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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)



The elementary students gathered at the park to watch the rest of the homecoming parade. (Photo by Bruce Babcock)

“In the darkest hour the soul is replenished and given strength to continue and endure.”

-HEART WARRIOR CHOSA



Chicken Soup
for the Soul

Upcoming Events

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

OPEN: Recycling Trailer in Groton
The recycling trailer is located west of the city shop. It takes cardboard, papers and aluminum cans.

Groton Area wins Homecoming Game in the Battle of the Tigers

Groton Area won its first homecoming game in several years with a 23-14 win over Moberidge-Pollock.

It was also the annual Battle of the Tigers with the trophy coming back to Groton after a leave of absence for three years.

Groton Area scored with 6:58 left in the first quarter on an Andrew Marzahn one yard run. Jackson Cogley kicked the PAT and it was 7-0.

Moberidge-Pollock would score on a one-yard run by Holden Eismann with 6:03 left in the second quarter. The run attempt failed and Groton Area held a 7-6 lead at halftime.

Moberidge-Pollock would take the lead late in the third quarter when Holden Eismann scored on a three-yard run. The PAT was good on a pass from Jackson Eismann to Holden Eismann. The visiting Tigers now held a 14-7 lead.

Early in the third quarter, Groton Area would hit pay dirt with Kaden Kurtz scored on a seven yard run. Jackson Cogley kicked the PAT and with 10:26 left in the game, the game was tied at 14.

Groton Area would score with 2:27 left, thanks to penalty. On fourth down, Cogley attempted a field goal. It was short and Moberidge-Pollock grabbed the ball and ran it back to its own 45 yard line. However, a penalty on Moberidge-Pollock recalled the returned and the ball returned to Groton Area with an automatic first down. That would set up a score by Kaden Kurtz on a six-yard run with 2:27 left. Cogley kicked the PAT and it was 21-14.

Moberidge-Pollock went on a fourth down deep in their own territory; however, a bad snap resulted in the ball going into the end zone and Jordan Bjerke would tackle the Moberidge-Pollock player for a two-point safety with 1:17 left.

Groton Area had the upper hand in all areas with more first downs, 15-11, more yards rushing, 113-111, and more yards passing, 114-62, and fewer penalty yards, 69-35.

Rushing: Groton: 33-113 (Kaden Kurtz 19-70, 2 TD; Andrew Marzahn 9-29, 1 TD; Favian Sanchez 4-9, Pierce Kettering 1-5). Moberidge: 30-111 (Cole Wellner 16-112, Holden Eismann 11-7, Trent Schmeichel 1-2).

Passing: Groton: Kaden Kurtz completed 6 of 18 for 114 yards. (Receivers: Favian Sanchez 3-69, Jordan Bjerke 1-30, Andrew Marzahn 2-15). Moberidge: Holden Eismann completed 9 of 19 passes for 62 yards. (Receivers: Jackson Eismann 2-21, Brady Bauer 2-18, Simon Fried 2-13, Dayday Heminger 2-8, Cole Wellner 1-2).

Fumbles: Groton: None. Moberidge: had 2, lost 1 (caused by Pierce Kettering and recovered by Favian Sanchez).

Penalties: Groton: 3-35, Moberidge: 6-69.

Defense: Groton: Tackles: Pierce Kettering 8, Colby Dunker 8, Jordan Bjerke 7, Evan Nehls 6, Kaden Kurtz 6. Also Bjerke had a safety. Moberidge: Ashton Pfitzer 17, Cole Wellner 7, Colby Hinsz 4.

Record: Groton: 4-1. Moberidge: 1-3.

Next Game: Groton hosts Roncalli. Moberidge hosts Webster.



The Battle of the Tigers trophy has returned to Groton after a three-year absence. (Photo by Britt Andera Frost)

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2021 Groton Area Homecoming Parade

Unless noted all photos are lifted from the GDILIVE.COM Video.



Groton American Legion



Groton Area Marching Band

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Parade Marshall Chuck Padfield



Senior Snow Queen Tiara DeHoet
Junior Snow Queen Lydia Meier

(Photo by April Abeln)



Queen Megan Fliehs
King Kaden Kurtz



Homecoming Court

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



Groton ~ 397-8456 ~ kenssuperfair.com

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Junior Kindergarten



Kindergarten

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First Grade



Second Grade



Third Grade

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Fourth Grade



Fifth Grade

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Teddy Bear Day Care Too



Junior High Marching Band

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The freshmen class float won first place



Senior Class Float

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The seventh grade class float won third place



Sixth grade class float

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Sarah Schuster shows her excitement telling everyone that the Fellowship of Christian Athletes float won first place in the commercial division.



The eighth grade class float won second place

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Junior class float



Miss South Dakota, Groton's own Kaitlyn O'Neill.

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Pumpkin Fest



Class of 1981

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Class of 1996



FCCLA

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Both of these are Class of 1970



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Class of 1971

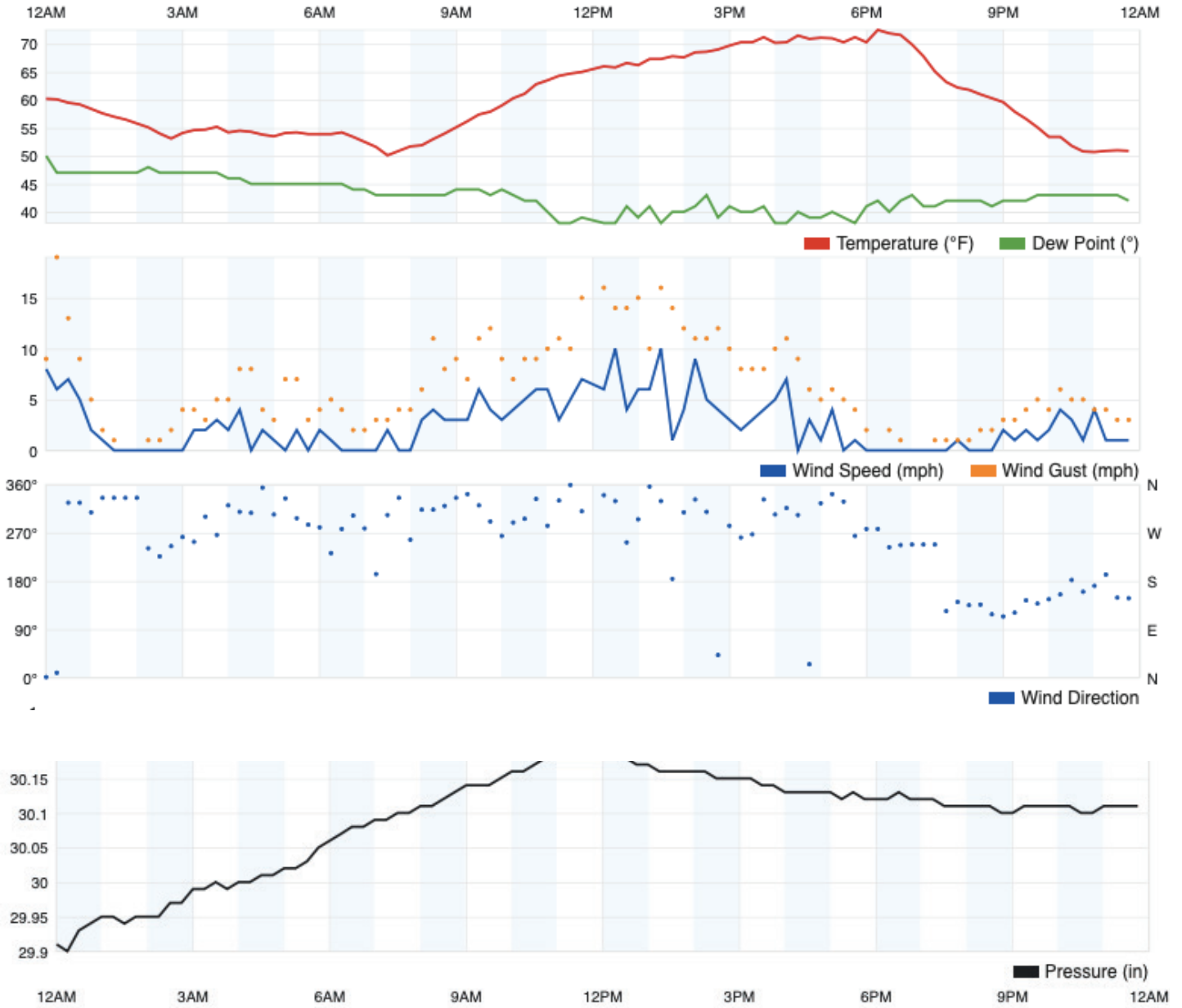


1971 Royalty Terry Gilchrist and Renee Mydland Swisher

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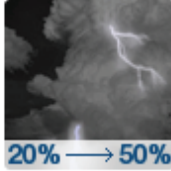

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Yesterday's Groton Weather Graphs



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Today	Tonight	Sunday	Sunday Night	Monday
				
Sunny and Breezy	Clear then Partly Cloudy and Breezy	Mostly Sunny	Slight Chance T-storms then Chance T-storms	Showers Likely
High: 82 °F	Low: 68 °F	High: 89 °F	Low: 55 °F	High: 67 °F

Hot & WINDY TODAY


Very High Fire Danger West River



Today

 Upper 70s to Low 90s
South Winds Generally 20 – 35mph

Tonight

 60s
South Winds Generally 20 – 35mph
Over 50mph for Parts of the Sisseton Hills

National Weather Service – Aberdeen, SD

weather.gov/Aberdeen



National Weather Service Aberdeen



@NWSAberdeen



A stiff south breezy is expected for the region today, with above average temperatures and dry conditions particularly west river. Winds increase tonight in eastern South Dakota with very mild temperatures. Sunday will continue hot and breezy.

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Today in Weather History

September 18, 2000: Mid-September record to near record heat occurred across central and northeast South Dakota as well as west central Minnesota. Aberdeen, Kennebec, Pierre, and Wheaton all set record highs for the day. Aberdeen and Wheaton set record highs of 95 degrees. Kennebec rose to a record high of 99 degrees while Pierre rose to 104 degrees on this day in 2000. Some of the near record highs occurred at Timber Lake and Mobridge with 92 degrees and 97 degrees, respectively.

1926: The great "Miami Hurricane" produced winds of 138 mph that drove ocean waters into the Biscayne Bay drowning 135 persons. The eye of the hurricane passed over Miami, at which time the barometric pressure reached 27.61 inches. Tides up to twelve feet high accompanied the storm, which claimed a total of 372 lives.

1941: One of the greatest aurora borealis or northern lights ever observed in the central Atlantic and mid-central portions of the U.S. occurred on the night of September 18-19th. The displays continued from twilight until just before dawn and were observed as far south as Florida and southern California.

1926 - The great "Miami Hurricane" produced winds reaching 138 mph which drove ocean waters into the Biscayne Bay drowning 135 persons. The eye of the hurricane passed over Miami, at which time the barometric pressure reached 27.61 inches. Tides up to twelve feet high accompanied the hurricane, which claimed a total of 372 lives. (David Ludlum) (The Weather Channel)

1987 - Early morning thunderstorms in northern Texas produced wind gusts to 65 mph at Sulphur Springs, and 2.50 inches of rain in one hour at Commerce, which caused widespread street flooding. Bonham TX received 4.50 inches of rain which also resulted in widespread street flooding as Pig Branch overflowed its banks. (Storm Data) (The National Weather Summary)

1988 - A strong cold front produced severe thunderstorms in the north central U.S. High winds behind the cold front gusted to 92 mph at Fort Collins CO, and up to a foot of snow blanketed the mountains of Montana, with seven inches reported at Great Falls. High winds in Colorado caused three million dollars damage. (Storm Data) (The National Weather Summary)

1989 - Hurricane Hugo hit Puerto Rico, producing wind gusts to 92 mph at San Juan, and wind gusts to 120 mph at Roosevelt Roads. Hugo produced a storm surge of four to six feet, and northeastern sections of the island were deluged with more than ten inches of rain. Hugo claimed the lives of a dozen persons in Puerto Rico, and caused a billion dollars damage, including 100 million dollars damage to crops. Thunderstorms representing what remained of Hurricane Octave continued to bring heavy rain to the valleys of northern California. Heavier 24 hour rainfall totals included 3.15 inches at Redding, and 2.66 inches at Red Bluff. (The National Weather Summary) (Storm Data)

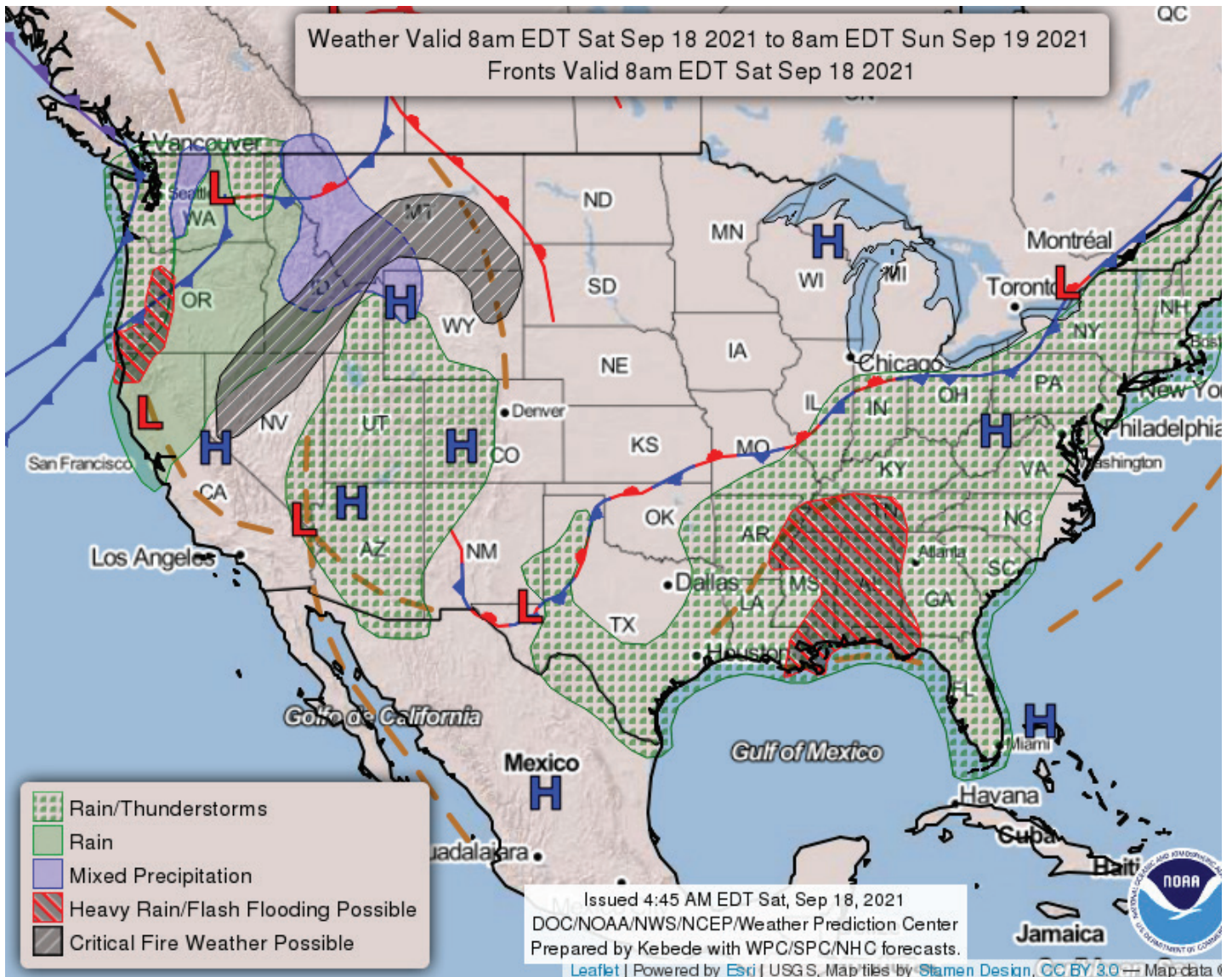
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Yesterday's Groton Weather Today's Info

High Temp: 72.5 °F at 6:15 PM
Low Temp: 50.1 °F at 7:30 AM
Wind: 19 mph at 12:15 AM
Precip: 0.00

Record High: 95° in 2000
Record Low: 22° in 1896
Average High: 74°F
Average Low: 46°F
Average Precip in Sept.: 1.20
Precip to date in Sept.: 2.32
Average Precip to date: 17.54
Precip Year to Date: 15.16
Sunset Tonight: 7:38:58 PM
Sunrise Tomorrow: 7:14:57 AM



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SHOWING HIS SALVATION

"Brother," said St. Francis of Assisi to a young monk who had just entered the monastery, "let's go to town and preach." They left the monastery and walked to the town and did not say a word to each other or the people they passed by in the marketplace. After several hours they retraced their steps and returned to the monastery.

The young monk wondered what was going on. After waiting for what seemed like an eternity, he finally broke his silence and asked, "I thought we were going to town to preach to the people. Why didn't we stop and preach?"

"But we have been preaching," replied St. Francis. "As we walked, we were observed: people watched our manners, our faces, our behavior, and our clothes; and what they saw and observed represented what we stood for. We have been preaching."

All of us "preach" all the time. Our behavior is our message and our places of interest become our pulpits. Our lives are lectures, and our pursuits are examples of our priorities. People watch us even as we watch them. And each time we pass from view and our words can no longer be heard, our sermons end. But a decision has been made about our values and what we believe is important. Our sermon is what we said and did.

The problem we face today is not the quantity of Christians but the quality of their lives. And if we want to win more, we must be more. How different would the world be if when we "declared God's glory and goodness," we also "lived God's love and grace." How we live our lives is more important than the words we speak.

Prayer: Lord, give us an awareness that we are "preaching" Your message by what we do. May our lives represent who You are. In Jesus' Name, Amen.

Scripture For Today: Proclaim his salvation day after day. Psalm 96:2b

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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

South Dakota inmates drive away from community project

SIoux FALLS, S.D. (AP) — South Dakota authorities are searching for two inmates who drove away from a community service project in Sioux Falls.

Thomas Wilson, 32, and Peyton Laird, 22, were assigned to a community service project when they stole a car and drove away Friday morning, according to state Department of Corrections officials.

