

# Groton Daily Independent

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## Position Opening

Parish Secretary opening for Bethesda- Butler Lutheran Churches. Approximately 25-30 hours per month with the option of some work from home hours. Mail resume to Bethesda Lutheran Church, PO Box 426, Bristol, SD 57219 before October 1st. (0914.0928)

## Upcoming Events

### Thursday, Sept. 16

Boys Golf at Dakota Magic Golf Course, 11 a.m.  
Cross Country at Lee Park Golf Course, 4 p.m.  
Volleyball hosting Mobridge-Pollock: 7th/C at 4 p.m., 8th/JV at 5 p.m., Varsity to follow (JV and Varsity matches to be broadcast live on GDILIVE.COM)



### Friday, Sept. 17

Homecoming Parade, 1 p.m.  
FFA Pork Loin Supper @ Football Field 5:30 PM  
TigerPalooza at GHS Gym, 2:30 p.m. to 4:30 p.m.  
Football hosting Mobridge-Pollock, 7 p.m.

### Saturday, Sept. 18

Girls Soccer at Garretson, 1 p.m.  
Boys Soccer at Freeman Academy, 5 p.m.  
Groton Fly-In/Drive-In at Groton Airport

## Homecoming Week Dress up days

Day	MS/HS	Elementary
Thursday	Class color Day	Pajama Day
Friday	Spirit Day	Spirit Day



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

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

## The Life of Arlis Doeden

Arlis Faye (Nepp) Doeden, wife of Douglas Duane Doeden (55 years) and mother to four angelic children, passed away on September 11th, 2021 at the age of 74 surrounded by her family.

Arlis was born on July 19, 1947 in Pipestone, MN to Mahlon and Una (Lopau) Nepp. On November 6, 1965 she married Douglas at Good Shepherd Lutheran Church and made their home on a farm by Lake Wilson, MN. They moved to Groton, SD in 1972 and became neighbors with their longtime friends Dave and Mary Blackmun.

Arlis loved being with family and friends, teaching and playing the piano, directing the church choir, and organizing and spearheading the Arlis Doeden Community Transit. Arlis felt blessed to have acquired many important friends through her years at 3M and other job endeavors. She developed strong relationships throughout her years working with the volunteers at transit and church creating lasting friendships. Arlis's passion for music drove her volunteerism which was embedded in her life in many facets through playing for the show choir, many community events, supporting other music teachers, etc. Arlis's favorite thing to do was spend time with Doug. They enjoyed bird watching, playing Euchre and Yahtzee, tending to their flower garden, attending sporting events and music productions, home decorating and remodeling projects, and having coffee with their friends.

Arlis was preceded in death by her husband, Doug, her parents Mahlon and Una, mother and father-in-law Jennie and Oliver Doeden and brother-in-law Kevin Doeden. She is survived by her children and their spouses; Jodene (Ward) Votapka, Troy (Chris) Doeden, Jillaine (Bob) Sheehan, Tobin (Liz) Doeden, 14 grandchildren, 6 great-grandchildren and extended family Pam and Brad Hanson. Arlis is also survived by brothers Harlan (Kathy) Nepp, Dale Nepp, Craig (Sheila) Nepp, sister Shirley (Charlie) Warren, brothers-in-law Harris (Linda) Doeden, Keith Doeden, sisters-in-law Pat (Bob) Idzorik, Peg (Harvey) Erstad and Sandy Doeden.

Funeral services for Arlis will be 10:00 a.m. Friday, September 17th at Paetznick-Garness Funeral Chapel, Groton. Pastor Kari Foss will officiate. Burial will follow in Union Cemetery, Groton. Visitation will be held at Emmanuel Lutheran Church on Thursday from 4-6 p.m. with a prayer service at 6:00 p.m.

Pallbearers: Chase McKittrick, Connor McKittrick, Camden Hurd, Jackson Doeden, Oliver Doeden, Cade Sheehan, Jonathan Doeden, Calder Sheehan,

Psalm 116 Readers: Sophie Doeden, Josie Doeden, Grace Doeden, Carma Sheehan Townsend, Jennie Doeden, Audrey Doeden.

Honorary Pallbearers: Jim Ackman, Dave Bergjord, Dave Blackmun, Rick Brunmeier, Randy Crawford, Jay Johnson, Marc Johnson, Randy Stanley.

Esteemed Transit & Home Coffee Crews: Jerry Bjerke, Dennis Larsen, Dave McGannon, Gordon Nelson, Tyke Nyberg, John Wheeting, June Ackman, Mary Blackmun, Melinda Eikamp, Pam Hanson, Jan Hoffman, Pat Nehls, Marge Overacker, Karen Wolter,

Transit Board: Sherry Kohler, Dick Kolker, Steve Smith, Topper Tastad, Lori Westby.



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## Good Luck Tigers During Homecoming Week!

**Boys Golf  
at Dakota  
Magic Golf  
Course  
Thursday**

A golf ball is depicted with a trail of fire and smoke behind it, suggesting speed and energy.

**Cross Country  
at Lee Park  
Aberdeen  
Thursday**

A silhouette of a cross-country runner is shown in a dynamic, forward-leaning pose, with a trail of fire and smoke behind them.

**Mobridge-  
Pollock  
Thursday  
7th-8th  
C-JV  
Varsity**

A volleyball is shown with a trail of fire and smoke behind it, indicating a fast-paced game.

**Boys at  
Freeman  
Academy  
Girls at  
Garretson  
Saturday**

A soccer ball is depicted with a trail of fire and smoke behind it, symbolizing a dynamic match.

**Mobridge-  
Pollock  
Friday  
7 p.m.  
Home**

A football is shown with a trail of fire and smoke behind it, representing a high-stakes game.

**Good Luck from these businesses and GDILIVE.COM sponsors for the volleyball match and football game.**

**Allied Climate Professionals with Kevin Nehls**

**Bahr Spray Foam**

**Blocker Construction**

**Bary Keith at Harr Motors**

**Greg Johnson Construction**

**Groton Daily Independent**

**Harry Implement**

**Jark Realty**

**John Sieh Agency**

**Lori's Pharmacy**

**Mike-N-Jo's Body-N-Glass**

**Milbrandt Enterprises Inc**

**S & S Lumber**

**Weismantel Insurance Agency**





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## #467 in a series

### Covid-19 Update: by Marie Miller

I'm a day early. So much information was building up that I didn't want to give it another day. These less-frequent Updates have been running long enough as it is. So here we are. Let's see what's new.

I had thought we were on a downward trend, but not so fast—maybe, and maybe not. New cases are a little difficult to read at the moment. Our seven-day new-case average was over 164,000 on September 2, dropped to just under 146,000, and is now back up at 152,177 as of midday today. These seven-day averages are used to smooth out the day-to-day fluctuations; but they're fluctuating too, so I'm not so sure just what we're seeing at this point. We're still down over 14 days, but this uptick is worrisome. I guess we'll see how things progress from here.

Thirteen states and territories are showing definite downward trends. Some states are at a high, but stable infection rate, which means they're in a terrible spot, but at least it's not getting worse. That doesn't mean we'll continue the trend. I hope we will, but almost half of states still have test positivity rates above 10 percent when three percent is considered the threshold of a safe return to more normal living. Twenty-seven states are still increasing by double-digits. I don't know where we're going from here, but this seems like a good time to stay with the program just a while longer in the hope we can get out ahead of this thing for good.

While Florida and Louisiana are showing big improvement, other southern states are stepping up to fill in the gaps. Tennessee, Kentucky, the Carolinas, Georgia, and Oklahoma are soaring with seven-day new case daily averages from 86 to an astonishing 160 per 100,000 residents. Kids are back in school, and little is being done in many places to mitigate transmission as that happens. Vaccination rates are running low too. Dr. Ryan Stanton, an emergency room doctor in Lexington, Kentucky, put it this way: "The problem now is we have been trying to educate based on science, but I think most of the education that is happening now is based on tragedy, personal tragedy." That is simply awful, but I've been thinking for some time this is what it's going to take. I wish that wasn't true.

We did manage to hit 41 million right on schedule as I projected on Sunday, and we did it shortly after I posted my last Update. That's never welcome news. I can't begin to express how eager I am for the day when I wonder whether we're going to ever hit the next million; but I'm afraid that day is far, far in our future. The number at midday today was 41,448,621. Here's the rundown:

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

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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  
September 5 – 40 million – 6 days  
September 12 – 41 million – 7 days

We're seeing hospitals continue to experience severe stresses; we finally dropped below 100,000 just yesterday—first time in nearly three weeks, but we still have 99,275 Covid-19 patients plugging up the works across the country. That puts us at 77 percent occupancy for all hospital beds in the nation; 80 percent of ICU beds were occupied this week. A quarter of hospitals have ICUs more than 95 percent full; as recently as June, that number was just one-tenth of hospitals. Because the current surge is uneven across the nation, some hospitals are in worse shape than others, and most of those hospitals are in the South. At the end of last week, Alabama had 60 more patients needing intensive care than ICU beds for them. Arkansas has just 23 ICU beds available statewide—and that's an improvement over recent weeks. Texas has 169 hospitals with ICUs more than 95 percent full and only around 700 beds left in the state. Florida has 24 hospitals with ICUs over capacity. Appalachian Regional Health Care, a 13-hospital system in Kentucky and West Virginia, reported on Tuesday they had zero ICU beds with 35 patients waiting for one to open up and three regular hospital beds available across its entire system. Kentucky's governor says they're rapidly approaching the point where they're going to have to go to crisis standards of care. Likewise, at one hospital in Anchorage, Alaska, they've gone to crisis standards as well; elective surgeries have been postponed, and patients are waiting for hours in their cars to see a physician. Dr. Kristin Solana Walkinshaw, senior leader at Providence Hospital in Anchorage, said in a message to the community that rationing may include dialysis and "specialized ventilatory support." That seems bad to this lay person. As a destination hospital for many people in outlying areas, this is a critical situation because Providence

is no longer able to accept their patients. Staffing shortages have become critical in many locations. We talked recently (Update #465 posted September 8 at <https://www.facebook.com/marie.schwabmiller/posts/5081888198494212> and Update #466 posted September 12 at <https://www.facebook.com/marie.schwabmiller/posts/5095356673814031>) about northern Idaho's need to go to crisis standards of care. Well, that's spreading to the rest of the state as transmission has continued unabated. The southwestern and southern parts of the state that contain the population centers are moving in that direction fast; ICUs and ventilator numbers are setting records. We know the vast majority of the folks in those Covid beds across the nation have not been vaccinated; Idaho, for example, is one of the least vaccinated states in the nation. We have Covid-19 patients dying while they wait for the level of care they need; transport to other facilities is frequently difficult in hard-hit areas because all the other hospitals are experiencing the same issues. We have patients waiting for needed surgical procedures because there's no staff available to care for them as they recover, resulting in canceled surgeries. And now we have people dying from non-Covid causes because the hospital beds they need for care after their heart attack or stroke are full of unvaccinated Covid-19 patients. I am hearing a great deal of frustration from all sides about this problem.

In the meanwhile, hospitals have plans in place to deal with situations like we're in right now. Some have plans to add more beds, something we've seen a lot of over the past 20 months—beds in the cafeterias and tents in parking lots, transferring patients around to other facilities, stopping elective procedures (that is, anything that isn't an actual emergency); but as we've discussed before, the real limiting factor is staff. It doesn't help to have another 20 ICU beds if you don't have people to care for the patients in these beds. There was a health care staffing shortage well before Covid-19 showed up; the pandemic has exacerbated the problem: Some people got Covid and died. Other people burned out and quit. Still others have worked so much overtime and so many extra shifts for so many months that they are simply unable to continue doing it. Staffing agencies' people are equally burnt out, and they're simply not as available.

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What it comes down to in the worst instances is making decisions about how much care you can provide to whom—rationing. I've been hearing a lot of stuff about how hospitals have an ethical obligation to care for all who present themselves for care, about how their staffs have a professional obligation to take all comers, about how health care is a human right. None of that is false; but if you don't have anyone else to call and there's no one available to take the patient, you're up against a hard stop. We cannot manufacture more nurses or therapists or physicians. We already have students doing the work of fully-qualified professionals in some locations because there's no other option. So some institutions are having to make some hard choices. The Emergency Medical Treatment and Labor Act (EMTALA) requires emergency departments to screen and stabilize anyone who comes in, and that is happening. But what do you do when your emergency department is bursting at the seams with people you can't move to the ICU or to a ward because those places are full-up? Some people will die waiting for care. I don't have a solution to this problem, and as long as the system is overwhelmed by people with Covid-19—and that is the current situation in places—then we're in this bad spot where some folks will die because no one can care for them. What's wrong with this picture?

Let's complicate it in one more way. We talked last week about much of northern Idaho having moved to crisis standards of care and above about the rest of the state following them, but that is having consequences elsewhere—outside of Idaho. Idaho, which has eschewed pretty much all attempts at mitigating transmission—no rules on masking, distancing, quarantining students, capacity limits, etc.—and one of the lowest vaccination rates in the nation as well, has been transferring patients to hospitals in neighboring Washington. In Washington, there are a statewide requirement to mask indoors, quarantine rules in schools, and vaccination mandates for many workers, as well as one of the highest vaccination rates in the nation; but eastern Washington (the part that borders on Idaho), a region with lower vaccination rates than the rest of the state, is experiencing its own a surge at the moment. The influx of new patients from Idaho's unchecked transmission is putting some already crowded Washington hospitals in danger of needing to go to crisis standards for care too. This certainly isn't the only border between states with significantly different approaches to this virus, so I'm wondering where else this sort of scenario is playing out.

Seven-day average deaths is at 1888, highest number since March 2 and still increasing by 40 percent over a 14-day period. We all know the drill by now; it's going to take some time for this to catch up, even if new cases are really decreasing. Deaths always lag hospitalizations which always lag new cases. That means the numbers are going to be fairly terrible for a couple of weeks at least. As of midday today, we have lost 664,231 lives to this virus so far in the pandemic.

We talked about this next possibility months and months ago, back last August in my Update #177 posted August, 18, 2020, at <https://www.facebook.com/marie.schwabmiller/posts/4004519329564443>. (Other mentions were in Update #152 posted on July 24, 2020, at <https://www.facebook.com/marie.schwabmiller/posts/3802390993110612> and Update #213 posted September 23, 2020, at <https://www.facebook.com/marie.schwabmiller/posts/4004519329564443>.) And now we have the first US trial of Covid-sniffing dogs. Two dogs, One Betta and Cobra, are trained to smell the subtle metabolic changes seen in Covid-19 patients and show remarkable accuracy in detecting infection, even in asymptomatic people. They are deployed at Miami International Airport, where they sniff the face masks of airline and airport employees to detect the presence of virus in sweat and breath. Anyone who alerts the dogs is asked to take a rapid Covid test to confirm. One Betta has had 98.1 percent accuracy, and Cobra is at 99.4 percent; so these guys are good, better than most of our diagnostic or screening tests. At this point, the sniff test is voluntary, so those with phobias about dogs or other concerns can avoid it. The pilot project is slated for two months, but there is a possibility the program can expand. While the dogs are expensive and laborious to train, there may well be a place for this sort of instantaneous detection.

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From the earliest days of this pandemic, we've known that asymptomatic infections had consequences not just for transmission, but for the infected person as well; now we're homing in on what those consequences might be. Of 54 percent of 76 asymptomatic passengers on the Diamond Princess, the cruise ship anchored off the coast of Japan for weeks in the spring of last year, we were seeing fluid build-up in their lungs; that's not normal. Further studies of asymptomatic individuals have occurred in often-tested populations like college athletes, health care workers, and other workplaces with testing protocols. What we're seeing from those is blood clots in the kidneys, lungs, and brain leading to seizures, strokes, heart attacks, and death; heart damage from myocarditis (inflammation of the heart muscle); an inflammatory disorder; and long-Covid with its pain, breathing problems, fatigue, brain fog, dizziness, sleep disturbances, and high blood pressure. We're not sure what all is causing these symptoms, but around one in five—and maybe up to one-third of—asymptomatic patients show up with long-Covid symptoms, some of which are disabling. There is a need for more follow-up on people diagnosed with Covid-19 to identify those who will have lingering issues.

Friday the FDA's Vaccines and Related Biologic Products Advisory Committee meets to discuss booster doses of vaccines. Their decision may be informed by a letter published Monday in *The Lancet* by an international group of vaccine scientists, including a couple who are in charge of matters related to vaccines at the FDA. The letter reviews the state of research with respect to the safety and efficacy of a booster dose and concludes that the quality of the available evidence that argues for additional doses is not great, pointing out the kinds of flaws inherent in the sorts of observational studies available and the ways in which these flaws make it difficult to draw firm conclusions. Their overall recommendation is that we can get much further toward bringing the pandemic under control by using our existing supply to vaccinate the unvaccinated than by offering additional doses to the fully vaccinated and that there is insufficient evidence of a waning level of protection in the vaccinated. They say, "Current evidence does not, therefore, appear to show a need for boosting in the general population, in which efficacy against severe disease remains high."

On the other hand, I am seeing statements from other well-regarded vaccine scientists who make a strong case that additional doses may keep more people out of the hospital and interrupt transmission by and from vaccinated people, which would do much to tamp down outbreaks. I see a new study from Israel has been published in the *New England Journal of Medicine* today that finds "that the rates of confirmed Covid-19 and severe illness were substantially lower among those who received a booster (third) dose of the BNT162b2 [Pfizer/BioNTech] vaccine." Lots of very smart people on both sides of this one.

Additionally, the FDA released their review of Pfizer/BioNTech's application for authorization of booster doses and the company's briefing document for the meeting today. Pfizer's document said, fairly predictably—they are applying for approval, after all—that "[t]he totality of the available data supports the public health need for a booster (third) dose of BNT162b2 at approximately 6 months after the second dose of BNT162b2 for individuals 16 years of age and older." If they couldn't make this statement, I'm guessing they'd have sat on the application for a while longer. I read the Israeli paper, the review, and the briefing document, but I'm not smart enough to know how all of this fits into what else is known or how it should influence the Committee. I will say that the FDA review doesn't give any hint at all of which way the wind's blowing in the agency on this one; often it will. Most people who know things are expecting a more, shall we say, exciting meeting than the ones held so far to deal with Covid-19 vaccines. Since the meeting is open, I guess we'll find out on Friday how all of this plays out. I have no prediction at all.

Speaking of vaccines, I am aware there are many parents eagerly anticipating the day when their 5- to 11-year-old children can be vaccinated. Pfizer announced Tuesday that they plan to submit their data with



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a request for emergency use authorization (EUA) in this age group in early October and for ages 6 months to 5 in November, and the FDA had already issued a statement on Friday that said the agency is "prepared to complete its review as quickly as possible, likely in a matter of weeks rather than months." So if the quality of the data submitted is high, then I'm thinking that vaccine may start going into the older group's arms by late October or early November, and I think we could see an EUA for the very young children by the end of the year.

Moderna indicates they are also nearing the point where they're going to be able to make a submission too; that will be later, however, probably another month or two down the road. Janssen/Johnson & Johnson is farther behind. Dr. Rochelle Walensky, director of the CDC, said on the Today Show on Monday that her agency is working "with urgency." I think everyone gets how critical this is to having these kids in schools safely, and no one is inclined to slow-walk any part of the approval process. So they do need to make sure these vaccines are safe for children, that they have the optimal dose for them, and that they work; but I think it's going to happen as quickly as possible given the amount of work left to be done.

Also with respect to children's safety, Walensky spoke on Monday about masking in schools. She made it clear that there is no science to support claims that masking is in any way harmful to children: "We have not seen any science that defends that point of view." And she discussed data from Los Angeles County showing that rates of infection in children are "three and a half times higher in areas that have not practiced the mitigation strategies compared to those that are," adding that "masks really are the way to go." She also cited data from Georgia from last year that show schools using masks have 37 percent less closure due to outbreaks. "I would say that data actually absolutely show that masking decreases outbreaks in schools." I've been hearing a lot of hokum lately about how masks are suffocating people and don't make any difference in limiting transmission anyway; one such claimed that massive masking study in Bangladesh showed that masking is pointless. Spoiler: The study shows just the opposite—and yes, I actually read the paper; that's how you figure out what it says. We discussed this just a couple of weeks ago; check out my Update #464 posted September 4 at <https://www.facebook.com/marie.schwabmiller/posts/5069167656432933>.

I ran across a research article published in Health Affairs from a team at Indiana University and the RAND Corporation that assesses the impact of the early vaccination campaign in the US between December 21, 2020, and May 9, 2021. I will note I am unable to access the paper itself, so I am relying on the abstract and a summary here. The researchers used modeling to estimate the early rollout was associated in that time period with a reduction of over 139,000 deaths in the US; that averages out to five per 10,000 adult residents. The reductions varied across different states, but taken together and computing the value of statistical life (a topic we discussed a long time ago in my Update #92 posted on May 25 at <https://www.facebook.com/marie.schwabmiller/posts/3624789104204136>), the benefit from this rollout works out to between \$625 billion and \$1.4 trillion. That's a lot of money for an investment of around \$13 billion. Not surprisingly, Sumedha Gupta, first author, an economist at Indiana University-Purdue University, was quoted in RAND's news release about the study saying, "Our results suggest that further attempts to vaccinate populations globally and in a coordinated fashion will be critical to achieving greater control of the COVID-19 pandemic."

I also read a data analysis from the Kaiser Family Foundation of preventable hospitalization costs over a three-month period, June, July, and August, 2021. They adjusted for the fact that not every person hospitalized who had Covid-19 was hospitalized for Covid-19, so they excluded those who were in for something else and were only incidentally diagnosed as Covid-19-positive. That means they worked from only those who were hospitalized primarily for Covid-19. They also accounted for the fact that some proportion of hospitalized patients with Covid-19 are vaccinated and adjusted for that as well so that vaccinated folks



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didn't mess up their calculations. They then adjusted for the fact that, if all of those unvaccinated people had been vaccinated, some proportion of those would have ended up hospitalized with breakthroughs anyhow; and in the end, the numbers they came up with were 32,000 preventable hospitalizations in June; 68,000 in July; and 187,000 in August.

The research team was able to estimate an average hospitalization cost per patient at \$20,000. They acknowledge that there are limitations to this estimate, but note that it is likely an underestimate. This is because it does not include the substantial costs for what are typically several outpatient visits before admission (and also excludes costs for outpatients who were never hospitalized), it is a lowball estimate even from the data used, and it omits the costs for treating vaccinated people these preventably-hospitalized folks exposed who themselves later had breakthroughs and required treatment. That gets us to actually preventable costs, but not all of them. Even so, the bottom line is these models show that, in the three-month period under analysis, the preventable hospitalization costs for those unvaccinated folks comes to something in the neighborhood of \$5.7 billion. That's a pretty fancy neighborhood, huh?

I guess the B.1.617.2 or Delta variant, first identified in India, is more transmissible in non-human primates too. That outbreak at Zoo Atlanta I mentioned last time we talked has spread from just four to 18 of the 20 lowland gorillas at the zoo over just these few days. While the gorillas live in four troops, there is a great deal of interaction among the troops, so it makes sense that we're seeing this sort of spread. Still, a 90 percent attack rate is really, really high—and who knows, maybe the other two will turn up infected yet too. It appears the source was a fully-vaccinated employee who, despite wearing protective gear, managed to transmit the infection to the animals before she showed symptoms or was tested and diagnosed. For the record, while it is clear humans can transmit the infection to gorillas, there is no evidence to date that the gorillas can return the favor; and zoo visitors are kept too far from these primates to be at any risk of transmission at any rate.

That's it for today. Stay well, and let's hope we don't get back together again too soon. In a pandemic, no news is good news.

**Help Wanted: Ken's in Groton**  
**Cashiers, stockers and deli**  
**Apply at store**



To encourage and uplift the next generation of South Dakota artists  
submissions are open for the



**TWELVE** talented student artists  
from **FOUR** age divisions  
will have their work selected  
for display in the South Dakota Capitol Building  
**AND** have the chance to sell their artwork  
to become part of the state art collection!

**DEADLINE: November 12, 2021**

The competition is open to all K-12 South Dakota students  
who may submit their artwork  
for consideration in the exhibition.

Submissions are accepted electronically.  
Details can be found on the  
South Dakota Governor's Student Art Competition page at  
[artscouncil.sd.gov](http://artscouncil.sd.gov)



## Department of Health & Board of Nursing Warn of Scam Targeting South Dakota Nurses

PIERRE, S.D. – Today, the South Dakota Health Department (SD-DOH) and the South Dakota Board of Nursing (SD-BON) released this statement after ongoing reports of scams targeting licensed nurses. The scam is being carried out via threatening phone calls/email.

The scammers tell potential victims that their license is or will be suspended/revoked pending an investigation into their activities, and that they must pay a set dollar amount, within a certain time frame, to have such action(s) against them reversed.

“The Department of Health and Board of Nursing would like to remind all nurses in South Dakota that legitimate Department/Board business never asks for personal information nor requests payment in connection to any potential disciplinary action. No board of nursing operates this way, and all nurses have the right to due process. We will be forwarding all received complaints to the Attorney General’s office for review.” SD-DOH & SD-BON

In some cases, the scammer instructs victims to wire or e-transfer money to accounts or recipients that are located outside the country, another red-flag for all potential victims. The SD-BON asks that all nurses with questions regarding their license status call 605-362-2760. If you receive a call from this number that seems suspicious, as scammers can spoof caller ID, hang up and call the number back.

“It’s despicable that there are those out there targeting our frontline medical heroes in the midst of a pandemic,” added Kim Malsam-Rysdon, Secretary of Health.

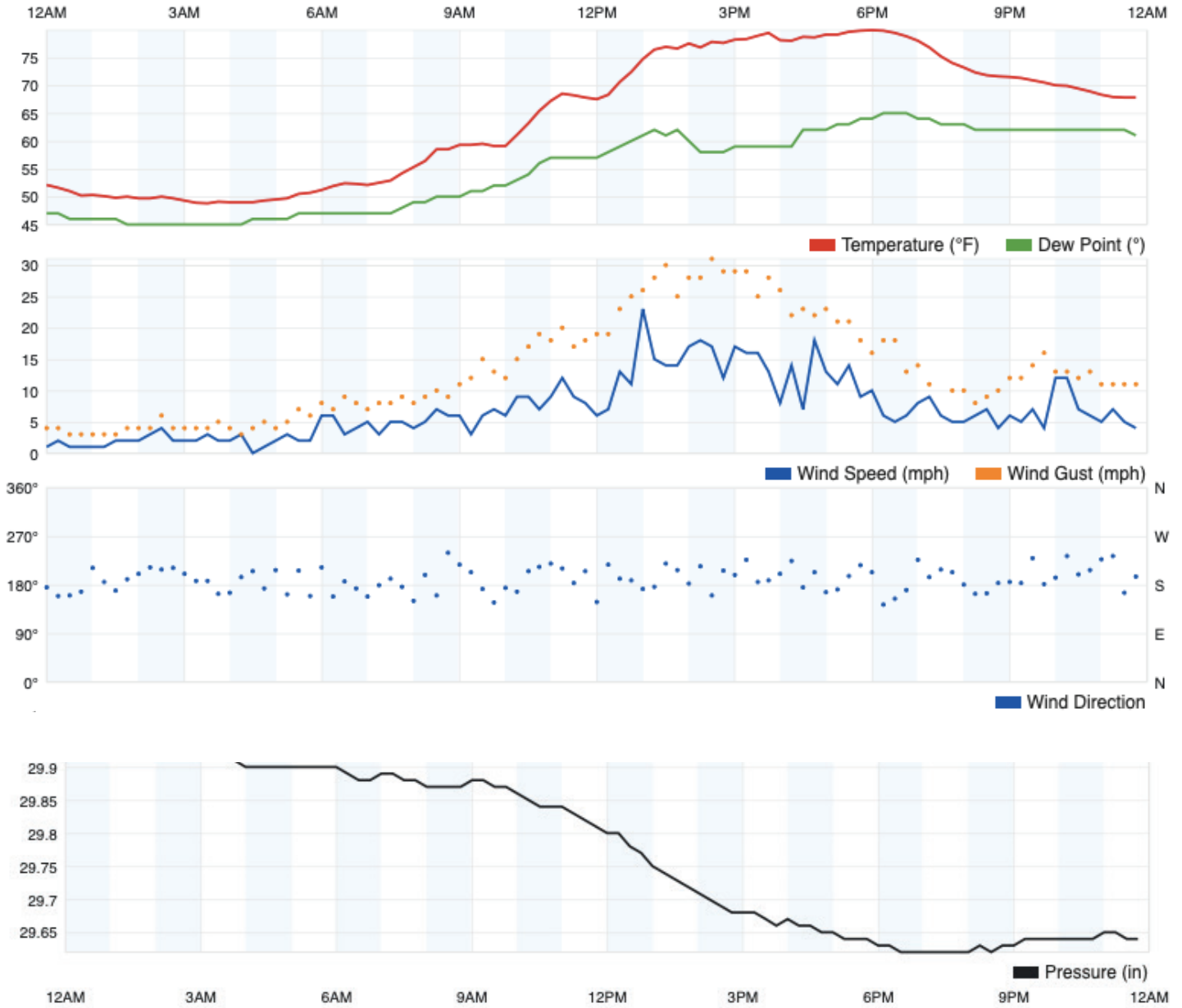
It’s not clear how many of South Dakota’s roughly 25,000 licensed nurses may have been targeted or contacted by the scammers. If you have been contacted or fallen victim to this scam, contact the Attorney General’s Division of Consumer Protection at 800-300-1986 or fill out a complaint form.



