war or other crisis. Biden quickly signed the legislation, which raises funding for the program from \$1 million to \$10 million.

A group of Republican lawmakers gathered on the House floor Tuesday morning and participated in a moment of silence for the 13 service members who were killed in the suicide bomber attack.

They also sought a House vote on legislation from Rep. Mike Gallagher, R-Wis., which among other things would require the administration to submit a report on how many Americans remain in Afghanistan as well as the number of Afghans who had applied for a category of visas reserved for those employed by or on behalf of the U.S. government.

The GOP lawmakers objected as Rep. Debbie Dingell, D-Mich., gaveled the House into adjournment. They then gathered for a press conference to denounce the administration.

For many U.S. commanders and troops who served in Afghanistan, it was a day of mixed emotions.

"All of us are conflicted with feelings of pain and anger, sorrow and sadness, combined with pride and resilience," said Gen. Mark Milley, chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff. He commanded troops in Afghanistan earlier in his career. "But one thing I am certain of, for any soldier, sailor, airman or Marine and their families, your service mattered. It was not in vain."

Lawyer: Britney Spears 'will not be extorted' by father

By ANDREW DALTON AP Entertainment Writer

LOS ANGELES (AP) — Britney Spears and her new attorney say her father is trying to get about \$2 million in payments before stepping down from the conservatorship that controls her life and money, a move they liken to extortion in a court filing Tuesday.

The document filed by lawyer Mathew Rosengart says the upcoming scheduled accounting of the conservatorship, which James Spears says he wants completed before he steps down, will mean significant

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payments for him.

"Britney Spears will not be extorted," the filing says. "Mr. Spears's blatant attempt to barter suspension and removal in exchange for approximately \$2 million in payments, on top of the millions already reaped from Ms. Spears's estate by Mr. Spears and his associates, is a non-starter."

A representative for James Spears did not immediately respond to a request for comment.

The filing is a supplement to Rosengart's July petition on Britney Spears' behalf for the removal and suspension of James Spears, which will be addressed at a Sept. 29 hearing.

In his response, James Spears revealed that he had already been planning to step down from his daughter's conservatorship, which he has controlled at least in part since it was established in 2008.

But James Spears offered no timetable for his departure, saying it would come only after several lingering issues, including the next accounting, are resolved.

James Spears said he would fight any attempt to force him out, that there were no grounds for doing so, and that he has always only acted in his daughter's best interest.

Rosengart's latest filing contends that while there is plenty of misconduct to address, it is not yet the issue.

"The only question before the Court — which has, unfortunately, been lost for years — is whether Mr. Spears' prompt suspension and removal are in best the interests of Britney Spears," the filing says, later adding that "the unequivocal answer is yes."

Since 2019, James Spears has controlled only his daughter's finances, after stepping down as the overseer of her personal life.

He was nevertheless the target of much of his daughter's ire in a pair of speeches before the court in June and July, in which she called the conservatorship "abusive." Spears said she had been required to use an intrauterine device for birth control, take medications against her will and prevented from getting married, having another child or even riding in her boyfriend's car unsupervised.

"This conservatorship is doing me way more harm than good," the 39-year-old Spears said at the time. "I deserve to have a life."

In an unrelated case, authorities in Ventura County are investigating an allegation of misdemeanor battery from a staff member at her home who said Britney Spears struck her.

Rosengart called the incident "a manufactured 'he said she said' regarding a cellphone, with no striking and obviously no injury whatsoever."

Oxygen supplies grow precarious amid COVID surge

By HEATHER HOLLINGSWORTH Associated Press

MISSION, Kan. (AP) — The COVID-19 surge is stretching oxygen supplies and sending hospitals scrambling for more ventilators, even as there are signs of hope that the spread of the virus is slowing down in pockets of the U.S.

In Tulsa, Oklahoma, a hospital recently called 911 after coming within just a few hours of running out of oxygen because they needed an emergency transfer for a patient on high-flow oxygen. The hospital got a shipment later that day, but the experience was a warning to other hospitals, said Dr. Jeffrey Goodloe, the chief medical officer for the EMS system that serves Tulsa and Oklahoma City.

"If it can happen to one hospital, it can happen to any hospital," Goodloe said. "There is no, 'that is happening over there.' There is here in a heartbeat."

The oxygen shortages are yet another sign of the toll that the summer COVID-19 resurgence has taken on the nation's hospital system. A handful of states including Florida, Oregon, Hawaii, Mississippi and Louisiana have set pandemic records for the number of COVID-19 hospitalizations, and many hospitals are dangerously short of staff and intensive care unit beds.

There is some good news, however.

The country is averaging 155,000 new infections a day, but the caseload trajectory has slowed down dramatically from earlier in August.

Florida, Missouri, Arkansas, Louisiana and Mississippi had slight declines in cases over last two weeks.

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Florida has seen a dip in COVID-19 admissions in recent days, as have hospitals in Springfield, Missouri, an early epicenter of the delta variant-driven surge.

Vaccination numbers are also up, and White House COVID-19 coordinator Jeff Zients credited vaccine mandates that have been implemented across the country, including restaurants, workplaces, sports stadiums and schools.

"Importantly, we've accelerated the pace of first shots. In August, we got over 14 million. That's almost 4 million more first shots in August compared to the prior month in July," Zients said Tuesday.

But the numbers haven't budged much in the one week since the U.S. Food and Drug Administration gave full approval to Pfizer for its vaccine after reviewing six months of safety data. The seven-day average for vaccine doses administered across the U.S. rose to 898,000 on Monday, up from 853,000 one week earlier.

Deaths are also on the rise, averaging more than 1,300 a day, in what health officials have predicted would happen as result of the massive rise in cases and hospitalizations over the last month.

Georgia and Oklahoma have emerged as new spots where hospital and state leaders are sounding alarm about the lack of capacity and supplies.

COVID-19 infections and hospitalizations are on the cusp of surpassing January peaks in Georgia as hospitals fretted Monday that the delta variant of the respiratory illness threatens to suck some Georgia hospitals dry of medical oxygen, a key treatment for people struggling to breathe.

Gov. Brian Kemp signed an executive order calling up as many as another 1,500 National Guard soldiers to help short-staffed hospitals with nonmedical jobs, on top of the 1,000 previously authorized.

Augusta University Medical Center has ordered 12 more ventilators to deal with the surge. The hospital was treating 122 COVID-19 patients on Tuesday, pushing its overall hospital census to a record of 501 patients.

The numbers of COVID-19 patients remains about 20 less than winter surge levels, but the hospital has been turning away transfers because it also is working through a backlog of patients who put off care at the height of the pandemic, said Dr. Phillip Coule, chief medical officer.

"We are watching our ventilator use very closely," he said, noting that more of its patients are needing high-flow oxygen and other treatments that sometimes lead up to them being put on ventilators. "We are concerned about it."