The Argus Leader reports Wilson is serving sentences for possession of a controlled substance and forgery from Pennington County.

Laird is serving sentences related to second-degree burglary and possession of a controlled substance from Minnehaha County.

The men could face charges of second-degree escape, punishable by up to five years in prison.

Friday's Scores

The Associated Press undefined

PREP VOLLEYBALL=

Gordon/Rushville, Neb. def. Bennett County, 25-20, 25-23, 25-9

Sioux Falls Jefferson def. Rapid City Central, 25-20, 25-22, 25-17

Sioux Falls Lutheran def. Sunshine Bible Academy, 25-27, 25-20, 25-12, 25-13

Sioux Falls Roosevelt def. Rapid City Stevens, 25-21, 25-11, 25-15

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

Information from: ScoreStream Inc., <http://ScoreStream.com>

Friday's Scores

The Associated Press undefined

PREP FOOTBALL=

Alcester-Hudson 70, Centerville 54

Avon 58, Burke 36

Belle Fourche 40, Custer 12

Bon Homme 24, Kimball/White Lake 18

Brandon Valley 13, Sioux Falls O'Gorman 10

Bridgewater-Emery/Ethan 38, Flandreau 13

Brookings 30, Aberdeen Central 7

Canistota 56, Garretson 50, OT

Canton 42, Vermillion 7

Cheyenne-Eagle Butte 20, St. Francis Indian 12

Corsica/Stickney 46, Colome 6

Dakota Valley 45, Sisseton 12

DeSmet 62, Arlington/Lake Preston 0

Dell Rapids 28, Lennox 14

Deuel 38, Dakota Hills 8

Elk Point-Jefferson 34, Beresford 7

Elkton-Lake Benton 56, Deubrook 6

Faulkton 28, Hitchcock-Tulare 24

Florence/Henry 47, Great Plains Lutheran 0

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Gordon/Rushville, Neb. 55, Bennett County 6
Groton Area 23, Mobridge-Pollock 14
Hamlin 32, Leola/Frederick 0
Hanson 34, Viborg-Hurley 0
Harding County 57, Dupree 7
Harrisburg 29, Sioux Falls Washington 23, 20T
Herreid/Selby Area 60, Kadoka Area 6
Howard 48, Irene-Wakonda 12
Ipswich 34, Warner 6
Langford 61, Waverly-South Shore 31
Lead-Deadwood 48, Hill City 8
Lemmon/McIntosh 56, Faith 0
Lower Brule 65, Takini 8
Madison 9, Milbank 0
New Underwood 44, Jones County 0
North Central Co-Op 28, Northwestern 20
Oelrichs 46, Marty Indian 30
Oldham-Ramona/Rutland 48, Estelline/Hendricks 0
Philip 36, White River 18
Pierre 43, Douglas 0
Platte-Geddes 52, Colman-Egan 0
Potter County 40, Stanley County 12
Redfield 26, Webster 9
Sioux Falls Jefferson 38, Yankton 35
Sioux Falls Lincoln 35, Rapid City Stevens 14
Sioux Valley 42, McCook Central/Montrose 32
Spearfish 21, Sturgis Brown 19
Sully Buttes def. Sunshine Bible Academy, forfeit
Tea Area 47, Mitchell 14
Timber Lake 58, Newell 6
Tiospa Zina Tribal 38, McLaughlin 28
Tri-Valley 18, Chamberlain 0
Tripp-Delmont/Armour/Andes Central/Dakota Christian 51, Lakota Tech 0
Wall 42, Lyman 6
Watertown 24, Huron 22
West Central 19, Sioux Falls Christian 0
Winnebago, Neb. 48, Todd County 12
Winner 61, Jim River 12
Wolsey-Wessington 50, Britton-Hecla 0
Woonsocket/Wessington Springs/Sanborn Central 26, Wagner 14

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

Information from: ScoreStream Inc., <http://ScoreStream.com>

Spearfish roundabout features huge stainless steel sculpture

By ALEX PORTAL Black Hills Pioneer

SPEARFISH, S.D. (AP) — As the work on the Jackson Boulevard improvement project comes to a close, one major finishing touch was added to the roundabout at the intersection at Jackson Boulevard and

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Ames Street.

"I feel real fortunate because I always get to put the frosting on the cake," said Dale Lamphere, a local artist, who was contracted by Black Hills State University to create "The Hive," an art installation, which brings the motif of the university front and center to the downtown district.

"The initial call was, perhaps to do the mascot, the Yellow Jacket," Lamphere said. "But this I think has a more universal appeal to it and certainly represents the Yellow Jackets."

Lamphere said "The Hive" was designed to be an abstract representation of an actual yellow jacket hive, while remaining a vibrant piece of accessible art for the community at large, the Black Hills Pioneer reported.

"I did study hives and understood the overlapping planes and the sort of linear texture that they have, so all of that is reflected in this piece," he said. "I like to use contemporary materials and design, and "The Hive" provided a lot of opportunities to make an abstract form that had meaning to it."

Initial meetings and design of the sculpture began a year and a half ago. Lamphere employs one other full-time assistant, and contracts with other local artists as needed for his large-scale projects. All together, he said, five artists worked on the piece; construction took around eight months.

"I have a real excellent welder that I work with full-time, Andy Roltgen, and I sure don't mind him getting a lot of credit because those things would be difficult to do without his level of expertise," he said.

"The Hive" stands at around 20 feet tall, weighing in at just over 3.5 tons, and is constructed entirely out of stainless steel.

"I was real excited by the dramatic contrasts of the materials and the scale of it, and the fact that it's in a roundabout where it's seen from all angles; that's both interesting and a challenge," Lamphere said with a laugh.

Special considerations were made to help mitigate the highly reflective surface of the stainless steel used. The bare slats have been textured slightly to cut down on sheen, and the green slats were coated using car-painting techniques.

"The gold is a coating called titanium nitride, and it was invented in World War II to coat optical equipment to keep it from being scratched in field conditions. So it's a real tough finish," Lamphere explained. "The sculpture is elevated enough to where headlights shouldn't be a problem. And most of the gold is angled upward a bit and that was consciously done so that we wouldn't be as prone to catch headlights."

Lamphere said he's proud to finally have a large-scale outdoor piece in the Black Hills, and he could think of nowhere better to construct his hive than Spearfish.

"I really enjoyed working with Black Hills State University and their staff on this, and I appreciate the opportunity to have a large-scale work here in Spearfish," he said. "It's the home of the Yellow Jackets."

SD Lottery

By The Associated Press undefined

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

Mega Millions

17-32-40-59-61, Mega Ball: 18, Megaplier: 3

(seventeen, thirty-two, forty, fifty-nine, sixty-one; Mega Ball: eighteen; Megaplier: three)

Estimated jackpot: \$405 million

Powerball

Estimated jackpot: \$457 million

Choi, Clarke share PGA Tour Champions lead in Sioux Falls

SIOUX FALLS, S.D. (AP) — K.J. Choi closed eagle-birdie-birdie for a 7-under 63 and share of the first-round lead with Darren Clarke in the PGA Tour Champions' Stanford International.

Choi had a bogey-free round at Minnehaha Country Club. The 51-year-old South Korean player won eight times on the PGA Tour.

"Good finish," Choi said. "It's very comfortable here, everybody is supporting Sanford and the tourna-

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ment is going good and the golf course is in beautiful, fantastic shape. ... Very important this course iron shot and putting. Sometimes confusing in the greens and the slope."

Clarke, the 53-year-old major champion from Northern Ireland, also finished with a birdie on the par-4 18th. He has two victories this season, the TimberTech Championship in November and Mitsubishi Electric Championship in January.

"I just liked this golf course from the first time I came here and I've really, really enjoyed it." said Clarke, who shot 62 on the course last year. "Seems to fit my eye. There's a couple holes where I can open up a little bit and have a dig at it, such as the first today, straight downwind, so I hit driver off the tee and just off the edge of the green and lobbed it up there. I just like the look of the golf course."

Robert Karlsson, Matt Gogel, Rod Pampling and Brandt Jobe were a stroke back. Mario Tiziani, U.S. Ryder Cup captain Steve Stricker's brother-in-law, was at 65 with Retief Goosen, Steven Alker and Mark Hensby.

Stricker, set to lead the United States against Europe next week at Whistling Straits in Wisconsin, birdied the last two holes for a 67. He won the inaugural event in 2018.

South Dakota player Tom Byrum topped the group at 66 with Jim Furyk, Ernie Els, Jerry Kelly and 2020 winner Miguel Angel Jimenez. Fred Couples matched Stricker at 67, and Davis Love III had a 69.

Couples, Furyk and Love will join Stricker at Whistling Straits as assistant captains. Karlsson is an assistant captain for Europe.

Charles Schwab Cup points leader Bernhard Langer shot 70.

SD girl killed in Minnesota storms that spawned 2 tornadoes

MANKATO, Minn. (AP) — A line of strong storms brought damaging winds and at least a couple tornadoes to Minnesota and western Wisconsin early Friday, causing at least one death.

Authorities in Mankato say a 4-year-old girl died when a tree branch fell on a tent at a city park around 2:30 a.m. The Mankato Free Press reported the girl was with her family at the park for the annual Mahkato Wacipi, or powwow.

Powwow Chairman Dave Brave Heart identified her as Natalia Ashes, of Yankton, South Dakota. He said she supposed to dance in a new jingle dress Friday.

"It's kind of a cloud over our powwow right now," he said, "but we're going to try to make it OK with ceremony and prayer."

To the north, a clean-up was underway across much of the Minneapolis-St. Paul area east into western Wisconsin. The southern and eastern metro area was particularly hard-hit by winds that gusted to 64 mph at Minneapolis-St. Paul International Airport just after 3 a.m., Minnesota Public Radio reported

The National Weather Service reported Friday evening that its storm survey crews determined the storms spawned at least a couple tornadoes in the south metro in Dakota County — one in Burnsville and the other in Apple Valley. Those tornadoes were not immediately assigned EF strength ratings.

South Dakota's top lawmakers release AG impeachment petition

By STEPHEN GROVES Associated Press

SIOUX FALLS, S.D. (AP) — South Dakota legislative leaders on Friday distributed a petition to lawmakers asking them to support a special session to consider impeaching Attorney General Jason Ravnsborg for a car crash last year that killed a pedestrian.

House Speaker Spencer Gosch released the text of the petition. Two-thirds of both the Republican-controlled House and Senate must sign on to convene the special session. Lawmakers would meet in November, the day after they are scheduled to hold a special session to consider new legislative districts.

The petition says the special session would be called for "investigating and evaluating whether the conduct of Jason Ravnsborg ... surrounding the death of Joe Boever, involved impeachable offenses."

Gosch has said that if the special session is approved, he will appoint a committee to investigate the conduct of the attorney general, a Republican whose term runs through 2022. The South Dakota Legislature has never tried to impeach an official as powerful as an attorney general. It would require a simple

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majority of the House to approve articles of impeachment, while two-thirds of senators must vote to convict and remove him from office.

The attorney general pleaded no contest to a pair of misdemeanors last month, and prosecutors dropped a third misdemeanor. Ravensborg avoided jail time and was sentenced to fines totaling over \$4,500 for making an illegal lane change and using a cellphone while driving. Investigators said his car veered onto the shoulder of the rural highway where Boever was walking late on Sept. 12 last year and that Ravensborg had been on his cellphone about a minute before the crash.

Republican Gov. Kristi Noem has repeatedly called for Ravensborg's resignation, but he has insisted he will not resign and can perform the duties of his office.

Communists, observers report violations in Russian election

By JIM HEINTZ Associated Press

MOSCOW (AP) — The head of Russia's Communist Party, the country's second-largest political party, is alleging widespread violations in the election for a new national parliament in which his party is widely expected to gain seats.

Communist Party chief Gennady Zyuganov said Saturday — the second of three days of voting in the election — that police and the national elections commission must respond to reports of "a number of absolutely egregious facts" including ballot-stuffing in several regions.

The Golos election-monitoring movement and independent media also reported violations including vote-buying and lax measures for guarding ballots at polling stations.

Central Elections Commission head Ella Pamfilova said later Saturday that more than 6,200 ballots have been annulled in five regions for procedural violations and ballot-stuffing.

The United Russia party, which is diligently loyal to President Vladimir Putin, appears certain to retain its dominance in the State Duma, the lower house of parliament. Still, some projections suggest the party could lose its current two-thirds majority, which is enough to change the constitution. The Communists are expected to pick up the biggest share of any seats lost by United Russia.

Although the Communists generally support Kremlin initiatives in the parliament, their gaining seats would be a loss of face for United Russia. The Communists are seen as potentially benefiting from the "Smart Voting" program promoted by imprisoned opposition leader Alexei Navalny and his team, which aims to undermine United Russia by advising voters on which candidates are in the strongest position to defeat United Russia's candidates.

However, it's unclear how effective the program will be after Apple and Google removed Smart Voting apps from their stores under Kremlin pressure. Authorities previously blocked access to its website. Navalny's organizations have been declared extremist, blocking anyone associated with them from running for office, thereby eliminating most significant opposition candidates from the election.

In St. Petersburg, voter Pavel Ivanov said he had access to the service and followed its advice to vote for a small party that "does not meet my preferences to the full extent but (will) present a certain opposition to the ruling party."

Zyuganov said the party has tallied at least 44 incidents of voting violations and the Communists have applied for permits to hold protests next week after the voting ends Sunday.

On Saturday, the news website Znak said a resident of the Moscow region was offering 1,000 rubles (\$15) to people who voted for United Russia. The publication said it called the man, who said the payment would come if the caller provided evidence of their vote through a messaging app.

The Golos movement cited reports from its observers and local news media of an array of apparent violations, including ballots being stored overnight in a cabinet with a broken door and of envelopes for storing ballot tallies appearing to have been opened and then resealed.

On the first day of voting Friday, unexpectedly long lines formed at some polling places, and independent media suggested this could show that state institutions and companies were forcing employees to vote.

But despite those lines, overall turnout appeared to be desultory. Pamfilova, the elections commission

head, said about 25% of the electorate had cast ballots by 3 p.m. Saturday, about halfway through the voting.

Some voters participated, but with little sense of involvement.

"I vote every year. What is happening in the end does not depend on us, nothing depends on us," Nikolai Martemyanov, a resident of the Siberian village of Desyatove, told The Associated Press.

Media in St. Petersburg on Friday reported on suspected cases of "carousel voting," in which voters cast ballots at several different polling stations. An AP video journalist saw the same voters, believed to be military school students, at two different polling stations; one of them said the group had gone to the wrong polling station at first.

A local Russian election commission member posted a video in which a man appeared to have tried to cast several ballots and then was confronted by a poll worker. The man in the video said he had obtained his ballots at a subway station.

Irina Titova in St. Petersburg and Yulya Alekseeva in Desyatovo contributed to this story.

Yemen Houthi rebels execute 9 over senior official's killing

By AHMED AL-HAJ and SAMY MAGDY Associated Press

SANAA, Yemen (AP) — Yemen's Houthi rebels executed on Saturday nine people they said were involved in the killing of a senior rebel official in an airstrike by the Saudi-led coalition more than three years ago.

The execution took place by firing squad and was held in public, early in the morning in the rebel-held capital of Sanaa. The Iranian-backed Houthis distributed photos apparently showing the killings. Hundreds of people attended the execution, mostly Houthis and their supporters.

The executions took place despite repeated calls by rights groups and lawyers to stop the killings and retry the suspects. They said the trial, held in a rebel-controlled court where the nine were convicted and sentenced to death, was flawed.

The nine were among more than 60 people the Houthis accused of involvement in the targeted killing of Saleh al-Samad in April 2018. Former President Donald Trump was also accused, according to court documents obtained by The Associated Press. Also accused were top Western, Israeli and Gulf Arab officials.

The Houthis charged the nine of spying for the Saudi-led coalition, which has been waging war against the rebels for years in an effort to bring back Yemen's internationally recognized government to power.

Al-Samad, who held the post of president in the Houthi-backed political body, was killed along with six of his companions in an airstrike by the Saudi-led coalition in the coastal city of Hodeida.

The nine, including a 17-year-old boy, were arrested months after al-Samad's killing. They had been forcefully disappeared for months in undisclosed places where they suffered inhuman treatment, according to Abdel-Majeed Sabra, a Yemeni lawyer representing one of the people executed.

The executions were also broadcast on big screens in Sanaa's Tahrir Square. The executions and their display caused outrage across the country, including among the relatives of the nine and also in Sanaa, where people refrain from criticizing the rebels for fear of reprisals.

"What I would say. I can't believe what has happened. This is madness and a crime," Abdel-Rahman Noah, a brother of one of the executed, told The Associated Press.

Another relative said she did not expect the Houthis to go through with the executions. "We were shocked. ... We thought that they were just threatening," she said tearfully, speaking on condition of anonymity for fear of reprisals from the rebels.

The rebels did not respond to requests for comment.

The nine wore sky blue prison garb with their hands bound behind their backs. Masked guards led them to an open area and forced them to lie down on their stomachs. Another officer with a rifle shot them to death in their backs.

One of the executed appeared scared while awaiting his turn to be shot; an armed Houthi was seen holding him tight, perhaps so that he would not fall.

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Several rights groups, including the U.S.-based American Center for Justice, which follows human rights abuses in Yemen, had called Friday for the U.N. to intervene to stop the executions. The groups said the trial had "included flagrant violations of fair trial guarantees and depriving individuals of providing sufficient defenses."

Yemen has been embroiled in a civil war since 2014, when the Houthis swept across much of the north and seized Sanaa, forcing the internationally recognized government into exile. The Saudi-led coalition entered the war the following year on the side of the government.

The stalemated conflict has killed more than 130,000 people and spawned the world's worst humanitarian crisis.

Magdy reported from on board the Geo Barents in the Mediterranean Sea.

One stunning afternoon: Setbacks imperil Biden's reset

By JONATHAN LEMIRE and ZEKE MILLER Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — It was an hour President Joe Biden would no doubt like to forget.

On Friday, the Pentagon acknowledged that a drone strike in Afghanistan killed 10 civilians, including seven children, not terrorists. A panel advising the Food and Drug Administration voted to not recommend COVID-19 booster shots for all Americans over age 16, dashing an administration hope. And France announced it was recalling its ambassador to the United States out of anger for being cut out of a secret nuclear submarine deal Biden had struck with the United Kingdom and Australia.

The headlines, all within an hour, underscored the perils for any president from situations that can define a term in office.