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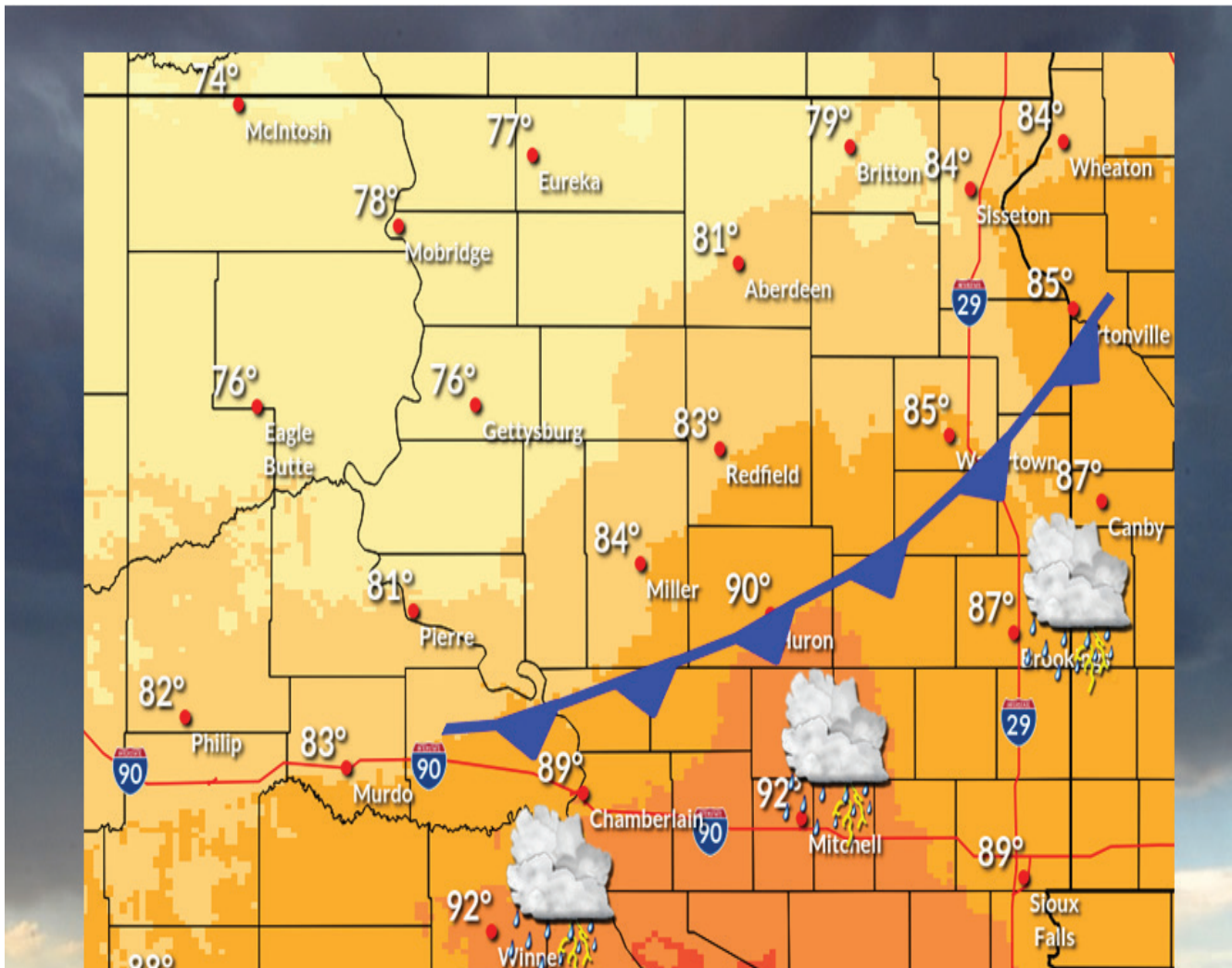
## Yesterday's Groton Weather Graphs



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Today	Tonight	Friday	Friday Night	Saturday
				
Sunny	Partly Cloudy then Slight Chance Showers	Sunny	Mostly Clear	Sunny
High: 81 °F	Low: 49 °F	High: 69 °F	Low: 48 °F	High: 81 °F



We could see a few storms fire along a front this afternoon but the greater risk for severe weather looks to move south and east through the afternoon hours, out of the forecast area. Temperatures will see a cool down this evening and for Friday.

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## Today in Weather History

September 16, 1965: A heavy snow event brought widespread snowfall across the region with snowfall accumulations of 1 inch in Colony and Devils Tower, 2.6 inches at the Rapid City Airport, 4 inches in Oelrichs, 5.1 inches in Redig, and 8 inches in Lead, Spearfish, and Sundance.

September 16, 2006: Two weak tornadoes touched down briefly west and north of Clark in the late afternoon. No damage occurred.

1881: Iowa's earliest measurable snow of record fell over western sections of the state. Four to six inches was reported between Stuart and Avoca.

1888: An estimated F2 tornado struck Washington, DC. The tornado first touched down on the south side of the city then moved up Maryland Avenue. The National Museum and Botanical Gardens were damaged before the tornado lifted off the ground.

1928: The Okeechobee Hurricane, also known as the San Felipe Segundo Hurricane was one of the deadliest hurricanes in the history of the Atlantic basin. This Hurricane made landfall near West Palm Beach, Florida as a Category 4 storm during the evening hours of the 16th. The storm surge caused water to pour out of the southern edge of Lake Okeechobee, flooding hundreds of square miles as high as 20 feet. This storm killed over 4,000 people, including 2,500 in Florida.

1984 - The remains of Tropical Storm Edourd began to produce torrential rains in the Lower Rio Grande Valley of Texas. Port Isabel reported more than 21 inches. (The Weather Channel)

1987 - Overnight rains soaked Arkansas, with 5.25 inches reported at Bismarck. In the town of Malvern, up to four feet of water was reported over several downtown streets, with water entering some homes and businesses. Thunderstorms in Texas drenched Lufkin with 4.30 inches of rain in just three hours. Evening thunderstorms produced severe weather in Missouri. A small tornado near Kirksville lifted a barn thirty feet into the air and then demolished it. (The National Weather Summary) (Storm Data)

1988 - Hurricane Gilbert moved ashore into Mexico. The hurricane established an all-time record for the western hemisphere with a barometric reading of 26.13 inches. Winds approached 200 mph, with higher gusts. Gilbert devastated Jamaica and the Yucatan Peninsula. (The Weather Channel) Hurricane Gilbert made landfall 120 miles south of Brownsville TX during the early evening. Winds gusted to 61 mph at Brownsville, and reached 82 mph at Padre Island. Six foot tides eroded three to four feet off beaches along the Lower Texas Coast, leaving the waterline seventy-five feet farther inland. Rainfall totals ranged up to 8.71 inches at Lamar TX. Gilbert caused three million dollars damage along the Lower Texas Coast, but less than a million dollars damage along the Middle Texas Coast. (The National Weather Summary) (Storm Data)

1989 - Showers and thunderstorms, representing what remained of Hurricane Octave, brought locally heavy rains to California, impeding the drying process for raisins and other crops. Sacramento CA was soaked with 1.53 inches of rain in six hours. At Phoenix AZ, the afternoon high of 107 degrees marked a record seventy-six days with afternoon highs 105 degrees or above. (The National Weather Summary) (Storm Data)



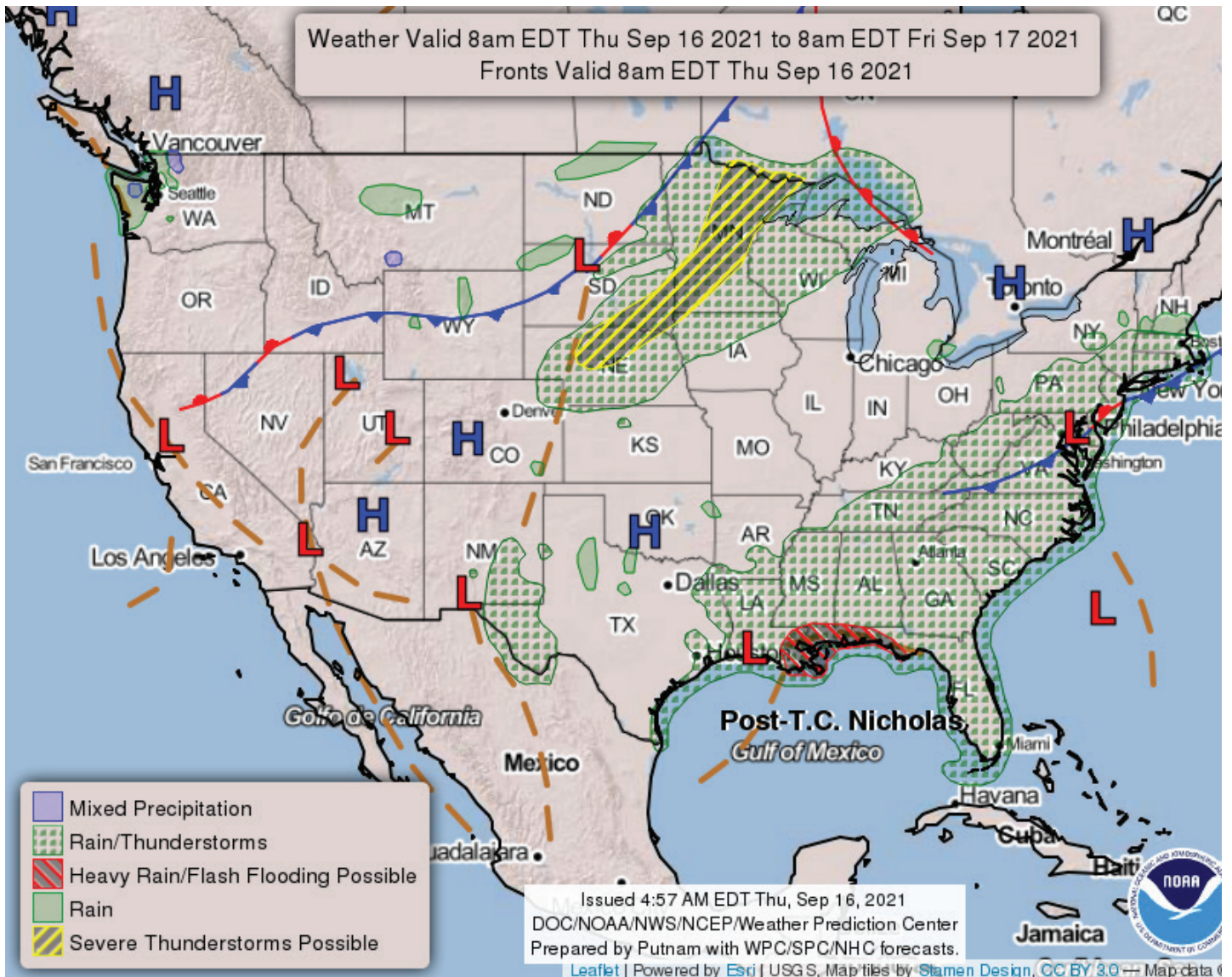
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## Yesterday's Groton Weather Today's Info

**High Temp: 79.9 °F at 6:00 PM**  
**Low Temp: 48.8 °F at 3:30 AM**  
**Wind: 31 mph at 2:30 PM**  
**Precip: 0.00**

**Record High: 96° in 1925**  
**Record Low: 20° in 1916**  
**Average High: 75°F**  
**Average Low: 47°F**  
**Average Precip in Sept.: 1.08**  
**Precip to date in Sept.: 2.32**  
**Average Precip to date: 17.42**  
**Precip Year to Date: 15.16**  
**Sunset Tonight: 7:42:50 PM**  
**Sunrise Tomorrow: 7:12:30 AM**



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## ARE YOU LISTENING?

A family in Calgary, Alberta, Canada purchased a well-trained and very expensive guard dog to protect their home and belongings. It brought them great peace and comfort and reduced their fears of someone invading their home.

One evening as the family gathered together to watch their favorite television program, the dog began to bark. "Hush, Sarge," said the father. But Sarge refused to stop barking and looked anxiously from one family member to another. They refused to be bothered as they watched the show. It was too entertaining.

Finally, the program was over, and the father excused himself and went upstairs to go to bed. As he entered his bedroom, he realized that the dog had been trying to get their attention. A thief had carefully and quietly entered their home, opened their safe and stolen their most valuable possessions. The repeated warnings of the dog could not get their attention to alert them to danger. The value of his warnings went unheeded.

"Today," (or - a more literal translation - "listen to Me now") warned the Psalmist, "if you hear His voice, do not harden your hearts!" Often God tries to "get our attention" to warn us of impending dangers. He does His best to speak to us through His Word or a friend, a verse of Scripture or a sermon. He reaches out to us in love and compassion - anxious to warn us of the attractiveness of self-destructive behaviors that destroy us. The power of temptation blinds us from seeing destruction that awaits us. But, like the family in Canada, we are so often too involved in the things of this world to hear His warning.

Prayer: Lord, open our ears to hear, our eyes to see, and our minds to be alert to the temptations we face constantly. May we listen for Your voice. In Jesus' Name, Amen.

Scripture For Today: Today, if only you would hear his voice, Do not harden your hearts as you did at Meribah. Psalm 95:7b-8

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## 2021 Community Events

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



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## News from the Associated Press

### SD Lottery

By The Associated Press undefined

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

Dakota Cash

02-04-16-28-29

(two, four, sixteen, twenty-eight, twenty-nine)

Estimated jackpot: \$88,000

Lotto America

08-19-33-34-37, Star Ball: 9, ASB: 3

(eight, nineteen, thirty-three, thirty-four, thirty-seven; Star Ball: nine; ASB: three)

Estimated jackpot: \$2.85 million

Mega Millions

Estimated jackpot: \$405 million

Powerball

01-04-18-46-62, Powerball: 25, Power Play: 3

(one, four, eighteen, forty-six, sixty-two; Powerball: twenty-five; Power Play: three)

Estimated jackpot: \$432 million

### South Dakota enlists Trump attorney in abortion lawsuit

SIOUX FALLS, S.D. (AP) — South Dakota has enlisted one of former President Donald Trump's lead attorneys to help in its attempt to lift a decade-old injunction that nullified part of a state law requiring women to consult with a crisis pregnancy center before having an abortion, the governor and attorney general said Wednesday.

Jay Sekulow, who was one of President Donald Trump's lead attorneys during his impeachment trial last year, will offer the services of his firm, the American Center for Law and Justice, for free, the governor's and attorney general's offices said. The nonprofit Christian legal advocacy group is based in Washington, D.C.

The announcement comes after the state revived a fight over a 2011 law that required women seeking an abortion to consult with a pregnancy center that often discourages women from having an abortion. Judge Karen Schreier, who was appointed under President Bill Clinton, ordered an injunction that kept the law from taking effect.

After Schreier ruled against the state's attempt to lift the injunction last month, the state appealed to the U.S. 8th Circuit Court of Appeals.

Sekulow was one of Trump's most visible defenders, enduring as a trusted attorney for the president even as other of his lawyers have been sidelined or entangled in controversy.

Noem first made the announcement Wednesday, calling Sekulow "a brilliant conservative legal mind."

Roughly an hour later, Attorney General Jason Ravensborg released a statement saying that he had consulted with Sekulow and appointed him and his staff as "special assistant attorneys general."

Ravensborg and Noem, both Republicans, have become political enemies as Noem has pressed for the attorney general to step down from his office for a car crash last year that killed a pedestrian.

### South Dakota Recognizes Clean Energy Week 2021

WASHINGTON, Sept. 15, 2021 /PRNewswire/ -- South Dakota Governor Kristi Noem has issued a proclamation recognizing September 20-24, 2021 as Clean Energy Week in the state in conjunction with National Clean Energy Week (NCEW) 2021.

Last year, Governor Noem, along with more than half of the nation's governors, signed proclamations

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officially recognizing Clean Energy Weeks in their respective states. In her proclamation, Governor Noem notes that in 2020, South Dakota ranked fourth in the nation in ethanol production capacity and that 83 percent of utility-scale electricity generated in the state came from renewable sources including hydro-electric power and wind energy.

"Thank you, Governor Noem for recognizing the important role that clean energy plays in addressing South Dakota's economic and energy needs through your Clean Energy Week proclamation," said Heather Reams, chair of NCEW and executive director of Citizens for Responsible Energy Solutions (CRES). "Today, 85 percent of greenhouse gas emissions are created outside of the United States. This means that U.S. energy and climate policy must foster innovation and commercialization pathways that work as well for South Dakota as they do for India. The fifth annual NCEW and the Policy Makers Symposium will provide a bipartisan platform to learn more about what is ahead for clean energy and build the necessary bridges between policy, finance, and innovation to make strides in this critical area."

"The State of South Dakota supports an all-inclusive energy portfolio because affordable energy is the backbone of a strong economy," said Governor Noem in her proclamation. "We must harness the power of South Dakota's entrepreneurs and small businesses and promote government collaboration to ensure South Dakota and the United States continue to lead with energy in the global marketplace and provide low-cost, reliable energy here at home."

Founded in 2017, NCEW brings together government officials, industry associations, businesses, non-profits, and advocates in the clean energy space for events in Washington, D.C., and across America. The weeklong recognition honors the clean energy sector's contributions to America's economic strength while reducing global emissions. Among the unique programming offered throughout the week, the NCEW Policy Makers Symposium will convene lawmakers, energy advocates, and private sector leaders for enlightening and influential clean energy and climate policy discussions.

Additional information about NCEW—including sponsorship opportunities, in-person events, examples of how businesses and communities can show their support, and registration for the Policy Makers Symposium—is available at <https://nationalcleanenergyweek.org/>.

National Clean Energy Week (NCEW), described by POLITICO as "a veritable who's who of the Clean Energy World," is an annual awareness week to recognize the value of clean energy including abundant job opportunities, economic growth, energy independence, consumer choice, lower energy prices, and a cleaner environment. Follow NCEW on Twitter (@NCEWConf) and Facebook (NationalCleanEnergyWeek) for event updates. [www.nationalcleanenergyweek.org](http://www.nationalcleanenergyweek.org)

View original content to download multimedia: <https://www.prnewswire.com/news-releases/south-dakota-recognizes-clean-energy-week-2021-301377842.html>

SOURCE Citizens for Responsible Energy Solutions

## Former South Dakota House majority leader dies

SIoux FALLS, S.D. (AP) — A former South Dakota lawmaker who helped ban smoking in bars and restaurants and served as House majority leader died this week.

Bob Faehn, who was 63, died from cancer on Monday, according to his family. Gov. Kristi Noem ordered that flags be flown half-staff at the Capitol on Friday in his honor.

During his tenure in the state House from 2005 to 2010, Faehn, a Republican, pushed a bill to ban smoking in bars and restaurants. He also worked in South Dakota media, starting as an ad salesman and sportswriter at the Watertown Public Opinion and eventually starting KXLG Radio in Watertown.

"The smoking issue was his number one concern," said Sen. Lee Schoenbeck, who was friends with Faehn. "He was a force for good in our community."

Schoenbeck said he and Faehn initially found themselves on opposing sides of political races in the Watertown area, but became friends sharing car rides to Pierre during the legislative session.

As the House majority leader from 2009 to 2010, Faehn worked closely with Noem, who was the assistant majority leader at the time.

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She said in a statement, "Bob was a dear friend, and it was a tremendous privilege to serve as his assistant majority leader."

## Editorial Roundup: South Dakota

By The Associated Press undefined  
Yankton Press & Dakotan. September 14, 2021.  
Editorial: Broadway Frontage Discussion Needed

An old discussion over a potentially prime piece of real estate is being revived by the Yankton City Commission.

At their meeting Monday, city commissioners talked briefly about the possibility of developing the property along Broadway west of the city cemetery. Further talks are expected.

This is more than seven acres of empty land situated along what could now fairly be viewed as Yankton's main street and certainly one of the most high-profile portions of the community.

The frontage land has long sat empty and undeveloped. Several decades ago, this property was nestled mostly on the outskirts of the city. But as Yankton has grown to the north, the Broadway land that slopes gently down from the cemetery (which is technically located along Douglas Ave.) has sat largely untouched.

Commissioners are broaching a topic last discussed in 2007, when an idea to possibly develop the property was brought up and dismissed. It comes up again because of requests that have been fielded from potential developers about the land.

This would be a good time to revisit the issue. The discussion can better gauge where the community is on the matter and what advantages and disadvantages may come with developing this property.

Contrary to what many people believe, the land is not platted or set aside for cemetery expansion, Community & Economic Development Director Dave Mingo noted Monday. Even without the Broadway frontage, it's estimated that, at the current burial rate, the city cemetery has more than 160 years of space available.

But the principle of the geography — developing land adjacent to the grounds of a municipal cemetery — remains a delicate subject.

Thus, the conversation is needed.

That area of Yankton has changed greatly during the last 30 years. The Fox Run development, located literally across the street (albeit a four-lane one) from the Broadway frontage in question, turned what was once a large block of mostly rural land into a sprawling development filled with businesses, housing and a golf course. It dramatically expanded the city's reach north to West Highway 50 and beyond. Thus, what was essentially open country has become an urbanized area — to the west of Broadway.

Meanwhile, there has been very little change on the east side below the cemetery.

Given the city's drive for development and the growth trend on the north side of town, the frontage property sits as an enticing draw filled with considerable potential.

This property is also important as an entryway showcase. When visitors come to Yankton from the north, they see several businesses and the Fox Run development on the west side, but a lot of open, undeveloped (albeit neatly manicured) space to the east. This creates a sketchy impression.

With that, one option for the property — if people are determined not to see any development — is to enhance the land as a more vibrant green space, creating a more aesthetically appealing look which does not intrude on the cemetery's atmosphere.

This piece of property offers several different paths forward for the community. The discussion should be considered in a modern-day context, for this is a very different Yankton from the one that has chosen to leave this land undeveloped for many years. It's time to examine the possibilities again.

END

## Labor shortage looms as arena nears finish in Rapid City

RAPID CITY, S.D. (AP) — Finding enough workers to staff the new Summit Arena at The Monument in Rapid City is imminent problem now that the \$130 million project nears its Oct. 1 finish, according to its



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executives.

At a board of directors meeting on Tuesday, executive director Craig Baltzer said the venue would work out details, but that using inmate labor would become a "pretty normal thing" going forward.

One problem with finding enough staff is that many of the performers and shows want all staff at the Monument in close proximity to the talent to be fully vaccinated, have a negative COVID-19 test, or sometimes both, Baltzer said.

"Because of the intricacy of what our events are requiring, last week for example, require that for any of our teams to have any interaction with their crew whatsoever, you either have to provide proof of vaccination or had to provide a negative COVID test within 48 hours of the event or both," Baltzer said. "And then another temperature check, they had to go through a myriad of questions. They had a purple wristband that they wear around so that they knew that they had passed all the tests to be able to work."

The production crew for the upcoming musical "Cats" asked if the venue could guarantee that all stagehands were vaccinated, Baltzer said. Shows are also requesting touchless catering and water stations to protect their performers, the Rapid City Journal reported.

## Climate change, logging collide -- and a forest shrinks

By MATTHEW BROWN Associated Press

CUSTER CITY, S.D. (AP) — Looking down a hillside dotted with large stumps and nearly devoid of trees, a pair of retired U.S. Forest Service employees lamented logging policies they helped craft to deal with two harbingers of climate change -- pine beetles and wildfires.

Timber production dramatically ramped up two decades ago in the Black Hills National Forest along the South Dakota-Wyoming border, as beetles ravaged huge expanses of forest and worries grew over wildfires.

The beetles left, but the loggers haven't — and they're now felling trees at twice the rate government scientists say is sustainable. That means the Black Hills forests are shrinking, with fewer and smaller trees.

Timber sales from federal forests nationwide more than doubled over the past 20 years, according to government data. In Washington, D.C., Republicans and Democrats alike have pushed more aggressive thinning of stands to reduce vegetation that fuels wildfires.

But critics of federal forest management say that in their fervor to do something about climate change, officials are allowing the removal of too many older trees that can actually better withstand fire.

In the Black Hills, stands of century-old ponderosa pines were thinned over the past two decades, then thinned again. In some areas, most of the remaining older and larger trees are being cut, leaving hillsides almost bare.

"Eventually you're not going to have any big trees on the whole forest," said Dave Mertz, who worked as a government natural resources officer overseeing Black Hills logging until retiring in 2017. "The timber industry is pulling the strings now. The Forest Service has lost its way."

### DIRE PREDICTIONS

Across the western U.S., more trees have been dying as climate change dramatically alters the landscape and leaves forests more susceptible. Wildfires, insects and disease are the top killers, researchers say.

A sweeping government review of forest health surveys since 1993 found that the rate of trees dying increased this century and outpaced new growth in all eight states examined — Arizona, Colorado, Idaho, Montana, Nevada, New Mexico, Utah and Wyoming. Timber harvested from Forest Service lands over the past two decades also increased.

In the Black Hills, those two trends have collided. With more trees being logged and even more killed by beetles and fires in recent years, government scientists say the forest can't grow fast enough to keep up.

The timber industry and allies in Congress are pushing back against that conclusion. Timber company representatives predict dire economic consequences if forest managers sharply reduce harvest levels. And they say wildfires and beetle outbreaks would get worse.

One of the region's seven mills closed in March, eliminating 120 jobs in Hill City, South Dakota. Owner Neiman Enterprises said a recent slowdown in timber sales meant it wouldn't have enough logs.

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"These companies aren't tech startups. They are multi-generational family companies that want to be there for the long term." said Ben Wudtke, director of the Black Hills Forest Resource Association of saw mills and logging companies.

## FIGHTING FIRE

To counter growing havoc from western wildfires, Biden's administration wants to double the forest acreage thinned or treated with prescribed burns to 6 million acres (2.4 million hectares) annually — bigger than New Hampshire.

One method to reduce fire risk is to remove dense stands of small trees and thick underbrush that accumulated for decades as wildfires — a natural part of the landscape — were suppressed.

It's expensive, labor-intensive work, and there's little market value in small trees. When sworn in this summer, Forest Service Chief Randy Moore said combating climate change will require making it worthwhile to harvest smaller trees, such as using the vegetation as biomass to generate electricity.

"It doesn't pay for itself and we don't have markets that seem to be increasing quickly enough," he said.

The service's former deputy chief, Jim Furnish, criticized the agency as too focused on timber production and too slow to react to climate change, to the detriment of the forest.

There are signs of change under President Joe Biden, including the administration's move last month to end large-scale commercial logging of old-growth trees in Alaska's Tongass National Forest.

But other projects that include old-growth removal are pending, including in Montana's Kootenai National Forest along the Canada border, the Kaibab National Forest just north of the Grand Canyon in Arizona and Idaho's Nez Perce-Clearwater National Forest.

"The Forest Service's approach to date has been to attack this as a management problem: 'We need to cut more trees,'" Furnish told The Associated Press. "You can't cut your way out of this problem."

Moore, the agency's chief, acknowledged the warming planet was forcing changes, but said he hoped to find a "sweet spot" between the environment and industry — while removing enough vegetation to reduce wildfire risk. In the Black Hills, officials said they would consider the latest science alongside economic impacts as they seek to make logging sustainable.

"We need the industry to help us," Moore said, referring to climate change. "It's not really about timber sales or cutting large trees."

## "BEAT TO HELL"

The Black Hills played an outsized role in the early formation of the nation's timber policies. In the 1890s, excessive logging to feed demand for timbers for a nearby gold mine helped spur creation of the national forest system. The first regulated logging sales in forest service history took place there in 1899.