With oxygen supplies, part of the issue is that hospitals have found success in treating coronavirus patients with high-flow oxygen tubes. But the method uses up to three times more oxygen than treatment methods used earlier in the pandemic, said Andy Brailo, chief customer officer for Premier, a group supply purchaser for hospitals.

Couple that with troubles finding enough drivers with the requisite hazardous material certifications to deliver oxygen to hard-hit hospitals, and supplies are running tighter than ever. Some hospitals have come within a day or two of running out. Others have resorted to using backup tanks that are normally only used when their main tank is being refilled.

In Orlando, residents have been asked to stop watering their lawns and washing cars because of oxygen shortages. That's because Orlando treats city water with liquid oxygen and supplied that typically go toward water treatment have been diverted to hospitals.

Brailo said the oxygen issue has been particularly acute in Florida. He said he has recently heard of problems in Louisiana, Kentucky and Texas as well.

"Hospitals have started thinking if we are out, what are the options we are going to have to take?" Brailo said. "In some cases that may mean having to move patients. And that may mean going to much more invasive ways to make sure those patients are oxygenated."

Dr. Ryan Stanton, an emergency room physician in Lexington, Kentucky, who has treated scores of COVID-19 patients, said doctors began discussing whether multiple people could be placed on a single ventilator over the past few days in private Facebook groups. He said that so far, no doctors have said they were attempting it.

"It is just a sign that you are getting at that critical breaking point," he said of the discussion.

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 has 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 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 has 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 heart surgeon 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.

Missionaries who are not fully vaccinated are also unable to receive an assignment outside of their home country.

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

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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 vaccine mandates, said the church should not be involved in health choices, and she worries people are being discriminated against based on their vaccine status.

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."

Texas Legislature sends sweeping GOP voting bill to governor

By PAUL J. WEBER and ACACIA CORONADO Associated Press

AUSTIN, Texas (AP) — The GOP-controlled Texas Legislature passed a broad overhaul of the state's election laws Tuesday, tightening already strict voting rules and dealing a bruising defeat to Democrats who waged a monthslong fight over what they argued was a brazen attempt to disenfranchise minorities and other Democratic-leaning voters.

Republican Gov. Greg Abbott said he will sign the bill, the latest in a national GOP campaign to add new hurdles to voting in the name of security. The effort, which led to new restrictions in Georgia, Florida, Arizona and elsewhere, was spurred in part by former President Donald Trump's false claims of a stolen election.

Texas Democrats fought the legislation for months, arguing the bill was tailored to make it harder for young people, racial and ethnic minorities and people with disabilities — all Democratic-leaning voters —

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to cast ballots, just as they see the demographics shifting to favor their party. The bill specifically targets Democratic strongholds, including Houston's Harris County, further tightening rules in a state already considered among the hardest places to cast a ballot.

The legislation set off a heated summer in Texas of walkouts by Democrats, Republicans threatening them with arrest, Abbott vetoing the paychecks of thousands of rank-and-file staffers when the bill failed to reach him sooner, and accusations of racism and voter suppression.

"The emotional reasons for not voting for it are that it creates hardships for people because of the color of their skin and their ethnicity, and I am part of that class of people," said Democrat Garnet Coleman, a state representative whose return to the Capitol earlier this month helped end a 38-day standoff.

Even the final vote did not escape a parting round of confrontation after Senate Republicans, at the last minute, scuttled one of the few areas of bipartisan agreement: efforts to shield voters with felony convictions from prosecution if they did not realize they were ineligible to cast a ballot. It had been included following backlash over the arrests of two Texas voters, both of whom are Black, which intensified criticism amid a broader fight over voting restrictions that opponents say disproportionately impact people of color.

Texas will limit voting hours and empower partisan poll watchers under the nearly 75-page bill, known as Senate Bill 1. It is largely similar to the one Democrats first walked out on 93 days ago, underscoring how Republicans, who have overwhelming majorities in both the House and Senate, held their ground in the face of months of protest and escalating brinksmanship.

"Senate Bill 1 will solidify trust and confidence in the outcome of our elections by making it easier to vote and harder to cheat. I look forward to signing Senate Bill 1 into law, ensuring election integrity in Texas," Abbott said in a statement minutes after the bill passed.

That acrimony is unlikely to end with Abbott's signature.

The Texas Capitol is set to immediately shift into another charged fight over redrawn voting maps that could lock in Republican electoral advantages for the next decade. Texas added more than 4 million new residents since 2010, more than any other state, with people of color accounting for more than nine in every 10 new residents.

Democrats criticized the voting bill as an attempt to suppress the turnout of an ascendant and more diverse electorate as Republicans, who are used to racking up commanding electoral victories in America's biggest red state, begin to lose ground.

Texas Republicans defended the bill in the same terms the GOP has used in more than a dozen other states that have also passed restrictive voting laws this year: calling the changes practical safeguards, while denying they are driven by Trump's baseless claims that he lost reelection because of widespread voter fraud.

When the bill won final approval Tuesday in the Senate, holding the gavel on the dais was Republican Lt. Gov. Dan Patrick. Days after the election last year, Patrick offered a \$1 million reward in support of Trump's unfounded claims of irregularities at the polls.

One provision in the bill had sought to add clarity that a person must have known he or she was voting illegally in order to face prosecution. But although it had buy-in from the House, it was rejected by Senate negotiators just as the bill was being finalized over the weekend.

Texas law prohibits people on parole, probation or supervised release from voting. But both Republican and Democratic lawmakers have expressed unease over the case of Crystal Mason, who was sentenced to five years in prison in 2018 for casting a provisional ballot in the 2016 presidential election when she was on probation. She has said she was unaware that she was ineligible to cast a ballot at the time.

Her provisional vote wound up not counting, and her case is now on appeal.

After the full voting bill cleared, the House approved a resolution that "a person should not be criminally incarcerated for making an innocent mistake." It passed 119-4.

"You should not be put in jail for five years under those circumstances," Republican state Rep. Dustin Burrows said.

Texas already has some of the nation's toughest election laws, and many of the most hotly contested changes now heading to Abbott are prohibitions on expanded voting options put in place during the CO-

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VID-19 pandemic in Texas' largest county, which includes Houston and is a major source of Democratic votes.

Harris County last year offered 24-hour polling places and drive-thru voting, as well as tried sending mail-ballot applications to 2 million registered voters. All of that would now be outlawed with Abbott's signature, and election officials who send mail-in ballots applications to voters who don't request one could face criminal penalties.

Republicans said the tightened rules reign in powers that local elections officials never had in the first place, while accusing critics of exaggerating the impacts. They also emphasized that polls during two weeks of early voting everywhere in Texas must now be open for at least an extra hour, and that more counties must have polls open for at least 12 hours.

Mason's illegal voting arrest is not the only one to draw criticism from Democrats and voting rights groups. In July, Hervis Rogers was arrested on charges of illegal voting because he cast a ballot while still on parole after waiting more than six hours in line during the 2020 presidential primary.

The cases drew national attention and angered critics who saw both as overzealous attempts by Republicans to look tough on rare cases of improper voting. The Brennan Center for Justice in 2017 ranked the risk of ballot fraud at 0.00004% to 0.0009%, based on studies of past elections.