Already, Biden has seen public approval numbers trend downward as the pandemic has deepened and Americans cast blame for the flawed U.S. withdrawal from Afghanistan.

The administration had hoped to roll out tougher vaccine guidelines, a new international alliance to thwart China and a recommitment to what Biden has done best: drawing on his years on Capitol Hill and knowledge of the legislative process to cajole fellow Democrats to pass the two far-reaching spending bills that make up the heart of his agenda.

Those ambitions are now more difficult to achieve.

Biden has proclaimed defeating the pandemic to be the central mission of his presidency. But the United States is now averaging more than 145,000 confirmed COVID-19 cases per day, compared with a low of about 8,500 per day three months ago.

The president has tried to shift the blame for the resurgence of cases to the more than 70 million Americans who have not gotten a vaccine and the GOP lawmakers who have opposed his increasingly forceful efforts to push people to get a shot. Aides had hoped for full FDA approval for the boosters, yet the advisory panel only recommended them for those over age 65 or with underlying health conditions or special circumstances.

Biden aides in recent days had quietly expressed relief that the Afghanistan withdrawal — like the war itself for much of its nearly two decades — has receded from headlines. That feeling was shattered Friday afternoon when the Pentagon revealed the errant target for what was believed to be the final American drone strike of the war.

Biden had long advocated leaving Afghanistan. Even after a suicide bombing killed 13 American service members, he told advisers the withdrawal decision was correct. He is known for his certitude, a stubbornness that flashed when he dismissed suggestions that he express regret for how the withdrawal occurred.

Aides have since been quick to note that more than 120,000 people have been successfully evacuated and they say U.S. efforts are securing the steady departure of others from under Taliban rule.

The end in Afghanistan was part of an effort to refocus foreign policy on China, an aim that accelerated with the surprise announcement of the agreement between the United States, United Kingdom and Australia.

But not only did Beijing balk, so did Paris, as France angrily accused the U.S. of cutting France out of

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the alliance and scuttling its own submarine deal with Australia.

And then France recalled its ambassador after its officials expressed dismay that, in their estimation, Biden had proven to be as unreliable a partner as his predecessor Donald Trump.

The strain with France came just as Biden had hoped to pivot to his ambitious domestic agenda.

But there are ideological divides among the Democrats on Capitol Hill about the \$3.5 trillion spending package meant to be passed in tandem with the \$1 trillion bipartisan infrastructure bill. And all of Congress will be forced to juggle the White House's legislation while being swamped with imminent deadlines on the debt ceiling and government funding.

The West Wing is re-creating a legislative strategy that worked to secure passage of the \$1.9 trillion COVID relief in March and pushed the \$1 trillion bipartisan infrastructure bill through the Senate in August, according to a half dozen White House aides and outside advisers who were not authorized to publicly discuss internal deliberations and spoke on condition of anonymity.

With Biden cajoling lawmakers, the infrastructure bill is to be passed through the House along with the \$3.5 trillion spending bill that contains many of the president's priorities, such as like climate change and child care, and would pass the Senate along party lines.

Because the Senate is in a 50-50 tie and Democrats' margin in the House is only a handful of seats, few votes can be lost. It could be a formidable task to unite Democratic moderates such as Sens. Joe Manchin of West Virginia and Kyrsten Sinema of Arizona, who want a far smaller spending bill, with liberals including Sen. Bernie Sanders of Vermont, who has steadfastly said it could not shrink.

The White House also has begun filling the president's schedule again with events meant to highlight the need to pass the bills, including linking visits to the sites of natural disasters — fires in California and Idaho, hurricane damage in Louisiana and the Northeast — to the climate change funding in the legislation.

This past Thursday, on what had previously been tentatively planned as a down day for Biden, the White House scheduled him to give a speech from the East Room during which he zeroed in on how tax enforcement to get big corporations and wealthy Americans to pay more would help fund his plan, without offering any new details.

But there are roadblocks. Manchin told Biden that he could not support \$3.5 trillion and White House aides have begun signaling that they would settle for a smaller package, even if it raises the ire of progressives.

Biden's advisers believe that, even if there is some unhappiness with the package, no Democratic lawmaker would want to be perceived as undermining the centerpiece of the agenda of a president from their own party.

The White House is also scaling back the president's travel so he can support the agenda on Capitol Hill, but it's led to concerns among some Democratic lawmakers that Biden isn't doing enough to personally sell the legislation to their constituents across the country.

Some aides worry about the exposure level Biden may have faced when he mingled in groups during a recent trip to the West and his three stops to mark the Sept. 11 anniversary, two officials said. Biden, 78, also did not get a summer vacation. His plan to spend time at his Delaware home in August was scuttled by the Afghanistan crisis.

Aides had finally scheduled him a break, a long weekend at his house in Rehoboth Beach, Delaware.. He reached his home Friday just after 1:30 p.m.

Ninety minutes later, any hope for a quiet weekend vanished.

Diplomatic niceties cast aside by France as sub deal ends

By ROD McGUIRK and ELAINE GANLEY Associated Press

PARIS (AP) — Tossing diplomatic niceties out the window, France's ambassador to Australia on Saturday described as a "huge mistake" the surprise cancellation of a multi-billion dollar submarine contract in favor of a U.S. deal.

Australia's sudden breaking of what was widely billed in France as the "contract of the century" has triggered the unprecedented show of anger among allies.

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"This has been a huge mistake, a very, very bad handling of the partnership," French ambassador Jean-Pierre Thebault said before flying home to France.

Paris recalled its ambassadors to Australia and the United States on Friday to protest an abruptly announced deal between the United States, Australia and Britain to supply the Australians with a fleet of at least eight nuclear-power submarines.

The arms agreement between France and Australia, signed in 2016, was supposed to be based "on trust, mutual understanding and sincerity," a fuming Thebault said. "I would like to be able to run into a time machine and be in a situation where we don't end up in such an incredible, clumsy, inadequate, un-Australian situation."

Thebault flew out of Australia about 17 hours after the announcement from Paris.

After an initial burst of anger from French Foreign Minister Jean-Yves Le Drian, Paris has been silent.

Le Drian said in a written statement Friday that the French decision — at the request from President Emmanuel Macron — "is justified by the exceptional seriousness of the announcements" made by Australia and the United States.

He said Australia's decision to scrap a big French conventional submarine purchase in favor of nuclear subs built with U.S. technology is "unacceptable behavior between allies and partners."

What French officials have called a complex, multi-layered contract was about more than submarines. It was the underpinning for France's vision of the critical Indo-Pacific region, where France has a presence and China is looking to bolster its influence.

The U.S. deal scraps a 90 billion Australian dollar (\$66 billion) contract with French majority state-owned Naval Group to build 12 conventional diesel-electric submarines.

The Naval Group said in a statement that consequences of the contract cancellation would be analyzed with Australia "in the coming days." It noted that teams in France and Australia have been at work on the project for the past five years.

Australian employees working with Naval Group and their families have set up home in the Normandy port of Cherbourg. A union official, David Robin, told BFMTV that employees were informed there may be an option to keep them on.

Australian Foreign Minister Marise Payne's office earlier had issued a statement responding to the diplomat's recall and noting Canberra's "regret" over its ally's withdrawal of its representative.

"Australia understands France's deep disappointment with our decision, which was taken in accordance with our clear and communicated national security interests," the statement said. It added that Australia values its relationship with France and looked forward to future engagements together.

Payne and Defense Minister Peter Dutton are currently in the United States for annual talks with their U.S. counterparts and their first with President Joe Biden's administration.

Before he was recalled, French envoy Thebault said on Friday he found out about the U.S. submarine deal: "Like everybody, thanks to the Australian press."

"We never were informed about any substantial changes," Thebault said. "There were many opportunities and many channels. Never was such a change mentioned."

After the U.S. deal was made public this week, Prime Minister Scott Morrison said he told President Macron in June that there were "very real issues about whether a conventional submarine capability" would address Australia's strategic security needs in the Indo-Pacific.

Morrison has not specifically referred to China's massive military buildup which had gained pace in recent years.

Morrison was in Paris on his way home from a Group of Seven nations summit in Britain where he had talks with soon-to-be-alliance partners Biden and British Prime Minister Boris Johnson. Thebault said he had also been at the meeting with Macron and Morrison.

Morrison mentioned "there were changes in the regional situation," but gave no indication that Australia was considering changing to nuclear propulsion, Thebault said.

"Everything was supposed to be done in full transparency between the two partners," he added.

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Thebault said difficulties the project had encountered were normal for its scale and large transfers of technologies.

Senior opposition lawmaker Mark Dreyfus called on the Australian government to fix its relationship with France.

"The impact on our relationship with France is a concern, particularly as a country with important interests in our region," Dreyfus said. "The French were blindsided by this decision and Mr. Morrison should have done much more to protect the relationship."

Heavy police presence as protesters trickle in for DC rally

By COLLEEN LONG, MICHAEL BALSAMO and ASHRAF KHALIL Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — The fence around the Capitol is back up. The District of Columbia's police department is at the ready. The U.S. Capitol Police have requested assistance from nearby law enforcement agencies including the National Guard.

The Capitol Police have taken no chances for Saturday's rally at the Capitol in support of rioters imprisoned after the violent Jan. 6 insurrection. They're working to avoid a repeat of the pre-inauguration attack.

An hour before the event was to begin, as music started blaring from the speakers, the few demonstrators in place were vastly outnumbered by the media and a heavy police presence.

A permit for the protest allows 700 people, but police were concerned about violent protesters and counterprotesters. Police were also preparing for the possibility that some demonstrators may arrive with weapons, though backpacks were allowed into the area and there were no checkpoints.

Police warned demonstrators ahead of time no weapons were allowed, and they were not to swim in the reflecting pools.

On Saturday morning, police were already working to separate the handful of Trump supporters and counterprotesters who had arrived hours before the rally was supposed to kick off. Law enforcement officers geared up at a staging area as large dump trucks and cement barricades lined the streets around the Capitol, outside of the fenced area.

Persistent attempts to rewrite the narrative of the violence and panic of Jan. 6, and the increasing volatility behind the lie that the 2020 election was stolen, have made it impossible to predict what may happen this weekend. After all, law enforcement was only expecting a free speech protest the day Trump supporters stormed the Capitol in an effort to disrupt the certification of Joe Biden's victory.

Capitol Police Chief Tom Manger said at a news conference Friday it was difficult to say whether threats of violence at the event were credible, but "chatter" online and elsewhere has been similar to intelligence that was missed in January.

The rally, organized by former Trump campaign staffer Matt Braynard, is aimed at supporting people who were detained after the Jan. 6 insurrection — about 63 people held behind bars out of the more than 600 charged in the deadly riot. It's just the latest attempt to downplay and deny the January violence.

Intelligence collected before the rally has suggested that extremist groups such as the Proud Boys and Oath Keepers will turn up. But some prominent members of the groups have sworn they aren't going and have told others not to attend. Far-right online chatter has been generally tame, and Republican lawmakers are downplaying the event.

Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin approved a request for about 100 members of the D.C. National Guard to be stationed at a city armory near the Capitol, to be called if needed as backup. They'll be without firearms, but will be equipped with batons and protective vests for self-defense.

Congress is out of session and no lawmakers were expected to be in the building Saturday. Biden was in Delaware for the weekend.

Many commenters on online platforms like Telegram that are popular with the far right disavowed the rally, saying they believed law enforcement was promoting the event to entrap Trump supporters. Some urged their followers not to attend an event they said was secretly organized by the FBI.

At the same time, however, some commenters continued to promote rallies planned in cities and state

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capitals across the country.

Meanwhile, Donald Trump is still using his platform as the most popular leader in the GOP to express sympathy for those who were arrested and continue spreading election misinformation, ratcheting up his attacks as the week wore on.

The Associated Press reviewed hundreds of court and jail records for the Capitol riot defendants to uncover how many were being detained and found roughly 63 held in federal custody awaiting trial or sentencing hearings. Federal officials are still looking for other suspects who could also wind up behind bars.

At least 30 are jailed in Washington. The rest are locked up in facilities across the country. They have said they are being treated unfairly, and one defendant said he was beaten.

Federal authorities have identified several of those detained as extremist group leaders, members or associates, including nine defendants linked to the Proud Boys and three connected to the antigovernment Oath Keepers. Dozens are charged with conspiring to mount coordinated attacks on the Capitol to block Congress from certifying the 2020 Electoral College vote, among the most serious of the charges.

Some jailed defendants are charged with assaulting police officers, others with making violent threats. A few were freed after their arrests but subsequently detained again, accused of violating release conditions.

The U.S. Court of Appeals for the District of Columbia Circuit has set standards for judges to apply in deciding whether to jail a Capitol riot defendant. A three-judge panel of the appeals court ruled in March that rioters accused of assaulting officers, breaking through windows, doors and barricades, or playing leadership roles in the attack were in "a different category of dangerousness" than those who merely cheered on the violence or entered the building after it was breached.

But it's unclear how the cases for the majority of those charged will end. On Friday, a California woman who joined the mob avoided a prison term when a federal judge sentenced her to probation, an outcome fitting an early pattern in the Jan. 6 riot prosecutions.

Associated Press writers Michael Kunzleman, Mary Clare Jalonick, Jacques Billeaud, David Klepper, Lisa Mascaro, Jake Bleiberg, Amanda Seitz, Nathan Ellgren and Robert Burns contributed to this report.

Fearful US residents in Afghanistan hiding out from Taliban

By BERNARD CONDON and JULIE WATSON Associated Press

Every night in yet another house in Afghanistan's capital, a U.S. green card-holding couple from California take turns sleeping, with one always awake to watch over their three young children so they can flee if they hear the footsteps of the Taliban.

They've moved seven times in two weeks, relying on relatives to take them in and feed them. Their days are an uncomfortable mix of fear and boredom, restricted to a couple of rooms where they read, watch TV and play "The Telephone Game" in which they whisper secrets and pass them on, a diversion for the children that has the added benefit of keeping them quiet.

All of it goes on during the agonizing wait for a call from anybody who can help them get out. A U.S. State Department official contacted them several days ago to tell them they were being assigned a case worker, but they haven't heard a word since. They tried and failed to get on a flight and now are talking to an international rescue organization.

"We are scared and keep hiding ourselves more and more," the mother said in a text message to The Associated Press. "Whenever we feel breathless, I pray."

Through messages, emails and phone conversations with loved ones and rescue groups, AP has pieced together what day-to-day life has been like for some of those left behind after the U.S. military's chaotic withdrawal -- that includes U.S. citizens, permanent U.S. resident green-card holders and visa applicants who aided U.S. troops during the 20-year war.

Those contacted by AP -- who are not being identified for their own safety -- described a fearful, furtive existence of hiding in houses for weeks, keeping the lights off at night, moving from place to place, and donning baggy clothing and burqas to avoid detection if they absolutely must venture out.

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All say they are scared the ruling Taliban will find them, throw them in jail, perhaps even kill them because they are Americans or had worked for the U.S. government. And they are concerned that the Biden administration's promised efforts to get them out have stalled.

When the phone rang in an apartment in Kabul a few weeks ago, the U.S. green card holder who answered -- a truck driver from Texas visiting family -- was hopeful it was the U.S. State Department finally responding to his pleas to get him and his parents on a flight out.

Instead, it was the Taliban.

"We won't hurt you. Let's meet. Nothing will happen," the caller said, according to the truck driver's brother, who lives with him in Texas and spoke to him afterwards. The call included a few ominous words: "We know where you are."

That was enough to send the man fleeing from the Kabul apartment where he had been staying with his mother, his two teenage brothers and his father, who was in particular danger because he had worked for years for a U.S. contractor overseeing security guards.

"They are hopeless," said the brother in Texas. "They think, 'We're stuck in the apartment and no one is here to help us.' They've been left behind."

U.S. Secretary of State Antony Blinken told Congress this past week that the government does not track U.S. permanent residents with green cards in Afghanistan but he estimates several thousand remain in the country, along with about 100 U.S. citizens. He promised the U.S. government was working to get them out.

As of Tuesday, 36 American citizens had been evacuated and 24 green card holders since the U.S. military left last month, according to the State Department. More were flown out Friday but the administration did not release those figures.

Neither the U.S. nor the Taliban have offered a clear explanation why so few have been evacuated.

That is hardly encouraging to another green card holder from Texas, a grandmother who recently watched from a rooftop as militants pulled up in a half-dozen police cars and Humvees to take over the house across the street.

"The Taliban. The Taliban," she whispered into the phone to her American son in a Dallas suburb, a conversation the woman recounted to the AP. "The women and kids are screaming. They're dragging the men to the cars."

She and her husband, who came to Kabul several months ago to visit relatives, are now terrified that the Taliban will not only uncover their American ties but those of their son back in Texas, who had worked for a U.S. military contractor for years.

Her son, who is also not being named, says he called U.S. embassy officials in Kabul several times before it shut down, filled out all the necessary paperwork, and even enlisted the help of a veteran's group and members of Congress.

He doesn't know what more he can do.

"What will we do if they knock on the door?" the 57-year-old mother asked on one of her daily calls. "What will we do?"

"Nothing is going to happen," replied the son.

Asked in a recent interview if he believed that, the son shot back, exasperated, "What else am I supposed to tell her?"

The Taliban government has promised to let Americans and Afghans with proper travel documents leave the country and to not retaliate against those who helped the United States. But U.N. human rights chief Michelle Bachelet said there is evidence they are not keeping their word. She warned Monday that the country had entered a "new and perilous phase," and cited credible reports of reprisal killings of Afghan military members and allegations of the Taliban hunting house-to-house for former government officials and people who cooperated with U.S. military and U.S. companies.

AP reporters in Afghanistan are not aware of any U.S. citizens or green card holders being picked up or arrested by the Taliban. But they have confirmed that several Afghans who worked for the previous

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government and military were taken in for questioning recently and released.

The California family, which includes a 9-year-old girl and two boys, ages 8 and 6, say they have been on the run for the past two weeks after the Taliban knocked on the door of their relative's apartment asking about the Americans staying there.

The family moved to Sacramento four years ago after the mother got a special immigrant visa because she worked for U.S.-funded projects in Kabul promoting women's rights. Now, the mother says both she and her daughter have been wearing burqas each time they move to their next "prison-home."

The father, who worked as an Uber driver, has been having panic attacks as they wait for help.

"I don't see the U.S. government stepping in and getting them out anytime soon," said the children's elementary school principal, Nate McGill, who has been exchanging daily texts with the family.