When artist and environmentalist Mary Zimmerman bought property within the Black Hills in 1988, neighboring public lands where that first timber sale took place had regrown so successfully that huge branches overhead "were like a cathedral."

The site was thinned in 1990, removing some big trees but leaving many. It was thinned more in 2016. Then logging crews returned last year and took out the remaining big trees. Cattle now graze the area.

"It's just beat to hell," said Zimmerman.

Her account was confirmed by Blaine Cook, forest management scientist for the Black Hills for more than two decades until his 2019 retirement.

## EARLY WARNINGS

Cook said his monitoring began to show last decade that the forest's growth rate wasn't keeping up with aggressive logging that was a response to the pine beetle outbreak that began in 1998. The high harvest rate continued after the outbreak peaked in 2012 and even after it ended in 2017.

Cook said his warnings that the forest was being damaged were rejected by superiors who faced political pressure to provide a steady supply of logs to sawmills in South Dakota and Wyoming.

Disagreement within the agency over whether there was too much logging culminated in a report this April by scientists from the forest service's research branch that was unequivocal: Black Hills logging needs to be cut back by at least half, possibly more, to be sustainable.

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The problem is that the forest changed but logging rates have not, said Mike Battaglia, one of the lead authors.

"In the late 90's, you had twice as much volume" of trees in the forest, he said. "To take out the same amount now, you're taking too much."

Forest industry representatives criticized the government's multi-year study for including only parts of the forest, saying that created an incomplete picture of how many trees are available to harvest.

They estimated up to 80% of the region's timber industry jobs would be lost if the forest service reduced logging to recommended levels. If that happens, they said the agency would have difficulty finding companies willing to do less profitable thinning work for wildfire protection.

"You have to have somebody around to do it," said the forest industry's Wudtke. "It's really critical that we keep these companies going."

## Paris' Arc de Triomphe is being wrapped in fabric

By ARNO PEDRAM Associated Press

PARIS (AP) — The city of Paris is unveiling a monumental artwork built around an actual monument: the Arc de Triomphe completely wrapped in silver and blue fabric.

The installation by late artist couple Christo and Jeanne-Claude, who conceived of the project in 1961, will open on Saturday. Visits will take place for nearly almost three weeks. At weekends, the Arc de Triomphe's traffic-heavy roundabout will be entirely pedestrianized.

Visitors to the famous Napoleonic arch, which dominates the Champs-Elysees Avenue, will not only be able to see the gleaming fabric, but also touch it too — as the artists had intended.

Those climbing the 50 meters (164 feet) to the top will step on it when they reach the roof terrace.

In a press conference celebrating the project entitled "Arc de Triomphe, Wrapped," France's Culture Minister Roselyne Bachelot called it "a formidable gift offered to Parisians, the French and beyond, to all art lovers."

Noting the deaths of the artists with sadness, Bachelot added that it was "a posthumous testimony of artistic genius."

Bulgarian-born Christo Vladimirov Javacheff met Jeanne-Claude Denat de Guillebon in Paris in 1958 and they later became lovers. The idea for the artwork was born in the early '60s, when they lived in Paris. Jeanne-Claude died in 2009, and Christo in May of last year. The monument was to be wrapped last fall, but the COVID-19 pandemic delayed it.

Christo "wanted to complete this project. He made us promise him that we will do it," the couple's nephew, Vladimir Yavachev, told The Associated Press.

The 14 million-euro (\$16.4 million) project is being financed through the sale of Christo's preparatory studies, drawings, scale models, and other pieces of work, Yavachev said.

The artists were known for elaborate, temporary creations that involved blanketing familiar public places with fabric, including Berlin's Reichstag and Paris' Pont Neuf bridge, and creating giant site-specific installations, such as a series of 7,503 gates in New York City's Central Park and the 24.5-mile "Running Fence" in California.

Yavachev said he plans to complete another one of their unfinished projects: a 150-meter-tall (492 feet) pyramid-like mastaba in Abu Dhabi.

"We have the blueprints, we just have to do it," he said.

## Hezbollah-organized fuel arrives in crisis-hit Lebanon

By FADI TAWIL and BILAL HUSSEIN Associated Press

AL-AIN, Lebanon (AP) — A convoy of tanker trucks carrying Iranian diesel crossed the border from Syria into Lebanon early Thursday, a delivery organized by the militant Hezbollah group to ease crippling fuel shortages in the crisis-hit country.

The delivery violates U.S. sanctions imposed on Tehran after former President Donald Trump pulled

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America out of a nuclear deal between Iran and world powers three years ago.

It was portrayed as a victory by Hezbollah, which stepped in to supply the fuel from its patron, Iran, while the cash-strapped government grappled with the fuel shortages for months.

"This is a very big and great thing for us because we broke the siege of America and foreign countries. ... We are working with the help of God and our great mother Iran," said Nabiha Idriss, a Hezbollah supporter who gathered with others to greet the tankers' convoy as it passed through the eastern town of Al-Ain.

Hezbollah has portrayed the Lebanese economic meltdown, which began in October 2019, as partly caused by an informal siege imposed by America due to the militant group's power and influence in Lebanon. The group has been sanctioned by consecutive U.S. administrations.

Lebanon's crisis is rooted in decades of corruption and mismanagement by the ruling class and a sectarian-based political system that thrives on patronage and nepotism. Severe shortages in fuel have paralyzed the country, resulting in crippling power cuts that have disrupted the work of hospitals and bakeries. Just to get gasoline, people must wait hours in line, commonly called, "queues of humiliation."

Hezbollah leader Sayyed Hassan Nasrallah had announced a month ago that Iran was sending fuel to Lebanon to help ease the crisis. The first Hezbollah-commissioned Iranian oil tanker arrived in the Syrian port of Baniyas on Sunday and the diesel was unloaded to Syrian storage places before it was brought overland to Lebanon on Thursday by tanker truck. The convoy went through an informal border crossing in Qusayr in Syria.

Nasrallah said in a televised speech earlier this week that the tanker did not offload its cargo directly in Lebanon to avoid embarrassing Lebanese authorities and risking sanctions on Lebanon.

Hezbollah, which is often accused by its opponents of operating a state-within-a-state and has been taking part in Syria's civil war alongside government forces, has its own crossing points along the Lebanon-Syria border away from formal border crossings.

There was no immediate comment from Lebanese or U.S. officials on the Iranian fuel delivery Thursday. "Don't forget this day," tweeted Laury Haytayan, a Lebanese oil and gas expert and activist, describing it as the day Hezbollah won over the Lebanese state.

Hezbollah's Al-Manar TV called it "the tanker truck convoys to break the American siege" adding that 20 tanker trucks each carrying 50,000 liters (13,210 gallons) crossed the border Thursday and were on their way to the eastern Lebanese city of Baalbek where Hezbollah will start distributing the fuel.

The tanker trucks crossed from Syria's central province of Homs into Lebanon's Bekaa Valley and were welcomed by residents who gathered on the sides of the main road. Hezbollah's yellow flags and banners praising the Iran-backed group and Syria's President Bashar Assad decorated the streets. A few women showered the trucks with rice and flowers as they drove past.

The arrival of the Iranian diesel comes nearly a week after a new government was formed ending a 13-month deadlock. Lebanon's new Prime Minister Najib Mikati has not commented on the deal to import fuel from Iran.

Nasrallah said earlier this week that the diesel will be donated for a period of one month to institutions including public hospitals, nursing homes, orphanages, water stations and the Lebanese Red Cross. Nasrallah added that others who will get fuel at low prices are private hospitals, medicine and serum factories, bakeries and cooperatives that sell food products.

Nasrallah said three other tankers carrying diesel and one carrying gasoline will arrive in the coming weeks.

## German police detain 4 on Yom Kippur after synagogue threat

By KIRSTEN GRIESHABER Associated Press

BERLIN (AP) — German security officials said Thursday they had detained four people, one of them a 16-year-old, in connection with a suspected plan to attack a synagogue in the western city of Hagen.

The detentions took place on Yom Kippur, the holiest day in Judaism, and two years after a deadly attack in another German city on the Yom Kippur holiday.

"One of the four people was a teenager living in Hagen," police spokeswoman Tanja Pfeffer in nearby



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Dortmund told The Associated Press. She declined to comment on a report by news magazine Der Spiegel saying the teenager was a Syrian national.

Without identifying sources, newsmagazine Der Spiegel reported that a foreign intelligence service tipped off German security officials about the threat.

It said the teenager told someone in an online chat that he was planning an attack with explosives on a synagogue, and the probe led investigators to the 16-year-old, who lived with his father in Hagen.

The detentions Thursday were preceded by police searches of several homes in Hagen, police said.

The interior minister of the state of North Rhine-Westphalia, where Hagen is located, confirmed that there was an attack threat, news agency dpa reported.

Speaking to young police officers in the city of Cologne, Herbert Reul said: "Your colleagues probably prevented" an attack.

On Wednesday afternoon, police had cordoned off the synagogue after receiving tips about a possible attack. Dozens of police officers secured the building overnight and were still on the scene Thursday morning.

The threat came as Jews were preparing for Yom Kippur, the holiest day in Judaism. Following the threat, a festive service planned for Wednesday night at the synagogue was canceled, dpa reported.

Hagen police said Wednesday night that they were in close contact with the Jewish community.

Two years ago on Yom Kippur, a German right-wing extremist attacked a synagogue in the eastern German city of Halle. The attack on is considered one of the worst anti-Semitic assaults in the country's post-war history.

The attacker repeatedly tried, but failed, to force his way into the synagogue with 52 worshippers inside. He then shot and killed a 40-year-old woman in the street outside and a 20-year-old man at a nearby kebab shop as an "appropriate target" with immigrant roots.

He posted an anti-Semitic screed before carrying out the Oct. 9, 2019, attack in the eastern German city of Halle and broadcast the shooting live on a popular gaming site.

German Justice Minister Christine Lambrecht sharply condemned the foiled Hagen attack.

"It is intolerable that Jews are again exposed to such a horrible threat and that they cannot celebrate the start of their highest holiday, Yom Kippur, together," the minister said.

## Chauvin to be arraigned for alleged civil rights violation

By AMY FORLITI Associated Press

MINNEAPOLIS (AP) — A former Minneapolis police officer convicted of murder in the death of George Floyd is scheduled to be arraigned Thursday for allegedly violating the civil rights of a teenager in a separate case that involved a restraint similar to the one used on Floyd.

Derek Chauvin was convicted earlier this year on state charges of second-degree unintentional murder, third-degree murder and second-degree manslaughter in Floyd's 2020 death. He was sentenced to 22 1/2 years. He's also charged in federal court with violating Floyd's civil rights when he knelt on the Black man's neck for about 9 1/2 minutes as Floyd was facedown on the pavement, not resisting and pleading for air.

But another indictment against Chauvin alleges he carried out a similar act against a then-14-year-old boy in 2017. This indictment alleges Chauvin deprived the teenager, who is Black, of his right to be free of unreasonable force when he held the teen by the throat, hit him in the head with a flashlight and held his knee on the boy's neck and upper back while he was prone, handcuffed and not resisting.

According to a police report from that 2017 encounter, Chauvin wrote that the teen resisted arrest and after the teen, whom he described as 6-foot-2 and about 240 pounds, was handcuffed, Chauvin "used body weight to pin" him to the floor. The boy was bleeding from the ear and needed two stitches.

That encounter was one of several mentioned in state court filings that prosecutors said showed Chauvin had used neck or head and upper body restraints seven times prior to Floyd's death dating back to 2014, including four times state prosecutors said he went too far and held the restraints "beyond the point when such force was needed under the circumstances."

At federal arraignment hearings, defendants can have the charges read to them, and not guilty pleas

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are typically entered. Thursday's hearing will be held remotely via videoconference.

Chauvin and three other former officers — Thomas Lane, J. Kueng and Tou Thao — were arraigned on civil rights violations in Floyd's death on Tuesday. All four pleaded not guilty to those charges. The indictment in the 2017 case was filed the same day as the one for Floyd's death.

According to the indictment in Floyd's death, the officers allegedly deprived Floyd of his rights while acting under government authority. The federal indictment alleges Chauvin violated Floyd's right to be free from unreasonable seizure and from unreasonable force by a police officer. Thao and Kueng are charged with violating Floyd's right to be free from unreasonable seizure by not intervening to stop Chauvin as he knelt on Floyd's neck. All four officers are charged with depriving Floyd of his rights when they failed to provide medical care.

Floyd repeatedly said he couldn't breathe as Chauvin pinned him to the ground. Kueng and Lane helped restrain Floyd; Kueng knelt on Floyd's back, and Lane held Floyd's legs, according to evidence in state court. Thao held back bystanders and kept them from intervening.

## Russia votes in parliament election without main opposition

By JIM HEINTZ Associated Press

MOSCOW (AP) — After a few weeks of desultory campaigning but months of relentless official moves to shut down significant opposition, Russia is holding three days of voting this weekend in a parliamentary election that is unlikely to change the country's political complexion.

There's no expectation that United Russia, the party devoted to President Vladimir Putin, will lose its dominance of the State Duma, the elected lower house of parliament. The main questions to be answered are whether the party will retain its current two-thirds majority that allows it to amend the constitution; whether anemic turnout will dull the party's prestige; and whether imprisoned opposition leader Alexei Navalny's Smart Voting initiative proves to be a viable strategy against it.

"There is very little intrigue in these elections ... and in fact they will not leave a special trace in political history," Andrei Kolesnikov, an analyst at the Carnegie Moscow Center, told The Associated Press.

Putin, however, on Thursday urged Russians to vote, saying in a video message that "election of (the Duma's) new composition is undoubtedly the most important event in the life of our society and country."

With 14 parties fielding candidates for half of the Duma's 450 seats that are chosen by party list, the election has a veneer of being genuinely competitive. But the three parties aside from United Russia that are expected to clear the 5% support necessary to get a seat rarely challenge the Kremlin.

The Kremlin wants control over the new parliament, which will still be in place in 2024, when Putin's current term expires and he must decide on running for reelection or choosing some other strategy to stay in power.

The other half of the seats are chosen in individual constituencies, where independent candidates or those from small parties such as the liberal Yabloko may have stronger chances. These seats are also where the Navalny team's Smart Voting strategy could make inroads.

The program sidesteps ideology in order to undermine United Russia, simply advising voters which candidate other than the ruling party's is the strongest in a single-mandate race.

It's essentially a defensive strategy.

"Voting to harm United Russia is not a meaningful goal, not a goal to choose another candidate whom you ideologically support," Kolesnikov said. But it showed potency in its inaugural use in 2018 when opposition candidates won 20 of 45 seats in the Moscow city council, and a year later when United Russia lost its majorities in the councils of three large cities.

However, it's unclear how widely it will be used this year after authorities blocked access to its website. The service remains available through apps, but Russia has threatened fines against Apple and Google to remove the apps from their online stores. The Foreign Ministry last week summoned U.S. Ambassador John Sullivan to protest election interference by American "digital giants."

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Blocking the website was the latest move to neutralize the Navalny operation, which was Russia's most visible and determined opposition organization, capable of calling sizable protests throughout the country.

Navalny himself was jailed in January upon returning to Russia from Germany where he had been recuperating from nerve-agent poisoning; he was subsequently sentenced to 2½ years in prison. A court later outlawed Navalny's Foundation for Fighting Corruption and a network of his regional offices as extremist organizations, a verdict that barred people associated with the groups from seeking public office and exposed them to lengthy prison terms.

Russian authorities also blocked some 50 websites run by his team or supporters for allegedly disseminating extremist propaganda.

In August, Russia added the independent vote-monitoring group Golos to its list of foreign agents, a move that does not block its work but strongly suggests it should be regarded with suspicion.

The Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe, whose election-monitoring missions are widely regarded as authoritative, will not send observers for the parliament vote, saying that Russia imposed excessive restrictions.

In addition to the Duma election, nine Russian regions will be choosing governors, 39 regions will be choosing legislatures and voters in 11 cities will be choosing city councils.

The Elections Commission ordered voting expanded to three days, concluding on Sunday, to reduce crowding at the polls amid the coronavirus pandemic. Critics say the decision raises the chance of ballot manipulation. Commission head Ella Pamfilova rejects the accusation, saying there will be "total video surveillance" of polling places and that ballots will be in secure containers.

Other ethical concerns also hover over the election. According to the state-funded pollster VTsIOM, more than one in 10 workers say they have been given directives by their bosses to vote. In St. Petersburg, a candidate from the Yabloko party named Boris Vishnevsky, who is running simultaneously for the Duma and a regional legislature, discovered that there are two other men using that name opposing him in each race — one of whom is a member of United Russia, according to the newspaper Novaya Gazeta.

Although polls indicate that general approval for United Russia is low, the party is expected to ride to an overwhelming first place in the new parliament. The independent Center for Current Politics predicts it will score 299-306 seats — down from the 343 it currently holds but within the range of the 303 seats needed to change the constitution.

The center's prognosis suggests that most of the seats lost by United Russia would be picked up by the Communist Party, the second-largest parliamentary faction. But the party largely conforms to the Kremlin line, as do the two other parties likely to get double-digit seats.

"The Communists themselves are not very dangerous," said commentator Sergei Parkhomenko on Ekho Moskvyy radio. The party is "a tool for imitating an opposition movement."

Allegations of widespread voting fraud sparked large protests in Moscow and St. Petersburg after the 2011 Duma elections. But with opposition groups neutered, the prospect of unrest this time appears remote.

"Protests will not take place where we expect them, not at the time when we expect them and not from those from whom we expect them," Parkhomenko said.

## France calls killing of Islamic State leader big victory

PARIS (AP) — France killed the leader of Islamic State in the Greater Sahara because the group attacked French aid workers, African civilians and U.S. troops, French officials said Thursday, calling him "enemy No. 1" in protracted anti-terrorism efforts in the Sahel.

French President Emmanuel Macron announced the death of Adnan Abu Walid al-Sahrawi overnight. According to Macron's office, al-Sahrawi personally ordered the killing of six French aid workers and their Nigerien colleagues last year, and his group was behind a 2017 attack that killed U.S. and Niger military personnel.

He was killed in a strike by France's Barkhane military operation "a few weeks ago," but authorities waited to be sure of his identity before making the announcement, French Defense Minister Florence Parly told

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RFI radio Thursday.

She did not disclose details of the operation or where al-Sahrawi was killed, though the Islamic State group is active along the border between Mali and Niger.

"He was at the origin of massacres and terror," French Foreign Minister Jean-Yves Le Drian said Thursday on France-Info radio. He urged African governments to fill the void and seize back ground taken by the Islamic State extremists.

Rumors of the militant leader's death had circulated for weeks in Mali, though authorities in the region had not confirmed it. It was not immediately possible to independently verify the claim or to know how the remains had been identified.

Al-Sahrawi had claimed responsibility for a 2017 attack in Niger that killed four U.S. military personnel and four people with Niger's military. His group also has abducted foreigners in the Sahel and is believed to still be holding American Jeffrey Woodke, who was abducted from his home in Niger in 2016.

The extremist leader was born in the disputed territory of Western Sahara and later joined the Polisario Front. After spending time in Algeria, he made his way to northern Mali where he became an important figure in the group known as MUJAO that controlled the major northern town of Gao in 2012.

A French-led military operation the following year ousted Islamic extremists from power in Gao and other northern cities, though those elements later regrouped and again carried out attacks.

The Malian group MUJAO was loyal to the regional al-Qaida affiliate. But in 2015, al-Sahrawi released an audio message pledging allegiance to the Islamic State group in Iraq and Syria.

France, the region's former colonial power, recently announced that it would be reducing its military presence in the region, with plans to withdraw 2,000 troops by early next year.

## Southwest China earthquake collapses homes, kills at least 3

BEIJING (AP) — An earthquake destroyed houses, killed at least three people and injured dozens Thursday in southwest China's Sichuan province.

Rescue work was underway following the magnitude-6.0 earthquake.

It struck at 4:33 a.m. at a depth of 10 kilometers (6 miles) in Luxian, a county in the city of Luzhou, the official Xinhua News Agency said. State broadcaster CCTV said 88 people were injured, three seriously, and that 35 houses had collapsed.

The epicenter was about 200 kilometers (120 miles) southeast of Chengdu, the provincial capital.

Xinhua reported that collapsed walls and houses could be seen on the way to the epicenter, and that electricity had been suspended in much of Jiaming town. Residents could be seen cleaning up.

Rescue workers were going door-to-door in heavy rain searching for people in damaged homes in Fuji town to move them to temporary shelters, Xinhua said. Workers distributed mooncakes, a traditional treat for the next week's Mid-Autumn Festival, and other food at one shelter.

Lai Jianrong, a Fuji resident, told Xinhua that she felt a mild tremor around 4 a.m. and ran out barefoot in her nightgown when the tremors became intense. "Some bricks fell off the wall and I didn't dare to go in again," the agency quoted her as saying.

More than 3,200 people have been moved to 79 shelters, CCTV said.

Western China is regularly hit by earthquakes. A magnitude-7.9 quake in May 2008 left nearly 90,000 people dead in Sichuan, many of them in collapsed schools and other poorly constructed buildings.

## UN chief urges 'rapid' emission cuts to curb climate change

By FRANK JORDANS and JAMEY KEATEN Associated Press

GENEVA (AP) — The head of the United Nations called Thursday for "immediate, rapid and large-scale" cuts in greenhouse gas emissions to curb global warming and avert climate disaster.

Ahead of the annual U.N. General Assembly meeting next week, Antonio Guterres warned governments that climate change is proceeding faster than predicted and fossil fuel emissions have already bounced



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back from a pandemic dip.

Speaking at the launch of a U.N.-backed report summarizing current efforts to tackle climate change, Guterres said recent extreme weather — from Hurricane Ida in the United States to floods in western Europe and the deadly heatwave in the Pacific Northwest — showed no country is safe from climate-related disasters.

"These changes are just the beginning of worse to come," he said, appealing to governments to meet the goals of the 2015 Paris climate accord.

"Unless there are immediate, rapid and large-scale reductions in greenhouse gas emissions, we will be unable to limit global heating to 1.5 degrees Celsius (2.7 Fahrenheit)," said Guterres. "The consequences will be catastrophic."

In their report, titled United in Science 21, six U.N. bodies and scientific organizations drew on existing research to argue that there is a direct link between human-caused emissions, record high temperatures and disasters that have a tangible impact on individuals and societies, including "billions of work hours (...) lost through heat alone."

Because of the long-lasting effects of many emissions already released into the atmosphere, further impacts are inevitable, they noted.

"Even with ambitious action to slow greenhouse gas emissions, sea levels will continue to rise and threaten low-lying islands and coastal populations throughout the world," the authors wrote.

University of Michigan environment dean Jonathan Overpeck, who wasn't part of the report, said scientists have said this before but it's important: "The situation is getting bad, we know why and we know how to solve it in ways that leave us, and future generations, with a better, healthier, more sustainable world."

Guterres urged governments to put forward more ambitious plans for cutting emissions by the upcoming U.N. climate summit in Glasgow, including a commitment to stop adding more greenhouse gas to the atmosphere by mid-century than can be removed.

Michael Mann, a prominent climate scientist at Pennsylvania State University, said he agreed with the report's message of urgency but questioned some of the starker warnings it contained.

In particular, the 1.5C threshold agreed in Paris didn't apply to individual years, some of which can be unusually hot due to other factors, he said.

"This misleading framing unnecessarily feeds the fears that the public has that we've somehow already crossed that threshold and that it is too late now to prevent," said Mann. "We have not. And it is not."

He also noted that the drop in emissions seen during the pandemic could be viewed as a positive sign that significant cuts are possible if entire economies are weaned off fossil fuels.

The United States, Britain and the European Union have already made pledges that — if implemented — would help avert dangerous planetary warming, said Mann.

Kim Cobb, a professor of Earth and Atmospheric Sciences at Georgia Tech, was equally reassured that the 1.5C target isn't out of reach.

"However, this new report is a stark reminder of the difference between the emissions pathways required to achieve that target, and the reality on the ground," she said. "Simply put, we are way off course."

## Latest: Malaysia reopens resort island as vaccinations rise

By The Associated Press undefined

KUALA LUMPUR, Malaysia — Hundreds of holiday-makers flocked to Malaysia's northern resort island of Langkawi as it reopened Thursday to fully vaccinated travelers.

Langkawi is the first holiday destination in the country to welcome visitors as part of a domestic tourism bubble. If successful, it could see other holiday destinations following suit in a bid to revive the economy. Malaysia has reported more than 2 million infections while deaths have surged above 21,000 despite a lockdown in June.

But vaccination has also picked up pace, with three-quarter of the country's adult population fully inoculated.

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The government says a lockdown is no longer feasible and that Malaysians have to learn to live with the virus, which will soon be treated as endemic. Restrictions have been loosened recently and Langkawi was allowed to reopen with strict health protocols.

Travelers older than 7 must test negative for COVID-19 before arriving on the island. Local media said airline tickets have been snapped up, with 19 flights carrying holiday-makers due to arrive in Langkawi on Thursday.

Ferries carrying hundreds of passengers were also headed to the island, which reportedly expects to welcome 400,000 visitors by the year's end.

## MORE ON THE PANDEMIC:

- US working on new COVID-19 rules for international visitors
- World leaders will have to be vaccinated to speak at U.N. General Assembly meeting
- Long weekend holiday turns into 9-week lockdown for AP Vietnam reporter
- There's no scientific evidence that masks harm kids' health despite social media claims
- See AP coverage at <https://apnews.com/hub/coronavirus-pandemic>

## HERE'S WHAT ELSE IS HAPPENING:

**ANCHORAGE, Alaska** — Alaska reported its highest number of new coronavirus cases Wednesday, after the state's largest hospital started rationing care because of a flood of COVID-19 patients.

Officials reported 1,068 new virus infections, which is 13% higher than last week. State officials say 201 Alaskans are hospitalized for COVID-19, and 34 of them are on ventilators.

The state's chief medical officer says hospitals continue to be stressed and there isn't capacity for patients who have COVID-19 as well as those with other needs. Statewide, there are about 1,100 non-intensive care unit beds in hospitals, with only 302 available Wednesday. Only 21 of the state's ICU beds are open.

**TORONTO** — The leader of the Canadian province of Alberta is apologizing for his handling of the pandemic and says he is reluctantly introducing a vaccine passport and imposing a mandatory work-from-home order two months after lifting nearly all restrictions.

Alberta is declaring a public health emergency as Premier Jason Kenney says the province might run out of beds and staff for intensive care units within 10 days.

Indoor dining at pubs and restaurants is now banned.

Kenney says it is clear the provincial government was wrong to end public health restrictions in the summer. He says COVID-19 is hitting Alberta harder than anywhere else in Canada because it has the lowest vaccination rate.

**RENO, Nev.** — The Nevada Hospital Association is urging people to avoid going to emergency rooms except in true emergencies, especially in northern Nevada where a resurgence in coronavirus infections is running double the rate in the Las Vegas area.

Health officials say the 30-day average for daily new coronavirus cases per 100,000 residents has increased fivefold in the Reno-Sparks area over the past six weeks — from 354 at the beginning of August to 1,621 now. The statewide rate is 951, and it's 720 in Clark County, which includes Las Vegas.

The head of the hospital association says that as a result, "many hospital emergency departments in northern Nevada are at capacity with patients."

State officials said Wednesday that 1,090 people were hospitalized at the beginning of the week for confirmed or suspected cases of COVID-19, the disease that can be caused by the coronavirus.

**WASHINGTON** — The U.S. government will spend \$470 million to learn more about long COVID-19, its causes and potential treatments.

The National Institutes of Health announced the plans Wednesday with a grant awarded to NYU Grossman

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School of Medicine and a goal of enrolling up to 40,000 adults and children. The effort, dubbed RECOVER, will involve researchers at more than 30 U.S. institutions.

"This is being taken with the greatest seriousness... at a scale that has not really been attempted with something like this," Dr. Francis Collins, NIH director, said at a briefing Wednesday.

Collins says its estimated 10% to 30% of people infected with COVID-19 may develop persistent, new or recurring symptoms that can last months or perhaps years.

Long COVID is an umbrella term for symptoms that linger, recur and show up for the first time four weeks or more after an initial infection. It also includes heart inflammation and multisystem inflammatory syndrome, a rare but serious condition that can occur in children after a COVID-19 infection.

Pain, headaches, fatigue, brain fog, shortness of breath, anxiety, depression, chronic coughs and sleep problems are among the reported symptoms of long COVID. Possible causes include the virus lingers in tissues and organs or it overstimulates the immune system.