Non-fan of R. Kelly describes still falling prey to him

NEW YORK (AP) — A woman who wasn't a fan of R. Kelly ended up getting exposed to a sexually transmitted disease after he enticed her to join him on the road, she testified on Tuesday at the R&B entertainer's sex-trafficking trial.

The witness, taking the stand without using her real name, said she was 19 when her older half sister invited her to a Kelly concert in San Antonio in 2017. Her sibling was a fan of his music, she said, but "I was not."

The sisters were invited to a backstage after-party — the beginning of a brief relationship that had elements also described by other victims alleging sexual abuse by Kelly when they were still in high school. Kelly paid for woman's flights and hotel rooms to his concerts in cities where he demanded sex from her in hotel rooms and other locations.

A prosecutor asked whether he told her he had herpes or wore condoms. "No, he did not," she responded. Earlier in the trial — now in its third week — the jury heard Kelly's personal physician describe treating him for herpes for several years and from another woman who claimed he gave her herpes from unprotected sex.

Kelly, 54, has repeatedly denied accusations that he preyed on victims during a 30-year career highlighted by his 1996 smash hit "I Believe I Can Fly." His lawyers have portrayed his accusers as groupies who are lying about their relationships with him.

Patriots cut Cam Newton, clearing way for Mac Jones to start

By KYLE HIGHTOWER AP Sports Writer

FOXBOROUGH, Mass. (AP) — The Mac Jones era in New England has begun.

The Patriots released Cam Newton on Tuesday, clearing the way for the rookie to open the season as New England's quarterback.

Newton's release came hours before NFL teams had to reduce their rosters to 53 players and brings an abrupt end to his time in New England. Newton went 7-8 as the starter in the Patriots' first season since Tom Brady departed and signed with Tampa Bay. New England finished 7-9 for the year.

"I really appreciate all the love and support during this time, but I must say please don't feel sorry for me!! #imGOOD," Newton posted on Instagram Tuesday.

Running back James White said Newton's departure is example of players never knowing what to expect when roster cuts are made.

"Cam did his best job for us and competed extremely hard. ... He's a good football player," White said.

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"I hope he gets another opportunity to land on his feet."

Newton started each of New England's three preseason games, but he also missed five days of practice leading into Sunday's exhibition finale against the New York Giants after a "misunderstanding" of NFL COVID-19 protocols. Newton attended an out-of-town doctor's appointment, and because he is unvaccinated, he had to stay away from the team for five days.

Newton tested positive for COVID-19 last season, forcing him to miss a game. The prospect of him being unavailable again because he hasn't been vaccinated may have played a role in the Patriots' decision.

Meanwhile, Jones was impressive throughout training camp, displaying an ability to lead the offense down the field and bounce back from mistakes. It helped him earn the respect of the coaching staff and veteran players.

"He's accepted the challenge and he's trying to push us, speaking up in the huddle," White said. "He's been building that confidence more and more. You just started believing him."

Jones won a national title last year at Alabama under Nick Saban, a longtime friend and former colleague of Patriots coach Bill Belichick. Jones has noted the similarities between the two coaches and said it's helped him integrate into the Patriots' culture.

Fellow Alabama alum and linebacker Dont'a Hightower said last week that Jones' work ethic has stood out in the locker room. He also noted how he recently heard the rookie had been looking at the Patriots' defensive plays to help him conceptualize how opposing defenses might attack.

"I give him credit for that because not a lot of young guys would see that as an opportunity and he did that on his own," Hightower said.

Belichick acknowledged at the time that Newton's COVID-19 protocols absence provided an opportunity for Jones. The rookie seized it, performing well during the first of two joint practices with the Giants.

"I'm going to be ready whenever my time comes up," Jones said after Sunday's 22-20 win over New York. "We got work to do and we'll get the things fixed and then we'll just keep rolling."

Though he didn't start any exhibition games, Jones took 107 snaps to 38 for Newton. He completed 69% (36 of 52) of his passes for 389 yards, a touchdown and no interceptions.

"Mac's done a great job," Patriots center David Andrews said. "He's come in and worked really hard. He's obviously done a lot of really good things."

When he was drafted in April, Jones became the first quarterback selected in the first round during Belichick's time in New England.

The Patriots' move means this could mark the second time since the NFL-AFL merger that more than two rookie quarterbacks started opening games.

Trevor Lawrence already has been named the starter in Jacksonville; Zach Wilson is projected to start for the Jets; and Jones is set for New England's opener against Miami on Sept. 12.

Five rookie quarterbacks started openers in 2012.

"I've learned at a young age to just prepare like the starter," Jones said Sunday. "You don't have to be the starter, but you have to prepare and get into your routine."

NOTES: CB Stephon Gilmore was placed on the physically unable to perform list, meaning he won't be eligible to play for the first six games of the season. Despite some accuracy issues in the Patriots' second exhibition game, rookie kicker Quinn Nordin did enough to beat out veteran Nick Folk for the starting job. That extends New England's streak to 18 consecutive years with an undrafted rookie making the initial 53-man roster.

AP FACT CHECK: Biden skirts broken promise on Afghan exit

By CALVIN WOODWARD and HOPE YEN Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — President Joe Biden on Tuesday glossed over his broken promise to keep U.S. troops in Afghanistan until the last Americans are out and offered the faint assurance — even with the last U.S. planes gone — that it's never too late for U.S. citizens to leave.

"There is no deadline," Biden said. But with its forces withdrawn, the U.S. is left with diplomatic persuasion instead of military muscle to get the Taliban extremists who've been fighting the U.S. for 20 years to

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give remaining Americans safe passage out.

BIDEN: "The bottom line: 90% of Americans in Afghanistan who wanted to leave were able to leave. For those remaining Americans, there is no deadline. We remain committed to get them out, if they want to come out. Secretary of State Blinken is leading the continued diplomatic efforts to ensure safe passage for any American, Afghan partner or foreign national who wants to leave Afghanistan." — White House remarks.

THE FACTS: For the record, Biden vowed that he would get 100% of Americans out before withdrawing forces.

And his suggestions Tuesday that many of the remaining Americans are dual nationals who may be undecided about leaving do not reflect the full reality.

He contended 100 to 200 Americans are still there and have "some intention to leave," adding: "Most of those who remain are dual citizens, longtime residents, but earlier decided to stay because of their family roots in Afghanistan." And White House press secretary Jen Psaki said afterward that Biden is telling those people that if they decide in two weeks that they want to go, "we will get you out."

But those comments may understate the desperation of Americans trapped in Afghanistan. Gen. Frank McKenzie, head of U.S. Central Command, said Monday that Americans tried to get to the Kabul airport for the final evacuations but couldn't. No Americans were on the last five jets to leave.

"We maintained the ability to bring them in up until immediately before departure, but we were not able to bring any Americans out," he said. "That activity ended probably about 12 hours before our exit, although we continue the outreach and would have been prepared to bring them on until the very last minute. But none of them made it to the airport, and were able to be — and were able to be accommodated."