Distraction has become the mother's go-to tool to shield her children from the stress. She quizzes them on what they want to do when they get back to California and what they want to be when they grow up.

Their daughter hopes to become a doctor someday, while their sons say they want to become teachers.

But distraction is not always enough. After a relative told the daughter that the Taliban were taking away small girls, she hid in a room and refused to come out until her dad puffed himself up and said he could beat the Taliban, making her laugh.

The mother smiled, hiding her fear from her daughter, but later texted her principal.

"This life is almost half-death."

Condon reported from New York, Watson from San Diego. Kathy Gannon in Kabul and Ellen Knickmeyer in Washington contributed to this report.

Taliban replace ministry for women with one restricting them

By KATHY GANNON Associated Press

KABUL, Afghanistan (AP) — Afghanistan's new Taliban rulers set up a ministry for the "propagation of virtue and the prevention of vice" in the building that once housed the Women's Affairs Ministry, escorting out World Bank staffers on Saturday as part of the forced move.

It was the latest troubling sign that the Taliban are restricting women's rights as they settle into government, just a month since they overran the capital of Kabul. During their previous rule of Afghanistan in the 1990s, the Taliban had denied girls and women the right to education and barred them from public life.

Separately, three explosions targeted Taliban vehicles in the eastern provincial capital of Jalalabad on Saturday, killing three people and wounding 20, witnesses said. There was no immediate claim of responsibility, but Islamic State group's militants, headquartered in the area, are enemies of the Taliban.

The Taliban are facing major economic and security problems as they attempt to govern, and a growing challenge by IS militants would further stretch their resources.

In Kabul, a new sign was up outside the women's affairs ministry, announcing it was now the "Ministry for Preaching and Guidance and the Propagation of Virtue and the Prevention of Vice."

Staff of the World Bank's \$100 million Women's Economic Empowerment and Rural Development Program, which was run out of the Women's Affairs Ministry, were escorted off the grounds, said program member Sharif Akhtar, who was among those being removed.

Mabouba Suraj, who heads the Afghan Women's Network, said she was astounded by the flurry of orders released by the Taliban-run government restricting women and girls.

On Friday, the Taliban-run education ministry asked boys from grades six to 12 back to school, starting on Saturday, along with their male teachers. There was no mention of girls in those grades returning to school. Previously, the Taliban's minister of higher education minister, had said girls would be given equal access to education, albeit in gender-segregated settings.

"It is becoming really, really troublesome. ... Is this the stage where the girls are going to be forgotten?" Suraj said. "I know they don't believe in giving explanations, but explanations are very important."

Suraj speculated that the contradictory statements perhaps reflect divisions within the Taliban as they

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seek to consolidate their power, with the more pragmatic within the movement losing out to hard-liners among them, at least for now.

Statements from the Taliban leadership often reflect a willingness to engage with the world, talk of open public spaces for women and girls and protecting Afghanistan's minorities. But orders to its rank and file on the ground are contradictory. Instead of what was promised, restrictions, particularly on women, have been implemented.

Suraj, an Afghan American who returned to Afghanistan in 2003 to promote women's rights and education, said many of her fellow activists have left the country.

She said she stayed in an effort to engage with the Taliban and find a middle ground, but until now has not been able to get the hard-line Islamic group's leadership to meet with activists who have remained in the country, to talk with women about the way forward.

"We have to talk. We have to find a middle ground," she said.

UNESCO's Director General Audrey Azoulay on Saturday added her voice to the growing concern over the Taliban's limitations on girls after only boys were told to go back to school.

"Should this ban be maintained, it would constitute an important violation of the fundamental right to education for girls and women," Azoulay said in a statement upon her arrival in New York for the opening of the U.N. General Assembly.

A former advisor to the women's ministry under the previous Afghan government sent a video message to The Associated Press from her home in Kabul, slamming the Taliban's move to close the ministry.

It is "the right of women to work, learn and participate in politics on the national and international stage," said Sara Seerat. "Unfortunately, in the current Taliban Islamic Emirate government there is no space in the Cabinet. By closing the women's ministry it shows they have no plans in the future to give women their rights or a chance to serve in the government and participate in other affairs."

Earlier this month the Taliban announced an all-male exclusively Taliban Cabinet but said it was an interim setup, offering some hope that a future government would be more inclusive as several of their leaders had promised.

Also on Saturday, an international flight by Pakistan's national carrier left Kabul's airport with 322 passengers on board and a flight by Iran's Mahan Air departed with 187 passengers on board, an airport official said.

The official, who spoke on condition of anonymity because he wasn't authorized to speak to the media, said the two international flights departed in the morning. The identities and nationalities of those on board were not immediately known.

The flights were the latest to depart Kabul in the past week as technical teams from Qatar and Turkey have worked to get the airport up to standard for international commercial aircraft.

A Qatar Airways flight on Friday took more Americans out of Afghanistan, according to Washington, the third such airlift by the Mideast carrier since the Taliban takeover and the frantic U.S. troop pullout from the country last month.

Associated Press writer Edith M. Lederer at the United Nations contributed to this report.

Afghan survivors of US drone strike: Sorry 'is not enough'

By KATHY GANNON Associated Press

KABUL, Afghanistan (AP) — Sorry is not enough for the Afghan survivors of an errant U.S. drone strike that killed 10 members of their family, including seven children.

Emal Ahmadi, whose 3-year-old daughter Malika was killed on Aug. 29, when the U.S. hellfire missile struck his elder brother's car, told The Associated Press on Saturday that the family demands Washington investigate who fired the drone and punish the military personnel responsible for the strike.

"That is not enough for us to say sorry," said Ahmadi. "The U.S.A. should find the person who did this."

Ahmadi said the family is also seeking financial compensation for their losses and demanded that several

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members of the family be relocated to a third country, without specifying which country.

The AP and other news organizations in Kabul reported after the strike that the driver of the targeted vehicle, Zemerai Ahmadi, was a longtime employee at an American humanitarian organization and cited an absence of evidence to support the Pentagon's assertion that the vehicle contained explosives.

The missile struck as the car was pulling into the family's driveway and the children ran to greet Zemerai.

On Friday, U.S. Marine Gen. Frank McKenzie, head of U.S. Central Command, called the strike a "tragic mistake," and after weeks of denials, said that innocent civilians were indeed killed in the attack and not an Islamic State extremist as was announced earlier.

The drone strike followed a devastating suicide bombing by the Islamic State group — a rival of the Taliban — that killed 169 Afghans and 13 U.S. military personnel at one of the gates to the Kabul airport. For days, desperate Afghans had swarmed the checkpoints outside the airport, trying to leave the country amid the chaotic U.S. and NATO troops pullout, fearing for their future under the Taliban.

McKenzie apologized for the error and said the United States is considering making reparation payments to the family of the victims.

Emal Ahmadi, who said he heard of the apology from friends in America, insisted that it won't bring back members of his family and while he expressed relief for the U.S. apology and recognition that his family were innocent victims, he said he was frustrated that it took weeks of pleading with Washington to at least make a call to the family.

Even as evidence mounted to the contrary, Pentagon officials asserted that the strike had been conducted correctly, to protect the U.S. troops remaining at Kabul's airport ahead of the final pullout the following day, on Aug. 30.

Looking exhausted, sitting in front of the charred ruins of Zemerai's car, Ahmadi said he wanted more than an apology from the United States — he wanted justice, including an investigation into who carried out the strike "and I want him punished by the U.S.A."

In the days before the Pentagon's apology, accounts from the family, documents from colleagues seen by The AP and the scene at the family home — where Zemerai's car was struck by the missile — all sharply contradicted the accounts by the U.S. military. Instead, they painted the picture of a family that had worked for Americans and were trying to gain visas to the U.S., fearing for their lives under the Taliban.

Zemerai was the family's breadwinner had looked after his three brothers, including Emal, and their children.

"Now I am then one who is responsible for all my family and I am jobless," said Emal Ahmadi. The situation "is not good," said Ahmadi of life under the Taliban. International aid groups and the United Nations have warned of a looming humanitarian crisis that could drive most Afghans below the poverty level.

McKenzie said the decision to strike a white Toyota Corolla sedan, after having tracked it for about eight hours, was made in an "earnest belief" — based on a standard of "reasonable certainty" — that it posed an imminent threat to American forces at the Kabul airport. The car was believed to have been carrying explosives in its trunk, he said.

But Ahmadi wondered how the family's home could have been mistaken for an Islamic State hideout.

"The U.S.A. can see from everywhere," he said of U.S. drone capabilities. "They can see that there were innocent children near the car and in the car. Whoever did this should be punished."

"It isn't right," he added.

New redistricting commissions splinter along partisan lines

By DAVID A. LIEB Associated Press

When voters in some states created new commissions to handle the politically thorny process of redistricting, the hope was that the bipartisan panelists could work together to draw new voting districts free of partisan gerrymandering.

Instead, cooperation has proved elusive.

In New York, Ohio and Virginia, commissions meeting for the first time this year have splintered into

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partisan camps to craft competing redistricting maps based on 2020 census data. The divisions have disappointed some activists who supported the reforms and highlighted how difficult it can be to purge politics from the once-a-decade process of realigning boundaries for U.S. House and state legislative seats.

As a result, the new state House and Senate districts in Republican-led Ohio will still favor the GOP. Democrats who control New York could still draw maps as they wish. And a potential stalemate in Virginia could eventually kick the process to the courts.

"It's probably predictable that this is sort of how it's panned out," said Alex Keena, a political scientist at Virginia Commonwealth University who has analyzed redistricting and gerrymandering.

Redistricting can carry significant consequences. Subtle changes in district lines can solidify a majority of voters for a particular party or split its opponents among multiple districts to dilute their influence. Republicans need to net just five seats to regain the U.S. House in the 2022 elections, which could determine the fate of President Joe Biden's remaining agenda.

Throughout most of American history, redistricting has been handled by state lawmakers and governors who have an incentive to draw lines favoring their own parties. But as public attention to gerrymandering has grown in recent decades, voters in an increasing number of states have shifted the task to special commissions.

Some commissions — such as those in Arizona, California, Colorado and Michigan — consist solely of citizens who hold the final say on what maps to enact. But others, such as in Ohio and Virginia, include politicians among their members or require their maps to be submitted to the legislature for final approval, as is the case in New York, Virginia and Utah.

If New York's Democratic-led Legislature rejects the work of the new commission (consisting of four Democrats, four Republicans and two independents), then lawmakers can draft and pass their own redistricting plans.

The prospects of that increased last week, when Democrats and Republicans on the commission failed to agree and instead released competing versions of new maps for the U.S. House, state Senate and state Assembly.

State Republican Party Chairman Nick Langworthy blasted the Democratic maps as "wildly gerrymandered" and accused Democratic commissioners of refusing to compromise.

State Democratic Party Chairman Jay Jacobs countered that there was no reason to "bend over backwards" to try to draw as many Republican seats as possible. He added: "We'll be fair, but to a point."

The commission's division frustrated Jennifer Wilson, deputy director of the League of Women Voters of New York. The organization supported the 2014 ballot measure that created the commission and encouraged people to testify at the panel's public hearings this year.

"It almost feels like a slap in the face to us and to all those people who spent the time to go and submit comments -- took time out of their daily lives to do that -- when it's very obvious there was no regard for any of those comments," Wilson said.

Frustration also is mounting in Ohio, where a commission dominated by Republican elected officials voted this past week to adopt a state legislative redistricting plan they favored. Because the plan had no Democratic support, the state constitution limits it to four years.

Democrats on the panel called the maps unfair. But Republican Senate President Matt Huffman asserted that special interests pressured Democrats not to back a redistricting plan that could have lasted the entire next decade.

Huffman said the new map likely would produce 62 Republican seats in the Ohio House and 23 in the Senate — down just a couple in each chamber from the current GOP supermajorities. Experts estimate the state's voters are more evenly divided, around 54% Republican to 46% Democratic.

The partisan map came despite more than a dozen public hearings dominated by testimony from Ohio residents who said the current gerrymandered maps have left them out in the cold.

"Too many of us have had little say in who represents us and watched helplessly as laws are passed that hurt our families and ignore our needs," Areege Hammad, of CAIR-Ohio, a civil rights organization

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for Muslims, testified.

She said the neighborhood around the Islamic Center of Cleveland, one of the region's largest Muslim populations, is fractured into multiple congressional and statehouse districts.

"Because of the way that districts are drawn, our elected officials have no incentive to be receptive, responsive or accessible to us or our concerns," she said.

Michigan's citizen redistricting commission released its first draft of a new state Senate and U.S. House map this past week and is still working on a state House map. It's planning to take more public comment on its proposals with a goal of finalizing maps by the end of the year — blowing past the Nov. 1 deadline set in the constitutional amendment approved by voters.

But the Michigan panel of four Democrats, four Republicans and five independents has so far avoided devolving into partisan encampments. One reason may be that Michigan's commission includes no politicians and no ability for the Republican-led Legislature to override its work, Keena said.

In Virginia, two separate mapmakers hired for Democrats and Republicans are to submit rival plans for consideration this coming week by the 16-member commission, which has four lawmakers and four citizens from each major party. If the commission can't agree — or the Democratic-led General Assembly rejects its maps — the decision will fall to the state Supreme Court, which is dominated by GOP-appointed judges.

How commissioners respond to the two maps will determine whether the reform effort works, said Liz White, executive director of OneVirginia2021, which supported last year's ballot measure creating the commission. She hopes panelists find a way "to marry" the two proposals.

"There's certainly a concern that two balanced sides just end in gridlock," White said. "The hope really is that the citizens are there to make sure that doesn't happen."

Even if the commission stalemates, the new process still could be considered an improvement over the previous one, because the public is getting to see deliberations and divisions that might otherwise have been kept behind closed doors, said Keena, of Virginia Commonwealth.

"We're going to be able to look back on this sort of experiment and see what works and what doesn't work," he said. "Hopefully, that will lead to better reforms in the future."

Lieb reported from Jefferson City, Missouri. Associated Press writers Julie Carr Smyth in Columbus, Ohio, and Marina Villeneuve in Albany, New York, contributed to this report.

EXPLAINER: What are the issues in Canada's close election?

By ROB GILLIES Associated Press

TORONTO (AP) — Prime Minister Justin Trudeau is facing a tough battle against his Conservative Party rival, Erin O'Toole, in Canadian elections on Monday.

Trudeau called the early election in hopes of winning a majority of seats in Parliament, but has faced criticism for calling a vote during a pandemic in order to cement his hold on power. Here's a guide to Monday's election:

WHAT'S AT STAKE?

Trudeau and his Liberal Party could lose power to the Conservative Party after six years in office. Trudeau has struggled to justify why he's holding the election early amid the pandemic, and the opposition has been relentless in accusing him of doing it for his own personal ambition. But Trudeau is betting that Canadians will reward him for navigating the coronavirus crisis better than most countries.

Canada has seen far fewer cases and deaths than many other nations, and Trudeau's government spent hundreds of billions of dollars to prop up the economy amid lockdowns. After a slow start Canada is now one of the most vaccinated countries in the world and leads the G-7 in vaccination rates. Trudeau recently reopened the border, but only to the vaccinated.

If elected, O'Toole says he will close the borders to prevent dangerous variants from coming in. In addition, O'Toole has pulled his Conservative Party to the center in a bid to win power and is now calling

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himself a progressive.

PANDEMIC POLITICS?

Trudeau argues having the Conservatives in power during a pandemic isn't wise, saying Canadians need a government that follows science. O'Toole isn't requiring his party's candidates to be vaccinated and won't say how many are unvaccinated. He describes vaccination as a personal health decision.

Trudeau supports making vaccines mandatory for Canadians to travel by air or rail, something the Conservatives oppose. Trudeau points out the dire situation in Alberta, run by a Conservative provincial government. Alberta Premier Jason Kenney says the province might run out of beds and staff for intensive care units within days. Kenney has apologized for the crisis and is now reluctantly introducing a vaccine passport and imposing a mandatory work-from-home order two months after lifting nearly all restrictions.

The Liberals, in turn, are running an attack ad that quotes O'Toole praising Kenney for his management of the pandemic, saying it's been better than Trudeau's federal government.

TRUDEAU FATIGUE?

Trudeau gambled by trying to capitalize on his government's handling of the pandemic but he's been accused of calling the election early for selfish, political reasons.

Tall and trim, Trudeau channeled the star power of his father, late prime minister Pierre Trudeau, when he was first elected in 2015. He appeared on the cover of Rolling Stone and in Vogue magazine, but analysts say high expectations and overexposure have contributed to some irritation with him. Photos of Trudeau appearing in black and brownface when he was younger also surfaced in the last election in 2019, casting doubt on his judgment.

WHAT DOES O'TOOLE STAND FOR?

The son of a long-time politician, O'Toole advertised himself as a "true blue conservative" who vowed to "Take Back Canada!" when he won his party's leadership just a year ago. Now he's calling himself progressive and disavowing social and fiscal policies that made him his party's leader. Polls show O'Toole could defeat Trudeau's Liberal Party despite criticism he will say and do anything to get elected.

O'Toole now favors a carbon tax he promised to kill and the Conservatives disparaged. O'Toole reversed the party's position on guns three weeks into the campaign, contradicting the Conservative platform he put out last month by pledging to maintain the Liberals' list of prohibited firearms.

FAR RIGHT IMPACT?

A politician who narrowly lost the leadership of the Conservative Party in 2017 now leads a far-right party that opposes vaccines and lockdowns. Polls suggest as much as 5% to 10% support for Maxime Bernier and his People's Party of Canada, which could bleed support from the Conservative Party and help the Liberals retain power. A worried O'Toole said Friday that while there are other parties, there's only one party that has a chance to defeat Trudeau — the Conservatives.

Anti-vaccine supporters of the People's Party have tried to disrupt Trudeau's campaign rallies. One party member was arrested for throwing gravel and rocks at Trudeau, and there have been protests outside hospitals.

A growing number of vaccinated Canadians are becoming increasingly upset with those who refuse to get vaccinated. It has been the biggest wedge issue for Trudeau.

A MINORITY GOVERNMENT?

Canadians don't directly elect the prime minister. Instead, the post goes to the leader of the party that either wins the majority of seats in the House of Commons or can ally with another party to reach a majority. Trudeau called the early election in hopes of winning a majority but polls suggest that no party is likely to get a majority of Parliament's 338 seats, so an alliance may be needed to pass legislation.