## Long weekend becomes 9 week lockdown for AP Vietnam reporter

By HAU DINH Associated Press

VUNG TAU, Vietnam (AP) — I wake up as the loudspeaker outside my window starts the community broadcast at 7 a.m. I try to recall the date. Vietnam's pandemic lockdown has been so long I've lost my sense of time. I now count by weeks.

This is the ninth I've been stuck in Vung Tau, a seaside resort more than 1,500 kilometers (900 miles) from my home in Hanoi.

I get out of bed, keeping to my routine of yoga before breakfast. As I roll out the mat, the broadcast gives the latest pandemic news and blares out a propaganda-style song: "Citizens, let's join forces in this fight so COVID disappears..."

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I got to Vung Tau for a long weekend to see my partner in mid-July.

In normal times, it is packed with vacationers escaping cities for fresh air, sunshine and delicious seafood.

As I started my travels, a new outbreak emerged in Vietnam but I was confident — and I believe the country was confident — that it would be able to stop it quickly, just as it had previous ones. Until then, Vietnam had reported just over 8,000 cases and 35 virus deaths and won global praise for its pandemic success.

The delta variant's arrival changed everything.

The strain spread like wildfire through factories in industrial zones, into markets and on to communities across the country. In Ho Chi Minh City, the country's largest with 10 million people, authorities ordered a city-wide lockdown. Soon it was expanded to include the entire southern region, home to more than a third of the country's 98 million people.

Inter-provincial public transport was halted, and air travel from Ho Chi Minh City was suspended, including my return flight home. I was stranded in Vung Tau as the city announced its first ever COVID-19 case.

It didn't seem like a big deal at first.

I was positive the situation would be under control quickly; that I'd just have to wait out the two-week lockdown and things would get back to normal. It seemed like a chance to slow down and enjoy time with my partner.

I took an avocado seed from a recent lunch, wrapped it in damp paper towel and put it in a bag to see if it would sprout before the lockdown ended.

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More than half of Vietnam's people are currently under lockdown.

New daily cases have surpassed 10,000 and deaths are being reported in hundreds. Of Vietnam's nearly 16,000 COVID-19 fatalities, more than 99% have come in this latest wave.

The government tightened restrictions further this month, telling people to "stay put wherever you are" to buy time to vaccinate more people.

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Barricades and checkpoints were set up to make sure people can't go out on the street unless they hold a permit. In some communities, authorities padlocked the gates of each household.

Under the restrictions, people must stay at home except for those working in a handful of businesses classified as essential services. In high-risk areas, the army has been mobilized to deliver food and basic necessities to each household. In lower-risk areas, like where I am, each family is allowed to go out to buy food and medicine once a week within their small neighborhood.

This week the government said it was speeding up its vaccination program. Over the weekend, more than 1 million shots were given in Hanoi alone and authorities were aiming to have 100% of eligible residents with at least one shot by week's end.

Still, the overall vaccination rate remains low with only 4% having received two shots.

Vung Tau extended its lockdown for the sixth time over the weekend, adding another two weeks.

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The lockdown day is long and the longer it goes on, the more it drags.

From my balcony, every time I feel frustrated, I comfort myself by thinking how lucky and privileged I am for not having to spend the lockdown in far less comfortable conditions like millions of my countrymen cooped up in small non-air conditioned apartments in the summer heat.

To avoid depression, I try to fill the days with other activities beside work. I binge Netflix with my partner, with whom I've never been together for such a long time over the past seven years. I spend more time learning my partner's native French. I follow workouts on YouTube, making up for the disruption of my marathon training.

Before this wave, I felt like the pandemic was somewhere else. I didn't know anyone who contracted the virus in Vietnam.

But bad news started to rush in: A friend of mine got it, together with four others in her family. Three of them were moved to three different hospitals while two remained at home because of their mild symptoms. On my Facebook feed, some changed their profile to black to mourn a lost loved one. The pandemic had become real to me.

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I video chat almost every day with my parents, who are in their 70s.

It worries me that the virus has inched onto their Hanoi street; their neighbors were the latest cases and their alley was cordoned off with a sign "pandemic area." I breathed a slight sigh of relief when they finally got their first shot of vaccine two weeks ago.

I also have a family group chat, including my three siblings and five nieces and nephews. We're very close and are used to seeing each other often. We haven't been able to meet up since the lockdown.

In marathons, there's a finish line, a goal that helps keep me going. With the lockdown extended over and over again, it's hard to envisage when it might end. Yet without it, who knows what the death toll could be.

For the moment, I try to seek solace in simpler things.

My avocado seed has sprouted and has grown tall, more quickly than others I've sprouted in the past.

I keep a lot of plants in Hanoi. Unfortunately, many must have died by now.

I didn't plan to be away this long.

## With eye on Iran, Israeli navy steps up Red Sea presence

By JOSEF FEDERMAN Associated Press

ATLIT, Israel (AP) — Israel's navy has stepped up its activities in the Red Sea "exponentially" in the face of growing Iranian threats to Israeli shipping, the country's just-retired navy commander said in an interview.

Vice Adm. Eli Sharvit stopped short of confirming a series of attacks and mishaps on Iranian ships that have been attributed to Israel. But he described Iranian activities on the high seas as a top Israeli concern and said the navy is able to strike wherever necessary to protect the country's economic and security interests.



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"The state of Israel will protect its freedom of navigation across the globe," Sharvit told The Associated Press, days after completing his five-year term. "That's not related to distance from the country."

Sharvit was a busy man during his tenure — overseeing a small but well-equipped force responsible for safeguarding Israel's Mediterranean coast as well as the Red Sea, a vital gateway for imports from Asia.

While the Israeli navy has an overwhelming advantage over its enemies in the region, it nonetheless faces an array of threats. They include the Lebanese militant group Hezbollah, which possesses an arsenal of guided surface-to-sea missiles, and Gaza's Hamas militant group, which has developed a small squad of naval commandos, as well as the challenges posed by Iran's military activity across the region.

One of the navy's most important responsibilities is protecting Israel's natural gas platforms in the Mediterranean Sea, which now provide some 75% of the country's electricity.

To the north, Hezbollah has made no secret of its intentions to target those platforms if war breaks out. The Iranian-backed militant group successfully struck an Israeli naval vessel during a 2006 war, killing four soldiers, and is believed to have vastly upgraded its missile stockpile since then. Israel says Iran continues to try to smuggle sophisticated weapons to Hezbollah.

Sharvit confirmed that Israel has intercepted many arms shipments to Hezbollah. "We are very vigilant concerning seaborne arms shipments, and every time that a shipment is one of arms, and not something else, we act," he said.

With Lebanon's economy in disarray, however, he said Israel has "no interest" in stopping fuel deliveries meant for civilian use.

Along Israel's southern flank, Sharvit said Hamas has a small but formidable unit of well-trained naval commandos.

Hamas frogmen managed to infiltrate an Israeli beach during a 2014 war before they were killed. Since then, the unit has been equipped with state-of-the-art equipment allowing them to travel underwater well up Israel's coastline and making them much harder to detect, Sharvit said.

During a recent war in May, Israel says it thwarted an attempt by Hamas to launch a torpedo-like underwater drone at Israeli targets.

Israel has faced criticism over its naval blockade and heavy restrictions on Gaza. Israel says the blockade is needed to prevent a Hamas military buildup. But critics, including human rights groups and U.N. officials, say the policy amounts to collective punishment.

"Israel's disproportionate and unreasonable restrictions on access to Gaza's territorial waters as well as to vital items needed to repair fishing boats harm the livelihoods of thousands, put lives at risk and hinder economic development," said Gisha, an Israeli rights group that has called for the blockade to be eased.

Sharvit, however, said it is difficult to separate the civilian and military spheres because Hamas uses the open waters to test rockets and train its navy commandos. "The sea is the biggest test site in Gaza," he said.

But Israel's biggest concern, by far, is archenemy Iran. Israel accuses Iran of trying to develop nuclear weapons, a charge Iran denies. It also cites Iran's military presence in neighboring Syria and Iran's support for militant groups like Hezbollah and Hamas.

In recent years, Israel and Iran have been engaged in a shadow war that has seen the killings of Iranian nuclear scientists, mysterious explosions at Iranian nuclear facilities and more recently a series of explosions on cargo ships with Iranian or Israeli connections. In most cases, no one has claimed responsibility.

Sharvit refused to discuss specific operations but said Israeli naval activity in the Red Sea has grown "exponentially" over the past three years.

Iran for years anchored a ship off Yemen that was believed to be a base for its paramilitary Revolutionary Guard. That ship, the MV Saviz, came under a suspected Israeli attack last April.

The Red Sea also has deep strategic significance by hosting key global shipping routes, including the Suez Canal and the Bab el-Mandeb Strait. Almost all of Israel's imports enter by sea.

"We have increased our presence in the Red Sea most significantly," Sharvit said. "We are operating there continuously with main ships, that is to say missile frigates and submarines. What in the past was

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for relatively short periods of time is now done continuously.”

He also said that Israel is ready to respond even further away to direct attacks on Israeli shipping. “If there were an attack on Israeli shipping lanes or Israeli freedom of navigation, Israel would have to respond,” he said.

He said that has not yet happened. The cargo ships believed to have been targeted by Iran in the Persian Gulf had Israeli connections but were owned and operated by businesses based elsewhere. He said such attacks merit an international response.

Yoel Guzansky, a senior fellow and Iran expert at the Institute for National Security Studies in Tel Aviv, described the navy as “good but small” and cautioned against relying too heavily on it in Israel’s overall Iran strategy.

“I think some operations may be an overstretch,” he said, adding that heightened tensions at sea could expose Israel’s vulnerabilities connected to its heavy reliance on global shipping.

“I would put my efforts elsewhere,” he said.

## **With foreign funds frozen, Afghan aid groups stuck in limbo**

By ISABEL DEBRE Associated Press

DUBAI, United Arab Emirates (AP) — A month after the fall of Kabul, the world is still wrestling with how to help Afghanistan’s impoverished people without propping up their Taliban leaders — a question that grows more urgent by the day.

With the Afghan government severed from the international banking system, aid groups both inside Afghanistan and abroad say they are struggling to get emergency relief, basic services and funds to a population at risk of starvation, unemployment and the coronavirus after 20 years of war.

Among the groups struggling to function is a public health nonprofit that paid salaries and purchased food and fuel for hospitals with contributions from the World Bank, the European Union and the U.S. Agency for International Development. The \$600 million in funds, which were funneled through the Afghan Health Ministry, dried up overnight after the Taliban took over the capital.

Now, clinics in Afghanistan’s eastern Khost Province no longer can afford to clean even as they are beset with COVID-19 patients, and the region’s hospitals have asked patients to purchase their own syringes, according to Organization for Health Promotion and Management’s local chapter head Abdul Wali.

“All we do is wait and pray for cash to come,” Wali said. “We face disaster, if this continues.”

Donor countries pledged during a United Nations appeal this week to open their purse strings to the tune of \$1.2 billion in humanitarian aid. But attempts by Western governments and international financial institutions to deprive the Taliban-controlled government of other funding sources until its intentions are clearer also has Afghan’s most vulnerable citizens hurting.

The World Bank, the International Monetary Fund and the European Union suspended financing for projects in Afghanistan, and the United States froze \$7 billion in Afghan foreign reserves held in New York. Foreign aid to Afghanistan previously ran some \$8.5 billion a year — nearly half of the country’s gross domestic product.

Without access to its own or foreign funds, the interim government in Kabul can’t even pay the import taxes needed to bring containers of badly needed food from a port in Pakistan, the country’s Chamber of Commerce and Industry Vice Chairman Yonus Momand said.

The West’s strategy is to strangle the Taliban’s finances to induce Afghanistan’s new leaders to respect the rights of women and religious minorities. The all-male, hard-line Cabinet appointed last week includes several ministers subject to U.N. sanctions and one with a \$5 million FBI bounty on his head.

While it’s unclear how long Afghan central bank reserves will remain out of reach, American officials insist that humanitarian groups can sidestep Taliban authorities to deliver directly to the needy Afghans fearing for their lives and futures in the wake of the chaotic U.S. pullout.

“It’s definitely still possible to meet the basic needs of Afghans without rewarding the government with broader economic assistance and diplomatic recognition,” said Lisa Curtis, former South and Central Asia

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director of the U.S. National Security Council.

But the situation on the ground shows the limits of that approach. Fighting over the years has displaced over 3.5 million people — including over half a million since the start of the year. The price of basic goods has soared. Bank lines snake down streets as people wait hours, even days, to withdraw money so they can feed their families.

While individuals are allowed to withdraw a maximum of \$200 per week from Afghanistan's banks, organizations are unable to get any funds. The paralysis has hampered the work of local authorities who used World Bank development funds to pay for health services and clean water, as well as international charitable groups trying to run vast aid operations.

"The cash remains the main issue," said Stefan Recker, Afghanistan director for Catholic relief organization Caritas. "We cannot pay our own staff, run our aid projects or implement badly needed new programs."

Cut off from their bank accounts, groups dependent on international donors are using stop-gap methods to stay afloat. They are getting their hands on operating cash through a mixture of mobile payment service M-PESA, Western Union transfers and hawala — the informal money transfer system that helped power the economy when Taliban ruled Afghanistan in the 1990s.

The ancient system, which existed in the country before banks, relies on the principle that if there are two people who want to send equal amounts of money between two locations, cash doesn't need to change hands. International anti-poverty organization CARE is among the relief providers that rely on hawala dealers to transfer funds and record loans across provinces.

"It's probably not a long-term solution, but the hawala system has been helpful for a long time," Marianne O'Grady, CARE's deputy Afghanistan director, said. "People trust in it, so it's what we're using."

Meanwhile, some countries, including the United Arab Emirates, Qatar and Uzbekistan, have avoided the messy debate over financial aid by dispatching planeloads of food and medicine to Kabul, betting that bags of rice will get distributed to the needy and not line the pockets of Taliban ministers who are on terrorism watch lists.

But many insist that informal money transfers and rice shipments are hardly the way to prevent Afghanistan's financial and social collapse at a time when the stakes are so high: along with drought and the threat of famine, potential Taliban brutality and a collapsing health care system, Afghans face more desperate times as winter approaches.

Although the \$1.2 billion raised at the U.N. this week exceeded expectations, uncertainty surrounds the outpouring of international sympathy. Aid workers want to know where exactly the money is going and when, as well as how the needs of cash-strapped local nongovernmental organizations will be addressed while Afghanistan's banking system remains crippled.

"The U.N. had a lot to say about food delivery, but I heard nothing about plans to reestablish a system of public services," said Vicki Aken, Afghanistan director for the International Rescue Committee. "What about paying the salaries of teachers and doctors?"

Those salaries now run through financial plumbing controlled by former insurgents with a brutal reputation. In maintaining its grip on the Afghan state's foreign reserves, the U.S. hopes to pressure the Taliban to honor their promises to create a moderate and inclusive government.

Although Afghanistan's new rulers vowed as recently as Tuesday to ensure the U.N. aid is distributed fairly, reports have emerged in recent days of Taliban fighters cracking down on journalists and peaceful protests.

"It's a gray zone," said Daniel Runde at the Washington-based Center for Strategic and International Studies. "We spent a ton of money building up state capacity. Do we now want a broken-down banking system so doctors can't administer vaccines? Do we care enough about women's education to work with this regime?"

As the international community ponders the answer, doctors at a government-run pediatric hospital in Kabul say they have run out of antibiotics and gauze and are bracing for a harsh winter without heating as they treat a growing number of malnourished children.

"The economic conditions are getting worse, so the (cases) of malnutrition are increasing," warned

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Noorulhaq Yousufzai, the doctor in charge of the clinic.

## At 101, she's still hauling lobsters with no plans to stop

By PATRICK WHITTLE and ROBERT F. BUKATY Associated Press

ROCKLAND, Maine (AP) — When Virginia Oliver started trapping lobster off Maine's rocky coast, World War II was more than a decade in the future, the electronic traffic signal was a recent invention and few women were harvesting lobsters.

Nearly a century later, at age 101, she's still doing it. The oldest lobster fisher in the state and possibly the oldest one in the world, Oliver still faithfully tends to her traps off Rockland, Maine, with her 78-year-old son Max.

Oliver started trapping lobsters at age 8, and these days she catches them using a boat that once belonged to her late husband and bears her own name, the "Virginia." She said she has no intention to stop, but she is concerned about the health of Maine's lobster population, which she said is subject to heavy fishing pressure these days.

"I've done it all my life, so I might as well keep doing it," Oliver said.

The lobster industry has changed over the course of Oliver's many decades on the water, and lobsters have grown from a working class food to a delicacy. The lobsters fetched 28 cents a pound on the docks when she first starting trapping them; now, it's 15 times that. Wire traps have replaced her beloved old wooden ones, which these days are used as kitsch in seafood restaurants.

Other aspects, though, are remarkably similar. She's still loading pogeys — lobster-speak for menhaden, a small fish — into traps to lure the crustaceans in. And she's still getting up long before dawn to get on the boat and do it.

She was destined for this life, in some ways. Her father was a lobster dealer, starting around the turn of the century, and instilled a love of the business in Oliver, who would join him on trips.

Wayne Gray, a family friend who lives nearby, said Oliver had a brief scare a couple of years ago when a crab snipped her finger and she had to get seven stitches. She never even considered hanging up her lobster traps, though.

"The doctor admonished her, said 'Why are you out there lobstering?'" Gray said. "She said, 'Because I want to.'"

After all these years, Oliver still gets excited about a lobster dinner of her own and typically fixes one for herself about once a week. And she has no plans to quit lobstering any time soon.

"I like doing it, I like being along the water," she said. "And so I'm going to keep on doing it just as long as I can."

## Friction among Taliban pragmatists, hard-liners intensifies

By KATHY GANNON Associated Press

KABUL, Afghanistan (AP) — Friction between pragmatists and ideologues in the Taliban leadership has intensified since the group formed a hard-line Cabinet last week that is more in line with their harsh rule in the 1990s than their recent promises of inclusiveness, said two Afghans familiar with the power struggle.

The wrangling has taken place behind the scenes, but rumors quickly began circulating about a recent violent confrontation between the two camps at the presidential palace, including claims that the leader of the pragmatic faction, Abdul Ghani Baradar, was killed.

The rumors reached such intensity that an audio recording and handwritten statement, both purportedly by Baradar himself, denied that he had been killed. Then on Wednesday, Baradar appeared in an interview with the country's national TV.

"I was traveling from Kabul so had no access to media in order to reject this news" Baradar said of the rumor.

Baradar served as the chief negotiator during talks between the Taliban and the United States that paved



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the way for the U.S. troop withdrawal from Afghanistan, which was completed in late August, two weeks after the Taliban overran the capital of Kabul.

Shortly after the Kabul takeover, Baradar had been the first senior Taliban official to hold out the possibility of an inclusive government, but such hopes were disappointed with the formation of an all-male, all-Taliban lineup last week.

In a further sign that the hard-liners had prevailed, the white Taliban flag was raised over the presidential palace, replacing the Afghan national flag.

A Taliban official said the leadership still hasn't made a final decision on the flag, with many leaning toward eventually flying both banners side by side. He spoke on condition of anonymity because he was not allowed to discuss internal deliberations with the media.

The two Afghans familiar with the power struggle also spoke on condition of anonymity to protect the confidentiality of those who shared their discontent over the Cabinet lineup. They said one Cabinet minister toyed with refusing his post, angered by the all-Taliban government that shunned the country's ethnic and religious minorities.

Taliban spokesman Zabihullah Mujahid has denied rifts in the leadership. On Tuesday, the Taliban foreign minister, Amir Khan Mutaqi, dismissed such reports as "propaganda."

Baradar had been noticeably absent from key functions. For instance he was not at the presidential palace earlier this week to receive the deputy prime minister of Qatar, Sheikh Mohammad bin Abdur Rahman Al-Thani, who is also foreign minister and was making the highest-level foreign visit yet since the Taliban takeover. Baradar's absence was jarring since Qatar had hosted him for years as head of the Taliban political office in the Qatari capital of Doha.

But in the interview shown Wednesday, Baradar said he did not participate in the meeting because he was not aware about the foreign minister's visit to Kabul. "I had already left and was not able to return back," Baradar said.

Several officials and Afghans who are familiar and in contact with Baradar told The Associated Press earlier that he was in the southwestern provincial capital of Kandahar for a meeting with Taliban leader Haibatullah Akhunzada. Another Taliban figure said Baradar was visiting family he had not seen in 20 years of war.

Analysts say the friction may not amount to a serious threat to the Taliban — for now.

"We've seen over the years that despite disputes, the Taliban largely remains a cohesive institution and that major decisions don't get serious pushback after the fact," said Michael Kugelman, Asia program deputy director at the Washington-based Wilson Center.

"I think the current internal dissension can be managed," he said. "Still, the Taliban will be under a lot of pressure as it tries to consolidate its power, gain legitimacy, and address major policy challenges. If these efforts fail, a stressed organization could well see more and increasingly serious infighting."

However, Taliban divisions today will be more difficult to resolve without the heavy-handed rule of the group's founder, the late Mullah Omar, who demanded unquestioned loyalty.

## Democrats push for changes to California recall efforts

By DON THOMPSON Associated Press

SACRAMENTO, Calif. (AP) — California Gov. Gavin Newsom handily defeated a recall election that could have removed him from office, but his Democratic allies in the Legislature already are seeking changes that could make it harder to mount such a challenge in the future.

Those changes could include raising the standard to require wrongdoing on the part of the officeholder, increasing the number of signatures needed to force a recall election, and changing the process that could permit someone with a small percentage of votes to replace the state's top elected official.

"I think the recall process has been weaponized," Newsom said Wednesday, a day after his decisive victory.

He added that the recall rules also affect school boards, city councils, county supervisors and district attorneys, notably in Los Angeles and San Francisco, where progressive prosecutors with reform agendas

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are facing recall efforts.

The governor noted that California has one of the nation's lowest thresholds for the number of signatures needed to trigger a recall election. In Newsom's case, recall proponents had to collect nearly 1.5 million signatures out of 22 million registered voters in their bid to oust him, or 12% of the electorate who voted him into office in 2018. By contrast, Kansas requires 40%.

But the efforts faced pushback from those who organized the recall election against Newsom and questions from experts, who said California's law is better than many others in limiting requirements that make it harder to recall politicians.

"They're working in opposition of the will of the people when they take action like that to limit our ability to self-govern," said Orrin Heatlie, chief proponent of the recall effort.

There is little benefit for Democrats in pushing changes that could anger voters, said Joshua Spivak, an expert on recalls and senior fellow at the Hugh L. Carey Institute for Government Reform in New York.

"From a political point of view, it's kind of crazy, and I can't imagine why they would spend political capital on this," Spivak said. "Are you going to go to the voters and say, 'Well, we didn't deal with the homeless problem but yeah, we fixed the recall?' It just doesn't seem like a smart move."

State Sen. Josh Newman, who was recalled in 2018 before regaining his seat two years later, said he will propose two constitutional amendments: one to raise the number of required signatures and another to have the lieutenant governor finish the governor's term if a recall succeeds.

"We need to create a system where a small, small, small minority of Californians can't create, can't initiate a recall that the California taxpayers spent almost \$300 million on and that frankly distracts and really has an impact on our ability to govern for nine months," Democratic Assemblyman Marc Berman said.

Newsom on Tuesday became only the second governor in U.S. history to defeat a recall; the other was Wisconsin Republican Scott Walker in 2012. The win cements him as a prominent figure in national Democratic politics and ensures that the nation's most populous state remains a laboratory for progressive policies.

With an estimated 74% of ballots counted, the "no" response to the question of whether to recall Newsom was ahead by a 28-point margin.

At the Capitol, Berman and Sen. Steven Glazer, who head the Legislature's elections panels, promised bipartisan hearings in the coming months, with the goal of proposing constitutional changes sometime after lawmakers reconvene in January. Changes to the recall law must be approved by voters.

GOP Assemblyman Kelly Seyarto, vice chairman of the elections committee, said Republicans will seek to ensure the proposals protect voters' ability to hold politicians accountable.

The two elections committees will look at recall laws in other states and hear from experts on California's process.

Nineteen states have some sort of recall process, Glazer said, but only Colorado has a similar two-stage process. The California system asks voters first whether they want to remove the incumbent. Then, if a majority favors removal, the candidate who gets the most votes on the second question becomes governor. In this week's race, 46 candidates were on the ballot.

In the majority of other recall states, he said, the only question on the ballot is whether the official should be recalled. If a majority of voters say yes, the office is then declared vacant and filled by appointment or a separate special election.

Changes have the backing of the California Legislature's two leaders, both Democrats, and their party holds two-thirds majorities in both chambers. But the final decision will come down to voters because the recall process was enshrined in the state Constitution in 1911.

"This is a system that was set up about a century ago and to the extent to which it's still valid in its current form, it needs to be looked at for sure," Assembly Speaker Anthony Rendon said.

A Public Policy Institute of California survey in July found that 86% of California likely voters approve of having a way to recall elected officials, a sentiment that transcends political parties, regions, and demographic groups. But two-thirds of likely voters also supported major or minor changes, though Republicans and Democrats split over the extent of the changes.

## California GOP licks wounds after another lopsided loss

By MICHAEL R. BLOOD AP Political Writer

LOS ANGELES (AP) — The results of Tuesday's recall election in which California Gov. Gavin Newsom defeated an attempt to remove him from office look all too familiar to the state's enfeebled Republicans — they were embarrassed again by Democrats, who haven't lost a statewide race in 15 years.

The returns were incomplete Wednesday — about 26% remained uncounted — but Newsom's 2.5 million-vote lead gave him an insurmountable lead. It was business as usual for him a day after his victory. He visited an Alameda County school to talk about the pandemic and investments in education, two key issues for him.

For the state GOP, it once again was a time to evaluate what went wrong. Despite pre-election polls showing high enthusiasm among Republican voters for an election that was driven by GOP activists, only 36% voted to remove Newsom. That preliminary result fell into a predictable range for statewide elections in recent years — an unwelcome sign for the party as it looks for a comeback.

When then-Democratic candidate Joe Biden defeated President Donald Trump in California in 2020, he grabbed 63.5% of the vote, compared to 34.3% for Trump. It was similar in 2018 statewide races, when no Republicans seeking top offices were able to break 40% of the vote.

That year, Newsom — in his first run for governor — received 62% of the vote, with Republican John Cox picking up 38%. Those double-digit margins reflect a simple political truth in the state at this time: There are a lot more Democrats in California than Republicans, with the party holding a statewide registration edge of nearly 2-to-1.

And issues being promoted by many conservatives — including dialing back environmental regulations, limiting the reach of COVID restrictions or echoing Trump's baseless claims of voter fraud — are out of step with the state's liberal-minded voters.

With the nation and state deeply divided by politics, the results showed "it is going to be harder for a hard, partisan Republican to get elected," said Republican consultant Tim Rosales. He advised Assemblyman Kevin Kiley, who was among the Republicans running in the recall to replace Newsom.

Newsom spent the last weeks of the campaign warning about the threat to Democratic policies on climate change, the pandemic and the threat of "Trumpism," while focusing his criticism on leading Republican candidate Larry Elder, a conservative who was seeking to become the state's first Black governor. Elder far outdistanced all other replacement candidates.

Even when comparing different statewide races, each with different candidates, in recent elections it's "showing the same results" for Republicans, said Paul Mitchell of Political Data Inc., a firm that gathers voting research for Democrats, independents and academics. "It very clearly shows Republicans are not going to be competitive statewide" in the current climate.

Cox, who ran again in the recall, lamented what he considered a weak turnout from supporters, noting that the vote total was on track to fall well short of the 6 million votes Trump received in the state in 2020.

"Where were these voters?" he asked. "Is it people just don't believe there can be any change?"

Republican registration in California has dipped to a meager 24%, meaning GOP candidates start at a huge disadvantage in any routine statewide race. Democrats control every statewide office and dominate the Legislature and congressional delegation.

But the recall was different. If Newsom was removed, his replacement would have been the top vote-getter among 46 replacement candidates that included no significant Democrats. That meant a Republican could slip into the governor's seat with support from a relatively narrow slice of GOP and conservative voters.

But it didn't happen. Newsom easily carried the first question on the ballot, whether he should be removed, yes or no, making the replacement voting irrelevant.

While statewide races continue to look out of reach for Republicans, the party has made inroads in Congress. It captured four Democratic House seats in 2020. Those seats will be hotly contested again in 2022.

While the preliminary statewide recall results show Newsom with a wide lead, the recall contest is much

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closer in competitive House districts in Southern California, said Sam Oh, who ran winning 2020 campaigns for Republican U.S. Reps. Michelle Steel in the 48th District, and Young Kim in the neighboring 39th.