Biden told ABC News unequivocally on Aug. 19 that the U.S. would not leave any Americans stranded. "Americans understand we're going to try and get it done before Aug. 31," Biden said then. "If we don't, we'll determine at the time, who's left."

And then? "And if there are American citizens left, we're going to stay until we get them all out."

The last U.S. planes took off from the airport Monday night, Aug. 30, one minute before midnight in Kabul.

U.S. officials estimated up to 200 Americans were left behind, along with unknown numbers of Afghans and others who were trying frantically to leave. By then, more than 100,000 people, mostly Afghans, had been flown to safety in the multinational evacuations.

Now that has become a matter for diplomacy,

U.S. officials said diplomats are in talks with neighboring countries and others to try to arrange non-U.S.-military evacuations for those remaining. Among the options, if the diplomacy works, are potential charter flights from the airport when it re-opens and overland routes.

COVID recession pushed Social Security insolvency up a year

By RICARDO ALONSO-ZALDIVAR and MARTIN CRUTSINGER Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — The sharp shock of the coronavirus recession pushed Social Security a year closer to insolvency but left Medicare's exhaustion date unchanged, the government reported Tuesday in a counterintuitive assessment that deepens the uncertainty around the nation's bedrock retirement programs.

The new projections in the annual Social Security and Medicare trustees reports indicate that Social Security's massive trust fund will be unable to pay full benefits in 2034 instead of last year's estimated exhaustion date of 2035. For the first time in 39 years the cost of delivering benefits will exceed the program's total income from payroll tax collections and interest during this year. From here on, Social Security will be tapping its savings to pay full benefits.

The depletion date for Medicare's trust fund for inpatient care remained unchanged from last year, estimated in 2026.

In the 1980s, financial warnings about Social Security prompted then-President Ronald Reagan and lawmakers of both parties in Congress to collaborate on a long-term solvency plan, but such action is unlikely in today's bitter political climate. Democrats who control the White House and Congress offered

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assurances they would protect both programs.

"The Biden-Harris administration is committed to safeguarding these programs and ensuring they continue to deliver economic security and health care to older Americans," Treasury Secretary Janet Yellen said in a statement.

The latest estimates reflected the push and pull of many factors flowing from the pandemic, and the full impact may take years to sort out. The deep but relatively short recession slashed revenue from payroll taxes. But the death toll from COVID-19, concentrated among older people, reduced future Social Security benefit payouts. Hospitals were stressed by the influx of COVID patients, but Medicare didn't have to pay for as many knee surgeries, colonoscopies and other more routine procedures. Birth rates and immigration, which tend to bolster the two programs, both fell.

For Social Security, the loss of payroll tax revenue outweighed any savings from what the program would have paid out to people whose lives were lost in the pandemic. The report noted that employment, earnings, interest rates and economic growth plummeted in the second quarter of 2020 after the pandemic hit the United States.

"The finances of both programs have been significantly affected by the pandemic and the recession of 2020," the trustees said. But "given the unprecedented level of uncertainty" there was no consensus on what the long-lasting effects of the pandemic would be. A looming question for Medicare: Will the population of beneficiaries who survived the pandemic be healthier on the whole, or will a high number suffer from new conditions like long COVID?

Social Security pays benefits to more than 65 million Americans, mainly retirees but also disabled people and survivors of deceased workers. Medicare covers more than 60 million older and disabled people. Together, both programs account for more than 40% of the federal budget, and act as stabilizer not only for families, but for the national economy.

While long-term projections are sobering, in the short run there was some good news for Social Security recipients.

Government economic experts who prepared the Social Security report estimated recent increases in inflation mean the cost-of-living adjustment for 2022 will approach 6%, a whopping jump from the 1.3% COLA awarded for this year.

Some of that may go for higher Medicare costs. The Medicare "Part B" premium for outpatient coverage was projected to rise by \$10 a month in 2022, to \$158.50 under the report's intermediate assumptions. The official number won't be released until later this year.

Social Security and Medicare remain under intense financial pressure with the retirement of millions of baby boomers, who are living longer than previous generations.

When the Social Security trust fund is depleted the government will be able to pay 78% of scheduled benefits, the report said. When Medicare's trust fund for inpatient care runs short, it will be able to pay only 91% of expected costs, mainly hospital bills.

Because reductions of that magnitude would cause a political uproar, it is likely that a future Congress would find ways to recover the lost benefits, either by hiking the payroll taxes paid by current workers or by increasing government borrowing to cover the shortfall. With Medicare, lawmakers could also raise premiums paid by beneficiaries.

It's unclear how the Medicare projections will affect the debate on Capitol Hill about authorizing the program to negotiate prescription drug prices and then using projected savings to provide new Medicare coverage for dental, vision and hearing services. Republicans have argued that any savings should go to shore up the underlying program, not expand benefits.

The Medicare report steered clear of making any projections about the new Alzheimer's drug, Aduhelm, which has a list price of \$55,000. Most of the 6 million Americans dealing with Alzheimer's are covered by the program, though not all would be candidates for the medication.

The trustees' reports, which have been delayed for months, represent the government's effort to assess the impact of last year's pandemic and recession on Social Security and Medicare.

The U.S. economy lost a staggering 22.4 million jobs in March and April 2020 as the pandemic forced

businesses to close or cut their hours and the economy went into recession.

But the recession turned out to be brief and hiring has bounced back as economic growth has resumed. Employers have brought back 16.7 million jobs since April 2020 but that gain still leaves the labor force 5.7 million jobs below where it was before the pandemic hit.

The trustees of Social Security and Medicare include the secretaries of Treasury, Health and Human Services, and Labor, as well as the Social Security commissioner. They are supposed to be joined by two "public trustees," knowledgeable private citizens who act as the eyes and ears of taxpayers and beneficiaries. But those posts have been vacant since July 2015 — before the end of the Obama administration. And this year there's no Social Security commissioner either, since President Joe Biden fired Andrew Saul, a holdover appointee from the Trump administration.

Black men executed in 1951 rape granted posthumous pardons

By DENISE LAVOIE AP Legal Affairs Writer

RICHMOND, Va. (AP) — Virginia Gov. Ralph Northam granted posthumous pardons Tuesday to seven Black men who were executed in 1951 for the rape of a white woman, in a case that attracted pleas for mercy from around the world and in recent years has been denounced as an example of racial disparity in the use of the death penalty.

Northam announced the pardons after meeting with about a dozen descendants of the men and their advocates. Cries and sobs could be heard from some of the descendants after Northam's announcement.

The "Martinsville Seven," as the men became known, were all convicted of raping 32-year-old Ruby Stroud Floyd, a white woman who had gone to a predominantly black neighborhood in Martinsville, Virginia, on Jan. 8, 1949, to collect money for clothes she had sold.

Four of the men were executed in Virginia's electric chair on Feb. 2, 1951. Three days later, the remaining three were also electrocuted. All of them were tried by all-white juries. It was the largest group of people executed for a single-victim crime in Virginia's history.