If Conservatives win the most seats — but not a majority — they are expected to seek an arrangement

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with the separatist Bloc Quebecois party in Quebec. Trudeau's Liberals would likely rely on the leftist New Democrats. The Liberals entered this election with 155 seats, the Conservatives had 119, the Bloc Quebecois 32 and the leftist New Democrats 24. The People's Party had none.

US nears plan for widescale expulsions of Haitian migrants

By ERIC GAY and ELLIOT SPAGAT Associated Press

DEL RIO, Texas (AP) — The Biden administration worked Saturday on plans to send many of the thousands of Haitian immigrants who have gathered in a Texas border city back to their Caribbean homeland, in a swift response to the huge influx of people who suddenly crossed the border from Mexico and congregated under and around a bridge.

Details were yet to be finalized but would likely involve five to eight flights per day that would begin Sunday, according to an official with direct knowledge of the plans who was not authorized to discuss the matter publicly and spoke to The Associated Press on the condition of anonymity. San Antonio, the nearest major city to Del Rio, where the migrants have gathered, could be among the departure cities.

The official said Friday that operational capacity and Haiti's willingness would determine the number of flights, but that "good progress" was being made.

Another administration official who spoke on the condition of anonymity expected two flights per day, at most, and said all migrants would be tested for COVID-19.

U.S. authorities closed traffic to vehicles and pedestrians in both directions Friday at the only border crossing in Del Rio after the chaotic influx of migrants presented the administration with a new and immediate challenge as it tries to manage large numbers of asylum-seekers who have been reaching U.S. soil.

U.S. Customs and Border Protection said it was closing the border crossing with Ciudad Acuña, Mexico, "to respond to urgent safety and security needs." Travelers were being directed to a crossing in Eagle Pass, 57 miles (91 kilometers) away.

Haitians on Friday crossed the Rio Grande freely and in a steady stream, going back and forth between the U.S. and Mexico through knee-deep water, with some parents carrying small children on their shoulders. Unable to buy supplies in the U.S., they returned briefly to Mexico for food and cardboard to settle, temporarily at least, under or near the bridge in Del Rio, a city of 35,000 that has been severely strained by migrant flows in recent months.

Migrants pitched tents and built makeshift shelters from giant reeds known as carrizo cane. Many bathed and washed clothing in the river.

The vast majority of the migrants at the bridge on Friday were Haitian, said Val Verde County Judge Lewis Owens, who is the county's top elected official and whose jurisdiction includes Del Rio. Some families had been under the bridge for as long as six days.

Trash piles were 10 feet (3.1 meters) wide, and at least two women had given birth, including one who tested positive for COVID-19 after being taken to a hospital, Owens said.

The county's sheriff, Frank Joe Martinez, estimated the crowd to be 13,700 and said more Haitians were traveling through Mexico by bus.

The flight plan, while potentially massive in scale, hinges on how Haitians respond. They might have to decide whether to stay put at the risk of being sent back to an impoverished homeland wracked by poverty and political instability or return to Mexico. Unaccompanied children are exempt from fast-track expulsions.

About 500 Haitians were ordered off buses by Mexican immigration authorities in the state of Tamaulipas, about 120 miles (200 kilometers) south of the Texas border, the state government said in a news release Friday. They continued toward the border on foot.

Haitians have been migrating to the U.S. in large numbers from South America for several years, many having left their Caribbean nation after a devastating earthquake in 2010. After jobs dried up from the 2016 Summer Olympics in Rio de Janeiro, many made the dangerous trek by foot, bus and car to the U.S. border, including through the infamous Darien Gap, a Panamanian jungle.

It is unclear how such a large number amassed so quickly, though many Haitians have been assembling

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in camps on the Mexican side of the border, including in Tijuana, across from San Diego, to wait while deciding whether to attempt to enter the United States.

The U.S. Department of Homeland Security did not respond to a request for comment. "We will address it accordingly," Homeland Security Secretary Alejandro Mayorkas said Friday on MSNBC.

An official in President Joe Biden's administration who wasn't authorized to address the matter publicly and spoke on the condition of anonymity said the action is not targeting Haitians specifically and does not reflect a policy shift, just a continuation of normal practices.

The Federal Aviation Administration, acting on a Border Patrol request, restricted drone flights around the bridge until Sept. 30, generally barring operations at or below 1,000 feet (305 meters) unless for security or law enforcement purposes.

Texas Gov. Greg Abbott, a Republican and frequent critic of President Joe Biden, said federal officials told him migrants under the bridge would be moved by the Defense Department to Arizona, California and elsewhere on the Texas border.

Some Haitians at the camp have lived in Mexican cities along the U.S. border for some time, moving often between them, while others arrived recently after being stuck near Mexico's southern border with Guatemala, said Nicole Phillips, the legal director for advocacy group Haitian Bridge Alliance. A sense of desperation spread after the Biden administration ended its practice of admitting asylum-seeking migrants daily who were deemed especially vulnerable.

"People are panicking on how they seek refuge," Phillips said.

Edgar Rodríguez, lawyer for the Casa del Migrante migrant shelter in Piedras Negras, north of Del Rio, noticed an increase of Haitians in the area two or three weeks ago and believes that misinformation may have played a part. Migrants often make decisions on false rumors that policies are about to change and that enforcement policies vary by city.

U.S. authorities are being severely tested after Biden quickly dismantled Trump administration policies that Biden considered cruel or inhumane, most notably one requiring asylum-seekers to remain in Mexico while waiting for U.S. immigration court hearings. Such migrants have been exposed to extreme violence in Mexico and faced extraordinary difficulty in finding attorneys.

The U.S. Supreme Court last month let stand a judge's order to reinstate the policy, though Mexico must agree to its terms. The Justice Department said in a court filing this week that discussions with the Mexican government were ongoing.

A pandemic-related order to immediately expel migrants without giving them the opportunity to seek asylum that was introduced in March 2020 remains in effect, but unaccompanied children and many families have been exempt. During his first month in office, Biden chose to exempt children traveling alone on humanitarian grounds.

The U.S. government has been unable to expel many Central American families because Mexican authorities have largely refused to accept them in Tamaulipas, which is across from Texas' Rio Grande Valley, the busiest corridor for illegal crossings. On Friday, the administration said it would appeal a judge's Thursday ruling that blocked it from applying Title 42, as the pandemic-related authority is known, to any families.

Mexico has agreed to take expelled families only from Mexico, Guatemala, Honduras and El Salvador, creating an opening for Haitians and other nationalities because the U.S. lacks the resources to detain and quickly expel them on flights to their homelands.

In August, U.S. authorities stopped migrants nearly 209,000 times at the border, which was close to a 20-year high even though many of the stops involved repeat crossers because there are no legal consequences for being expelled under Title 42 authority.

People crossing in families were stopped 86,487 times in August, but fewer than one out of every five of those encounters resulted in expulsion under Title 42. The rest were processed under immigration laws, which typically means they were released with a court date or a notice to report to immigration authorities.

U.S. authorities stopped Haitians 7,580 times in August, a figure that has increased every month since August 2020, when they stopped only 55. There have also been major increases of Ecuadorians, Venezu-

plans and other nationalities outside the traditional sending countries of Mexico, Guatemala, Honduras and El Salvador.

Spagat reported from San Diego. Associated Press writers Ben Fox, Alexandra Jaffe and Colleen Long in Washington, Paul Weber in Austin, David Koenig in Dallas and Maria Verza in Mexico City contributed to this report.

Democrats tackling flash points of taxes, health, climate

By ALAN FRAM Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — Revamp the tax code and important federal health care and environment programs. Spend \$3.5 trillion over 10 years, but maybe a lot less. Ensure that no more than three Democrats in all of Congress vote “no” because Republicans will be unanimously opposed.

Try to finish within the next couple of weeks. And oh yes: Failure means President Joe Biden’s own party will have repudiated him on the cornerstone of his domestic agenda.

That’s what congressional Democrats face as they try writing a final version of a massive bill bolstering the social safety net and strengthening efforts to tame climate change. Here’s a guide to some pivotal differences they must resolve:

PRICE TAG

The White House and top Democrats compromised on a \$3.5 trillion, 10-year cost for the bill. That’s a huge sum, though a fraction of the \$61 trillion in federal spending already slated over that period.

Moderates led by Sens. Joe Manchin of West Virginia and Kyrsten Sinema of Arizona have said \$3.5 trillion is too expensive, and votes from every Democrat in the 50-50 Senate are mandatory for success. Biden, House Speaker Nancy Pelosi, D-Calif., and Senate Majority Leader Chuck Schumer, D-N.Y., have recently acknowledged what seems inevitable: The final cost may have to drop.

Manchin has suggested limiting the total to \$1 trillion to \$1.5 trillion, which progressives reject as paltry. Led by Senate Budget Committee Chairman Bernie Sanders, I-Vt., they initially said at least \$6 trillion was needed for serious efforts to help families and curb global warming.

Eventually a compromise will be reached, with some expecting it in the \$2 trillion to \$2.5 trillion range. But since House committees just finished crafting a \$3.5 trillion version of the package, a smaller price tag means some priorities would have to be trimmed.

TAXES

To pay for much of the bill, the House Ways and Means Committee approved \$2.1 trillion in tax boosts, mostly on the rich and corporations. Some details and numbers seem likely to change.

Biden, who’s promised to not increase taxes on people earning under \$400,000, will probably get his proposal to raise the top individual income tax rate on the richest Americans to 39.6%. That would be up from 37% approved under former President Donald Trump.

But Democrats also want to raise other levies on the wealthiest. It’s unclear which proposals will survive and in what form.

For example, Senate Finance Committee Chairman Ron Wyden, D-Ore., has expressed interest in boosting taxes on the value of some large estates that heirs inherit. Ways and Means Chairman Richard Neal, D-Mass., omitted that from his panel’s plan.

Democrats want to provide tax credits for children, health care and child care costs and low-income workers. If the bill’s size shrinks, Democrats might save money by delaying, gradually phasing in or out or limiting some of those breaks. Some moderates say a proposed tax credit for buying electric vehicles shouldn’t go to higher-earning people.

Biden wants to raise the 21% corporate tax rate to 28% but may have to settle for around 25%. Democrats face other differences over taxes on corporate foreign income and stock buybacks.

MEDICARE

Three moderate Democrats blocked a House committee from approving a top priority for Biden and

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progressives: saving hundreds of billions by letting Medicare negotiate lower prices for pharmaceuticals it buys. Another committee approved the language, so it's not dead.

Still, the plan is opposed by drug manufacturers and some moderates want to water it down.

Democrats planned to use the savings to pay for another progressive goal: new dental, vision and hearing Medicare coverage. If the drug-pricing language is diluted and produces less savings, it's unclear how the Medicare expansion would be financed.

SALT AND IRS

In a town that loves acronyms, SALT, shorthand for state and local taxes, is on the table.

Democrats from high-tax coastal communities are demanding an increase in the current \$10,000 limit on deductions taxpayers can claim for state and local taxes they pay.

With Pelosi unable to afford losing more than three Democratic votes, many think that deduction ceiling will be increased. To make up for the lost revenue, the IRS could be given extra money or banks might be required to report more financial transaction information to the IRS, ideas aimed at bolstering tax collections.

OTHER PRIORITIES

The House has proposed grants for power companies that move toward renewable fuels and fines on those that don't, a pillar of the chamber's climate change agenda. Manchin, chairman of the Senate energy committee and a fierce defender of his state's coal industry, has told colleagues he opposes that.

The House has proposed a plan for mandatory family leave that's significantly costlier than what Senate Democrats envision. And lawmakers await a decision from the Senate parliamentarian on whether language helping millions of immigrants remain in the U.S. violates budget rules and must be omitted.

TIMING

Last month, Pelosi told moderates that the House would consider their top priority, a separate \$1 trillion bill financing road and other infrastructure projects, by Sept. 27.

In what seems a mutual political suicide pact, progressives have threatened to vote against that bill unless unenthusiastic moderates support the \$3.5 trillion package. Ideally, Democratic leaders would love for both bills to be voted on together.

With so many loose ends, it seems highly unlikely the \$3.5 trillion measure will be finished then. That's raised questions about how Pelosi will keep her party's antagonistic wings supportive of each other's priority bills and how she will shepherd both to passage.

DEMOCRATS' TWO SECRET WEAPONS

For one thing, a collapse of the effort would mean a jarring failure to enact their highest priorities, weakening their bid to retain their congressional majorities in next year's elections. Every Democrat knows that.

Another is Pelosi herself, who's proven deft at holding Democrats together and squeezing out votes she needs.

House Budget Committee Chairman John Yarmuth, D-Ky., cited both factors in an interview last week, describing what he tells Democrats.

"I've said everybody should be posturing and doing the best you can to stand up for your priorities, but in the final analysis you're going to vote for this thing," Yarmuth said. "And by the way, have you met Nancy Pelosi?"

After Afghanistan pullout, US seeks NATO basing, intel pacts

By LOLITA C. BALDOR Associated Press

ATHENS, Greece (AP) — Against the backdrop of the troop withdrawal from Afghanistan, the top U.S. military officer is meeting in Greece with NATO counterparts this weekend, hoping to forge more basing, intelligence sharing and other agreements to prevent terrorist groups from regrouping and threatening America and the region.

Army Gen. Mark Milley, chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, said the meeting of NATO defense chiefs will focus in part on the way ahead now that all alliance troops have pulled out of Afghanistan and the

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Taliban are in control.

Milley, U.S. Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin and American intelligence officials have warned that al-Qaida or the Islamic State group could regenerate in Afghanistan and pose a threat to the United States in one year to two years.

The U.S. military has said it can conduct counterterrorism surveillance and, if necessary, strikes in Afghanistan from "over the horizon" — meaning from assets based in other countries. But they have made it clear that surveillance flights from bases in the Persian Gulf are long and provide limited time in the air over Afghanistan. So they have talked about seeking basing agreements, overflight rights and increased intelligence-sharing with nations closer to Afghanistan, including some neighbors.

In recent months, however, U.S. officials have reported little progress in any negotiations on any basing agreements.

Milley said he will be talking to his military counterparts "to see what the possibilities are and then bring them back" to U.S. defense and diplomatic leaders for additional discussions. Then, he said, officials will see what they can turn into a reality.

"We are going to talk about over the horizon capabilities and where allies think appropriate that they can make a contribution, we're certainly open to that," Milley told reporters traveling with him to Greece. "There are opportunities where alliance members may choose to work closely with us on these over the horizon capabilities."

He said allies are concerned about counterterrorism and how to ensure an effective defense against terrorists.

At the opening of the morning session Saturday, NATO military leaders made it clear that avoiding a resurgence of terrorism in Afghanistan is a key goal for the alliance.

Greece's defense minister, Nikolaos Panagiotopoulos, told the group that allies must ensure the safety and security of at-risk Afghans who remain in the country and must prevent a humanitarian crisis.

More than 120,000 Americans, Afghans and others were flown out of Afghanistan during the chaotic and massive airlift operation in the days after Kabul, the capital, fell to the Taliban. But thousands more were left behind, with many fleeing to the borders and seeking help from aid agencies and ad hoc groups struggling to find ways out of the country.

Human rights and refugee groups are urging the European Union to step up its help for people trying to flee Afghanistan. The EU's asylum agency said that asylum applications by Afghans numbered 7,300 in July, before the government fell, and that was a 21% increase over June. Almost 1,200 were unaccompanied minors. More than half of asylum applications by Afghans in Europe are rejected.

"We are going through a period of significant challenges in Afghanistan," said Panagiotopoulos, adding that a key risk is the migration flow toward Europe. He said allies need to "provide support to those countries in the immediate neighborhood and must avoid a migration crisis at our borders."

Advocates fear US weighing climate vs. human rights on China

By ELLEN KNICKMEYER Associated Press

U.S. envoy John Kerry's diplomatic quest to stave off the worst scenarios of global warming is meeting resistance from China, the world's biggest climate polluter, which is adamant that the United States ease confrontation over other matters if it wants Beijing to speed up its climate efforts.

Rights advocates and Republican lawmakers say they see signs, including softer language and talk of heated internal debate among Biden administration officials, that China's pressure is leading the United States to back off on criticism of China's mass detentions, forced sterilization and other abuses of its predominantly Muslim Uyghur minority in the Xinjiang region.

But the White House took a step this past week that could further deepen the U.S.-China divide, forming a security alliance with Britain and Australia that will mean a greater sharing of defense capabilities, including helping equip Australia with nuclear-powered submarines.

President Joe Biden came out strong from the start of his presidency with sanctions over China's abuse

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of the Uyghurs, and his administration this spring called it genocide. But the U.S. desire for fast climate progress versus China's desire that the U.S. back off on issues such as human rights and religious freedom is creating conflict between two top Biden goals: steering the world away from the climate abyss and tempering China's rising influence.

It would be "disastrous in the long term for the United States government to backtrack, tone down, let the Chinese manipulate the issue," said Nury Turkel, a Uyghur advocate and the vice chairman of the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom, an advisory panel that makes policy recommendations to the White House and Congress.

Chinese leaders repeatedly linked the issue of climate change and their complaints over perceived U.S. confrontation on human rights and other issues during Kerry's most recent China trip this month, Kerry told reporters in a call.

The Chinese complained specifically about sanctions the administration has put on China's globally dominant solar panel industry, which the U.S. and rights groups say runs partly on the forced labor of imprisoned Uyghurs.

"My response to them was, 'Hey, look, climate is not ideological, it's not partisan, it's not a geostrategic weapon or tool, and it's certainly not, you know, day-to-day politics,'" said Kerry. He told reporters in a call after the talks that he could only relay China's complaints about the sanctions to Biden and Secretary of State Antony Blinken.

China in 2019 pumped out 27% of climate-eroding fossil fuel fumes, more than the rest of the developed world combined. The United States is the second-worst offender, at 11%.

That makes China central to the world's fast-evaporating hopes of cutting fumes from use of petroleum and coal before catastrophic climate change becomes inevitable and irreversible.

Kerry, the former secretary of state and Biden's global climate envoy, has led repeated calls, online meetings and visits to Chinese officials before November's U.N. climate summit in Scotland. He has urged the Chinese to move faster on steps such as cutting their building, financing and use of dirty-burning coal-fired power plants.

He and others see that summit as a last chance to make significant emissions cuts in time. Climate efforts will also be a theme of leaders at the U.N. General Assembly this coming week.