"The preliminary numbers after election day show the recall results are very close in these targeted seats," he said, referring to districts held by Steel and Kim. "It's setting up for a very competitive 2022 race again."

Those districts, however, could be reshaped during once-a-decade reapportionment that adjusts district boundaries to account for population shifts. And the dynamic that drove the recall will be different than the factors in each House race.

Elder's sudden rise to star of the GOP recall field was applauded by many conservative voters. After the conclusion of his first run for office, Elder teased a possible future run — "Stay tuned," he told supporters.

But signs of Republican infighting that has plagued the state party for years continued during the recall, as the GOP looks for a way forward following Trump's presidency.

The day after the results were in, two GOP consultants who worked for rival candidates highlighted the party's divisions during a Sacramento Press Club panel. Ron Nehring, a former state party chairman who backed former San Diego Mayor Kevin Faulconer, blasted the Elder campaign for raising accusations of voter fraud before the election was over.

"I find it astonishing that any campaign would seek to further erode public confidence in our elections with absolutely no evidence to do so," Nehring said.

Elder's campaign manager, Jeff Corless, pushed back, saying it was important for Republicans to ensure the elections have integrity. He said Elder often was asked if Democrats would steal the election.

"At the end of the day, election integrity is important and no one should have a problem with that," Corless said.

State Republican Party Chairwoman Jessica Millan Patterson called Newsom's victory "hollow" and predicted he would suffer in 2022, when he again is on the ballot.

"California remains a state where surging crime, raging wildfires, crippling drought ... unaffordable housing and suffocating taxes are a sobering reality," she tweeted.

## Senate hopeful flexes power of AG's office through lawsuits

By SUMMER BALLENTINE Associated Press

COLUMBIA, Mo. (AP) — Missouri's Republican attorney general, Eric Schmitt, sued China over the coronavirus. He signed on to a failed lawsuit seeking to overturn the results of the 2020 presidential election. Now, as he positions himself for a Senate run, he's turning his attention closer to home and suing to stop mask mandates in the state's liberal cities and Missouri schools.

For state attorneys general hoping to gain greater influence and advance their own political agendas, filing lawsuits has become an increasingly common strategy. The partisan divide over coronavirus restrictions has given GOP politicians an opening to showcase their conservative bona fides to voters and capitalize on the public's exhaustion with COVID-19 protocols a year and a half into a pandemic that shows no signs of waning.

For Schmitt, the fight over mask mandates could bolster his support in a crowded primary for retiring GOP Sen. Roy Blunt's seat in next year's midterm elections.

Schmitt is "taking advantage of what we call the politics of grievance," said retired St. Louis University political scientist Steven Puro. "He's going to play on that as much as he possibly can."

Schmitt's spokesperson framed the lawsuits as his way of "fighting back against government bureaucrats."

"Nothing is off the table in our mission to beat back the encroachment and overreach from local to federal government on the liberties and freedom of the people of Missouri," Chris Nuelle said in a statement.

Schmitt, 46, is now promising a fight over President Joe Biden's federal vaccine mandate that all employers with more than 100 workers require them to be vaccinated or be tested for the virus weekly.

"Missouri has been a national leader in pushing back against the Biden Administration & Covid related mandates," Schmitt tweeted last week. "Biden's historic overreach on vaccine mandates will not stand in



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Missouri.”

While the job’s responsibilities vary by state, most attorneys general are tasked with defending state laws and constitutions and acting as consumer-protection watchdogs.

They’ve long had the power to file headline-grabbing lawsuits with a political edge, but Paul Nolette, an associate professor at Marquette University and an expert on state attorneys general, said they’ve traditionally stuck to lower-profile lawsuits against scammers and defending state laws that are challenged in court.

Filing flashy legal challenges became increasingly popular among Republican attorneys general during the Obama era, Nolette said. When Donald Trump became president, Democratic attorneys general took the lead in suing the White House over its policies.

“Now Republican (attorneys general) are flexing their muscles during the Biden administration as well, particularly on this issue of suing municipalities and essentially their own constituents,” Nolette said. “I would classify that as still unusual, but it’s become more common just in the last few years.”

GOP attorneys general in red states now are zeroing in on liberal policies adopted by majority Democratic cities, the one place where Democrats have some control, he said.

For example, Texas Attorney General Ken Paxton has been fighting in court with San Antonio since 2018 over the city’s handling of immigrants suspected of being in the United States illegally, accusing city officials of violating a new state law targeting what conservative critics call “sanctuary cities.”

The practice is less common among Democratic attorneys general. Not because they’re less political, Nolette said, but because fewer people tend to live in rural Republican strongholds, so the impact of blocking conservative policies there is less attention-grabbing.

Even though Schmitt is technically suing his own constituents, University of Central Missouri political scientist Robynn Kuhlmann said Schmitt’s lawsuits will resonate in drastically different ways with Republicans and Democrats.

“While it may seem as if he’s attacking constituents of the liberal perspective, I think it’s important to note for those who are conservative it is in essence defending rights and liberties,” Kuhlmann said.

In fighting mask mandates, Schmitt is acting against the guidance of public health officials, who encourage mask wearing to stop the spread of COVID-19, particularly when it’s caused by the more contagious delta variant that has caused a spike in cases, hospitalizations and deaths. Schmitt’s lawsuit cites the low death rate among school-age children, and he has stressed the importance of letting families make their own health decisions.

A Columbia Public Schools spokesperson said in a statement after Schmitt sued that the district is “extremely disappointed to learn that the Missouri Attorney General has chosen to pursue litigation against the school district for providing safety measures for its scholars, teachers, and staff members.”

But Republicans might find there are limits to such moves. A recent Republican-fueled effort in California to recall Democratic Gov. Gavin Newsom, in part over COVID-19 restrictions that he imposed, came up short amid increasing worries over the perniciousness of the delta variant.

Lawsuits can be used as a tool for politically ambitious attorneys general to drum up name recognition, fundraising and votes, Nolette said.

The tactic works, Nolette said, because attorneys general can sue and immediately cash in on the recognition for taking action. The process is more complicated for a state lawmaker, who must work for months and sometimes years to get legislation passed.

“Some of these lawsuits, even if the expectation is that they’re not really going to go anywhere, the fact is you can always sue and get a hearing, even if the argument is ridiculous,” Nolette said.

Schmitt’s lawsuit seeking to hold China responsible for the COVID-19 pandemic is pending in federal court, and the Chinese government has refused to participate. Lawsuits against other countries typically don’t go anywhere because U.S. law generally prohibits them.

Schmitt is making more progress on his lawsuits against local masking rules. He secured a win last month when a Missouri judge banned St. Louis County from enforcing its mask mandate while Schmitt’s lawsuit plays out in court.

A number of Missouri attorneys general have used the position as a steppingstone to higher political office.

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Republican John Ashcroft was attorney general from 1977 to 1985 and later was elected Missouri governor and U.S. senator and then appointed U.S. attorney general under President George W. Bush.

Democrat Jay Nixon served as attorney general from 1993 to 2009, when he was elected governor. And Schmitt's predecessor, Republican Josh Hawley, served two years as attorney general before catapulting into the U.S. Senate.

The stakes are high for Schmitt, who faces a slew of other Republican Senate candidates, including former Gov. Eric Greitens, who resigned amid scandal in 2018, and Mark McCloskey, who was recently pardoned along with his wife for waving guns at social justice demonstrators last year. U.S. Reps. Vicky Hartzler and Billy Long also are running.

And even though Missouri now is considered a red state, there's concern among Republicans that the crowded field could give Greitens a path to the GOP nomination and possibly squander what should be an easy win for Republicans.

If Schmitt wants to win, Puro said, he needs to quickly clear the GOP field. Filing lawsuits that garner attention from state voters and wealthy national donors will help, Kuhlmann said.

"This allows for name recognition to occur in this crowded field, and also some credit claim in that he has this position as attorney general and is acting on defending Missouri's laws," she said.

## Can kids be harmed wearing masks to protect against COVID?

By LINDSEY TANNER AP Medical Writer

Can kids be harmed wearing masks to protect against COVID?

No, there is no scientific evidence showing masks cause harm to kids' health despite baseless claims suggesting otherwise.

The claims are circulating on social media and elsewhere just as virus outbreaks are hitting many reopened U.S. schools — particularly those without mask mandates.

Among the unfounded arguments: Masks can foster germs if they become moist or cause unhealthy levels of carbon dioxide. But experts say washing masks routinely keeps them safe and clean.

Some argue that young children miss important visual and social cues that enhance learning and development when their classmates and teachers are wearing masks. But others note that children with vision or hearing impairment learn to adapt and that other kids can, too.

"We don't know for sure that masks have no developmental effects but we do know that there are adverse effects from not trying to stop transmission," said Dr. Emily Levy, a critical care and infection control expert at Mayo Clinic Children's Center.

There's strong evidence masking children in schools can reduce COVID-19 transmission to other children and adults.

Across 166 schools in Maricopa County, Arizona, COVID-19 outbreaks are two times more common at those without mask mandates, said Dr. Rebecca Sunenshine, medical director of the county's public health department.

Studies from school districts in other states including North Carolina have also found that masking can greatly reduce COVID-19 transmission rates, especially when it's combined with physical distancing and other prevention measures.

"One thing that we know about prevention, about infection control is that there isn't a single intervention that will win the day," said Dr. Joshua Schaffzin, director of infection prevention and control at Cincinnati Children's Hospital.

But he noted there's plenty of evidence that masking is a key component in making schools safer.

To avoid skin irritation, doctors suggest washing masks regularly, making sure they fit properly and picking masks made with soft, breathable fabric.

## States learning how many Afghan evacuees coming their way

By AAMER MADHANI Associated Press

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WASHINGTON (AP) — The Biden administration began notifying governors and state refugee coordinators across the country about how many Afghan evacuees from among the first group of nearly 37,000 arrivals are slated to be resettled in their states.

California is projected to take more arrivals than any other — more than 5,200 people, according to State Department data for the Afghan Placement and Assistance program obtained by The Associated Press.

Alabama and Mississippi are each slated to welcome 10, U.S. officials said Wednesday. Hawaii, South Dakota, West Virginia, Wyoming and the District of Columbia are not expected to resettle anyone from the first group of evacuees who fled during the final days of the chaotic U.S. withdrawal last month.

The administration has requested funding from Congress to help resettle 65,000 Afghans in the United States by the end of this month and 95,000 by September 2022. President Joe Biden tapped the former governor of his home state of Delaware, Jack Markell, to temporarily serve as his point person on resettling Afghan evacuees in the United States.

States with a historically large number of Afghans who resettled in the U.S. over the last 20 years — including California, Maryland, Texas and Virginia — are again welcoming a disproportionate number of evacuees, according to the data. Many gravitate to northern Virginia, the Maryland suburbs of D.C. and northern California — some of the most expensive housing markets in the country.

Oklahoma, which over the course of the 20-year war had resettled a relatively small number of Afghans, is slated to resettle 1,800 new arrivals.

Many of the new evacuees requested to be resettled in those states because they already have family and close friends living in those states, according to two U.S. officials who spoke on the condition of anonymity to discuss the calls to state government officials. Resettlement agencies also have a large presence and capacity in many of those states.

The State Department resettled evacuees based on the advice of local affiliates of nine national resettlement agencies the U.S. government is working with, the officials said.

The officials said Afghan evacuees are advised that other parts of the country -- including areas with plentiful job openings and cheaper housing -- could be good places to begin their new lives in the U.S.

The Afghan evacuees go through a Department of Homeland Security-coordinated process of security vetting before being admitted. And every evacuee who comes into the United States also goes through health screening. Evacuees who are 12 and older are required to get the COVID-19 vaccination as a term of their humanitarian parolee status after entering the country.

Still, there have been unexpected complications.

U.S.-bound flights for evacuees who had been staying temporarily in third-country processing sites were halted last week after measles cases were discovered among several Afghans who had recently arrived in the U.S.

Some of the recent Afghan arrivals could also face a tough road ahead if Congress doesn't take action to treat them as refugees arriving in the U.S.

The Afghan evacuees are not currently eligible for food stamps, cash assistance through the Temporary Assistance for Needy Families program for low income families, Medicaid or other traditional refugee services that are funded through the Department of Health and Human Services.

Currently, each Afghan evacuee is slated to receive \$1,225 to help with rent, furniture and food and provide a small amount of pocket money. Biden has called on Congress to take action to ensure that the recent arrivals have access to the same benefits as refugees.

## SpaceX launches 4 amateurs on private Earth-circling trip

By MARCIA DUNN AP Aerospace Writer

CAPE CANAVERAL, Fla. (AP) — SpaceX's first private flight streaked into orbit Wednesday night with two contest winners, a health care worker and their rich sponsor, the most ambitious leap yet in space tourism.

It was the first time a spacecraft circled Earth with an all-amateur crew and no professional astronauts. "Punch it, SpaceX!" the flight's billionaire leader, Jared Isaacman, urged moments before liftoff.

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The Dragon capsule's two men and two women are looking to spend three days going round and round the planet from an unusually high orbit — 100 miles (160 kilometers) higher than the International Space Station — before splashing down off the Florida coast this weekend.

It's SpaceX founder Elon Musk's first entry in the competition for space tourism dollars.

Isaacman is the third billionaire to launch this summer, following the brief space-skimming flights by Virgin Galactic's Richard Branson and Blue Origin's Jeff Bezos in July. Only 38, Isaacman made his fortune from a payment-processing company he started in his teens.

Joining Isaacman on the trip dubbed Inspiration4 is Hayley Arceneaux, 29, a childhood bone cancer survivor who works as a physician assistant where she was treated — St. Jude Children's Research Hospital in Memphis, Tennessee. Isaacman has pledged \$100 million out of his own pocket to the hospital and is seeking another \$100 million in donations.

Arceneaux became the youngest American in space and the first person in space with a prosthesis, a titanium rod in her left leg.

Also along for the ride: sweepstakes winners Chris Sembroski, 42, a data engineer in Everett, Washington, and Sian Proctor, 51, a community college educator in Tempe, Arizona.

Once opposed to space tourism, NASA is now a supporter. "Low-Earth orbit is now more accessible for more people to experience the wonders of space," tweeted NASA Administrator Bill Nelson, a congressman when he hitched a ride on a space shuttle decades ago.

The recycled Falcon rocket soared from the same Kennedy Space Center pad used by the company's three previous astronaut flights for NASA. But this time, the Dragon capsule aimed for an altitude of 357 miles (575 kilometers), just beyond the Hubble Space Telescope.

Across the country, SpaceX employees at company headquarters in Hawthorne, California, cheered wildly at every flight milestone, including when the spent first-stage booster landed upright on an ocean platform. French astronaut Thomas Pesquet rooted from the space station on Twitter: "No matter if you're a professional or not, when you get strapped to a rocket and launch into space, we have something in common. All the very best from, well, space."

Isaacman noted upon reaching orbit that few people have been to space — fewer than 600 over 60 years. But he added, "Many are about to follow. The door's opening now and it's pretty incredible."

Their capsule has already been to orbit: It was used for SpaceX's second astronaut flight for NASA to the space station. The only significant change is the large domed window at the top in place of the usual space station docking mechanisms.

An accomplished pilot, Isaacman persuaded SpaceX to take the fully automated Dragon capsule higher than it's ever been. Initially reluctant because of the increased radiation exposure and other risks, SpaceX agreed after a safety review.

"Now I just wish we pushed them to go higher," Isaacman told reporters on the eve of the flight. "If we're going to go to the moon again and we're going to go to Mars and beyond, then we've got to get a little outside of our comfort zone and take the next step in that direction."

Isaacman, whose Shift4 Payments company is based in Allentown, Pennsylvania, is picking up the entire tab for the flight, but won't say how many millions he paid. He and others contend those big price tags will eventually lower the cost.

"Yes, today you must have and be willing to part with a large amount of cash to buy yourself a trip to space," said Explorers Club President Richard Garriott, a NASA astronaut's son who paid the Russians for a space station trip more than a decade ago. "But this is the only way we can get the price down and expand access, just as it has been with other industries before it.

Though the capsule is automated, the four Dragon riders spent six months training for the flight to cope with any emergency. That training included centrifuge and fighter jet flights, launch and reentry practice in SpaceX's capsule simulator and a grueling trek up Washington's Mount Rainier in the snow.

Four hours before liftoff, the four met with Musk before emerging from SpaceX's huge rocket hangar, waving and blowing kisses to their families and company employees, before they were driven off to get



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into their sleek white flight suits. Once at the launch pad, they posed for pictures and bumped gloved fists, before taking the elevator up. Proctor danced as she made her way to the hatch.

Unlike NASA missions, the public won't be able to listen in or watch events unfold in real time. Arceneaux hopes to link up with St. Jude patients, but the conversation won't be broadcast live.

SpaceX's next private trip, early next year, will see a retired NASA astronaut escorting three wealthy businessmen to the space station for a weeklong visit. The Russians are launching an actress, film director and a Japanese tycoon to the space station in the next few months.

"Someday NASA astronauts will be the exception, not the rule," said Cornell University's Mason Peck, an engineering professor who served as NASA's chief technologist nearly a decade ago. "But they'll likely continue to be the trailblazers the rest of us will follow."

## As COVID-19 vaccine mandates rise, religious exemptions grow

By COLLEEN LONG and ANDREW DEMILLO Associated Press

An estimated 2,600 Los Angeles Police Department employees are citing religious objections to try to get out of the required COVID-19 vaccination. In Washington state, thousands of state workers are seeking similar exemptions.

And in Arkansas, a hospital has been swamped with so many such requests from employees that it is apparently calling their bluff.

Religious objections, once used sparingly around the country to get exempted from various required vaccines, are becoming a much more widely used loophole against the COVID-19 shot.

And it is only likely to grow following President Joe Biden's sweeping new vaccine mandates covering more than 100 million Americans, including executive branch employees and workers at businesses with more than 100 people on the payroll.

The administration acknowledges that a small minority of Americans will use — and some may seek to exploit — religious exemptions. But it said it believes even marginal improvements in vaccination rates will save lives.

It is not clear how many federal employees have asked for a religious exemption, though union officials say there will be many requests. The Labor Department has said an accommodation can be denied if it causes an undue burden on the employer.

In the states, mask and vaccine requirements vary, but most offer exemptions for certain medical conditions or religious or philosophical objections. The use of such exemptions, particularly by parents on behalf of their schoolchildren, has been growing over the past decade.

The allowance was enshrined in the federal Civil Rights Act of 1964, which says employers must make reasonable accommodations for employees who object to work requirements because of "sincerely held" religious beliefs.

A religious belief does not have to be recognized by an organized religion, and it can be new, unusual or "seem illogical or unreasonable to others," according to rules laid out by the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission. But it can't be founded solely on political or social ideas.

That puts employers in the position of determining what is a legitimate religious belief and what is a dodge.

Many major religious denominations have no objections to the COVID-19 vaccines. But the rollout has prompted heated debates because of the longtime role that cell lines derived from fetal tissue have played, directly or indirectly, in the research and development of various vaccines and medicines.

Roman Catholic leaders in New Orleans and St. Louis went so far as to call Johnson & Johnson's COVID-19 shot "morally compromised." J&J has stressed that there is no fetal tissue in its vaccine.

Moreover, the Vatican's doctrine office has said it is "morally acceptable" for Catholics to receive COVID-19 vaccines that are based on research that used cells derived from aborted fetuses. Pope Francis himself has said it would be "suicide" not to get the shot, and he has been fully vaccinated with the Pfizer formula.

In New York, state lawmakers have attempted to make the vaccine mandatory for medical workers, with no religious exemptions. On Tuesday, a federal judge blocked the state from enforcing the rule to give a

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group of workers time to argue that it is illegal because it lacks the opt-out.

Andrew Kurtyko, a registered nurse, is among those who want a religious exemption to not take the vaccine, and he is preparing to leave New York for Florida with his 18-year-old daughter if necessary.

Kurtyko said the "draconian" vaccine requirements in the U.S. remind him of communist Poland where he grew up before he and his family immigrated to the United States in 1991. He is a Catholic who believes fetal stem cells were experimented with in making the vaccine. He called Pope Francis' guidance to get vaccinated "his own opinion."

"My parents came to this country for better living and crossed the ocean," said Kurtyko. "The least I can do is fight for myself and my family is to go to a different state where religious exemptions are still being honored. . . . Our rights are being trampled."

Across the U.S., public officials, doctors and community leaders have been trying to help people circumvent COVID-19 mask and vaccine requirements.

In Tulsa, Oklahoma, pastor Jackson Lahmeyer is offering a "religious exemption" form on his church's website for download, along with links for suggested donations to the church. The 29-year-old is running for the U.S. Senate as a Republican.

Anyone interested can get the form signed by a religious leader, or Lahmeyer can sign it himself if the person joins the church and donates. He said more than 35,000 people downloaded the form in just three days.

"We're not anti-vaxxers. We're just pro-freedom," Lahmeyer said. "A lot of these people who have signed ... have already taken the vaccine. They just don't think it's right that somebody else should be forced or lose their job."

But obtaining a religious exemption is not as simple as producing a signed form. Measles outbreaks in schools over the past decade prompted some states to change their policies. Some now require an actual signed affidavit from a religious leader, instead of an online form. California got rid of nonmedical exemptions in 2015.

Some employers are taking a hard line. United Airlines told employees last week that those who obtain religious exemptions will be put on unpaid leave until new coronavirus testing procedures are in place.

In Los Angeles, Police Chief Michel Moore said he is waiting for guidance from the city personnel department on how to handle exemption requests. The city has mandated that municipal employees get vaccinated by Oct. 5 unless they are granted a medical or religious exemption. A group of LAPD employees is suing over the policy.

Los Angeles Mayor Eric Garcetti had a warning for those seeking exemptions: "We will not tolerate the abuse of these exemptions by those who simply don't want to get vaccinated. To anyone thinking about filing a disingenuous exemption request, I strongly urge that you reconsider."

In Washington state, approximately 60,000 state employees are subject to a mandate issued by Gov. Jay Inslee that they be fully vaccinated by Oct. 18 or lose their job, unless they obtain a medical or religious exemption and receive an accommodation that allows them to remain employees.

As of Tuesday, more than 3,800 workers had requested religious exemptions. So far, 737 have been approved, but officials stressed that an exemption does not guarantee continued employment.

Once the exemption is approved, each agency has to evaluate whether the employee can still do the job with an accommodation while ensuring a safe workplace. Seven accommodations so far have been granted.

Inslee spokeswoman Tara Lee said the process "may help distinguish between a sincerely held personal belief and a sincerely held religious belief."

In Arkansas, about 5% of the staff at the privately run Conway Regional Health System has requested religious or medical exemptions.

The hospital responded by sending employees a form that lists a multitude of common medicines — including Tylenol, Pepto-Bismol, Preparation H and Tums — that it said were developed or tested using fetal cell lines.

The form asks people to sign it and attest that "my sincerely held religious belief is consistent and true

and I do not use or will not use" any of the listed medications.

In a statement, Conway Regional Health President and CEO Matt Troup said: "Staff who are sincere ... should have no hesitancy with agreeing to the list of medicines listed."

## **Biden announces Indo-Pacific alliance with UK, Australia**

By AAMER MADHANI and JONATHAN LEMIRE Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — President Joe Biden announced Wednesday that the United States is forming a new Indo-Pacific security alliance with Britain and Australia that will allow for greater sharing of defense capabilities — including helping equip Australia with nuclear-powered submarines. It's a move that could deepen a growing chasm in U.S.-China relations.

Biden made the announcement alongside British Prime Minister Boris Johnson and Australian Prime Minister Scott Morrison, who joined him by video to unveil the new alliance, which will be called AUKUS (pronounced AWK-us). The three announced they would quickly turn their attention to developing nuclear-powered submarines for Australia.

"We all recognize the imperative of ensuring peace and stability in the Indo-Pacific over the long term," said Biden, who said the new alliance reflects a broader trend of key European partners playing a role in the Indo-Pacific. "We need to be able to address both the current strategic environment in the region and how it may evolve."

None of the leaders mentioned China in their remarks. But the new security alliance is likely to be seen as a provocative move by Beijing, which has repeatedly lashed out at Biden as he's sought to refocus U.S. foreign policy on the Pacific in the early going of his presidency.

Before the announcement, a senior administration official sought to play down the idea that the alliance was meant to serve as a deterrent against China in the region. The official, who spoke on the condition of anonymity to preview the announcement, said the alliance's creation was not aimed at any one country, and is about a larger effort to sustain engagement and deterrence in the Indo-Pacific by the three nations.

Johnson said the alliance would allow the three English-speaking maritime democracies to strengthen their bonds and sharpen their focus on an increasingly complicated part of the world.

"We will have a new opportunity to reinforce Britain's place at the leading edge of science and technology, strengthening our national expertise, and perhaps most significant, the U.K., Australia and the U.S. will be joined even more closely together," Johnson said.

The three countries have agreed to share information in areas including artificial intelligence, cyber and underwater defense capabilities.

But plans to support Australia acquiring nuclear-powered submarines are certain to catch Beijing's attention. To date, the only country that the United States has shared nuclear propulsion technology with is Britain. Morrison said Australia is not seeking to develop a nuclear weapons program and information sharing would be limited to helping it develop a submarine fleet.

The Australian prime minister said plans for the nuclear-powered submarines would be developed over the next 18 months and the vessels would be built in Adelaide, Australia.

Australia had announced in 2016 that French company DCNS had beat out bidders from Japan and Germany to build the next generation of submarines in Australia's largest-ever defense contract.

Top French officials made clear they were unhappy with the deal, which undercuts the DCNS deal.

"The American choice to exclude a European ally and partner such as France from a structuring partnership with Australia, at a time when we are facing unprecedented challenges in the Indo-Pacific region, whether in terms of our values or in terms of respect for multilateralism based on the rule of law, shows a lack of coherence that France can only note and regret," French foreign minister Jean-Yves Le Drian and defense minister Florence Parly said in a joint statement.

Morrison said the three countries had "always seen through a similar lens," but, as the world becomes more complex, "to meet these new challenges, to help deliver the security and stability our region needs, we must now take our partnership to a new level."

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Matt Pottinger, who served as deputy national security adviser in the Trump administration, said that equipping Australia with nuclear-powered submarines was a significant step that would help the U.S. and its allies on the military and diplomatic fronts.

Underwater warfare capabilities have been Beijing's "Achilles' heel," Pottinger said. A nuclear-powered submarine fleet would allow Australia to conduct longer patrols, giving the new alliance a stronger presence in the region.

"When you have a strong military, it provides a backdrop of deterrence that gives countries the confidence to resist bullying," said Pottinger, who is now a visiting fellow at the Hoover Institution at Stanford University. "Part of the problem right now is that Beijing has gotten rather arrogant and it's been less willing to engage productively in diplomacy."

The announcement of the new security alliance comes as the U.S.-China relationship has deteriorated. Beijing has taken exception to Biden administration officials repeatedly calling out China over human rights abuses in Xinjiang province, the crackdown on democracy activists in Hong Kong, and cybersecurity breaches originating from China, as well as Beijing's handling of the coronavirus pandemic and what the White House has labeled as "coercive and unfair" trade practices.

Even as White House officials have repeatedly spoken out about China, administration officials say they want to work with Beijing on areas of common interest, including curbing the pandemic and climate change.

Biden spoke by phone with China's President Xi Jinping last week amid growing frustration on the American side that high-level engagement between the two leaders' top advisers has been largely unfruitful.

After the 90-minute phone call, official Xinhua News Agency reported that Xi expressed concerns that U.S. government policy toward China has caused "serious difficulties" in relations.

Asked Tuesday about media reports that Xi had declined to commit to meet with him in person, the U.S. president said it was "untrue." Biden did not speak in "specific terms" about the new AUKUS alliance during last week's call with the Chinese leader, according to the senior administration official.

The U.S. and Australia, along with India and Japan, are members of a strategic dialogue known as "the Quad." Biden is set to host fellow Quad leaders at the White House next week.

Biden has sought to rally allies to speak with a more unified voice on China and has tried to send the message that he would take a radically different approach to China than former President Donald Trump, who placed trade and economic issues above all else in the U.S.-China relationship.

In June, at Biden's urging, Group of Seven nations called on China to respect human rights in Hong Kong and Xinjiang province and to permit a full probe into the origins of COVID-19. While the allies broadly agreed to work toward competing against China, there was less unity on how adversarial a public position the group should take.