At the time, rape was a capital offense. But Northam said Tuesday that the death penalty for rape was applied almost exclusively to Black people. From 1908 — when Virginia began using the electric chair — to 1951, state records show that all 45 people executed for rape were Black, he said. The pardons do not address the guilt or innocence of the men, but Northam said the pardons are an acknowledgement that they did not receive due process and received a "racially-biased death sentence not similarly applied to white defendants."

"These men were executed because they were Black, and that's not right," Northam said.

"Their punishment did not fit the crime. They should not have been executed," he added.

All seven men were convicted and sentenced to death within eight days. Northam said some of the defendants were impaired at the time of their arrests or unable to read confessions they signed. He said none of the men had attorneys present while they were interrogated.

Before their executions, protesters picketed at the White House, and the governor's office received letters from around the world asking for mercy.

James Walter Grayson is the son of Francis DeSales Grayson, who was one of the seven. He sobbed loudly when Northam told the family members he would grant the pardons after meeting with them Tuesday. "Thank you, Jesus. Thank you, Lord," he said, as he wept while being embraced by two other descendants of the men.

Grayson said he was 4 years old when his father was executed.

"It means so much to me," he said of the pardon.

"I remember the very day the police came to the door. He kissed us and they took him away," he told The Associated Press in an interview after the announcement.

Rudolph McCollum Jr., a former Richmond mayor who is the great-nephew of Francis DeSales Grayson and the nephew of another one of the executed men, Booker T. Millner, told Northam the executions represent "a wound that continues to mar Virginia's history and the efforts to move beyond its dubious

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past." He wept when Northam announced he would pardon the men.

In December, advocates and descendants of the men asked Northam to issue posthumous pardons. Their petition does not argue that the men were innocent, but says their trials were unfair and the punishment was extreme and unjust.

"The Martinsville Seven were not given adequate due process 'simply for being black,' they were sentenced to death for a crime that a white person would not have been executed for 'simply for being black,' and they were killed, by the Commonwealth, 'simply for being black,'" the advocates wrote in their letter to Northam.

The seven men, most in their late teens or early 20s, were: Grayson, Millner, Frank Hairston Jr.; Howard Lee Hairston; James Luther Hairston; Joe Henry Hampton; and John Clabon Taylor.

Eric W. Rise, an associate professor at the University of Delaware who wrote a 1995 book on the case: "The Martinsville Seven: Race, Rape, and Capital Punishment," said Floyd told police she was raped by a large group of Black men and testified at all six trials. Two of the men were tried together.

All seven men signed statements admitting they were present during the attack, but they had no access to their parents or attorneys at the time, Rise said.

"The validity of the confessions were one of the things their defense attorneys brought up at the trials," Rise said.

Four of the men testified in their own defense. Rise said two men said they had consensual sex with her, one man denied any involvement, and another man said he was so intoxicated he could not remember what happened.

Northam has now granted a total of 604 pardons since taking office in 2018, more than the previous nine governors combined, his administration announced Tuesday.

"This is about righting wrongs," Northam said. "We all deserve a criminal justice system that is fair, equal, and gets it right — no matter who you are or what you look like," he said.

In March, Northam, a Democrat, signed legislation passed by the Democrat-controlled legislature abolishing the state's death penalty. It was a dramatic shift for Virginia, a state that had the second-highest number of executions in the U.S. The case of the Martinsville Seven was cited during the legislative debate as an example of the disproportionate use of the death penalty against people of color.

Mike Richards is out as producer of 'Jeopardy!' and 'Wheel'

By LYNN ELBER AP Television Writer

LOS ANGELES (AP) — Mike Richards is out as executive producer of "Jeopardy!," days after he exited as the quiz show's newly appointed host because of past misogynistic and disparaging comments.

Richards is also no longer executive producer of "Wheel of Fortune," according to a memo to staff that was confirmed by Sony Pictures Television, which produces both of the shows.

"We had hoped that when Mike stepped down from the host position at Jeopardy! it would have minimized the disruption and internal difficulties we have all experienced these last few weeks. That clearly has not happened," Suzanne Prete, an executive with the game shows, said in the memo.

The lag between Richards' Aug. 20 decision to step down as host and Sony's announcement Tuesday was filled with speculation about why the studio was keeping him on. "Jeopardy!" fans called him unsuitable for the venerated show, and there were reports of dissatisfaction by staffers.

"Richards has been perceived as damaged goods since the moment the scandal broke," said crisis public relations expert Eden Gillott, referring to Richards' podcast remarks. "It's surprising that Sony kept Richards on as executive producer for as long as it did."

In her memo, Prete said she will work with Richards' interim replacement, Michael Davies, until further notice. Davies produces ABC's "Who Wants to Be A Millionaire."

James Holzhauer, a "Jeopardy!" champion who mocked Richards when he surrendered the host job, weighed in Tuesday.

"Do I think Mike Richards's podcast comments were appropriate for polite society? No. But did he deserve

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the benefit of the doubt for the job he did running Jeopardy? Also no," Holzhauer tweeted.

The short-lived Richards era caught the attention of comedian and TV host W. Kamau Bell (CNN's "United Shades of America").

"I really want the "Tiger King" style documentary on this whole thing," Bell posted on Twitter.

Richards had signed an overall development deal with Sony in 2019, and was announced as executive producer of "Jeopardy!" and "Wheel of Fortune" in May 2020.

He quickly became controversial when he went from behind-the-scenes to Sony's pick for host of "Jeopardy!" — even before his 2013-14 podcast comments demeaning women and making stereotypical remarks about Asian, Jews and others surfaced.

Anointing Richards as successor to the admired Alex Trebek was a questionable choice to some, especially since the studio had conducted a splashy search with guest hosts that included actors, sports figures, journalists — and Richards.

Questions were raised about whether Richards had put his finger on the scale in favor of himself, and whether he had the gravitas that was seen in other candidates, such as fan favorite LeVar Burton. The decision to bypass a person of color or a woman for the flagship show also was criticized, although guest host Mayim Bialik was named host for prime-time "Jeopardy!" specials.

The episodes that Richards taped during his short tenure as host are scheduled to air when the show returns for its 38th season starting Sept. 13; a do-over with a substitute host would be a slap at the contestants and further undermine the show.

Richards largely had game and reality shows on his resume, but "Jeopardy!" is widely regarded as something more: A contest that adheres to civility and is won on the basis of knowledge, and which had long been stewarded by the dignified Trebek. He died in November 2020 at age 80, shortly after taping his final shows.

Richards' comments on his "The Randumb Show" podcast were reported by The Ringer website, and the ensuing furor prompted him to announce that staying on as host would be "too much of a distraction for our fans" and wrong for the show.

On the podcast, Richards used derogatory, crude language about women and their bodies and disparaged the homeless, among others.