China under President Xi Jinping has said it will hit peak climate pollution by the end of this decade and then make China climate pollution neutral by 2060, a decade later than the U.S. and other countries have pledged.

As China asserts its economic influence and territorial claims, and tension and competition rise with the United States, Xi and his officials have shown no desire to be seen as following the U.S. line on climate or anything else.

Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi told the U.S. diplomat in a video meeting on Kerry's latest China trip that "China-U.S. cooperation on climate change cannot be divorced from the overall situation of China-U.S. relations."

The U.S. should "take positive actions to bring China-U.S. relations back on track," Wang added, according to a Foreign Ministry statement.

"The Chinese believe that the U.S. needs cooperation from China more than China needs the United States," and like others see the United States as weaker now than in the past, said Bonnie Glaser, an expert on Asia and Asia security matters at the German Marshall Fund of the United States.

U.S. global climate objectives in that context are another "point of leverage, and they are trying to use that to get the United States to back off some policies they find particularly objectionable," including U.S. pressure on human rights, Glaser said.

Kerry has said no country is as committed to human rights as the United States and that his climate discussions with China's leaders have been constructive.

But there's talk China's pressure on the human rights-climate front is having effect.

An account circulating in China policy and human rights circles in Washington claimed Kerry had a forceful debate with other administration officials on the matter before his most recent China trip. Some claim

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administration influence in a bipartisan bill on Uyghur forced labor that stalled in the House after easily passing the Senate.

The State Department declined comment on the two matters.

Uyghur and human rights advocates say they believe administration officials are softening their tone on social media and in other public comments on China and human rights.

They point to a White House statement on a call between Xi and Biden on Sept. 9 that made no mention of human rights.

White House press secretary Jen Psaki said the United States continues trying to make progress on areas of both shared interest and mutual disputes with China.

Republican Sen. Marco Rubio of Florida, who with Sen. Jeff Merkley, D-Ore., is the main author of the Uyghur forced labor bill, said in a statement that administration officials' "single-minded focus on climate led them to downplay the genocide in Xinjiang."

People "working to end the genocide are horrified at what we observe" in the administration, said Julie Millsap of the Campaign for Uyghurs advocacy group. No one with knowledge of China would expect a one-off "dialogue using human rights issues as leverage for climate change is going to work," she said.

The standoff is an agonizing one for climate advocates.

Helen Clarkson, CEO of The Climate Group, hesitated when asked about the matter. She wouldn't trade human rights for emission cuts, she said, but "there is a way to do both."

Asked how, Clarkson said, "I don't tell John Kerry how to do his job. But of course, it's important we hang on to the fundamental principles."

Associated Press writers Seth Borenstein and Matthew Lee in Washington contributed to this report.

France's Notre Dame cathedral secured at last. Next: rebuild

PARIS (AP) — France's Notre Dame Cathedral is finally stable and secure enough for artisans to start rebuilding it, more than two years after the shocking fire that tore through its roof, knocked down its spire and threatened to bring the rest of the medieval monument down, too.

The government agency overseeing the reconstruction announced in a statement Saturday that the works to secure the structure — which began the day after the April 15, 2019 fire — are at last complete.

Carpenters, scaffolding experts, professional climbers, organ mechanics and others took part in the effort, which included special temporary structures to secure the iconic towers, vaults and walls of the huge roofless structure, and a special "umbrella" to protect it from the weather.

Negotiations will now begin with companies bidding to take part in the mammoth reconstruction effort, the statement said. It will include some 100 different tenders for various projects. Work to restore the organ will begin in the fall, with other works expected to begin in the winter.

The agency is maintaining President Emmanuel Macron's goal of allowing visitors back inside in 2024, the year Paris hosts the Olympics.

The announcement was made on a weekend that France and countries across Europe celebrate Heritage Days, when historical landmarks, government buildings and other sites are opened to the public.

Top doctors say not so fast to Biden's boosters-for-all plan

By ZEKE MILLER Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — Just one month ago, President Joe Biden and his health advisers announced big plans to soon deliver a booster shot of the coronavirus vaccine to all Americans. But after campaigning for the White House on a pledge to "follow the science," Biden found himself uncharacteristically ahead of it with that lofty pronouncement.

Some of nation's top medical advisers on Friday delivered a stinging rebuke of the idea, in essence telling the White House: not so fast.

A key government advisory panel overwhelmingly rejected Biden's plan to give COVID-19 booster shots

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across the board and instead recommended the extra vaccine dose only for those who are age 65 or older or who run a high risk of severe disease.

Biden's Aug. 18 announcement that the federal government was preparing to shore up nearly all Americans' protection had been made with great fanfare. It was meant to calm the nerves of millions of Americans fearful of a new, more transmissible strain of the coronavirus.

"The plan is for every adult to get a booster shot eight months after you got your second shot," Biden said, noting that his administration would be ready to begin the program on Sept. 20.

Biden added the qualification that third doses would require the signoff of health officials at the Food and Drug Administration and the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, but his public message glossed over the nuance.

"Just remember," he said, "as a simple rule: Eight months after your second shot, get a booster shot."

Biden's plan drew immediate outrage from global health groups that encouraged the United States and other well-off nations to refrain from administering boosters until poorer countries could provide first doses to their most vulnerable citizens.

"Viewed from a global perspective, this is a squandering of a scarce global resource, as a consequence of which people will die," said Dr. Peter Lurie, president of the Center for Science in the Public Interest. "I feel completely comfortable saying this," he added, acknowledging that domestic political considerations weigh differently on presidents.

The Biden plan was criticized, too, by medical professionals, who cited a lack of safety data on extra doses and raised doubts about the value of mass boosters, rather than ones targeted to specific groups.

"It created enormous pressure on the agency to go along with what the White House wanted," said Lurie, who characterized the FDA panel's decision as a "rebuke" of Biden's efforts to circumvent standard procedures. "That's what we're trying to get beyond after the Trump era."

"Following them has served FDA very well when they've done that," he added. He contrasted the expeditious authorization of the vaccines to the agency's brief flirtation with unproven COVID-19 treatments such as the malaria drug hydroxychloroquine during the Trump administration. "When they've strayed from it, they've got in trouble."

The nonbinding recommendation from the outside experts who advise the FDA is not the last word. The FDA will consider the group's advice and make its own decision, probably within days. The CDC is set to weigh in next week.

One of the FDA's advisers, Dr. Paul Offit of Children's Hospital of Philadelphia, told reporters after the meeting that while the Biden administration had planned for boosters for the general population, "that's not this. This is, 'We're going to test the water one foot at a time.'"

The committee "parked all of that stuff and did their job," said Norman Baylor, former director of the FDA's office of vaccine review. "I'll be very frank here: I think this meeting was rushed. I would say it should have happened later," so that the FDA had more data to make the decision.

White House allies defended the administration's aggressive preparation for the boosters, which has included regular messaging from doctors about their necessity and bolstering the federal stockpile of doses.

They argue that the American people elect a president, not a scientist, to act in their best interests. They reason that the alternative — holding off on preparing for boosters until federal health officials give the green light — could have cost lives.

The U.S. surgeon general, Dr. Vivek Murthy, told reporters before the panel's vote that the administration was aiming to be transparent with the public about the promise of boosters providing enduring protection and was not trying to pressure regulators to act. He said the administration also wanted to be prepared in the event the boosters were approved.

"We have always said that this initial plan would be contingent on the FDA and the CDC's independent evaluation," Murthy said. "We will follow that evaluation and their recommendations, we will make sure our final plan reflects it."

"What we were doing in August and we continue to do there is really prioritizing transparency and

preparation," he added.

Administration officials noted that the experts' recommendation Friday probably would result in boosters for people most likely to get them anyway had the entire population been given the go-ahead. Seniors were in the first group of Americans to be eligible for vaccination after their authorization last December, followed by those with preexisting conditions that put them at higher risk for serious disease. Those populations account for tens of millions of Americans, officials said.

After Friday's voting, the White House tried to put the advisory panel's action in a positive light.

"Today was an important step forward in providing better protection to Americans from COVID-19," said White House spokesman Kevin Munoz. "We stand ready to provide booster shots to eligible Americans once the process concludes at the end of next week."

Dr. Leana Wen, a former Baltimore health commissioner who comments regularly on the pandemic, said the decision about boosters "is not just one of science. It's one of values."

"Because when we're considering issues like should additional doses go to Americans or people around the world, that is not the right decision for a scientific regulatory committee," she said. "That is up to the president of the United States."

Associated Press writers Matthew Perrone and Lauran Neergaard contributed to this report.

Official: US to expel Haitians from border, fly to Haiti

By ERIC GAY and ELLIOT SPAGAT Associated Press

DEL RIO, Texas (AP) — The Biden administration plans the widescale expulsion of Haitian migrants from a small Texas border city by putting them on flights to Haiti starting Sunday, an official said Friday, representing a swift and dramatic response to thousands who suddenly crossed the border from Mexico and gathered under and around a bridge.

Details are yet to be finalized but will likely involve five to eight flights a day, according to the official with direct knowledge of the plans who was not authorized to discuss the matter publicly and spoke to The Associated Press on condition of anonymity. San Antonio, the nearest major city, may be among the departure cities.

Another administration official speaking on condition of anonymity expected two flights a day at most and said all migrants would be tested for COVID-19.

U.S. authorities closed traffic to vehicles and pedestrians in both directions at the only border crossing in Del Rio, Texas, after chaos unfolded Friday and presented the administration with a new and immediate challenge as it tries to manage large numbers of asylum-seekers who have been reaching U.S. soil.

U.S. Customs and Border Protection said it was closing the border crossing with Ciudad Acuna, Mexico, "to respond to urgent safety and security needs." Travelers were being directed to Eagle Pass, Texas, 57 miles (91 kilometers) away.

Haitians crossed the Rio Grande freely and in a steady stream, going back and forth between the U.S. and Mexico through knee-deep water, with some parents carrying small children on their shoulders. Unable to buy supplies in the U.S., they returned briefly to Mexico for food and cardboard to settle, temporarily at least, under or near the bridge in Del Rio, a city of 35,000 that has been severely strained by migrant flows in recent months.

Migrants pitched tents and built makeshift shelters from giant reeds known as carrizo cane. Many bathed and washed clothing in the river.

The vast majority of the migrants at the bridge on Friday were Haitian, said Val Verde County Judge Lewis Owens, who is the county's top elected official and whose jurisdiction includes Del Rio. Some families have been under the bridge for as long as six days.

Trash piles were 10 feet (3.1 meters) wide, and at least two women have given birth, including one who tested positive for COVID-19 after being taken to a hospital, Owens said.

Val Verde County Sheriff Frank Joe Martinez estimated the crowd at 13,700 and said more Haitians were

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traveling through Mexico by bus.

The flight plan, while potentially massive in scale, hinges on how Haitians respond. They may face a choice: stay put at the risk of being sent back to their impoverished homeland -- wracked by poverty, political instability and a recent earthquake — or return to Mexico. Unaccompanied children are exempt from fast-track expulsions.

About 500 Haitians were ordered off buses by Mexican immigration authorities in the state of Tamaulipas, about 120 miles (200 kilometers) south of the Texas border, the state government said in a news release Friday. They continued toward the border on foot.

Haitians have been migrating to the U.S. in large numbers from South America for several years, many of them having left the Caribbean nation after a devastating earthquake in 2010. After jobs dried up from the 2016 Summer Olympics in Rio de Janeiro, many made the dangerous trek by foot, bus and car to the U.S. border, including through the infamous Darien Gap, a Panamanian jungle.

It is unclear how such a large number amassed so quickly, though many Haitians have been assembling in camps on the Mexican side of the border, including in Tijuana, across from San Diego, to wait while deciding whether to attempt to enter the United States.

The U.S. Department of Homeland Security did not respond to a request for comment. "We will address it accordingly," Homeland Security Secretary Alejandro Mayorkas said on MSNBC.

An administration official, who was not authorized to address the matter publicly and spoke on condition of anonymity, said the action is not targeting Haitians specifically and does not reflect a policy shift, just a continuation of normal practices.

The Federal Aviation Administration, acting on a Border Patrol request, restricted drone flights around the bridge until Sept. 30, generally barring operations at or below 1,000 feet (305 meters) unless for security or law enforcement purposes.

Texas Gov. Greg Abbott, a Republican and frequent critic of President Joe Biden, said federal officials told him migrants under the bridge would be moved by the Defense Department to Arizona, California and elsewhere on the Texas border.

Some Haitians at the camp have lived in Mexican cities on the U.S. border for some time, moving often between them, while others arrived recently after being stuck near Mexico's southern border with Guatemala, said Nicole Phillips, the legal director for advocacy group Haitian Bridge Alliance. A sense of desperation spread after the Biden administration ended its practice of admitting asylum-seeking migrants daily who were deemed especially vulnerable.

"People are panicking on how they seek refuge," Phillips said.

Edgar Rodríguez, lawyer for the Casa del Migrante migrant shelter in Piedras Negras, north of Del Rio, noticed an increase of Haitians in the area two or three weeks ago and believes that misinformation may have played a part. Migrants often make decisions on false rumors that policies are about to change and that enforcement policies vary by city.

U.S. authorities are being severely tested after Biden quickly dismantled Trump administration policies that Biden considered cruel or inhumane, most notably one requiring asylum-seekers to remain in Mexico while waiting for U.S. immigration court hearings. Such migrants have been exposed to extreme violence in Mexico and faced extraordinary difficulty in finding attorneys.

The U.S. Supreme Court last month let stand a judge's order to reinstate the policy, though Mexico must agree to its terms. The Justice Department said in a court filing this week that discussions with the Mexican government were ongoing.

A pandemic-related order to immediately expel migrants without giving them the opportunity to seek asylum that was introduced in March 2020 remains in effect, but unaccompanied children and many families have been exempt. During his first month in office, Biden chose to exempt children traveling alone on humanitarian grounds.

The U.S. government has been unable to expel many Central American families because Mexican authorities have largely refused to accept them in the state of Tamaulipas, which is across from Texas' Rio

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Grande Valley, the busiest corridor for illegal crossings. On Friday, the administration said it would appeal a judge's ruling a day earlier that blocked it from applying Title 42, as the pandemic-related authority is known, to any families.

Mexico has agreed to take expelled families only from Mexico, Guatemala, Honduras and El Salvador, creating an opening for Haitians and other nationalities because the U.S. lacks the resources to detain and quickly expel them on flights to their homelands.

In August, U.S. authorities stopped migrants nearly 209,000 times at the border, which was close to a 20-year high even though many of the stops involved repeat crossers because there are no legal consequences for being expelled under Title 42 authority.

People crossing in families were stopped 86,487 times in August, but fewer than one out of every five of those encounters resulted in expulsion under Title 42. The rest were processed under immigration laws, which typically means they were released with a court date or a notice to report to immigration authorities.

U.S. authorities stopped Haitians 7,580 times in August, a figure that has increased every month since August 2020, when they stopped only 55. There have also been major increases of Ecuadorians, Venezuelans and other nationalities outside the traditional sending countries of Mexico, Guatemala, Honduras and El Salvador.

Spagat reported from San Diego. Associated Press writers Ben Fox, Alexandra Jaffe and Colleen Long in Washington, Paul Weber in Austin, David Koenig in Dallas and Maria Verza in Mexico City contributed to this report.

Crews watching weather as wildfire burns near sequoias

THREE RIVERS, Calif. (AP) — Crews were watching the weather this weekend as they battled California wildfires that have burned into some groves of gigantic ancient sequoias as they try to protect the world's largest tree.

The National Weather Service issued a weather watch for critical fire conditions in the Sequoia National Park in the Sierra Nevada, where the Colony Fire was burning about a mile from Giant Forest, a grove of 2,000 giant sequoias.

Firefighters have wrapped the base of the General Sherman Tree in fire-resistant aluminum of the type used in wildland firefighter emergency shelters and to protect historic wooden buildings, fire spokeswoman Rebecca Paterson said.

The General Sherman Tree is the largest in the world by volume, at 52,508 cubic feet (1,487 cubic meters), according to the National Park Service. It towers 275 feet (84 meters) high and has a circumference of 103 feet (31 meters) at ground level.

The Colony Fire is one of two lightning-caused blazes, known together as the KNP Complex, that have burned about 18 square miles (46 square kilometers) of forest land.

The fires forced the evacuation of the park this week, and parts of Three Rivers, a foothill community of about 2,500 people outside the park's main entrance. Crews have been bulldozing a line between the fire and the community.

Cooler, calmer weather and morning low-hanging smoke that choked off air limited the fire's growth in recent days but the National Weather Service said a low-pressure system will bring some gusty winds and lower humidity through Sunday in the fire area.

However, fire officials weren't expecting the kinds of explosive wind-driven growth that in recent months turned Sierra Nevada blazes into monsters that devoured hundreds of homes.

"There isn't a lot of extreme weather predicted for the next few days, which is good news, there's not a lot of big wind shifts predicted. However, there's also no rain predicted," fire information spokeswoman Rebecca Paterson said. "So we're anticipating that the fires are going to continue to grow. Hopefully they're not going to grow too fast."

Giant sequoias are adapted to fire, which can help them thrive by releasing seeds from their cones and

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creating clearings that allow young sequoias to grow. But the extraordinary intensity of fires — fueled by climate change — can overwhelm the trees.

The fires already have burned into several groves containing trees as tall as 200 feet (61 meters) feet tall and 2,000 years old. They include Oriole Lake Grove in the national park and Peyrone North and South groves in the neighboring Sequoia National Forest.

The fire also had reached Long Meadow Grove in the national forest, where two decades ago then-President Clinton signed a proclamation establishing a national monument.

"These groves are just as impressive and just as ecologically important to the forest," Tim Borden, who is sequoia restoration and stewardship manager for the Save the Redwoods League, told the Bay Area News Group. "They just aren't as well known. My heart sinks when I think about it."

To the south, the Windy Fire grew to nearly 11 square miles (28 square kilometers) on the Tule River Indian Reservation and in Giant Sequoia National Monument, where it has burned into one grove of sequoias and threatens others.

Fire officials haven't yet been able to determine how much damage was done to the groves, which are in remote and hard-to-reach areas.

Last year, the Castle Fire killed an estimated 7,500 to 10,600 large sequoias, according to the National Park Service. That was an estimated 10% to 14% of all the sequoias in the world.

The current fires are eating through tinder-dry timber, grass and brush.