## Milley defends calls to Chinese as effort to avoid conflict

By JONATHAN LEMIRE and ROBERT BURNS Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — The top U.S. military officer on Wednesday defended the phone calls he made to his Chinese counterpart in the turbulent final months of Donald Trump's presidency, saying the conversations were intended to convey "reassurance" to the Chinese military and were in line with his responsibilities as chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff.

Some in Congress accused Gen. Mark Milley of having overstepped his authority and urged President Joe Biden to fire him, but Biden indicated Wednesday he stands behind Milley.

"I have great confidence in Gen. Milley," Biden said when asked by a reporter whether Milley had done the right thing.

In a written statement, Milley's spokesman, Col. Dave Butler, said Milley acted within his authority as the most senior uniformed adviser to the president and to the secretary of defense.

"His calls with the Chinese and others in October and January were in keeping with these duties and responsibilities conveying reassurance in order to maintain strategic stability," Butler said. "All calls from the chairman to his counterparts, including those reported, are staffed, coordinated and communicated



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with the Department of Defense and the interagency.”

The Milley phone calls were described in excerpts from the forthcoming book “Peril” by Washington Post journalists Bob Woodward and Robert Costa. The book says Milley told Gen. Li Zuo Cheng of the People’s Liberation Army that he would warn his counterpart in the event of a U.S. attack.

Milley was appointed chairman of the Joint Chiefs in 2019 by Trump and kept on by Biden. In that position Milley does not command any troops but rather is an adviser to the president and to the secretary of defense. John Kirby, spokesman for Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin, said Austin has “complete and utter trust and confidence in Gen. Milley.”

The book by Woodward and Costa reported that Milley, fearful of Trump’s actions in his final weeks as president, twice called his Chinese counterpart to assure him that the United States was not going to attack China. One call took place on Oct. 30, 2020, four days before the election that Trump lost. The second call was on Jan. 8, 2021, less than two weeks before Biden’s inauguration and just two days after the insurrection at the U.S. Capitol by supporters of Trump.

The Associated Press obtained a copy of the book. Details from the book, which is set to be released next week, were first reported by The Washington Post on Tuesday.

“General Li, I want to assure you that the American government is stable and everything is going to be okay,” Milley told him in the first call, according to the book. “We are not going to attack or conduct any kinetic operations against you.”

“If we’re going to attack, I’m going to call you ahead of time. It’s not going to be a surprise,” Milley reportedly said.

In his statement Wednesday, Milley’s spokesman did not directly address this aspect of the call but said Milley regularly communicates with his counterparts across the globe, including in China and Russia, to reduce tensions, provide clarity and avoid “unintended consequences or conflict.”

Milley spoke with a number of other military leaders around the world after the Jan. 6 riot, including from the United Kingdom, Russia and Pakistan. A readout of those calls in January referred to “several” other counterparts that he spoke to with similar messages of reassurance that the U.S. government was strong and in control.

The second call was meant to placate Chinese fears about the events of Jan. 6. But the book reports that Li wasn’t as easily assuaged, even after Milley promised him: “We are 100 percent steady. Everything’s fine. But democracy can be sloppy sometimes.”

On Tuesday, Trump said Milley should be tried for treason if it was true that he had promised Li that he would warn him in the event of a U.S. attack. In a follow-up statement Wednesday, Trump called Milley “a complete nutjob” and said he “never told me about calls being made to China.”

“He put our Country in a very dangerous position but President Xi knows better, and would’ve called me,” Trump added.

Milley believed the president suffered a mental decline after the election, agreeing with a view shared by House Speaker Nancy Pelosi in a phone call they had Jan. 8, according to officials. Milley also asked senior officers to swear an “oath” that Milley had to be involved if Trump gave an order to launch nuclear weapons, according to the book.

In the statement Wednesday, Milley’s spokesman said Milley had conferred with the senior officers about nuclear weapons protocols “to remind uniformed leaders in the Pentagon of the long-established and robust procedures in light of media reporting on the subject.” Butler, the spokesman, appeared to be referring to news reports of the Jan. 8 Milley-Pelosi phone call. Butler did not address whether Milley had insisted he be part of the nuclear weapons procedures.

Pelosi had previously said she spoke to Milley that day about “available precautions” to prevent Trump from initiating military action or ordering a nuclear launch, and she told colleagues she was given unspecified assurances that there were longstanding safeguards in place.

Milley, according to the book, called the admiral overseeing the U.S. Indo-Pacific Command, the military unit responsible for Asia and the Pacific region, and recommended postponing upcoming military exercises.

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It's not clear what, if any, military exercises were actually postponed. But defense officials said it is more likely that the military postponed a planned operation, such as a freedom of navigation transit by a U.S. Navy ship in the Pacific region. The defense officials spoke on condition of anonymity to discuss private conversations.

In response to the book, Sen. Marco Rubio, R-Fla., sent Biden a letter Tuesday urging him to fire Milley, saying the general worked to "actively undermine the sitting Commander in Chief."

Sen. Ted Cruz, R-Texas, called the report "deeply concerning," telling reporters at the Capitol, "I think the first step is for General Milley to answer the question as to what exactly he said."

Sen. Dick Durbin, D-Ill., said he had no concerns that Milley might have exceeded his authority, telling reporters that Democratic lawmakers "were circumspect in our language but many of us made it clear that we were counting on him to avoid the disaster which we knew could happen at any moment."

## Democrats could change 'weaponized' California recall system

By DON THOMPSON Associated Press

SACRAMENTO, Calif. (AP) — Hours after California Gov. Gavin Newsom beat back a recall election that could have cost him his job, his fellow Democrats in the state Legislature said Wednesday that they will push for changes to make it more difficult to challenge a sitting governor.

That could include increasing the number of signatures needed to force a recall election, raising the standard to require wrongdoing on the part of the officeholder and changing the process that could permit someone with a small percentage of votes to replace the state's top elected official.

"I think the recall process has been weaponized," Newsom said a day after his decisive victory.

He said the recall rules affect not just governors but school boards, city councils, county supervisors and district attorneys, notably in Los Angeles and San Francisco, where progressive prosecutors with reform agendas are facing recall efforts.

The governor noted that California has one of the nation's lowest thresholds for the number of signatures needed to trigger a recall election. In Newsom's case, organizers had to collect nearly 1.5 million signatures out of California's 22 million registered voters in their bid to oust him, or 12% of the electorate who voted him into office in 2018. By contrast, Kansas requires 40%.

But the efforts faced pushback from those who organized the recall election against Newsom and questions from experts, who said California's law is better than many others in limiting requirements that make it harder to recall politicians.

"They're working in opposition of the will of the people when they take action like that to limit our ability to self-govern," said Orrin Heatlie, chief proponent of the recall effort.

There is little benefit for Democrats in pushing changes that could anger voters, said Joshua Spivak, an expert on recalls and senior fellow at the Hugh L. Carey Institute for Government Reform in New York.

"From a political point of view, it's kind of crazy, and I can't imagine why they would spend political capital on this," Spivak said. "Are you going to go to the voters and say, 'Well, we didn't deal with the homeless problem but yeah, we fixed the recall?' It just doesn't seem like a smart move."

Newsom declined to say what changes he favors, saying he is too close to the process as a recall target who could someday face another attempt.

Other Democrats were more specific.

"We need to create a system where a small, small, small minority of Californians can't create, can't initiate a recall that the California taxpayers spent almost \$300 million on and that frankly distracts and really has an impact on our ability to govern for nine months," Assemblyman Marc Berman said.

State Sen. Josh Newman, who was recalled in 2018 before regaining his seat two years later, said he will propose two constitutional amendments: one to raise the number of required signatures and another to have the lieutenant governor finish the governor's term if a recall succeeds.

Newsom on Tuesday became only the second governor in U.S. history to defeat a recall; the other was Wisconsin Republican Scott Walker in 2012. The win cements him as a prominent figure in national Demo-

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cratic politics and ensures that the nation's most populous state remains a laboratory for progressive policies.

The race was seen as a test of whether opposition to former President Donald Trump and his brand of conservative politics remains a motivating force for Democrats and independents as the party looks ahead to midterm elections next year. With an estimated 74% of ballots counted, the "no" response to the question of whether to recall Newsom was ahead by a 28-point margin.

At the Capitol, Berman and Sen. Steven Glazer, who head the elections panels in their respective chambers, promised bipartisan hearings in the coming months, with the goal of proposing constitutional changes after lawmakers reconvene in January. Changes to the recall law must be approved by voters.

GOP Assemblyman Kelly Seyarto, vice chairman of the elections committee, said Republicans will seek to ensure the proposals protect voters' ability to hold politicians accountable.

The two elections committees will look at recall laws in other states and hear from experts on California's process.

"I want to make sure we have is a system where a governor can't be recalled and replaced by someone" who gets fewer votes because "that's undemocratic, and there's really no other way to say that," Berman said.

Nineteen states have some sort of recall process, Glazer said, but only Colorado has a similar two-stage process. The California system asks voters first whether they want to remove the incumbent. Then, if a majority favors removal, the candidate who gets the most votes on the second question becomes governor. In this week's race, 46 candidates were on the ballot.

In the majority of other recall states, he said, the only question on the ballot is whether the official should be recalled. If a majority of voters say yes, the office is declared vacant and filled by appointment or a separate special election.

Changes have the backing of the California Legislature's two leaders, both Democrats, and their party holds two-thirds majorities in both chambers. But the final decision will come down to voters because the recall process was enshrined in the state Constitution in 1911.

"This is a system that was set up about a century ago and to the extent to which it's still valid in its current form, it needs to be looked at for sure," Assembly Speaker Anthony Rendon said.

A Public Policy Institute of California survey in July showed that 86% of likely voters approve of having a way to recall elected officials, a sentiment that transcends political parties, regions, and demographic groups. But two-thirds of likely voters also supported major or minor changes, though Republicans and Democrats split over the extent of the changes.

Newsom on Wednesday hailed the election results as evidence that most voters support his approach to the coronavirus pandemic, including mask and vaccine mandates.

Supporters of the recall expressed frustration over monthslong business closures and restrictions that kept most children out of classrooms. Rising homicides, a homelessness crisis and an unemployment fraud scandal further angered Newsom's critics.

## France says head of Islamic State in Sahara has been killed

By BABA AHMED and KRISTA LARSON Associated Press

BAMAKO, Mali (AP) — France's president announced the death of Islamic State in the Greater Sahara's leader late Wednesday, calling Adnan Abu Walid al-Sahrawi's killing "a major success" for the French military after more than eight years fighting extremists in the Sahel.

French President Emmanuel Macron tweeted that al-Sahrawi "was neutralized by French forces" but gave no further details. It was not announced where al-Sahrawi was killed, though the Islamic State group is active along the border between Mali and Niger.

"The nation is thinking tonight of all its heroes who died for France in the Sahel in the Serval and Barkhane operations, of the bereaved families, of all of its wounded," Macron tweeted. "Their sacrifice is not in vain."

Rumors of the militant leader's death had circulated for weeks in Mali, though authorities in the region had not confirmed it. It was not immediately possible to independently verify the claim or to know how

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the remains had been identified.

"This is a decisive blow against this terrorist group," French Defense Minister Florence Parly tweeted. "Our fight continues."

Al-Sahrawi had claimed responsibility for a 2017 attack in Niger that killed four U.S. military personnel and four people with Niger's military. His group also has abducted foreigners in the Sahel and is believed to still be holding American Jeffrey Woodke, who was abducted from his home in Niger in 2016.

The extremist leader was born in the disputed territory of Western Sahara and later joined the Polisario Front. After spending time in Algeria, he made his way to northern Mali where he became an important figure in the group known as MUJAO that controlled the major northern town of Gao in 2012.

A French-led military operation the following year ousted Islamic extremists from power in Gao and other northern cities, though those elements later regrouped and again carried out attacks.

The Malian group MUJAO was loyal to the regional al-Qaida affiliate. But in 2015, al-Sahrawi released an audio message pledging allegiance to the Islamic State group in Iraq and Syria.

The French military has been fighting Islamic extremists in the Sahel region where France was once the colonial power since the 2013 intervention in northern Mali. It recently announced, though, that it would be reducing its military presence in the region, with plans to withdraw 2,000 troops by early next year.

News of al-Sahrawi's death comes as France's global fight against the Islamic State organization is making headlines in Paris. The key defendant in the 2015 Paris attacks trial said Wednesday that those coordinated killings were in retaliation for French airstrikes on the Islamic State group, calling the deaths of 130 innocent people "nothing personal" as he acknowledged his role for the first time.

## **Biles: FBI turned 'blind eye' to reports of gymnasts' abuse**

By MARY CLARE JALONICK, WILL GRAVES and MICHAEL BALSAMO Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — Olympic gold medalist Simone Biles told Congress in forceful testimony Wednesday that federal law enforcement and gymnastics officials turned a "blind eye" to USA Gymnastics team doctor Larry Nassar's sexual abuse of her and hundreds of other women.

Biles told the Senate Judiciary Committee that "enough is enough" as she and three other U.S. gymnasts spoke in stark emotional terms about the lasting toll Nassar's crimes have taken on their lives. In response, FBI Director Christopher Wray said he was "deeply and profoundly sorry" for delays in Nassar's prosecution and the pain it caused.

The four-time Olympic gold medalist and five-time world champion — widely considered to be the greatest gymnast of all time — said she "can imagine no place that I would be less comfortable right now than sitting here in front of you." She declared herself a survivor of sexual abuse.

"I blame Larry Nassar and I also blame an entire system that enabled and perpetrated his abuse," Biles said through tears. In addition to failures of the FBI, she said USA Gymnastics and the United States Olympic and Paralympic Committee "knew that I was abused by their official team doctor long before I was ever made aware of their knowledge."

Biles said a message needs to be sent: "If you allow a predator to harm children, the consequences will be swift and severe. Enough is enough."

The hearing is part of a congressional effort to hold the FBI accountable after multiple missteps in investigating the case, including the delays that allowed the now-imprisoned Nassar to abuse other young gymnasts. All four witnesses said they knew girls or women who were molested by Nassar after the FBI had been made aware of allegations against him in 2015.

An internal investigation by the Justice Department released in July said the FBI made fundamental errors in the probe and did not treat the case with the "utmost seriousness" after USA Gymnastics first reported the allegations to the FBI's field office in Indianapolis in 2015. The FBI has acknowledged its own conduct was inexcusable.

Wray blasted his own agents who failed to appropriately respond to the complaints and made a promise to the victims that he was committed to "make damn sure everybody at the FBI remembers what hap-



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pened here” and that it never happens again.

A supervisory FBI agent who had failed to properly investigate the Nassar case, and later lied about it, has been fired by the agency, Wray said.

McKayla Maroney, a member of the gold-medal winning U.S. Olympic gymnastics team in 2012, recounted to senators a night when, at age 15, she found the doctor on top of her while she was naked — one of many times she was abused. She said she thought she was going to die that evening. But she said that when she recalled those memories in a call with FBI agents, crying, there was “dead silence.”

Maroney said the FBI “minimized and disregarded” her and the other gymnasts as they delayed the probe. “I think for so long all of us questioned, just because someone else wasn’t fully validating us, that we doubted what happened to us,” Maroney said. “And I think that makes the healing process take longer.”

Biles and Maroney were joined by Aly Raisman, who won gold medals alongside them on the 2012 and 2016 Olympic teams, and gymnast Maggie Nichols. Raisman told the senators that it “disgusts” her that they are still looking for answers six years after the original allegations against Nassar were reported.

Raisman noted the traumatic effect the abuse has had on all of them.

“Being here today is taking everything I have,” she said. “My main concern is I hope I have the energy to just walk out of here. I don’t think people realize how much it affects us.”

Speaking alongside senators after the hearing, Raisman called for more investigations of USA Gymnastics, Olympic officials and the FBI. The probes should be independent and go back decades, she said, because there might still be people in positions of power who should be held accountable.

Biles acknowledged in January 2018 that she was among the hundreds of athletes who were abused by Nassar. She is the only one of the witnesses who competed in the 2020 Tokyo Olympics — held this year after a one-year delay due to the coronavirus pandemic — where she removed herself from the team finals to focus on her mental health.

She returned to earn a bronze medal on beam but told the committee the lingering trauma from her abuse at the hands of Nassar played a factor in her decision to opt out of several competitions. At the hearing, she said she had wanted her presence in Tokyo “to help maintain a connection” between the failures of officials and the Olympic competition, but that “has proven to be an exceptionally difficult burden for me to carry.”

Democratic and Republican senators expressed disgust over the case and said they would continue to investigate. Senate Judiciary Committee Chairman Richard Durbin, D-Ill., said it was among the most compelling and heartbreaking testimony he had ever heard.

“We have a job to do and we know it,” Durbin said.

Sen. Jerry Moran, R-Kansas, called Nassar a “monster” and wondered how many other abusers have escaped justice, considering that even world-class athletes were ignored in this case.

The internal probe by Justice Department Inspector General Michael Horowitz, who testified alongside Wray, was spurred by allegations that the FBI failed to promptly address complaints made in 2015 against Nassar. USA Gymnastics had conducted its own internal investigation and the organization’s then-president, Stephen Penny, reported the allegations to the FBI’s field office in Indianapolis. But it was months before the bureau opened a formal investigation.

The watchdog investigation found that when the FBI’s Indianapolis field office’s handling of the matter came under scrutiny, officials there did not take any responsibility for the missteps and gave incomplete and inaccurate information to internal FBI inquiries to make it look like they had been diligent in their investigation.

The report also detailed that while the FBI was investigating the Nassar allegations, the head of the FBI’s field office in Indianapolis, W. Jay Abbott, was talking to Penny about getting a job with the Olympic Committee. He applied for the job but didn’t get it and later retired from the FBI, the report said.

Nassar pleaded guilty in 2017 to federal child pornography offenses and sexual abuse charges in Michigan. He is now serving decades in prison after hundreds of girls and women said he sexually abused them under the guise of medical treatment when he worked for Michigan State and Indiana-based USA Gymnastics, which trains Olympians.

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Litigation over the abuse may soon be coming to an end after USA Gymnastics and hundreds of Nassar's victims filed a joint \$425 million settlement proposal in U.S. Bankruptcy Court in Indianapolis last month.

## World leaders face new rule at UN meeting: vaccination

By JENNIFER PELTZ Associated Press

UNITED NATIONS (AP) — World leaders will have to be vaccinated against the coronavirus to speak at the U.N. General Assembly's big meeting next week, the assembly leader and New York City officials have said, prompting swift objections from at least one nation.

With the diplomatic world's premier event being held in person for the first time during the pandemic, city International Affairs commissioner Penny Abeywardena told the assembly in a letter last week that officials consider the hall a "convention center" and therefore subject to the city's vaccination requirement.

"We are proud to join in the ongoing efforts to keep all U.N.G.A. attendees and our fellow New Yorkers safe during the pandemic," she and Mayor Bill de Blasio said in a statement Wednesday, adding that the city would offer free, walk-in vaccinations — Johnson & Johnson's single shot — and testing outside the U.N. during the meeting.

G.A. President Abdulla Shahid embraced the vaccination requirement in a letter Tuesday, calling it "an important step in our return to a fully-functional General Assembly."

But Russian Ambassador Vassily Nebenzia blasted the vaccine demand as a "clearly discriminatory" infringement on nations' rights at the U.N.

"We believe that no measures beyond reasonable precautions should be introduced that de-facto prevent member states to participate in a meeting in GA Hall," he wrote to Shahid in a Wednesday letter seen by The Associated Press.

Requesting an urgent Assembly meeting Thursday to discuss the matter, Nebenzia said the group needed to think about people who can't be vaccinated for medical reasons and those who have developed antibodies from very recent cases of COVID-19. He also pointed to people who have gotten vaccines that don't have World Health Organization approval — the city's criterion for an acceptable inoculation, according to de Blasio spokesperson Mitch Schwartz.

The WHO is reviewing Russia's Sputnik V vaccine but hasn't yet approved it.

The city's letter represented a rare effort to broach conditions for goings-on at the U.N. headquarters, which is international territory. Under a 1947 agreement between the U.N. and the United States, the world body has considerable autonomy — police and American officials need permission to come in, and no federal, state or local law applies if it conflicts with U.N. rules.

It's not immediately clear how the vaccination requirement will be enforced. Schwartz said it would be up to the U.N. An inquiry was sent to the Assembly.

Stephane Dujarric, a spokesperson for U.N. Secretary-General Antonio Guterres, noted the Assembly's authority to make decisions affecting delegates but said the organization would work to help implement them.

Nor is it clear how many of the dignitaries converging on the U.N. next week are vaccinated — or whether their aides had access to the vaccine.

Some 104 heads of state and government and 23 cabinet ministers plan to deliver their countries' signature speeches in person from the Assembly hall's marble rostrum. Other nations' leaders are speaking by video — the only option any country had last year, when the virus crisis prompted an extraordinary decision to hold the world's premier diplomatic gathering virtually.

This time, each leader who shows up in person can bring along only six people to the U.N. headquarters, and only four into the Assembly hall. Meanwhile, the world body is requiring all its own staffers in the building during the week to be vaccinated.

## Ex-cop's murder conviction reversed in 911 caller's death

By AMY FORLITI Associated Press

MINNEAPOLIS (AP) — The Minnesota Supreme Court on Wednesday threw out the third-degree murder

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conviction of a former Minneapolis police officer who fatally shot a woman who had called 911 to report a possible rape behind her home.

In its ruling in the case of Mohamed Noor, the Supreme Court also clarified what would constitute third-degree murder, or depraved-mind murder, saying the statute doesn't apply if a defendant's actions are directed at a particular person.

Noor was convicted of third-degree murder and second-degree manslaughter in the 2017 death of Justine Ruszczyk Damond, a dual U.S.-Australian citizen who called 911 to report a possible sexual assault behind her home. He was sentenced to 12 1/2 years on the murder count but was not sentenced for manslaughter.

The ruling means his murder conviction is overturned and the case will now go back to the district court, where he will be sentenced on the manslaughter count. He has already served more than 28 months of his murder sentence. If sentenced to the presumptive four years for manslaughter, he could be eligible for supervised release around the end of this year.

Damond's fiancé, Don Damond, said the ruling was a "double blow against justice." In a statement to The Associated Press he said that since Justine's death, he has worked to try to prevent more fatalities at the hands of "stressed and inadequately trained police officers." He said the Minneapolis Police Department hasn't made any real progress toward change, and now Noor is not being held accountable for his fiancée's killing.

"I have lived with the tragic loss of Justine and none of this can hurt my heart more than it has been, but now it truly feels like there has been no justice for Justine," he said.

Caitlinrose Fisher, an attorney who worked on Noor's appeal, said she's grateful the Supreme Court clarified the law, and hopes it will lead to greater equity and consistency in charging decisions.

"We've said from the beginning that this was a tragedy but it wasn't a murder, and now the Supreme Court agrees and recognizes that," she said.

Noor's defense team also released a joint statement, saying "fairness has been delivered" and Noor is looking forward to hugging his son as soon as possible.

Hennepin County Attorney Mike Freeman, whose office prosecuted the case, said in a statement that he disagrees with the Supreme Court's analysis but must accept the decision. Freeman said the conviction on second-degree manslaughter still stands and was just.

The ruling could give former Minneapolis Officer Derek Chauvin grounds to contest his own third-degree murder conviction in George Floyd's May 2020 death. But that wouldn't have much impact on Chauvin since he was also convicted of the more serious count of second-degree murder and is serving 22 1/2 years on that count. Experts say it's unlikely Chauvin would be successful in appealing his second-degree murder conviction.

The ruling in Noor's case was also closely watched for its possible impact on three other former Minneapolis officers awaiting trial in Floyd's death. Prosecutors had wanted to add charges of aiding and abetting third-degree murder against them, but that's unlikely to happen now. The three men are due to go on trial in March on charges of aiding and abetting both second-degree murder and manslaughter.

The Attorney General's Office, which is prosecuting that case, said it is studying the decision.

The Supreme Court said that for a third-degree murder charge, the person's mental state must show a "generalized indifference to human life, which cannot exist when the defendant's conduct is directed with particularity at the person who is killed."

The justices said that Noor's conduct was directed with particularity at Damond, "and the evidence is therefore insufficient to sustain his conviction ... for depraved-mind murder."

State law has defined third-degree murder as "an act eminently dangerous to others and evincing a depraved mind, without regard for human life." A central dispute has been whether "dangerous to others" must be read as plural, or if the fatal act can be directed at a single, specific person.

In its ruling, the Supreme Court pointed to numerous other cases in which it has interpreted the "depraved mind, regardless of human life" phrase. In roughly 20 cases over more than 160 years, the Supreme Court has repeatedly held that depraved-mind murder shows an indifference to life in general, not to the life of

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a specific, targeted person.

"We reaffirm our precedent today and confirm that the mental state required for depraved-mind murder cannot exist when the defendant's actions are directed with particularity at the person who is killed," the justices wrote. The Supreme Court also made the point of overruling one of its own prior rulings that contradicted this precedent — saying that in that case, the justices had gotten it wrong.

While evidence shows Noor's conduct was aimed at Damond, the state argued that depraved-mind murder applied because Noor's partner and a bicyclist were nearby.

The Supreme Court said the mere proximity of others does not establish that Noor had an indifference to human life in general.

The justices also said that they may agree that Noor's decision to shoot his gun because he was startled was unreasonable, adding that his "conduct was especially troubling given the trust that citizens should be able to place in our peace officers. But the tragic circumstances of this case do not change the fact that Noor's conduct was directed with particularity toward Rusczyk."

Prosecutors had argued that since nearly all killings by officers are directed at a specific person, no officers could be prosecuted for third-degree murder if the statute was interpreted as Noor's attorneys suggested. But the Supreme Court disagreed, saying anyone, including an officer, who kills someone while showing indifference to human life "in general" could be convicted of depraved-mind murder. The justices also noted that officers could be prosecuted on other murder counts if the facts of the case warrant it.

Noor testified in his 2019 trial that a loud bang on his squad car made him fear for his and his partner's life, so he reached across his partner from the passenger seat and fired through the driver's window. Fisher told the Supreme Court justices that "it would be very hard to imagine" that an officer's "split-second reaction to a perceived threat" would count as a "depraved-mind murder" but that other charges could be justified instead, such as manslaughter.

Fisher said Wednesday that Noor "really believed that he was saving his partner's life that night, and instead he tragically caused the loss of an innocent life ... I think just having reaffirmation that a mistake like that isn't murder will mean more than words can say."

## After humble beginnings, Oregon's Dutch Bros launches IPO

By ANDREW SELSKY Associated Press

SALEM, Ore. (AP) — After humble beginnings as a pushcart operation in an Oregon town and growing into a company with hundreds of drive-thru coffee shops, Dutch Bros Coffee launched an initial public offering Wednesday on the New York Stock Exchange.

The offering drew an enthusiastic response from investors, who sent shares of the company up by more than 50% within hours.

Dutch Bros Coffee Executive Chairman Travis Boersma rang the ceremonial first trade bell on the floor of the NYSE on Wednesday. The company had an initial public offering price of \$23. By the close of the day's trading, the share price had jumped to about \$37.

The IPO was the biggest in state history and made the coffee company the state's fifth-most-valuable company, with a stock market value approaching that of Portland-based Columbia Sportswear, according to The Oregonian/OregonLive.

The Pacific Northwest is known for its love of coffee. Starbucks started in 1971 in Seattle's historic Pike Place Market. Unlike that chain, which is now ubiquitous in the United States and beyond, Dutch Bros is 100% drive-thru.

The shops with windmill emblems have sprouted up across the West and are now located as far east as Texas and Oklahoma.

Wearing a baseball cap turned backwards and a T-shirt saying Rage Against the Machine — the name of a hard rock band — Boersma exuberantly banged a gavel while presiding over the closing bell at the NYSE while flanked by executives and guests of Dutch Bros Coffee.

"It's a mindblow, man," he told KDRV, an Oregon TV station. "Who would have thought that you could



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take a coffee cart in a small little town like Grants Pass — really do what you hear about as you grow up as a kid, you know, the American dream — and actually go out and pull it off.”

“It’s surreal,” he added.

Company President and CEO Joth Ricci told IPO Edge, a news outlet focusing on new company share offerings, that the company decision to go public doesn’t mean its growth will be overly aggressive.

“We are not accelerating growth because of the IPO but staying disciplined,” Ricci told IPO Edge.

Boersma and his brother Dane started off in business in 1992 selling espresso-based beverages from their pushcart near the railroad tracks in the southern Oregon town of Grants Pass, which now has a population of about 37,000.

Among the current offerings are many sugary and energy drinks. Among them is Shark Attack, composed of an in-house brand of energy drink plus blue raspberry, coconut, lime and pomegranate syrups. A medium-sized blended, icy version packs 500 calories.