There also was renewed attention to Richards and his 2009-18 tenure as a producer on "The Price is Right." Several lawsuits had been filed by former models against the show alleging discriminatory behavior, including one which named Richards. He reportedly was dropped from it before a settlement was reached.

When Richards exited as host, Sony said the podcasts and their contents came as a surprise, vowing to hold him to a standard of "professionalism and respect" as producer.

That Sony failed to properly scrutinize Richards from the start was unsupportable, said Gillott, president of Gillott Communications.

The studio "created turmoil within the organization because it didn't ask the right questions in its search for a host, hesitated in responding to the controversy, and didn't sever all ties quickly," she said.

Victorious Taliban focus on governing after US withdrawal

By KATHY GANNON, TAMEEM AKHGAR and JOSEPH KRAUSS Associated Press

KABUL, Afghanistan (AP) — The Taliban reveled in their victory after the American withdrawal from Afghanistan, reiterating their pledge Tuesday to bring peace and security to the country after decades of war. Their anxious citizens, meanwhile, are waiting to see what the new order looks like.

Having humbled the world's most powerful military, the Taliban now face the challenge of governing a nation of 38 million people that relies heavily on international aid, and imposing some form of Islamic rule on a population that is far more educated and cosmopolitan than it was when the group last governed Afghanistan in the late 1990s.

Thousands who had worked with the U.S. and its allies, as well as up to 200 Americans, remained in the country after the massive airlift ended with the last U.S. soldiers flying out of Kabul international airport

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just before midnight Monday. President Joe Biden defended his handling of the withdrawal, saying the U.S. government had reached out 19 times since March to encourage all American citizens in Afghanistan to leave.

Turbaned Taliban leaders flanked by fighters from the group's elite Badri unit toured the airport Tuesday and posed for photos.

"Afghanistan is finally free," Hekmatullah Wasiq, a top Taliban official, told The Associated Press on the tarmac. "Everything is peaceful. Everything is safe."

He urged people to return to work and reiterated the Taliban's offer of amnesty to all Afghans who had fought against the group over the last 20 years. "People have to be patient," he said. "Slowly we will get everything back to normal. It will take time."

A long-running economic crisis has worsened since the Taliban's rapid takeover of the country in mid-August, with people crowding banks to maximize their daily withdrawal limit of about \$200. Civil servants haven't been paid in months and the local currency is losing value. Most of Afghanistan's foreign reserves are held abroad and currently frozen.

"We keep coming to work but we are not getting paid," said Abdul Maqsood, a traffic police officer on duty near the airport. He said he hasn't received his salary in four months.

A major drought threatens the food supply, and thousands who fled during the Taliban's lightning advance remain in squalid camps.

"Afghanistan is on the brink of a humanitarian catastrophe," said Ramiz Alakbarov, the local U.N. humanitarian coordinator. He said \$1.3 billion is needed for aid efforts, only 39% of which has been received.

The challenges the Taliban face in reviving the economy could give Western nations leverage as they push the group to fulfill a pledge to allow free travel, form an inclusive government and guarantee women's rights. The Taliban say they want to have good relations with other countries, including the United States.

There are few signs of the draconian restrictions the Taliban imposed last time they were in power. Schools have reopened to boys and girls, though Taliban officials have said they will study separately. Women are out on the streets wearing Islamic headscarves — as they always have — rather than the all-encompassing burqa the Taliban required in the past.

"I am not afraid of the Taliban," said Masooda, a fifth-grader, as she headed to school on Tuesday.

When the Taliban last ruled the country, from 1996 to 2001, they banned television, music and even photography, but there's no sign of that yet. TV stations are still operating normally and the Taliban fighters themselves can be seen taking selfies around Kabul.

On Tuesday, the sound of dance music trickled out of an upscale wedding hall in Kabul, where a celebration was in full swing inside.

Shadab Azimi, the 26-year-old manager, said at least seven wedding parties had been held since the Taliban takeover, with festivities moved to daytime because of security concerns. He said the Taliban have yet to announce any restrictions on music, but that wedding singers have canceled out of caution, forcing him to use tapes.

Azimi said a Taliban patrol stops by a couple times a day, but only to ask if he needs help with security. Unlike the now-disbanded police of the toppled, Western-backed government, the Taliban don't ask for bribes, he said.

"Former officials, including police officers, were always asking us for money and forcing us to host their friends for lunches and dinners," he said. "This is one of the positive points of the Taliban."

Abdul Waseeq, 25, runs a women's clothing shop in downtown Kabul selling Western-style jeans and jackets. The Taliban have left him alone, but his clientele seems to have vanished and he's concerned about the banking crisis.

"Most of our customers who were buying these kinds of clothes are gone, evacuated from Kabul," he said.

For now, the Taliban appear less interested in imposing restrictions on daily life than in getting the country running again, a task that could prove challenging to fighters who have spent most of their lives waging an insurgency in the countryside.

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They are expected to focus on the Kabul airport, where scenes of desperation and horror played out for weeks as tens of thousands fled in a massive U.S.-led airlift.

Early Tuesday, the airport was littered with artifacts of the withdrawal. Inside the terminal were scattered piles of clothes, luggage and documents. Several CH-46 helicopters used by American forces were parked in a hangar. The U.S. military says it disabled 27 Humvees and 73 aircraft before leaving.

Taliban spokesman Zabihullah Mujahid later said technical teams are "repairing and cleaning" the airport and advised people to avoid the area for the time being.

The Taliban have said they will allow people with legal documents to travel freely, but it remains to be seen whether any commercial airlines will be willing to offer service. The Taliban are expected to hold talks with Qatar and Turkey on resuming airport operations.

"I hope you will be very cautious in dealing with the nation," Mujahid said in a speech at the airport, addressing the Taliban fighters gathered there. "Our nation has suffered war and invasion, and the people do not have more tolerance."

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

Despite billions of dollars in Western aid over the past two decades, more than half of Afghans survive on less than a dollar a day. For the poorest, the change from one ruling system to another hardly matters in their daily struggle to survive.

Sal Mohammad, 25, collects scrap metal and sells it to support his wife and 2-year-old daughter. On a good day, he makes about \$5.

"I don't feel that anything has changed in my life since the Taliban took over Kabul," he said. "I don't care about any of them, neither the Taliban, nor the government, nor the U.S. I would like peace in my country, nothing more."

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

By TOM VERDIN Associated Press

SACRAMENTO, Calif. (AP) — The Caldor Fire roared over a ridge of the Sierra Nevada as the winds returned this week and bore down on the southern end of Lake Tahoe. Perhaps more than 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, 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 Eldorado National Forest, where the Caldor Fire has cut wide path of destruction, would be filled with day hikers, backpackers, campers, kayakers and paddleboarders. 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 warnings of dangerous weather in 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 BURNED?

The immediate danger is to South Lake Tahoe, the city of 22,000 that straddles the border between California and Nevada. That threat edged closer to reality Tuesday as wind-driven embers pierced the valley and ignited smaller blazes on the outskirts of town.

Before its run over the mountains at Echo Summit, the fire had already destroyed hundreds of homes where it originated in the Sierra Nevada 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.