Historic drought tied to climate change is making wildfires harder to fight. It has killed millions of trees in California alone. Scientists say climate change has made the West much warmer and drier in the past 30 years and will continue to make weather more extreme and wildfires more frequent and destructive.

More than 7,000 wildfires in California this year have damaged or destroyed more than 3,000 homes and other buildings and torched well over 3000 square miles (7,770 square kilometers) of land, according to the California Department of Forestry and Fire Protection.

In Russian Far East city, discontent smolders amid election

By DANIEL KOZIN Associated Press

KHABAROVSK, Russia (AP) — The handful of demonstrators gathering each evening in Khabarovsk are a shadow of the masses who took part in an unusually sustained wave of protests last year in the Russian Far Eastern city, but they are a chronic reminder of the political tensions that persist.

The demonstrators have been demanding the release of the region's popular former governor, Sergei Furgal, who was arrested last year on charges of being involved in killings.

Now, his Kremlin-appointed replacement, Mikhail Degtyaryov, is on the ballot for governor in the three days of regional voting that concludes Sunday. The regional election is taking place at the same time that Russians are voting for members of the State Duma, the national parliament.

The race for governor is being closely watched to gauge how much anger remains in the region, located seven time zones and 6,100 kilometers (3,800 miles) east of Moscow.

"The region really worries the Kremlin because they don't want a repeat of those incidents (last year's protests) of course. Khabarovsk is now under close supervision," said Andrei Kolesnikov of the Carnegie Moscow Center think tank.

Three other people are on the ballot for governor, but supporters of Furgal and others in the city of about 600,000 complain they are insignificant candidates who were allowed to run to give the appearance of a democratic and competitive race.

"Whoever posed even the smallest threat was barred from running, and they left only spoiler candidates," said 64-year-old protester Zigmund Khudyakov.

Notably, United Russia — the country's dominant political party and loyal backer of President Vladimir Putin — is not fielding a candidate for governor in Khabarovsk. Nor is Russia's second-largest party, the Communists.

Degtyaryov, a member of the nationalist Liberal Democratic Party, is widely believed to be backed by

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the Kremlin with both advice and money.

The man who wanted to run on the Communist ticket was kept off the ballot because he was unable to get enough signatures from officials. That aspiring candidate, Pyotr Perevezentsev, told The Associated Press that municipal authorities in some districts had been told by their superiors whose nominating petitions to sign.

"People representing the presidential administration curated these elections," he said.

Separately, Furgal's son Anton says he was kept off the ballot for the national parliament. "There is an opinion that if my last name had been Ivanov, for example, I would likely be allowed to run," he said.

Degtyaryov rejects such claims.

"As head of the Khabarovsk regional government, I am obligated to ensure transparent, legal, free and fair elections, and we are following all of these provisions," he said on a recent televised question-and-answer session with residents.

The weeks of protests that arose after Sergei Furgal's arrest in July 2020 appeared to catch authorities by surprise. Unlike in Moscow, where police usually move quickly to disperse unsanctioned rallies, authorities didn't interfere with the unauthorized demonstrations in Khabarovsk, apparently expecting them to fizzle out.

A Liberal Democratic Party member, Furgal won the 2018 regional gubernatorial election even though he had refrained from campaigning and publicly supported his Kremlin-backed rival.

His victory was a humiliating setback for United Russia, which also lost its control over the regional legislature.

While in office, Furgal earned a reputation as a "people's governor," cutting his own salary, ordering the sale of an expensive yacht bought by the previous administration, and offering new benefits to residents.

His arrest, which was shown on Russian TV stations, came after the Investigative Committee, the nation's top criminal investigation agency, said he was accused of involvement in the murders of several businessmen in the region and nearby territories in 2004 and 2005. During interrogation in Moscow, Furgal denied the charges, according to the Tass news agency.

Ultranationalist lawmaker Vladimir Zhirinovskiy, a veteran politician with a reputation for outspoken comments and also a member of the Liberal Democrats, once called Furgal "the best governor the region ever had."

Furgal's arrest brought hundreds, and then thousands, of people into the streets of Khabarovsk in a regular Saturday protest. A year later, the rallies — albeit much smaller — continue.

Local activists say that's because of sustained pressure from authorities interested in ensuring Degtyaryov wins the election.

Under new rules enforced by police who monitor and film the protests, the rallies are restricted to 10 people at most. Officers disperse anything larger.

The protesters say they are pressured at work and at university, with some adding that they lost their jobs after being seen at the demonstrations.

Many wear T-shirts with the face of imprisoned opposition leader Alexei Navalny, while others carry signs depicting Furgal or denouncing the new governor.

"We constantly live in fear because any day we can be arrested," said Denis Pedish, a 47-year-old education worker who says he now comes to protests with a packed bag of essentials in case he is detained.

"It's difficult. But people have hope and faith and are actively fighting the lawlessness of the authorities and the lawlessness of the elections, which are a laughingstock for the world to see," Pedish said.

Anna Frants and Olga Tregubova in Moscow contributed reporting.

Aluminum wrap used to protect homes in California wildfires

By SCOTT SONNER Associated Press

RENO, Nev. (AP) — Martin Diky said he panicked as a huge wildfire started racing down a slope toward

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his wooden house near Lake Tahoe.

The contractor had enough time to do some quick research and decided to wrap his mountain home with an aluminum protective covering. The material that can withstand intensive heat for short periods resembles tin foil from the kitchen drawer but is modeled after the tent-like shelters that wildland firefighters use as a last resort to protect themselves when trapped by flames.

Diky, who lives most of the time in the San Francisco Bay Area, bought \$6,000 worth of wrapping from Firezat Inc. in San Diego, enough to cover his 1,400-square-foot (130-square-meter) second home on the edge of the small California community of Meyers.

"It's pretty expensive, and you'd feel stupid if they stopped the fire before it got close," he said. "But I'm really glad we did it. It was pretty nerve-wracking when the flames came down the slope."

The flexible aluminum sheets that Diky affixed to his \$700,000 home are not widely used because they are pricey and difficult to install, though they have saved some properties, including historic cabins managed by the U.S. government.

Fire crews even wrapped the base of the world's largest tree this week to protect it from wildfires burning near a famous grove of gigantic old-growth sequoias in California's Sequoia National Park. The colossal General Sherman Tree, some of the other sequoias in the Giant Forest, a museum and some other buildings also were wrapped amid the possibility of intense flames.

It comes after another aluminum-wrapped home near Lake Tahoe survived the Caldor Fire, about 20 miles (32 kilometers) west of Diky's home, while neighboring houses were destroyed.

The wrapping deflects heat away from buildings, helping prevent flammable materials from combusting. It also keeps airborne embers — a major contributor to spreading wildfires — from slipping through vents and other openings in a home. With a fiberglass backing and acrylic adhesive, the wraps can withstand heat of up to 1,022 degrees Fahrenheit (550 Celsius).

Until about a decade ago, most wildfire damage was blamed on homes catching fire as flames burned nearby vegetation. Recent studies suggest a bigger role is structure-to-structure fires that spread in a domino effect because of tremendous heat that causes manufactured materials to burst into flames.

The company where Diky bought his wraps gets about 95% of its sales from the U.S. Forest Service and National Park Service. Firezat Inc. founding president Dan Hirning estimates the Forest Service has wrapped 600 to 700 buildings, bridges, communication towers and other structures in national forests this year alone.

Firefighters on social media liken the wraps to a "big baked potato." One who helped install some said he felt like he was "wrapping Christmas presents."

Forest Service officials say they have been using the wraps for several years throughout the American West to protect sensitive structures. At Lake Tahoe, they have wrapped the Angora Ridge Lookout, a nationally registered historic fire lookout tower, said Phil Heitzke, an agency battalion chief.

"Many times, Forest Service structures are wrapped well in advance of the fire," he said in a statement. Crews often can then focus on protecting other buildings or other work.

Firezat sells fire shield rolls that are 5 feet (1.5 meters) wide by 200 feet (61 meters) long for about \$700 each. Installation by a contractor typically costs thousands of dollars.

"People think we should be selling tons of these things, but it's not as much as everybody thinks," Hirning said. Despite the cost, he said a building won't burn unless "fire falls right on it."

A mechanical engineering professor at Ohio's Case Western Reserve University published 10 years of research about protective wraps in the *Frontiers in Mechanical Engineering* journal in 2019, saying they "demonstrated both remarkable performance and technical limitations."

The aluminized surface blocked up to 92% of convective heat and up to 96% of radiation, Fumiaki Takahashi said.

The wrapping is most effective if a wildfire burns past with exposure of less than 10 minutes, he said. It's less effective in areas with high-density housing, where spreading infernos can burn for hours without being stopped by firefighters.

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The wraps "show promise in being effective, but further research is needed to develop more efficient yet still lightweight" protection against severe fires, Takahashi said in an email. He said he wouldn't recommend them for everyone because they require proper installation.

"But once the installation methods are established (like a standard), I would," he wrote. "There have been multiple successful stories for saving historic cabins by the U.S. Forest Service."

Hirning said most of individual buyers he's had over the years are looking to protect "really expensive cabins, really expensive homes, resorts, etc." They include homeowners on \$5 million lots in Malibu, California, who are asked to sign an agreement that the Forest Service isn't responsible for protecting their property in some cases.

A Wyoming rancher once put Hirning on a conference call with a fire commander and insurance adjuster who was going to reduce his rates if he wrapped a cabin worth about \$1.5 million.

"Often it's people who can't get fire insurance or their insurance has been dropped. They want to wrap it to protect their investments that way," he said.

Diky suggests getting extra help putting up the wrapping.

"They recommended three people could do it in 3.5 hours. I brought four contractors with me and worked all day into the night ... busted our butt for 12.5 hours," he said.

As far as sales taking off as a result of recent wildfires, Hirning emphasized that it's "an extremely seasonal business."

"The first five years, new competitors were coming on each year. And at the end of each year, I got a phone call: "Would you be interested in buying our inventory?" he said.

Once it starts raining and snowing, he says he often doesn't sell anything for nine months straight. That could change, however, as climate change contributes to more intense weather and more destructive, nearly year-round wildfire seasons.

Pentagon reverses itself, calls deadly Kabul strike an error

By ROBERT BURNS AP National Security Writer

WASHINGTON (AP) — The Pentagon has retreated from its defense of a drone strike that killed multiple civilians in Afghanistan last month, announcing that a review revealed that only civilians were killed in the attack, not an Islamic State extremist as first believed.

"The strike was a tragic mistake," Marine Gen. Frank McKenzie, head of U.S. Central Command, told a Pentagon news conference Friday.

McKenzie apologized for the error and said the United States is considering making reparation payments to the family of the victims. He said the decision to strike a white Toyota Corolla sedan, after having tracked it for about eight hours, was made in an "earnest belief" — based on a standard of "reasonable certainty" — that it posed an imminent threat to American forces at Kabul airport. The car was believed to have been carrying explosives in its trunk, he said.

For days after the Aug. 29 strike, Pentagon officials asserted that it had been conducted correctly, despite 10 civilians being killed, including seven children. News organizations later raised doubts about that version of events, reporting that the driver of the targeted vehicle was a longtime employee at an American humanitarian organization and citing an absence of evidence to support the Pentagon's assertion that the vehicle contained explosives.

The airstrike was the last of a U.S. war that ended as it had begun in 2001 — with the Taliban in power in Kabul. The speed with which the Taliban overran the country took the U.S. government by surprise and forced it to send several thousand troops to the Kabul airport for a hurried evacuation of Americans, Afghans and others. The evacuation, which began Aug. 14, unfolded under a near-constant threat of attack by the Islamic State group's Afghanistan affiliate.

McKenzie, who oversaw U.S. military operations in Afghanistan, including a final evacuation of U.S. forces and more than 120,000 civilians from Kabul airport, expressed his condolences to the family and friends of those killed.

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"I am now convinced that as many as 10 civilians, including up to seven children, were tragically killed in that strike," McKenzie said. "Moreover, we now assess that it is unlikely that the vehicle and those who died were associated with ISIS-K or were a direct threat to U.S. forces," he added, referring to the Islamic State group's Afghanistan affiliate.

Prior to the strike, U.S. intelligence had indicated a likelihood that a white Toyota Corolla would be used in an attack against U.S. forces, McKenzie said. On the morning of Aug. 29, such a vehicle was detected at a compound in Kabul that U.S. intelligence in the preceding 48 hours had determined was used by the Islamic State group to plan and facilitate attacks. The vehicle was tracked by U.S. drone aircraft from that compound to numerous other locations in the city before the decision was made to attack it at a point just a couple of miles from Kabul airport, McKenzie said.

"Clearly our intelligence was wrong on this particular white Toyota Corolla," he said.

Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin, in a written statement, apologized for what he called "a horrible mistake."

"We now know that there was no connection" between the driver of the vehicle and the Islamic State group, and that the driver's activities that day were "completely harmless and not at all related to the imminent threat we believed we faced," Austin said.

Gen. Mark Milley, chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, told reporters two days after the attack that it appeared to have been a "righteous" strike and that at least one of the people killed was a "facilitator" for the Islamic State group's Afghanistan affiliate, which had killed 169 Afghan civilians and 13 American service members in a suicide bombing on Aug. 26 at the Kabul airport.

After McKenzie's remarks on Friday, Milley expressed regret.

"This is a horrible tragedy of war and it's heart wrenching," Milley told reporters traveling with him in Europe. "We are committed to being fully transparent about this incident."

"In a dynamic high-threat environment, the commanders on the ground had appropriate authority and had reasonable certainty that the target was valid, but after deeper post-strike analysis our conclusion is that innocent civilians were killed," Milley added.

Accounts from the family of the victims, 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 painted a picture of a family that had worked for Americans and were trying to gain visas to the United States, fearing for their lives under the Taliban.

The family said that 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 Hellfire missile incinerated the car, killing seven children and an adult son and nephew of Zemerai.

Amnesty International, the humanitarian aid group, called the U.S. military's admission of a mistake a good first step.

"The U.S. must now commit to a full, transparent, and impartial investigation into this incident," said Brian Castner, a senior crisis adviser with Amnesty International. "Anyone suspected of criminal responsibility should be prosecuted in a fair trial. Survivors and families of the victims should be kept informed of the progress of the investigation and be given full reparation."

Rep. Adam Schiff, the California Democrat who is chairman of the House Intelligence Committee, said a fuller explanation must be provided.

"We need to know what went wrong in the hours and minutes leading up to the strike to prevent similar tragedies in the future," he said. "I am also concerned about the accuracy and completeness of public statements made in the immediate aftermath of the strike, and whether those accounted for all of the information possessed by the government at the time."

Brian Laundrie's family tells police, FBI he is missing

Associated Press undefined

NORTH PORT, Fla. (AP) — Police in Florida said they are working with the FBI to find 23-year-old Brian

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Laundrie, whose girlfriend disappeared during a cross-country trek in a converted van.

North Port police said late Friday that Laundrie's parents told them that they haven't seen him since Tuesday. Police said they spoke with the family at the family's request.

Laundrie and his 22-year-old girlfriend, Gabrielle "Gabby" Petito, left in July on a journey that took them to national parks out West. She was reported missing on Sept. 11 by her family and is now the subject of a nationwide search joined by the FBI.

Investigators said Laundrie returned in the van to his parents' home in North Port, Florida, on Sept. 1. They've identified him as a person of interest in the case.

The investigation is now a "multiple missing person" case, police said, adding that they are not investigating a crime.

An attorney for Brian Laundrie, Steven Bertolino, did not immediately respond to a request for comment from the Associated Press on Friday night.

Earlier in the week, Petito's family pleaded for the Laundrie family to tell them where their son last saw her. Petito and Laundrie were childhood sweethearts who met while growing up on Long Island. His parents later moved to North Port, about 35 miles (55 kilometers) south of Sarasota.

Police video released by the Moab Police Department in Utah showed that an officer pulled the van over on Aug. 12 after it was seen speeding and hitting a curb near the entrance to Arches National Park. The body cam video showed an emotional Petito, who sat inside a police cruiser while officers also questioned Laundrie.

Laundrie says on the video the couple got into a minor scuffle that began when he climbed into the van with dirty feet, and said he didn't want to pursue a domestic violence charge against Petito, who officers decided was the aggressor.

He told the officers he wasn't going to pursue charges because he loves her. "It was just a squabble. Sorry it had to get so public," Laundrie says on the video.

Ultimately Moab police decided not file any charges and instead separated the couple for the night, with Laundrie checking into a motel and Petito remaining with the converted sleeper van.

The official conversation with the family came shortly after the North Port chief Garrison had publicly vented frustration over Brian Laundrie's lack of help on Wednesday, pleading for Laundrie's lawyer to arrange a conversation. "Two people left on a trip and one person returned!" an earlier tweet by the police chief had said.

Their trek in the Ford Transit van began in July from New York's Long Island, where both grew up. They intended to reach Oregon by Halloween according to their social media accounts, but Petito vanished after her last known contact with family in late August from Grand Teton National Park in Wyoming, authorities said.

Laundrie drove the Ford Transit van back to Florida on Sept. 1 alone, police said. Petito's family filed a missing persons report last Saturday with police in Suffolk County, New York.

Petito's parents released a letter through their attorney on Thursday to Laundrie's parents, asking them to help investigators locate Petito, despite their instinct to protect their son.

Bertolino, Laundrie's attorney, said the Laundrie family is hoping for Petito's safe return, but he had asked them not to speak with investigators.

"We're still trying to nail down geographic areas," Garrison said recently. "There's a lot of information we are going through. Our focus is to find Gabby."

In other developments, a sheriff in Utah said Friday that detectives have determined there is no connection between Petito's disappearance on the trip and a still-unsolved slaying of two women who were fatally shot at a campsite near Moab, Utah — the same tourist town where Petito and Laundrie had the fight in which police intervened.

The two women's bodies were found Aug. 18, six days after the traffic stop involving Laundrie and Petito. The two women, Kylene Schulte, 24, and Crystal Turner, 38, had told friends they feared a "creepy man" they had seen nearby might harm them.

Utah's Grand County Sheriff Steven White said without elaboration in a news release the two cases were unrelated.

Families recount trauma at sentencing for school shooter

By JAMES ANDERSON Associated Press

DENVER (AP) — A judge on Friday sentenced a former student to life in prison without parole for a 2019 shooting inside a suburban Denver high school that killed one teenager and injured eight others, telling the defendant he had shown no remorse and had failed to help a devastated community understand his actions.