Dane Boersma died of amyotrophic lateral sclerosis, called ALS and also known as Lou Gehrig’s disease, in 2009 at age 55.

Dutch Bros Coffee in May held its 15th annual Drink One for Dane day, in which the company donated a portion of proceeds from all of its shops to the Muscular Dystrophy Association, the leading non-profit organization in ALS research, care and advocacy.

## Officials: Police in Elijah McClain hometown racially biased

By PATTY NIEBERG Associated Press/Report for America

DENVER (AP) — A civil rights investigation that was launched amid outrage over the death of Elijah McClain — a Black man put into a chokehold during an encounter with suburban Denver police two years ago — found a deeply engrained culture of racially biased policing within the department, Colorado’s attorney general said Wednesday.

Attorney General Phil Weiser said the investigation found the Aurora Police Department has long had a culture in which officers treat people of color — especially Black people — differently than white people. He said the agency also has a pattern of using unlawful excessive force; frequently escalates encounters with civilians; and fails to properly document police interactions with residents.

It’s the latest mark against the Aurora department since Weiser’s office indicted three officers and two paramedics on manslaughter and other charges this month in connection with McClain’s death.

“These actions are unacceptable. They hurt the people that law enforcement is entrusted” to serve, Weiser said.

The investigation cites numerous examples of biased policing in addition to McClain’s death. Among them:

— Police responded to two mental health calls on the same day. In one, police drew their weapons and aimed at a Black man who claimed he had a knife and planned to kill himself in what the report called “a tense standoff.” The other incident with a white man who was “very drunk and exhibiting mental health issues” ended after an officer “walked up to him, extended his hand, and said, ‘I’m (Joe), you look to be hurting. How can we help you?’”

— A city panel that oversees officer hiring and discipline overturned a decision by a former police chief to fire a lieutenant who used a racial epithet to refer to a group of Black residents.

Weiser urged the police department to commit to recommended reforms in officer training, its policies on use of force and especially stricter standards for police stops and arrests. If it fails to do so, he said his office will seek a court order compelling the department to do so — but he noted that the department fully cooperated in the investigation.

Police stopped McClain, a 23-year-old massage therapist, as he walked home from a store on Aug. 24, 2019, after a 911 caller reported a man wearing a ski mask and waving his hands who seemed “sketchy.”

Officers put McClain in a chokehold and pinned him down. Paramedics injected him with 500 milligrams of ketamine, an amount appropriate for someone 77 pounds (35 kilograms) heavier than McClain’s 143-pound (64-kilogram) frame, according to an indictment. He fell unconscious, was pronounced brain-dead at a

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hospital, and was taken off life support.

The state civil rights probe, announced in August 2020, was the first of its kind under a sweeping police accountability law passed in Colorado amid protests over the killings of McClain and George Floyd.

Weiser said his office wants a state agreement with Aurora, called a consent decree, to be submitted to a court. The agreement would have ongoing independent oversight and would specify what the city and department must do to fulfill his investigation's recommendations.

Aurora police Chief Vanessa Wilson and City Manager Jim Twombly said in statements that they will cooperate with Weiser's office and already have been working to implement reforms in the department.

"We acknowledge there are changes to be made," Wilson said, adding: "We will not broad brush this agency or discount the professionalism and integrity that individual officers bring to our community every day."

Sheneen McClain, the single mother who raised Elijah, said she participated in the state investigation, welcomed its findings and urged the police department to work with Weiser's office.

"It's just terrible that it takes my son's death for Aurora police to change what they've been doing for a long time in this community," she said. "Front and center: Elijah would still be here if the system was operating like it should. My son's death was preventable and it's really sad that it took all this to get justice done and make sure it won't happen to someone else."

The Colorado police accountability law made it unlawful for police officers or other employees of government agencies to deprive people of their constitutional rights and gave the attorney general the power to enforce it.

Under the law, if the attorney general finds an agency has "a pattern or practice" of violating people's rights, the attorney general must notify the agency of the reasons for that belief and give it 60 days to make changes. If the agency does not make changes, the attorney general can file a lawsuit to force them.

State Rep. Leslie Herod, a Democrat from Denver who helped craft the police accountability legislation, said Weiser's recommendations proved the law is working.

"We have affirmed what the citizens of Aurora and so many folks already knew: That the Aurora Police Department has operated in a way that is racist and that is particularly racist against Black people and presents harm to our community," said Herod, who is Black.

Weiser's office is also prosecuting three police officers and two paramedics on manslaughter, criminally negligent homicide and assault charges in McClain's death. He convened a grand jury to decide whether to file criminal charges after being ordered to take another look at the case by Democratic Gov. Jared Polis amid last year's protests.

The grand jury indicted all five.

The Aurora Police Department faced criticism when officers put four Black girls on the ground last year and handcuffed two of them next to a car that police suspected was stolen but turned out not to be.

And an officer was charged with assault in July after being captured on body camera video pistol-whipping and choking a Black man during an arrest. Another officer was charged with not intervening as required under the new police accountability law.

Lorenzo M. Boyd, Stewart professor in criminal justice and community policing at the University of New Haven in Connecticut, said Weiser's action is unusual because the federal, not state government generally reaches court-approved agreements with local police departments to ensure changes are made.

"A lot of times the state tries to not ruffle feathers at home. They'll farm things out to the feds to kind of keep their hands clean," Boyd said. "But it seems like in this situation, the state's attorney general in Colorado decides, you know, we need to fix our own house before outsiders need to come in and do it."

## **FDA strikes cautious tone ahead of vaccine booster meeting**

By LAURAN NEERGAARD and MATTHEW PERRONE Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — Influential government advisers will debate Friday if there's enough proof that a booster dose of Pfizer's COVID-19 vaccine is safe and effective — the first step toward deciding which

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Americans need one and when.

The Food and Drug Administration on Wednesday posted much of the evidence its advisory panel will consider. The agency struck a decidedly neutral tone on the rationale for boosters — an unusual and careful approach that's all the more striking after President Joe Biden and his top health advisers trumpeted a booster campaign they hoped to begin next week.

Pfizer's argument: While protection against severe disease is holding strong in the U.S., immunity against milder infection wanes somewhere around six to eight months after the second dose. The company gave an extra dose to 306 people at that point and recorded levels of virus-fighting antibodies threefold higher than after the earlier shots.

More important, Pfizer said, those antibodies appear strong enough to handle the extra-contagious delta variant that is surging around the country.

To bolster its case, Pfizer pointed the FDA to data from Israel, which began offering boosters over the summer.

That study tracked about 1 million people 60 and older and found those who got the extra shot were far less likely to become infected soon afterward. Pfizer said that translates to "roughly 95% effectiveness" when delta was spreading, comparable to the protection seen shortly after the vaccine's rollout earlier in the year.

The Israeli data, also published Wednesday in the *New England Journal of Medicine*, cannot say how long the boosted protection lasts.

The FDA's reviewers, however, suggested they would mainly look to research on how the vaccines are working among Americans, saying that "may most accurately represent vaccine effectiveness in the U.S. population."

Overall, the data show that the Pfizer and other U.S.-authorized COVID-19 vaccines "still afford protection against severe COVID-19 disease and death in the United States," the agency said, summarizing the evidence.

The FDA is not bound to follow the advice of its independent advisory panel. But if the agency overrules its own experts, that could stoke public confusion. Earlier this week, two top FDA vaccine regulators joined a group of international scientists in rejecting boosters now for otherwise healthy individuals, citing the strong continuing protection against severe disease.

Dr. Anna Durbin of Johns Hopkins School of Public Health said it's important to understand the FDA's decision simply is whether an extra dose is safe and does what it promises — to raise immunity levels.

If the FDA decides the extra shot does those two things, then the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention will have to decide who should get another dose. The CDC has scheduled a meeting of its own advisers for next week and has signaled it is considering a booster for certain people — such as older adults, nursing home residents and front-line health workers — rather than the general population.

The broader issue: "What really is going to control the delta variant is vaccinating the unvaccinated, not boosters," Durbin said. More than one-third of Americans who are eligible for the shots aren't yet fully vaccinated, according to CDC data.

The U.S. already offers an extra dose of the Pfizer or Moderna vaccines to people with severely weakened immune systems.

For the average person, what's the evidence that immunity is waning? The CDC says real-world data show protection against severe illness, hospitalizations and deaths is holding strong. But in one recent study, protection against infection slipped as the delta variant hit: It was 91% in the spring but 78% in June and July. The CDC also has seen a hint that for people 75 and older, protection against hospitalizations slightly declined in the summer.

Moderna also has asked FDA to allow a booster dose of its vaccine, and on Wednesday posted its own study of waning immunity.

Researchers compared about 14,000 people in Moderna's 2020 vaccine study who had gotten a first dose about a year ago with another 11,000 vaccinated last winter, roughly eight months ago. As delta surged in July and August, Moderna concluded the more recently vaccinated group had a 36% lower rate

of "breakthrough" infections compared with those vaccinated longer ago.

It's not clear how soon FDA will consider a Moderna booster, or one for people who received the single-shot Johnson & Johnson vaccine.

## States learning how many Afghan evacuees coming their way

By AAMER MADHANI Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — The Biden administration on Wednesday began notifying governors and state refugee coordinators across the country about how many Afghan evacuees from among the first group of nearly 37,000 arrivals are slated to be resettled in their states.

California is projected to take more arrivals than any other — more than 5,200 people, according to State Department data for the Afghan Placement and Assistance program obtained by The Associated Press.

Alabama and Mississippi are each slated to welcome 10, according to U.S. officials. Hawaii, South Dakota, West Virginia, Wyoming and the District of Columbia are not expected to resettle anyone from the first group of evacuees who fled during the final days of the chaotic U.S. withdrawal last month.

The administration has requested funding from Congress to help resettle 65,000 Afghans in the United States by the end of this month and 95,000 by September 2022. President Joe Biden tapped the former governor of his home state of Delaware, Jack Markell, to temporarily serve as his point person on resettling Afghan evacuees in the United States.

States with a historically large number of Afghans who resettled in the U.S. over the last 20 years — including California, Maryland, Texas and Virginia — are again welcoming a disproportionate number of evacuees, according to the data. Many gravitate to northern Virginia, the Maryland suburbs of D.C. and northern California — some of the most expensive housing markets in the country.

Oklahoma, which over the course of the 20-year war had resettled a relatively small number of Afghans, is slated to resettle 1,800 new arrivals.

Many of the new evacuees requested to be resettled in those states because they already have family and close friends living in those states, according to two U.S. officials who spoke on the condition of anonymity to discuss the calls to state government officials. Resettlement agencies also have a large presence and capacity in many of those states.

The State Department resettled evacuees based on the advice of local affiliates of nine national resettlement agencies the U.S. government is working with, the officials said.

The officials said Afghan evacuees are advised that other parts of the country -- including areas with plentiful job openings and cheaper housing -- could be good places to begin their new lives in the U.S.

The Afghan evacuees go through a Department of Homeland Security-coordinated process of security vetting before being admitted. And every evacuee who comes into the United States also goes through health screening. Evacuees who are 12 and older are required to get the COVID-19 vaccination as a term of their humanitarian parolee status after entering the country.

Still, there have been unexpected complications.

U.S.-bound flights for evacuees who had been staying temporarily in third-country processing sites were halted last week after measles cases were discovered among several Afghans who had recently arrived in the U.S.

Some of the recent Afghan arrivals could also face a tough road ahead if Congress doesn't take action to treat them as refugees arriving in the U.S.

The Afghan evacuees are not currently eligible for food stamps, cash assistance through the Temporary Assistance for Needy Families program for low income families, Medicaid or other traditional refugee services that are funded through the Department of Health and Human Services.

Currently, each Afghan evacuee is slated to receive \$1,225 to help with rent, furniture and food and provide a small amount of pocket money. Biden has called on Congress to take action to ensure that the recent arrivals have access to the same benefits as refugees.



## Kim Jong Un's sister warns of 'destruction' of S.Korean ties

By HYUNG-JIN KIM and KIM TONG-HYUNG Associated Press

SEOUL, South Korea (AP) — The powerful sister of North Korean leader Kim Jong Un on Wednesday criticized South Korea's president and threatened a "complete destruction" of bilateral relations after both countries tested ballistic missiles hours apart.

The launches of missiles underscored a return of tensions between the rivals at a time when talks aimed at stripping North Korea of its nuclear program are stalled.

Kim's sister, Kim Yo Jong, criticized South Korean President Moon Jae-in for comments he made while observing his country's missile tests, including its first of a submarine-launched ballistic missile. Moon said South Korea's growing missile capabilities will serve as a "sure deterrence" against North Korean provocations.

The tests came hours after the South Korean and Japanese militaries said North Korea had fired two ballistic missiles into the sea.

In a statement carried by state media, Kim berated Moon for describing North Korean weapons demonstrations as a provocation, and warned of a "complete destruction" of bilateral relations if he continues with what she described as slander of North Korea.

She said North Korea is developing its military capabilities for self-defense without targeting a specific country, and that South Korea is also increasing its military capabilities. North Korea has often accused the South of hypocrisy for introducing modern weapons while calling for talks on easing tensions between the divided countries.

"If the president joins in the slander and detraction (against us), this will be followed by counter actions, and the North-South relations will be pushed toward a complete destruction," she said. "We do not want that."

The South Korean and Japanese militaries said the two short-range ballistic missiles fired by North Korea flew 800 kilometers (500 miles) before landing in the sea inside Japan's exclusive economic zone — a worrying development even though they did not reach Japanese territorial waters. The last time a North Korean missile landed inside that zone was in October 2019.

The launches came two days after North Korea said it fired a newly developed cruise missile, its first known missile test in six months.

Hours after the latest North Korean launches, South Korea reported its first test of a submarine-launched ballistic missile. As Moon and other top officials looked on, the missile flew from a submarine and hit a designated target, Moon's office said. It did not say how far the weapon flew.

The U.N. Security Council scheduled emergency consultations on the North Korean missile launches late Wednesday afternoon at the request of France and Estonia, diplomats said.

U.N. spokesman Stephane Dujarric expressed concern at the missile launches, reiterating that "diplomatic engagement remains the only pathway to sustainable peace and complete, verifiable denuclearization of the Korean peninsula."

Experts say North Korea is building up its weapons systems to apply pressure on the United States in the hopes of winning relief from economic sanctions aimed at forcing the North to abandon its nuclear arsenal. U.S.-led talks on the issue have been stalled for more than two years.

"North Korea is trying to communicate a message that things will not go as Washington wishes, if it doesn't accept the North's demands," said Moon Seong Mook, an analyst with the Seoul-based Korea Research Institute for National Strategy. He said North Korea may think it has an opportunity now to win concessions from U.S. President Joe Biden's administration while it is embroiled in a domestic debate following the chaotic pullout from Afghanistan.

Observers say Moon's government, which has been actively pursuing reconciliation with North Korea, may have taken action to appear tougher in response to criticism that it's too soft on the North.

The rival nations are still technically in a state of war since the 1950-53 Korean War, which pitted the North and ally China against the South and U.S.-led U.N. forces, ended in an armistice, not a peace treaty.

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Japanese Prime Minister Yoshihide Suga said the launches “threaten the peace and safety of Japan and the region and are absolutely outrageous.”

The U.S. Indo-Pacific Command said the North Korean test “highlights the destabilizing impact of (North Korea’s) illicit weapons program” though it said it didn’t pose an immediate threat to the U.S.

The North Korean launches represent a violation of U.N. Security Council resolutions that bar North Korea from engaging in any ballistic missile activity. But the council typically doesn’t impose new sanctions when the North launches short-range missiles, like Wednesday’s.

Wednesday’s tests came as Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi was in Seoul for meetings with Moon and other senior officials to discuss North Korea and other issues.

It’s unusual for North Korea to make provocative launches when China, its last major ally and biggest aid provider, is engaged in a major diplomatic event. But some experts say North Korea may have used the timing to draw extra attention.

Kim Dong-yub, a professor at the University of North Korean Studies in Seoul, said Wednesday’s tests appeared to be of an improved version of a short-range missile it tested in March. He said the weapon is likely modeled on Russia’s Iskander missiles, which are designed to fly at relatively low altitudes, making them harder to be intercepted by missile defense systems.

The international community wants North Korea to abandon its nuclear program and has long used a combination of the threat of sanctions and the promise of economic help to try to influence the North. But negotiations have stalled since 2019, when then-U.S. President Donald Trump’s administration rejected the North’s demand for major sanctions relief in exchange for dismantling an aging nuclear facility.

Kim Jong Un’s government has so far rejected the Biden administration’s overtures for dialogue, demanding that Washington abandon what it calls “hostile” policies first. But North Korea has maintained its self-imposed moratorium on nuclear and long-range missile tests, a sign that it may not want to completely scuttle the possibility of reopening the talks.

In 2017, North Korea claimed to have acquired the ability to strike the American mainland with nuclear weapons after conducting three intercontinental ballistic missile tests and its most powerful nuclear test. In recent years, it has also performed a series of underwater-launched missile tests in what experts say is a worrying development because such weapons are difficult to detect and would provide North Korea with retaliatory strike capability.

South Korea, which doesn’t have nuclear weapons, is under the protection of the U.S. “nuclear umbrella,” which guarantees a devastating American response in the event of an attack on its ally. But South Korea has been accelerating efforts to build up its conventional arms, including developing more powerful missiles.

Experts say South Korea’s military advancements are aimed at improving its capacity for preemptive strikes and destroying key North Korean facilities and bunkers.

Separate from the submarine-launched missile, South Korea also tested a missile from an aircraft.

## **Afghan killed by drone praised by co-workers in US aid group**

By KATHY GANNON and ERIC TUCKER Associated Press

KABUL, Afghanistan (AP) — The Afghan man who was killed in a U.S. drone strike last month was an enthusiastic and beloved longtime employee at an American humanitarian organization, his colleagues say, painting a stark contrast to the Pentagon’s claims that he was an Islamic State group militant about to carry out an attack on American troops.

Signs have been mounting that the U.S. military may have targeted the wrong man in the Aug. 29 strike in Kabul, with devastating consequences, killing seven children and two other adults from his family. The Pentagon says it is further investigating the strike, but it has no way to do so on the ground in Afghanistan after the Taliban takeover, severely limiting its ability to gather evidence.

Accounts from the family, documents from colleagues seen by The Associated Press, and the scene at the family home — where Zemerai Ahmadi’s car was struck by a Hellfire missile just as he pulled into the driveway — all seem to sharply contradict the accounts by the U.S. military. Instead, they paint the picture of a family that had worked for Americans and were trying to gain visas to the United States, fearing for

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their lives under the Taliban.

At the home, the mangled, incinerated Toyota Corolla remains in the driveway. But there are no signs of large secondary blasts the Pentagon said were caused by explosives hidden in the car trunk. In the tightly cramped, walled compound, the house is undamaged except for broken glass, even a badly built wooden balcony remains in place. A brick wall immediately adjacent to the car stands intact. Trees and foliage close to the car are not burned or torn.

The family wants the United States to hear their side of the story and see the facts on the ground.

"We just want that they come here. See what they did. Talk to us. Give us the proof," Emal Ahmadi, Zemerai's younger brother, said of the U.S. military. Near tears, he opened a photo on his phone of his 3-year-old daughter, Malika, in her favorite dress. Another photo showed her charred remains after she was killed in the strike.

On Tuesday, U.S. Secretary of State Antony Blinken acknowledged he did not know if the man targeted in the strike was an IS operative or an aid worker. "I don't know because we're reviewing it," he said at a Senate Foreign Relations Committee hearing.

The strike was carried out in the final days of the U.S. presence in Afghanistan, as American troops were carrying out evacuations at Kabul's airport. Only days earlier, an IS suicide bombers at the airport killed 169 Afghans and 13 U.S. servicemembers.

The Pentagon says the strike prevented another IS attack at the airport. Officials said the U.S. military had been observing the car for hours as it drove and saw people loading explosives into the back. Days after amid reports of the children killed, Gen. Mark Milley, chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, called it a "righteous strike," and said "at least one of the people that were killed was an ISIS facilitator," using an acronym for the Islamic State group.

The U.S. acknowledged reports of civilian casualties and said they may have been caused by secondary explosions. The family said when the 37-year-old Zemerai, alone in his car, pulled up to the house, he honked his horn. His 11-year-old son ran out, and Zemerai let the boy get in and drive the car into the driveway. The other kids ran out to watch, and the missile incinerated the car, killing seven children and an adult son and nephew of Zemerai.

"That was my last memory, the sound of his horn," said another of Zemerai's brothers, Romal Ahmadi, who was inside the house at the time. His three children, aged two to seven, were killed.

Zemerai worked for 15 years for Nutrition & Education International, a California-based non-profit aimed at countering malnutrition in Afghanistan. Romal also worked briefly for NEI.

Only days before the strike, Zemerai and Romal applied for special visas to the U.S. for those who had worked with U.S. companies. His brother, Emal and the nephew who was killed, Ahmad Naser Haideri, had also applied for special visas because of their work for the U.S. military.

Emal provided the AP with documents including their visa applications, letters of recommendation and even a medal Haideri had received for his service with a special U.S. trained elite special force. Haideri also had a letter of reference from the U.S.-based Multi Country Security Solutions Group, where he worked as a contractor, calling him "an important part of our commitment to provide the best faithful service to the U.S. Special Forces."

"He was an excellent employee," the firm's president, Timothy Williams, who wrote the letter of reference, told the AP. "I'm not going to change from that just because of the incident that happened. I'm going to stand behind my guys."

Zemerai's colleagues at NEI described him as a talented worker who worked his way up from a handyman to a skilled engineer and an essential employee.

Last year, when the company was unable to pay employees at full salary because of the coronavirus pandemic, employees were given the opportunity to leave their positions for better paying work elsewhere.

But Ahmadi declined, saying, "I am NEI. From beginning to end, until we accomplish our goal," the company's founder and president, Steven Kwon, told the AP.

Colleagues recalled him as a doting father and enthusiastic dancer who kept an optimistic spirit amid the chaos of his surroundings and was quick to comfort those around him with a joke. He had grown up

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poor in Kabul and maintained "such a heart for the poor," said a co-worker who asked to be identified only as Sonia for safety reasons.

"He was definitely the best of us. Absolutely," she said.

He also always supported the company's efforts to hire more women and create women's programs, which is one of many reasons that colleagues said the suggestion that he was connected to any sort of extremism seems preposterous to them.

"Everything we're hearing about him is just so disturbing and so absurd because he had such love for his people," said Sonia. "How would he overnight turn around and start wanting to kill his own people. It makes absolutely no sense at all whatsoever."

It seems unlikely the U.S. will send anyone to the Ahmadi home to investigate. Pentagon spokesman John Kirby said he's "not aware of any option that would put investigators on the ground in Kabul." The U.S. Central Command said it would rely on "other means," without elaborating but apparently meaning surveillance video and intercepts that led to the strike.

The family, grieving and furious, still wants refuge in the United States. On top of their already existing worries over their past work with the U.S., they now fear the new Taliban rulers will suspect them of being IS. The Islamic State group is a violent rival of the Taliban.

"The U.S. has accused us. They haven't cleared our name and they won't even talk to us, and now the suspicion is on us," Emal said. "We are angry, but we don't know what to do. For our safety we would go to America, but it must be all our families, not just me."

Much to their dismay, Ahmadi's colleagues say they haven't been contacted by anyone from the Biden administration about what happened.

"Just talk to us because our teams are now terrified," Sonia said. "I mean, in addition to being afraid of the Taliban and ISIS, they're now even more afraid of the U.S. government."

## 2015 Paris attacks suspect: Deaths of 130 'nothing personal'

By LORI HINNANT Associated Press

PARIS (AP) — The key defendant in the 2015 Paris attacks trial said Wednesday the coordinated killings were in retaliation for French airstrikes on the Islamic State group, calling the deaths of 130 innocent people "nothing personal" as he acknowledged his role for the first time.

Salah Abdeslam, who wore all black and declined to remove his mask as he spoke in a custom-built courtroom, has been silent throughout the investigation. Observers were waiting to see if he would offer any details during the trial.

Nine Islamic State group gunmen and suicide bombers struck within minutes of one another at several Paris locations on Nov. 13, 2015, targeting fans at the national soccer stadium and cafe-goers and ending with a bloodbath in the Bataclan concert hall. It was the deadliest violence to strike France since World War II and among the worst terror attacks to hit the West, shaking the country's sense of security and rewriting its politics.

Abdeslam is the only survivor of that cell, most of whose members were French or Belgian. After his suicide vest malfunctioned on the night of the attacks, he fled to his hometown of Brussels.

On Wednesday, a screen in the courtroom showed a photo of the car Abdeslam abandoned in northern Paris after he dropped off the three suicide bombers at the stadium. Abdeslam's target was unclear, but when Islamic State claimed responsibility the next day, the statement alluded to an attack that never took place in the neighborhood where he left the car.

The two people Abdeslam called upon to drive through the night from Brussels to Paris to pick him up are among the 20 on trial. Six of those are being tried in absentia.

Abdeslam, who was arrested months after the attacks, said the killings were a response to French airstrikes in Syria and Iraq. France was part of the international coalition that formed as the extremists conquered vast territory in both countries.

"We fought France, we attacked France, we targeted the civilian population. It was nothing personal against them," Abdeslam said. "I know my statement may be shocking, but it is not to dig the knife deeper



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in the wound but to be sincere towards those who are suffering immeasurable grief.”

George Salines, whose daughter Lola was among the 90 dead inside the Bataclan, refused to accept Abdeslam’s rationale.

“To explain that what we wanted to target was France and not individual persons — right, except it was people who were injured and killed, innocent people, targeted voluntarily. It’s morally unacceptable,” he said.

The same network struck the Brussels airport and subway system in March 2016, killing another 32 people. Among those on trial in Paris is Mohammed Abrini, who left the city the night before the 2015 attacks and took part in the Brussels one. He acknowledged a role on Wednesday.

“I recognize my participation ... (but) in this evil that happened in France, I am neither the commander nor the architect. I provided no logistical nor financial help,” Abrini said.

The specter of the man who was the architect of the attacks, the late Abdelhamid Abaaoud, loomed large in the first days of the trial.

The courtroom saw him in a video escaping into the metro. An investigator testified that he was on the phone to the attackers and to someone in Brussels throughout the assaults.

Antiterrorism investigators spotted Abaaoud in surveillance video walking into the Paris metro with another of the gunmen. They recognized Abaaoud by his fluorescent orange shoes — and it was a key moment in the case.

“As soon as we see this video, it changes everything because we realize there are still at least two terrorists still alive,” the investigator testified. His name was not released publicly, as is common in French antiterrorism trials.

Abaaoud and the remaining gunman died days later in a police shootout and suicide explosion.

The same investigator also testified to the devastation that officials felt as the attacks unfolded.

“The sentiment we had that evening at the Bataclan was one of failure. ... I’m not sure we had the means to prevent everything. But when we went into the Bataclan that was the feeling,” he said.

The trial is scheduled to last nine months. Already, Abdeslam has burst out with comments against the group’s treatment in prison and declared his profession as “fighter for the Islamic State.” But Wednesday’s statements came at the invitation of the presiding judge.

“This court cannot be a platform for his fanaticism,” warned Mehana Mouhou, a lawyer for 70 victims. “The court cannot be a platform for his propaganda. We need to be very careful about that.”

## **Pope: No place for politics in Biden Communion flap**

By NICOLE WINFIELD Associated Press

ABOARD THE PAPAL PLANE (AP) — Pope Francis said Wednesday that Catholic bishops must minister with “compassion and tenderness,” not condemnation, to politicians who support abortion rights and warned that clerics shouldn’t let politics enter into questions about receiving Communion.

Francis was asked en route home from Slovakia about the debate in the U.S. church about whether President Joe Biden and other politicians should be denied Communion because of their stances on abortion. U.S. bishops have agreed to draft a “teaching document” that many of them hope will rebuke Catholic politicians, including Biden, for receiving Communion despite their support for abortion rights.

Francis declined to give a “yes” or “no” answer, saying he didn’t know the U.S. case well enough. He repeated that abortion was “homicide,” and that Catholic priests cannot give the Eucharist to someone who is not in communion with the church. He cited the case of a Jew, or someone who isn’t baptized or who has fallen away from the church.

Most importantly, he said, was that priests and bishops must respond pastorally and not politically to any problem that comes before them. He said they must use “the style of God” to accompany the faithful with “closeness, compassion and tenderness.”

“And what should pastors do? Be pastors, and not go condemning, condemning,” Francis said.