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The news here is not all bad. Over the weekend, before the flames churned 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.

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 and, at night, s'mores and sing-a-longs around a well-protected campfire.

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 back-country of granite and lakes that was shaped by glaciers and now is being tested by fire.

WHAT IS SOUTH LAKE TAHOE?

The 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 before the coronavirus 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, bartenders, 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 the fire.

WHAT REMAINS IN THE FIRE'S PATH?

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, and its appetite is extending to heavily used recreation areas on the fringes of the Tahoe region. Crews are trying to keep it from yet another ski resort, Kirkwood, about 30 miles (48 kilometers) south of Tahoe, and the trout-fishing lakes, hiking trails and stands of quaking aspen, bursting with gold in fall, that surround it.

As the fire 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, fire and fear. The Range of Light has burst into a range of flame, and so far there is no stopping it.

New Taliban rulers face tough economic, security challenges

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By KATHY GANNON Associated Press

KABUL, Afghanistan (AP) — Afghanistan's new Taliban rulers face tough economic and security challenges as they step back into power in a country that is vastly different from the one they left 20 years ago.

When they last ruled in the late 1990s, Afghanistan was a poor agricultural nation, and the Taliban were preoccupied with imposing their harsh brand of Islam on an already deeply traditional and largely complacent population.

This time, they're inheriting a more developed society with a small, educated middle class, but also an economy that has been devastated by war and corruption. Even before the Taliban overran Kabul on Aug. 15, the jobless rate was more than 30% and more than half of Afghans lived in poverty, despite two decades of U.S. involvement and billions of dollars in aid.

The Taliban have sought to reassure Afghans that they've changed from 1996, when they ruled with a heavy hand. Men had to grow beards and women had to wear the all-encompassing burqa. Girls were denied education and entertainment like music and television were shunned.

That past haunts many Afghans, and there is an underlying sense of fear that the Taliban of old lurk below the surface of the country's new rulers. It's keeping many people away from returning to their jobs, despite assurances from the Taliban, and it has prompted thousands to seek a future outside Afghanistan.

"The Taliban's greatest challenge is to ... embrace others in governing Afghanistan," said Torek Farhadi, a former adviser to the toppled Western-backed government.

"They feel they have a military victory and it might seem strange for their ranks that they now have to gift positions of power to others," Farhadi said.

But, he added, a new government can only succeed if all Afghans, including women, can feel represented.

Several of the Taliban leaders who are now in charge in Kabul were part of the harsher regime of the 1990s, but they appear to have changed during their years in exile.

In 1996, Mullah Abdul Ghani Baradar barely wanted to travel to Kabul, content to stay in the southern provincial town of Kandahar. But in recent years, he has emerged as the top political negotiator, living in Qatar, the Gulf Arab nation that hosted a Taliban political office. Baradar has stood beside high-level Russian, Chinese and even U.S. political leaders.

Today's Taliban have been conciliatory, urging former opponents to return to the country and promising not to exact revenge.

Their first big test is the formation of a new government. They have promised it will include non-Taliban figures, but it's not clear if they are genuinely willing to share power.

An inclusive government could go far in slowing a mass exodus of Afghans, particularly the young and educated, and persuading the international community to keep sending desperately needed aid.

The Taliban have conflicting demands and constituencies to please. Even among the leaders, there are contradictory views of how to govern. In addition, Afghanistan's tribal elders are another powerful group that can't be ignored.

Then there are the thousands of fighters whose formative years have been spent on the battlefield and who are imbued with a sense of victory over a superpower. It's heady stuff for many of the young fighters, and convincing them that compromise is for the common good may be difficult, if not impossible.

In the past, groups of Taliban fighters who felt the movement had betrayed its original hard-line beliefs defected to the Islamic State group, now a major security threat in the country. Last week, an IS suicide bomber blew himself up outside Kabul's airport, killing 169 Afghans and 13 U.S. service members and disrupting the Taliban's efforts to facilitate a massive U.S. airlift.

Time also is not on the side of the Taliban.

The economy has been in the doldrums for years. If peace comes to Afghanistan, its citizens will increase their demands for economic relief — a near impossibility if the international community, which had funded 80% of former President Ashraf Ghani's government, withdraws its support.

A new government must deliver quickly and ease the economic crisis, said Michael Kugelman, an analyst at the Wilson Center, a U.S.-based think tank.

If it fails, "you have to start contemplating the possibility of large-scale protests against the Taliban that would clearly represent a major challenge to the Taliban as it attempts to consolidate its power," he said.

But how far the Taliban are willing to bend to ease international concerns, while staying true to their own set of beliefs, could further widen divisions among the leadership, particularly those with more rigid ideology.

Farhadi said there is a reservoir of expertise among Afghanistan's expatriates on which the Taliban could draw, but much rests on the face of the new government.

Kugelman said the Taliban need that expertise. .

"You have a regime that doesn't have any experience dealing with policy at a moment when you have a major policy crisis, compounded by the fact that the international community is going to cut off access to funds for this Taliban government," he said.

"And as always, it's the people, the Afghan people, who will suffer the most," he added.

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 centuries ago 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.

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.

Festival director Alberto Barbera said Tuesday he hopes the festival's 2021 edition will mark the "reopening that was not the case last year." But unlike the film festival in Cannes, which came back to life this year in France after skipping 2020, Venice still has to comply with stringent Italian anti-COVID restrictions.

A huge barricade once again is sealing off public access to the red carpet and there are limited chances for fans to catch VIP water taxi arrivals on the Lido. More than 10 testing stations have been set up, and festival-goers 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 still used."

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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.

Wine spat: Italy heir accuses Sting of slander, flat apology

By COLLEEN BARRY Associated press

MILAN (AP) — The heir of a late duke who sold Sting his Tuscan winery 25 years ago says the singer has hit a flat note with a lame apology for comments the family deems slanderous.

The juicy celebrity dispute has spilled onto the pages of Italian newspapers. Sting told the weekly magazine “Sette” on Aug. 13 that he was persuaded into buying the Palagio winery near Florence in 1997 after

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tasting an "excellent" glass of red wine offered by the owner, Simone Vincenzo Velluti Zati di San Clemente. The singer, however, said it later turned out that the wine was a Barolo from Italy's Piedmont region, and not a local Tuscan Chianti at all.

The magazine labeled the move "a hoax" and claimed the singer "had been tricked" into the purchase. Sting, in the interview, said he only realized the truth about the wine's origins after he had purchased the Palagio estate, including its vineyards, and he noticed guests pouring the Palagio red into the bushes rather than drinking it. He said he and his wife became determined to "avenge" themselves by producing "an excellent wine also from the Palagio vineyards."

The 45-year-old son of the duke, who died in 2012 at 86, wrote a long, stinging rebuke to Sting's accusations, calling them "slander, poisonous and completely false."

Simone Vincenzo Velluti Zati said it would have been completely out of character for his father to have passed off Barolo for Chianti, and said Sting's use of the interview and the anecdote to promote a new organic pizzeria on the estate was "in poor taste."

In his letter, Velluti Zati said Sting's allegations "not only do not respond to the truth, they are highly damaging to the memory of my father and to my reputation."

Sting responded with a letter on Aug. 24, which was obtained by The Associated Press, offering his "sincere and unequivocal apologies," and acknowledging that the story "as reported was disrespectful to the memory of your distinguished father."

Sting called the duke "an honorable man, who never misled me," and said the anecdote was instead self-deprecating, highlighting the fact that 25 years ago he was unable "to distinguish a Barolo from a bar of soap."

Velluti Zati told the AP on Tuesday that the apology was a "necessary act" from the singer that was hardly convincing. He has not decided yet whether to take any further action.

After leaked videos, Iran opens cases against prison guards

DUBAI, United Arab Emirates (AP) — Iranian prosecutors opened criminal cases against six guards at the country's notorious Evin prison, the judiciary reported on Tuesday, after footage showing the widespread abuse of detainees at the facility leaked out last week.

The judiciary's three-day investigation into mistreatment and grim conditions at Tehran's Evin prison had landed "some" prison guards in detention, said judiciary spokesman Zabihollah Khodaeian. Authorities also summoned two guards and punished others, Khodaeian said, without elaborating on the penalties or identifying the suspects.

The revelation comes days after The Associated Press published parts of the videos and a report about the abuse at the facility in northern Tehran, long known for holding political prisoners and those with ties to the West whom Iran uses as bargaining chips in international negotiations. An online account, purportedly by a self-described hacker group, shared footage of the incident, as well as parts of other surveillance video it seized.

"The scenes shown in the published films were against the law and it is not justifiable under any circumstances," said Khodaeian, noting that the leaked clips had been selected and edited from different scenes over the course of years.

In one part of the footage, a man smashes a bathroom mirror to try to cut open his arm. Prisoners — and even guards — beat each other in scenes captured by surveillance cameras. Inmates sleeping in single rooms with bunk beds stacked three high against the walls, wrapping themselves in blankets to stay warm.

Iran's judiciary ordered an investigation into the abuse last week after the head of the country's prison system acknowledged the videos were real, expressing contrition and saying he took responsibility for the "unacceptable behaviors."

Since its construction in 1971 under Iran's shah, the prison has seen a series of abuses that continued into the Islamic Republic.

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Today in History

By The Associated Press undefined

Today in History

Today is Wednesday, Sept. 1, the 244th day of 2021. There are 121 days left in the year.

Today's Highlight in History:

On Sept. 1, 1939, World War II began as Nazi Germany invaded Poland.

On this date:

In 1159, Pope Adrian IV, the only English pope, died.

In 1807, former Vice President Aaron Burr was found not guilty of treason. (Burr was then tried on a misdemeanor charge, but was again acquitted.)

In 1923, the Japanese cities of Tokyo and Yokohama were devastated by an earthquake that claimed some 140,000 lives.

In 1942, U.S. District Court Judge Martin I. Welsh, ruling from Sacramento, Calif., on a lawsuit brought by the American Civil Liberties Union on behalf of Fred Korematsu, upheld the wartime detention of Japanese-Americans as well as Japanese nationals.

In 1945, Americans received word of Japan's formal surrender that ended World War II. (Because of the time difference, it was Sept. 2 in Tokyo Bay, where the ceremony took place.)

In 1969, a coup in Libya brought Moammar Gadhafi to power.

In 1972, American Bobby Fischer won the international chess crown in Reykjavik (RAY'-kyuh-vik), Iceland, as Boris Spassky of the Soviet Union resigned before the resumption of Game 21. An arson fire at the Blue Bird Cafe in Montreal, Canada, claimed 37 lives.

In 1983, 269 people were killed when a Korean Air Lines Boeing 747 was shot down by a Soviet jet fighter after the airliner entered Soviet airspace.

In 1985, a U.S.-French expedition located the wreckage of the Titanic on the floor of the Atlantic Ocean roughly 400 miles off Newfoundland.

In 2005, New Orleans Mayor Ray Nagin issued a "desperate SOS" as his city descended into anarchy amid the flooding left by Hurricane Katrina.

In 2009, Vermont's law allowing same-sex marriage went into effect.

In 2015, invoking "God's authority," Rowan County, Kentucky, Clerk Kim Davis denied marriage licenses to gay couples again in direct defiance of the federal courts, and vowed not to resign, even under the pressure of steep fines or jail. (Davis would spend five days in jail; she was released only after her staff issued the licenses on her behalf but removed her name from the form.)

Ten years ago: In a fiery broadcast from hiding, Libya's Moammar Gadhafi warned that loyalist tribes in his main strongholds were armed and preparing for battle. Leaders and envoys from 60 countries and the U.N. met in Paris for talks with Libya's rebel-led National Transitional Council to map the country's future.

Five years ago: A massive fireball and explosion erupted at SpaceX's main launch pad at Cape Canaveral, destroying a rocket as well as a satellite that Facebook was counting on to spread internet service in Africa.

One year ago: Visiting Kenosha, Wisconsin, where he toured the charred remains of a city block, President Donald Trump blamed "domestic terror" for the violence that had followed the shooting of Jacob Blake, who'd been left paralyzed when he was shot in the back seven times by a police officer. Florida Gov. Ron DeSantis said he would lift the state's ban on visiting nursing homes; the ban had been in effect since mid-March over fears of spreading the coronavirus. U.S. Sen. Edward Markey of Massachusetts defeated U.S. Rep. Joe Kennedy III in a hard-fought Democratic Senate primary; it was the first time a Kennedy had lost a race for Congress in Massachusetts. With videoconferencing an integral part of daily life during the pandemic, the Wall Street market value of Zoom surged to more than \$129 billion, higher than Citigroup, Boeing and Starbucks.

Today's Birthdays: Actor George Maharis is 93. Conductor Seiji Ozawa (SAY'-jee oh-ZAH'-wah) is 86. Attorney and law professor Alan Dershowitz is 83. Comedian-actor Lily Tomlin is 82. Actor Don Stroud is 78. Conductor Leonard Slatkin is 77. Singer Archie Bell is 77. Singer Barry Gibb is 75. Rock musician Greg Errico

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is 73. Talk show host Dr. Phil McGraw is 71. Singer Gloria Estefan is 64. Jazz musician Boney James is 60. Singer-musician Grant Lee Phillips (Grant Lee Buffalo) is 58. Country singer-songwriter Charlie Robison is 57. Retired NBA All-Star Tim Hardaway is 55. Actor Ricardo Antonio Chavira is 50. Actor Maury Sterling is 50. Rock singer JD Fortune is 48. Actor Scott Speedman is 46. Country singer Angaleena Presley (Pistol Annies) is 45. Actor Boyd Holbrook is 40. Actor Zoe Lister-Jones is 39. Rock musician Joe Trohman is 37. Actor Aisling (ASH'-ling) Loftus is 31.