Francis recalled cases when the church had held fast to a principle on political grounds and it ended badly, citing the Inquisition-era condemnation of Giordano Bruno for alleged heresy. He was burned at

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the stake in Rome's Campo dei Fiori.

"Whenever the church, in order to defend a principle, didn't do it pastorally, it has taken political sides," Francis said. "If a pastor leaves the pastorate of the church, he immediately becomes a politician."

Francis said he had never denied Communion to anyone, though he said he never knowingly had a pro-abortion politician before him, either. And he admitted he once gave Communion to an elderly woman who, after the fact, confessed that she was Jewish.

Francis repeated his belief that the Eucharist "is not a prize for the perfect" but rather "a gift of the presence of Jesus in the church." But he was unequivocal that it cannot be given to anyone who is not "in communion" with the church, though he declined to say if a pro-abortion politician was out of communion.

He was similarly unequivocal that abortion is murder, and that even a weeks-old embryo is a human life that must be protected.

"If you have an abortion, you kill," Francis said. "That's why the church is so tough on this issue, because if you accept this, you accept homicide daily."

U.S. bishops agreed in June that the conference doctrine committee will draft a statement on the meaning of Communion in the life of the church that will be submitted for consideration, probably an in-person gathering in November. To be formally adopted, the document would need support of two-thirds of the bishops.

Despite the short flight back from Bratislava, the Slovak capital, Francis fielded an unusually wide array of questions. Among other things he said:

—That he couldn't understand why some people refuse to take COVID-19 vaccines, saying "humanity has a history of friendship with vaccines" and that serene discussion was necessary to help them.

—That states can and should pass civil laws to allow homosexual couples to have inheritance rights and health care coverage, but that the church couldn't accept gay marriage because marriage is a sacrament between a man and woman. "Marriage is marriage. This doesn't mean condemning people who are like this. No, please! They are our brothers and sisters and we have to accompany them."

—That his surgery to remove 33 centimeters (13 inches) of his colon in July wasn't easy, despite those who have marveled at how well he had recovered. "It wasn't cosmetic surgery," he quipped.

## Dire warning from Newsom helped turn California recall tide

By MICHAEL R. BLOOD and KATHLEEN RONAYNE Associated Press

LOS ANGELES (AP) — An ominous four-word message issued by California Gov. Gavin Newsom's campaign on the morning of Aug. 5 served as the shock Democrats needed to take seriously a recall election that could remove him from office: "This recall is close."

Newsom's warning in a fundraising email came just days after a poll indicated the once-popular Democratic governor who was elected in a 2018 landslide was facing the unthinkable prospect of losing his job in a state that hadn't elected a Republican in a statewide race in 15 years.

The race is "close enough to start thinking about what it'd be like if we had a Republican governor in California. Sorry to put the thought in your head, but it's true," Newsom's campaign wrote.

The alarmist message was quickly incorporated into Newsom's remarks on the campaign trail — he was in serious trouble, he warned. The sequence of events combined to create a turning point in the race and helped energize California's dominant Democratic voters, who until then appeared to be greeting the contest with a collective shrug.

Newsom on Tuesday easily turned back the attempt to retire him less than three years into his first term. Incomplete returns showed him headed toward a landslide win with about 65% of the vote.

A major lesson of Newsom's decisive win is "you can wake up the base," Newsom strategist Sean Clegg said this week. "The base may start out asleep ... but you can wake up the base."

Newsom's victory also provides him with a dramatic comeback story that he is likely to employ as he seeks to broaden his popularity in advance of a 2022 reelection race, while seeking to return his name into discussion about future presidential candidates.

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Concentrating the narrative on the threat of a Republican upset in the nation's most populous state "became a self-fulfilling prophesy, where the more you talk about it being close, the more (Democrats) pay attention," said Los Angeles-based Democratic consultant Michael Trujillo, who was not involved in the campaign.

For Democrats, the fear of losing the California governor's seat also opened up national fundraising pipelines that gave Newsom a vast cash advantage over his rivals. That concern also provided a connection point with minority communities about how their lives could change with a conservative Republican governor in Sacramento.

Newsom also benefited at other critical junctures of the campaign with strategy decisions by his campaign and other factors involving happenstance or even luck.

The state collected an astounding windfall of tax dollars that resulted in a record surplus, allowing Newsom to dispense billions in funding for an array of programs, from cleaning up trash to early education and homelessness.

In what Democrats said was a fortunate turn for Newsom, the election was reshuffled when conservative talk show host Larry Elder entered the race in July. The lawyer and author who could have become the state's first Black governor quickly emerged as Newsom's chief foil, and the race came into sharper focus for voters as a one-on-one matchup.

Elder came to the race with conservative-libertarian principles that were out of step with many of the state's left-leaning voters.

He is a supporter of former President Donald Trump, who is a reviled figure in California outside of his conservative base. Elder is critical of the landmark Roe v. Wade decision on abortion rights, has spoken in opposition to the minimum wage and promised to erase state vaccine and mask mandates that Newsom has insisted save lives.

With Elder in the race, Newsom seized the opportunity to frame the election as a competition between two radically different visions for California's future. He warned repeatedly that progressive values on the environment, health care and women's rights were on the ballot, while Elder would herald the return of an era of "Trumpism."

Elder galvanized the conservative base, but gave Democrats a clear enemy.

"Larry Elder handed them so many gifts on a platter. He is literally the antithesis of most California voters," said Dana Williamson, who was a top adviser to former Democratic California Gov. Jerry Brown, who preceded Newsom.

Ron Nehring, former chairman of the California Republican Party and a supporter of GOP candidate Kevin Faulconer, said Elder "served as a life preserver for Gavin Newsom" because he gave the governor a target and shifted attention from his own record.

Newsom came to the recall with advantages not shared by governors in other states.

Democrats hold a vast numerical edge over Republicans in California -- a nearly 2-to-1 margin, or about 5 million voters. As the target of the recall, the political committee backing Newsom was allowed to raise unlimited funds, which gave him the cash to flood TV screens with advertising.

That main committee backing Newsom raised nearly \$70 million through the end of August. By comparison, two committees supporting Elder's campaign raised about \$15 million.

Newsom also was supported by the nation's largest state Democratic Party and politically powerful public worker unions - his campaign said 25,000 volunteers hit the streets the weekend before the election.

Meanwhile, infighting broke out among Republican candidates. The GOP never seemed to settle on a unified strategy -- the party considered endorsing a candidate, then dropped it. National Republicans largely stayed on the sidelines after the Republican National Committee gave \$250,000, most of it to the state party.

Another key advantage for Newsom came when his campaign succeeded in keeping the replacement ballot free of any established Democrats. Newsom's strategists were wary of the historical context: Voters in a 2003 recall election ousted Democrat Gray Davis, who faced an intraparty challenge from Lt. Gov. Cruz Bustamante.

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Bustamante's appearance on the ballot gave Democrats a viable option to the unpopular Davis and Republican Arnold Schwarzenegger ended up cruising to victory.

Newsom's campaign team also pinpointed the emergence of the highly contagious delta variant as a factor that reordered the race, especially with Elder emerging as the dominant GOP rival.

"We saw the delta surge as a real inflection moment in this campaign. I think it was a turning point for us," said Clegg. "What delta brought into clear, clear focus was what the stakes are in this election, when one party has basically become an anti-science, anti-vaccine, anti-public health party."

Referring to Elder, he said the race could be distilled into a single sentence: "This recall is a vote for a pro-Trump, anti-vax Republican governor who's going to reverse vaccine mandates on day one."

## **Animal rights group: Faeroes should end dolphin slaughters**

By JAN M. OLSEN Associated Press

COPENHAGEN, Denmark (AP) — The international animal rights group Sea Shepherd said Wednesday it hopes that pressure will build from within the Faeroe Islands to end its traditional drive of sea mammals into shallow water, where they are slaughtered for their meat and blubber.

A local activist published gruesome video footage of Sunday's slaughter of 1,428 white-sided dolphins on the central Faeroese island of Eysturoy in the North Atlantic archipelago. The number of dolphins was so large — much higher than in previous years — that it appears participants may not have been able to follow regulations to minimize the suffering of the mammals.

"It was a complete disaster, completely unprecedented in fact, it could even be the largest single hunt of cetaceans in documented history anywhere in the world," said Robert Read, campaign director for the Sea Shepherd Conservation Society.

Environmental activists have long claimed the practice is cruel. But this year even people on the Faeroes who defend the four-century-old practice have spoken out amid fears that this year's slaughter will draw unwanted attention.

"We must admit that things did not go as we would like to," said Hans Jacob Hermansen, the former chairman of the Faeroese association behind the drives. "We are going to evaluate if anything went wrong, what went wrong and why, and what can we do to avoid that in the future."

Sea Shepherd says it is hoping for "much tighter restrictions" around such hunts and, if not, "at least a ban on the killing of the Atlantic white-sided dolphins."

Faeroese hunters are used to criticism from animal rights groups and push back at what they see as an interference in a cultural practice.

Each year, islanders drive herds of the mammals — chiefly pilot whales — into shallow waters, where they are stabbed to death. A blow-hole hook is used to secure the beached whales and their spine and main artery leading to the brain are severed with knives, turning water in the bay red with blood. The drives are regulated by law and the meat and blubber are shared on a community basis.

"The killing of pilot whales is not very much different from killing cattle or anything else. It's just that we have an open abattoir," Hermansen told The Associated Press. "Everyone can see it ... but if a cow also doesn't die immediately, you don't stop killing cattle."

The white-side dolphins and pilot whales are not endangered species.

But Read said Sunday's slaughter was "completely indiscriminate. The entire pod is killed and pregnant mothers, calves, everything." He added that residents used "power boats and jet skis to chase dolphins and pilot whales for hours on end, they really have no chance of escape."

Fisheries Minister Jacob Vestergaard said everything this year was done by the book in the dolphin hunt. The Faeroes — 18 rocky islands located halfway between Scotland and Iceland — are semi-independent and part of the Danish realm.

## **Sidelined by rivals, Germany's far-right AfD bides time**



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By FRANK JORDANS Associated Press

BERLIN (AP) — Immigration is a side issue in this year's German election campaign, but that hasn't stopped the country's biggest far-right party from trying to play it up.

"Cologne, Kassel or Konstanz can't cope with more Kabul," Alternative for Germany declared on one of its posters ahead of the Sept. 26 election — a reference to the government's decision to take in several thousand Afghans who had worked for the German military or aid groups before the Taliban takeover.

Another poster, showing a retired couple embracing on a pier, reads: "We'll share our pensions, but not with the whole world. Solidarity has its limits."

The party shook Germany's political establishment four years ago, when it came in third in parliamentary elections after stoking anti-immigrant sentiment over Chancellor Angela Merkel's 2015 decision to allow hundreds of thousands of people fleeing war and poverty into the country.

"The 2017 election was strongly influenced by refugee and migration politics," said Hendrik Traeger, a political scientist at the University of Leipzig. "Alternative for Germany made that its core issue. This time it's not among the top three election topics, though."

According to surveys, the top issues this time include climate change, COVID-19, pensions and the economy.

The election will bring a changing of the guard to Germany. Merkel, a member of the center-right Christian Democratic Union, is stepping down at age 67 after 16 years as chancellor.

Polls indicate that Alternative for Germany, known by its German acronym AfD, could struggle to hold on to the 12.6% share of the vote it got four years ago — though researchers note that respondents do not always admit in surveys that they will vote for the party.

Still, even with a low two-digit result, AfD could pose a headache for whichever party wins the election, forcing it to form a broader, more cumbersome coalition to secure a majority.

Polls put Merkel's Union bloc narrowly behind its junior partner, the center-left Social Democrats, less than two weeks before election day. They and all other parties have categorically ruled out working with AfD.

AfD's co-leader, Tino Chrupalla, has no illusions that his party will win big. But he said he is confident it can enter government in one of Germany's 16 states in the coming years and build on that.

Given the country's Nazi past, the rise of AfD has alarmed many in Germany and beyond. The party has come under heightened scrutiny from German intelligence over its ties to extremists, and Jewish leaders have accused it of downplaying the crimes of the Nazis.

AfD opposes school mask requirements and other government coronavirus policies, does not see climate change as a human-made problem, has a cozy relationship with Russia and wants Germany to quit the European Union.

Armin Laschet, who leads the Union bloc, has insisted his party will not ally with AfD. "We need Europe more than ever," he said in June, accusing AfD of "harming German interests."

That pledge will be put to the test in eastern states such as Saxony, where AfD came in a strong second with 27.5% of the vote in a state election two years ago.

"I'm pretty confident that sooner or later there's no way around Alternative for Germany," Chrupalla said Wednesday. "That will certainly happen first in a state parliament."

Chrupalla said he already has a lot of contact with Union politicians and sees common ground with candidates such as Hans-Georg Maassen, Germany's former domestic intelligence chief, now running for a seat in parliament's lower house, the Bundestag, on an anti-immigration platform. Many in Maassen's party aren't happy about his candidacy.

Maassen was ousted from his post as head of the BfV intelligence agency in 2018 after downplaying anti-immigrant violence.

In an effort to expand its base, AfD has backed opposition to the government's COVID-19 measures, arguing that the virus doesn't pose a great threat. Researchers say that in Saxony, resistance to vaccination is strongest in areas where support for AfD is greatest.

"I say we need to be more laid back," Chrupalla said of the virus, which has killed almost 93,000 people

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in Germany. "This virus, which will probably never go away, like viruses in general never go away, we'll just have to live with it."

As for climate change, which is listed as the most important topic among voters, AfD accuses others of stirring "panic," wants Germany to quit the Paris accord and believes climate change should be viewed "positively."

## 5 takeaways after California governor handily defeats recall

By NICHOLAS RICCARDI Associated Press

California Gov. Gavin Newsom ably fended off a recall attempt from Republicans on Tuesday, changing the stakes of the contest from a referendum on his own performance and into a partisan fight over Trumpism and the coronavirus.

Five takeaways from Newsom's victory:

### COVID PRECAUTIONS CAN HELP DEMOCRATS

Republicans intended the recall to be a referendum on Democrats' rule of California, and the homelessness, crime, high housing costs and energy problems that accompanied it. But in a bit of political maneuvering — and with the help of the spreading delta variant — Newsom turned it into a referendum on Republicans' opposition to precautions against the coronavirus.

The Republicans running to replace Newsom opposed mask and vaccine mandates, and the California governor was happy to highlight that. Newsom aired an ad calling the recall "a matter of life and death" and accusing the top Republican candidate, talk radio host Larry Elder, of "peddling deadly conspiracy theories."

Ironically, the recall gained steam after Newsom was caught in November at a lobbyist's birthday party at a swanky Napa Valley restaurant — unmasked and in a large party that violated his own social distancing orders. But his strategists have been arguing for weeks that his leadership during the pandemic is a plus for him — and that other Democrats shouldn't be afraid to lead on the issue.

In his remarks after winning, Newsom kept the emphasis on the virus. "I want to focus on what we said yes to as a state: We said 'yes' to science, we said 'yes' to vaccines, we said 'yes' to ending this pandemic," the governor told reporters.

### GOP REVIVES BASELESS FRAUD CLAIMS

Republicans' groundless claims of election fraud aren't going away anytime soon.

Even while ballots were still being cast, Republicans were claiming the election was "rigged." It was a baseless allegation — and a strange one considering Republicans performed relatively well under the same California election system in November, gaining four congressional seats.

But former President Donald Trump's false election fraud rhetoric quickly has burrowed into Republican politics. The former president enthusiastically added his own voice to the claims. And, several days before the polls closed, the Elder campaign bizarrely began circulating a link to a petition demanding an investigation into his loss, alleging widespread fraud — which some Republicans feared was a message that his voters shouldn't even bother to show up Tuesday.

The recall was always a long shot in a state where registered Democrats outnumber registered Republicans by nearly 2-to-1 and where the GOP hasn't won a statewide election since 2006. But Republicans' turn to conspiracy theories and baseless fraud claims to explain a loss that polls had indicated was coming for months shows the party won't walk away from those suspicions. That led to the Jan. 6 attack on the U.S. Capitol after Trump's defeat.

Notably, Elder seemed to try to climb down from the inflammatory election allegations Tuesday night. In his concession speech he told supporters: "Let's be gracious in defeat."

Still, some Californians worry about what could happen in their state.

"This is going to be the second election in a row where there are going to be aggressive, emotional charges of voter fraud," said Mindy Romero, director of the Center for Inclusive Democracy at the University of Southern California. "I cannot see a positive out of it."

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## NO LIGHT AT END OF THE TUNNEL FOR CALIFORNIA GOP

The recall offered California Republicans their only plausible shot at statewide office in one of the bluest states in the nation. The recall is a way to dodge a head-to-head match that would send voters to their regular partisan corners.

That's what happened in 2003 when Republican Arnold Schwarzenegger won a recall against Democratic Gov. Gray Davis. Schwarzenegger's moderate politics never would have won a GOP primary but were appealing enough to voters fed up with the incumbent. Some Republicans hoped that would happen again this year, with former San Diego Mayor Kevin Faulconer, a moderate, on the ballot.

But there were two problems for the GOP. First, California is very different now compared to 2003 — it's more liberal and more diverse. There are more than 3 million more registered Democrats in the state now than during the last recall, but nearly 400,000 fewer Republicans.

Second, Faulconer never caught on. Instead, Elder's bombastic style, honed during his decades on talk radio and echoing Trump, vaulted him to the top of the Republican pack. Newsom, sensing a favorable contrast, started pounding Elder on the airwaves.

Some Republicans had hoped the populist approach of Elder, who is African American, could appeal to California's diverse electorate. But that doesn't seem to have worked.

"Larry Elder was exactly what Gavin Newsom needed," said Rob Stutzman, a veteran California GOP strategist.

## NEWSOM STEPS BACK FROM THE BRINK

There's no question that Newsom won the recall election. But he might not have emerged unscathed.

When he was elected in 2018, Newsom was riding an anti-Trump wave in a state that saw itself as the heart of the "resistance" to Republican power in Washington. The former San Francisco mayor was mulled as a possible future presidential candidate.

Three years later, his state is reeling from a brutal drought and accompanying wildfires. Heat waves trigger rolling blackouts. Homelessness continues to plague the state's megacities as the cost of housing shows no signs of letting up.

The recall demonstrated that Republicans are unlikely to beat Newsom in a partisan race. And the governor can boast of a lopsided win on Tuesday, though the precise margin likely won't be known for weeks when all the ballots are counted.

But California has a large bench of Democrats who may be itching to move up and the state's problems aren't going away anytime soon. "I think there are Democrats who are watching this thing with their bibs on and their forks and knives out," Stutzman said.

Newsom's political operation was able to keep any major Democrats from running as an alternative in the recall, freeing him up to paint the effort as a partisan Republican scam. Will he be able to keep challengers out in 2022?

## MUDDLED SIGNS FOR THE MIDTERMS

The recall is the first significant election of Joe Biden's presidency and served as something of a political stress test for both parties ahead of next year's midterms.

Democrats showed they could turn out their voters even as their party held the White House — a traditionally tough feat that is why the party in power usually loses seats in Congress in midterm elections. Republicans are trying to win back the House and Senate. Turnout in the recall was expected to be high — some experts predicted it'll be in the neighborhood of the more than 12 million who voted in 2018 in California.

The rejection of the recall — and Elder — shows that a candidate who is too aligned with Trump remains toxic in some areas, both Democratic ones and also current political battlegrounds like formerly Republican Orange County.

Finally, the recall was a referendum on Newsom and how Californians wanted their state governed, particularly in regards to the coronavirus — an issue the governor has a lot of influence over. The midterms will be a referendum on Biden. The power the GOP could win — control of Congress — is not the execu-

tive branch, where coronavirus regulations have come from to date.

It's not clear Democrats can mount the same defense of Congress as they did of their governor in the nation's most populous state.

## Unvaccinated French health care workers face suspension

By OLEG CETINIC and THOMAS ADAMSON Associated Press

PARIS (AP) — Health care workers in France face suspension from their jobs starting Wednesday if they haven't been vaccinated against COVID-19. With as many as 300,000 workers still not vaccinated, some hospitals fear staff shortages will add to their strain.

Vaccines are now compulsory for medical care, home care and emergency workers in France, and Wednesday is the deadline for such staff to have had at least one shot. Failing that, they face having pay suspended or not being able to work. But a top court has forbidden staff to be fired outright.

The mandate was approved by France's parliament over the summer to protect patients and the public from new surges of COVID-19. More than 113,000 people with the virus have died in France, and health authorities say most of those hospitalized in the most recent surge weren't vaccinated.

"It's aimed at one thing: protecting hospitals, protecting health care workers, protecting our fragile populations," government spokesman Gabriel Attal said Wednesday. "We are not stigmatizing anyone. We are making everyone take responsibility."

More than 90% of French health care workers are vaccinated, Attal said, and polls suggest most people support the vaccine mandate for medical staff. The government health authority said Tuesday that means about 300,000 health workers remained unvaccinated.

While 83% of French adults are fully vaccinated, a small, vocal minority of people are opposed to the coronavirus vaccines, including some health care workers.

Many cite incorrect information about the vaccines circulating online, worry about their long-term effects or want more time to decide. Others are angry at President Emmanuel Macron's government and the mandate, not the vaccines themselves.

Since some hospitals are already facing strains after a year and half of fighting the pandemic and catching up on other treatments, some who oppose the vaccine requirement fear staff shortages could spell disaster.

"We are raising the alarm ... if you insist on implementing this measure your beds will be closed, thus reducing chances (of survival) for a number of patients," said Christophe Prudhomme, emergency room doctor and CGT union member, at a protest outside the Health Ministry on Tuesday.

If health care workers have had only one dose so far, they have to take a virus test every three days until they have completed the second one. Oct. 15 is the legal deadline for both vaccines to have been completed.

Firms and employers failing to verify the vaccination statuses of their staff are liable for a 135 euro (\$160) fine that can rise to 3,750 euros (\$4,430) for repeated failure.

"I am not a revolutionary, I am just afraid and we are thousands in this situation. I want them to listen to us and sit and talk around a table," said Rachid Ouchem, a medical-psychological assistant at a hospital in Plaisir west of Paris who doesn't want to be vaccinated and is facing suspension.

"We can't decide ourselves, we have doubts," he told The Associated Press. "We had politicians saying one thing and its opposite."

Scientists note that the vaccines used in France were tested widely and the data shared publicly. World-wide, 5.7 billion coronavirus vaccine doses have been administered so far, providing an exceptionally broad overview of vaccines' impact on people's health.

The vaccine mandate and France's "health pass" system required for restaurants and other venues have prompted two months of weekly protests by far-right activists and some other groups. They also spurred a spike in vaccinations through the summer, though the pace has slowed this month.

While French Polynesia is suffering the country's worst outbreak so far, France's South Pacific territory of New Caledonia has ordered obligatory vaccinations for the whole population to try to avoid a similar fate.



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## Today in History

By The Associated Press undefined

Today in History

Today is Thursday, Sept. 16, the 259th day of 2021. There are 106 days left in the year.

Today's Highlights in History:

On Sept. 16, 1974, President Gerald R. Ford announced a conditional amnesty program for Vietnam war deserters and draft-evaders.

On this date:

In 1630, the Massachusetts village of Shawmut changed its name to Boston.

In 1810, Mexico began its revolt against Spanish rule.

In 1908, General Motors was founded in Flint, Michigan, by William C. Durant.

In 1940, Samuel T. Rayburn of Texas was elected Speaker of the U.S. House of Representatives.

In 1982, the massacre of between 1,200 and 1,400 Palestinian men, women and children at the hands of Israeli-allied Christian Phalange militiamen began in west Beirut's Sabra and Shatila refugee camps.

In 1987, two dozen countries signed the Montreal Protocol, a treaty designed to save the Earth's ozone layer by calling on nations to reduce emissions of harmful chemicals by the year 2000.

In 2001, President George W. Bush, speaking on the South Lawn of the White House, said there was "no question" Osama bin Laden and his followers were the prime suspects in the Sept. 11 attacks; Bush pledged the government would "find them, get them running and hunt them down."

In 2007, contractors for the U.S. security firm Blackwater USA guarding a U.S. State Department convoy in Baghdad opened fire on civilian vehicles, mistakenly believing they were under attack; 14 Iraqis died. O.J. Simpson was arrested in the alleged armed robbery of sports memorabilia collectors in Las Vegas. (Simpson was later convicted of kidnapping and armed robbery and sentenced to nine to 33 years in prison; he was released in 2017.)

In 2009, Mary Travers, 72, part of the folk trio Peter, Paul and Mary, died in Danbury, Connecticut.

In 2012, in appearances on Sunday news shows, the U.S. ambassador to the United Nations, Susan Rice, said there was no evidence that the attack on the U.S. diplomatic outpost in Benghazi, Libya, was premeditated. But Libya's interim president, Mohammed el-Megarif, told CBS he had no doubt attackers spent months planning the assault and purposely chose the date, September 11.

In 2013, Aaron Alexis, a former U.S. Navy reservist, went on a shooting rampage inside the Washington Navy Yard, killing 12 people before being shot dead by police.

In 2014, President Barack Obama declared that the Ebola epidemic in West Africa could threaten security around the world and ordered 3,000 U.S. troops to the region in emergency aid muscle.

Ten years ago: President Barack Obama signed into law a major overhaul of the nation's patent system to ease the way for inventors to bring their products to market. A World War II-era fighter plane plunged into spectators during air races in Reno, Nevada, killing 74-year-old Florida stunt pilot Jimmy Leeward and 10 others. A Russian Soyuz capsule carrying three crew members, including NASA astronaut Ron Garan, from the International Space Station touched down safely in Kazakhstan, but not without rattling nerves after a breakdown in communications.

Five years ago: After five years of promoting a false conspiracy theory about Barack Obama's birthplace, Republican Donald Trump abruptly reversed course, acknowledging that the president was born in America, but then claiming the "birther movement" was begun by his Democratic rival, Hillary Clinton. (While the question of Obama's birthplace was raised by some backers of Clinton's primary campaign against Obama eight years earlier, Clinton had long denounced it as a "racist lie.") Three-time Pulitzer Prize-winning playwright Edward Albee, 88, died in Montauk, New York.

One year ago: College football's Big Ten conference reversed its plan to push fall sports to spring because of the pandemic, and said it would open its football season in late October; the about-face came

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after sharp pressure from coaches, players, parents and President Donald Trump. Hurricane Sally lumbered ashore near the Florida-Alabama line with 105 mph winds and rain measured in feet, swamping homes and forcing the rescue of hundreds of people as it pushed inland. Carrie Underwood and Thomas Rhett tied for entertainer of the year at the Academy of Country Music Awards, the first time the top prize had been split between two artists.

Today's Birthdays: Actor Janis Paige is 99. Actor George Chakiris is 89. Bluesman Billy Boy Arnold is 86. Movie director Jim McBride is 80. Actor Linda Miller is 79. R&B singer Betty Kelley (Martha & the Vandellas) is 77. Musician Kenney Jones (Small Faces; Faces; The Who) is 73. Actor Susan Ruttan is 73. Rock musician Ron Blair (Tom Petty & the Heartbreakers; Mudcrutch) is 73. Actor Ed Begley Jr. is 72. Country singer David Bellamy (The Bellamy Brothers) is 71. Actor Mickey Rourke is 69. Actor-comedian Lenny Clarke is 68. Actor Kurt Fuller is 68. Jazz musician Earl Klugh is 68. Actor Christopher Rich is 68. TV personality Mark McEwen is 67. Baseball Hall of Famer Robin Yount is 66. Magician David Copperfield is 65. Country singer-songwriter Terry McBride is 63. Actor Jennifer Tilly is 63. Retired MLB All-Star pitcher Orel Hershiser is 63. Baseball Hall of Famer Tim Lincecum is 62. Actor Jayne Brook is 61. Singer Richard Marx is 58. Comedian Molly Shannon is 57. Singer Marc Anthony is 53. News anchor/talk show host Tamron Hall is 51. Comedian-actor Amy Poehler is 50. Actor Toks Olagundoye (tohks oh-lah-GOON'-doh-yay) is 46. Country singer Matt Stillwell is 46. Singer Musiq (MYOO'-sihk) is 44. Actor Michael Mosley is 43. Rapper Flo Rida is 42. Actor Alexis Bledel is 40. Actor Sabrina Bryan is 37. Actor Madeline Zima is 36. Actor Ian Harding is 35. Actor Kyla Pratt is 35. Actor Daren Kagasoff is 34. Rock singer Teddy Geiger is 33. Actor-dancer Bailey De Young is 32. Rock singer-musician Nick Jonas (The Jonas Brothers) is 29. Actor Elena Kampouris is 24.