Devon Erickson, now 20, was convicted in June of 46 charges, including first-degree murder in the death of Kendrick Castillo, an 18-year-old senior hailed as a hero for trying to stop the attack on a classroom at STEM School Highlands Ranch, south of Denver.

Prosecutors said Erickson partnered with fellow student Alec McKinney in the May 7, 2019, shooting. McKinney told investigators that he planned the attack for weeks and intended to target classmates who repeatedly mocked him because he was transgender, according to court documents. Since Erickson was 18 at the time of the attack, he faced a mandatory life sentence.

After a lengthy and emotional hearing in which survivors shared their pain, trauma and disruptions to their lives, Judge Theresa Michelle Slade added hundreds of years of prison time to Erickson's life sentence for multiple charges of attempted murder and other counts.

Wearing handcuffs, a red-and-white-striped prison suit and a blue mask amid the coronavirus pandemic, Erickson displayed virtually no emotion except for blowing his nose into his mask after sentencing. But just after his parents, sister and grandfather told him they loved him in their testimony, his voice broke when the judge asked if he wanted to speak. He declined.

"I don't think there is anything I can say to you, Mr. Erickson, that would make any difference," Slade said, recounting how the shooting had devastated not only those at the school and their families but untold numbers of people beyond the suburban community where the school is located.

The judge said Erickson never tried to explain his actions, leaving a gaping hole for a community seeking at least some sense of closure.

"I don't believe, Mr. Erickson, at least for now, that it makes a difference to you," Slade said. "So what you do the rest of your life in prison, that's not on me. It's on you."

McKinney, who was 16 at the time of the shooting, was sentenced to life in prison last year but could become eligible for parole after about 20 years under a program for juvenile offenders.

Erickson and McKinney targeted a classroom of students sitting in the dark as they watched a movie at the end of their senior year. The two entered through separate doors to maximize the number of students they could kill, prosecutors said.

Erickson and McKinney concocted a "victim-hero" plan in which McKinney would either kill himself or be killed by Erickson, prosecutors said.

The shootings stopped when Castillo and two other students, Joshua Jones and Brendan Bialy, charged Erickson, whose gun jammed after he fired four times. A school security guard apprehended McKinney.

Defense attorneys argued that Erickson was pressured into participating by McKinney, who testified against Erickson after pleading guilty last year. The defense also suggested that Castillo was accidentally shot as he pushed Erickson against a wall.

Statements Friday by teachers, former students, their parents and Castillo's mother and father wove a harrowing picture of lives shattered by enduring trauma, panic attacks, recurring nightmares of gunshots, blood, screams and heavily armed SWAT teams rescuing those in hiding inside the school.

One teacher said she became so frightened of working with older students and worrying about what they might do that she now teaches younger children.

Jones and Bialy, who were shot while helping Castillo subdue Erickson, didn't hide their disgust.

"He killed Kendrick, and he didn't care," Jones said, nearly heaving at the witness stand. "I would implore

you to put him in jail for as long as you can.”

“The defendant is a loser,” Bialy said. “He walked into a classroom, armed, with vulnerable students, and he lost.”

Castillo’s parents, John and Maria Castillo, proudly, if painfully, described their son as an only child who was happy — a young man of faith always ready to help others.

“We don’t want to forget Kendrick, but it’s an emotional journey that most people will never understand, and I hope they don’t,” John Castillo said.

Defense attorney David Kaplan insisted that Erickson was “exceptionally remorseful.” Witnesses and family described him as an unselfish and cheerful person who helped others and loved school, a jazz singer who gave lessons to younger students — and someone who fell under the sway of McKinney.

Erickson’s father, Jim Erickson, read aloud the names of those injured and apologized to them, teachers, students, law enforcement and the broader community.

“We pray for these people every day,” he said, crying. “We hope that they can find peace, and we hope that they can find forgiveness — and I know that’s a hard ask, forgiveness.”

At his sentencing last year, McKinney said he did not want leniency. But he also suggested the shooting was Erickson’s idea.

NY millionaire Robert Durst guilty of best friend’s murder

By BRIAN MELLEY Associated Press

INGLEWOOD, Calif. (AP) — A Los Angeles jury convicted Robert Durst on Friday of murdering his best friend 20 years ago, a case that took on new life after the New York real estate heir participated in a documentary that connected him to the slaying that was linked to his wife’s 1982 disappearance.

Durst, 78, was not in court for the verdict from the jury that deliberated about seven hours over three days. He was in isolation at a jail because he was exposed to someone with coronavirus.

Durst, who faces a mandatory term of life in prison without parole when sentenced Oct. 18, was convicted of the first-degree murder of Susan Berman. She was shot at point-blank range in the back of the head in her Los Angeles home in December 2000 as she was prepared to tell police how she helped cover up his wife’s killing.

Berman, the daughter of a Las Vegas mobster, was Durst’s longtime confidante who told friends she provided a phony alibi for him after his wife vanished.

Prosecutors painted a portrait of a rich narcissist who didn’t think the laws applied to him and ruthlessly disposed of people who stood in his way. They interlaced evidence of Berman’s killing with Kathie Durst’s suspected death and the 2001 killing of a tenant in a Texas flophouse where Robert Durst holed up while on the run from New York authorities.

“Bob Durst has been around a lot of years, and he’s been able to commit a lot of horrific crimes. We just feel really gratified that he’s been held accountable,” Deputy District Attorney John Lewin said.

Lewin met with jurors after the verdict and said they thought prosecutors had proven Durst had killed his wife and had murdered both Berman and his Texas neighbor in an effort to escape justice.

He said jurors did not find Durst credible as a witness.

“He’s a narcissistic psychopath. He killed his wife and then he had to keep killing to cover it up,” Lewin said.

Lewin said he hoped Durst understands what it’s like to be held accountable — even if it took 40 years. “Considering what he’s done, he got a lot more of a life than he was entitled to,” the prosecutor said.

Durst was arrested in 2015 while hiding out in a New Orleans hotel on the eve of the airing of the final episode of “The Jinx: The Life and Deaths of Robert Durst,” in which he was confronted with incriminating evidence and made what prosecutors said was a confession.

Durst could be heard muttering to himself on a live microphone in a bathroom: “There it is. You’re caught.”

Durst’s decision to testify in his own defense — hoping for a repeat of his acquittal in the Texas killing — backfired as he was forced to admit lying under oath, made damning admissions and had his credibility destroyed when questioned by the prosecutor.

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Defense lawyer David Chesnoff said Friday they believed there was "substantial reasonable doubt" and were disappointed in the verdict. He said Durst would pursue all avenues of appeal.

The conviction marks a victory for authorities who have sought to put Durst behind bars for murder in three states. Durst was never charged in the disappearance of his wife, who has never been found, and he was acquitted of murder in Galveston, Texas, where he admitted dismembering the victim's body and tossing it out to sea.

The story of Durst, the estranged scion of a New York real estate developer, has been fodder for New York tabloids since his wife vanished. He provided plot twists so numerous that Hollywood couldn't resist making a feature film about his life that eventually led to the documentary and discovery of new evidence in Berman's slaying.

Durst ran from the law multiple times, disguised as a mute woman in Texas and staying under an alias at a New Orleans hotel with a shoulders-to-head latex mask for a presumed getaway. He jumped bail in Texas and was arrested after shoplifting a chicken sandwich in Pennsylvania, despite having \$37,000 in cash — along with two handguns — in his rental car.

He later quipped that he was "the worst fugitive the world has ever met."

Durst escaped close scrutiny from investigators when his wife disappeared. But his troubles resurfaced in late 2000 when New York authorities reopened the case.

His lawyer told him to be prepared to be charged in the case, and he fled a life of luxury to Galveston, Texas, where he rented a cheap apartment as "Dorothy Ciner," a woman he pretended couldn't speak. He eventually dropped the disguise after mishaps that included walking into a men's restroom and igniting his wig at a bar while lighting a cigarette.

Just before Christmas, he testified that he traveled to LA to visit Berman for a "staycation" with plans to see some of the tourist sites.

Durst, who had long denied ever being in LA at the time of Berman's death, testified at trial that he found her dead on a bedroom floor when he arrived.

Berman, a writer who had been friends with Durst since they were students at the University of California, Los Angeles, had serious financial problems at the time. Durst had given her \$50,000, and prosecutors suggested she was trying to leverage more money from him by telling him she was going to speak with the cops.

Nine months after her death, Durst killed his Galveston neighbor Morris Black, in what he said was either an accident or self-defense. Durst said he found Black, who he had become friends with, in his apartment holding Durst's .22-caliber pistol.

Durst was acquitted after testifying the 71-year-old was killed in a struggle for the gun. Durst then chopped up Black's body and tossed it out to sea. He was convicted of destroying evidence for discarding the body parts.

After the trial and the ghastly evidence of the dismemberment, Durst found he was a pariah, he said. Despite an estimated \$100 million fortune, he was turned away by multiple condominium associations and said the Los Angeles County Museum of Art wouldn't take his money unless he donated anonymously.

Durst thought a 2010 feature film based on his life, "All Good Things," starring Ryan Gosling as him and Kirsten Dunst as Kathie, had been largely accurate and painted a sympathetic portrait, despite implicating him in three killings. He only objected that he was depicted killing his dog — something he would never do.

He reached out to the filmmaker and agreed to sit for lengthy interviews for a documentary. He encouraged his friends to do the same and gave the filmmakers access to boxes of his records.

He came to deeply regret his decision after "The Jinx" aired on HBO in 2015, calling it a "very, very, very big mistake."

The documentary filmmakers discovered a crucial piece of evidence that connected him to an anonymous note sent to police directing them to Berman's lifeless body.

Durst, who was so confident he couldn't be connected to the note, told filmmakers "only the killer could have written" the note.

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Filmmakers confronted him with a letter he sent Berman a year earlier. The handwriting was identical and Beverly Hills was misspelled as "Beverley" on both. He couldn't tell the two apart.

The gotcha moment provided the climax of the movie as Durst stepped off camera and muttered to himself on a live microphone in the bathroom: "Killed them all, of course."

During 14 days of testimony that was so punishing Judge Mark Windham called it "devastating," Durst denied killing his wife and Berman, though he said he would lie if he did.

He tried to explain away the note and what prosecutors said was a confession during an unguarded moment.

For the first time, Durst admitted on the witness stand that he sent the note and had been in Los Angeles at the time of Berman's death.

Durst said he sent the note because he wanted Berman to be found but didn't want anyone to know he had been there because it would look suspicious.

He acknowledged that even he had difficulty imagining he could have written the note without killing Berman.

"It's very difficult to believe, to accept, that I wrote the letter and did not kill Susan Berman," Durst testified.

A prosecutor said it was one of the truest things Durst said amid a ton of lies.

France recalls ambassadors to US, Australia over sub deal

By SYLVIE CORBET Associated Press

PARIS (AP) — America's oldest ally, France, recalled its ambassador to the United States on Friday in an unprecedented show of anger that dwarfed decades of previous rifts.

The relationship conceived in 18th century revolutions appeared at a tipping point after the U.S., Australia and Britain shunned France in creating a new Indo-Pacific security arrangement.

It was the first time ever France has recalled its ambassador to the U.S., according to the French foreign ministry. Paris also recalled its envoy to Australia.

Foreign Minister Jean-Yves Le Drian said in a written statement that the French decision, on request from President Emmanuel Macron, "is justified by the exceptional seriousness of the announcements" made by Australia and the United States.

He said Australia's decision to scrap a big French conventional submarine purchase in favor of nuclear subs built with U.S. technology is "unacceptable behavior between allies and partners."

Ambassador Philippe Etienne tweeted the announcements are "directly affecting the vision we have of our alliances, of our partnerships and of the importance of the Indo-Pacific for Europe."

The Biden administration has been in close contact with French officials about the decision to recall Etienne to Paris, National Security Council spokesperson Emily Horne said.

"We understand their position and will continue to be engaged in the coming days to resolve our differences, as we have done at other points over the course of our long alliance," she said in a statement. "France is our oldest ally and one of our strongest partners, and we share a long history of shared democratic values and a commitment to working together to address global challenges."

State Department spokesman Ned Price also stressed the value the U.S. places on its relationship with France and expressed hope that talks between the two sides will continue in the coming days, including at the United Nations General Assembly next week.

Macron, however, for the first time since he came into office in 2017, won't be making a speech to the annual meeting of world leaders. Le Drian will instead deliver the French address.

The Australian government said it regretted France's decision to recall its ambassador to that nation.

"Australia understands France's deep disappointment with our decision, which was taken in accordance with our clear and communicated national security interests," Foreign Minister Marise Payne's office said in a statement. It added that Australia valued its relationship with France and looked forward to future engagements together.

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The decision to recall the ambassador represents a shocking turnaround for France under Macron, who — after an increasingly bitter relationship with former President Donald Trump — warmly clasped hands with Biden at a G-7 summit in June and confirmed that “America is back.”

Macron has not yet commented on the issue. The recall is his boldest foreign policy move yet in a four-year presidency in which he has sought to strengthen France’s diplomatic footprint and role in European policy-making, and to rally France’s neighbors around his vision for a Europe less dependent on the U.S. military umbrella.

France has pushed for several years for a European strategy for boosting economic, political and defense ties in the region stretching from India and China to Japan and New Zealand. The EU this week unveiled its plan for the Indo-Pacific.

Earlier Friday, a top French diplomat, who spoke anonymously in line with customary government practice, said that Macron received a letter from Australian Prime Minister Scott Morrison on Wednesday morning announcing the decision to cancel the submarine deal.

French officials then decided to reach out to the U.S. administration “to ask what was going on,” he said. He added that discussions with Washington took place just two to three hours before Biden’s public announcement.

Le Drian on Thursday expressed “total incomprehension” at the move and criticized both Australia and the U.S.

“It was really a stab in the back. We built a relationship of trust with Australia, and this trust was betrayed,” he said. “This is not done between allies.”

He also compared Biden’s move to those of Trump under his “America First” doctrine.

Paris had raised the issue of the Indo-Pacific strategy during the June 25 visit to Paris of U.S. Secretary of State Antony Blinken, expressing the importance of its submarine program with Australia, the French diplomat said.

“We said that it was for us a very important and critical component in our Indo-Pacific strategy,” he said. Blinken met with Macron during the visit.

The French diplomat said Australia never mentioned to France its will to shift to nuclear-powered submarines, including during a meeting between Macron and Morrison in Paris on June 15.

A recall of ambassadors is highly unusual between allied countries.

In 2019, Paris recalled its envoy to neighboring Italy after the country’s leaders made critical public comments about the French government. Last year, France recalled its ambassador to Turkey after Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan said Macron needed mental health treatment.

Associated Press writers Aamer Madhani in Washington, Edith Lederer at the United Nations, Rod McGruk in Canberra, Australia, and Angela Charlton in Paris contributed to the story.

Use of OxyContin profits to fight opioids formally approved

By GEOFF MULVIHILL Associated Press

A judge formally approved a plan Friday to turn OxyContin maker Purdue Pharma into a new company no longer owned by members of the Sackler family and with its profits going to fight the opioid epidemic.

U.S. Bankruptcy Judge Robert Drain officially confirmed the reorganization Friday, more than two weeks after he announced he would do so pending two largely technical changes to the plan presented by the company and hashed out with lawyers representing those with claims against the company.

His confirmation took more than six hours to read in court earlier this month, and the written version is 159 pages long, full of reasoning that appeals courts can consider later. Several states among other parties have already appealed the decision.

The deal resolves some 3,000 lawsuits filed by state and local governments, Native American tribes, unions, hospitals and others who claimed the company’s marketing of prescription opioids helped spark and continue an overdose epidemic linked to more than 500,000 deaths in the U.S. in the last two decades.

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The plan will use company profits and \$4.5 billion in cash and charitable assets from members of the Sackler family to pay some individual victims amounts expected to range from \$3,500 to \$48,000, and help fund opioid treatment and prevention programs across the U.S.

Members of the Sackler family are also required to get out of the opioid business worldwide in time.

Millions of company documents, including communications with company lawyers, are to be made public.

The changes are to take effect when the bankruptcy process is finalized; the earliest that could be is in December.

The attorneys generals from the states of Connecticut, Maryland, Washington and the District of Columbia, as well as the U.S. Bankruptcy Trustee have all announced appeals. Their chief objection is that members of the wealthy Sackler family would be granted protection from lawsuits over opioids.

For many people in recovery from opioid addictions or who have lost loved ones to overdoses, the deal is infuriating.

Ellen Isaacs, a mother whose son died from an overdose, filed court papers requesting Drain not accept the plan. At a hearing on Monday, she gave a passionate some sometimes tearful 40-minute speech on her request. Like other activists, she asserted that Sackler family members — who have never been charged with criminal wrongdoing — are getting away with crimes, and that politicians and courts are not doing enough to end the opioid epidemic.

"The attorneys are playing games on paper and humans are dying," she said.

Drain said the money from the settlement would help avert more deaths, even if it will come too late for Isaacs' son.

"I did not become a judge to get things wrong," he told her.

He stood by his confirmation of the plan.

At the hearing, Drain also said he would approve a request from Purdue to use nearly \$7 million to start setting up the funds that will distribute settlement money to victims, government entities and others. He also, for the third year, approved a plan of incentive payments for Purdue executives if they meet certain goals.

California wildfires burn into groves of giant sequoia trees

THREE RIVERS, Calif. (AP) — California wildfires have burned into at least four groves of gigantic ancient sequoias in national parks and forests, though cooler weather on Friday helped crews trying to keep the flames away from a famous cluster containing the world's largest tree.

The fires lapped into the groves with trees that can be up to 200 feet (61 meters) tall and 2,000 years old, including Oriole Lake Grove in Sequoia National Park and Peyrone North and South groves in the neighboring Sequoia National Forest.

The fire also had reached the forest's Long Meadow Grove, where then-President Bill Clinton signed a proclamation two decades ago establishing a national monument. Fire officials haven't yet been able to determine how much damage was done to the groves, which are in remote, hard-to-reach areas.

"These groves are just as impressive and just as ecologically important to the forest. They just aren't as well-known," Tim Borden, sequoia restoration and stewardship manager for the Save the Redwoods League, told the Bay Area News Group. "My heart sinks when I think about it."

Flames were still about a mile (1.5 kilometers) from the famed Giant Forest, where some 2,000 massive sequoias grow on a plateau high in the mountains of the national park.

Firefighters have placed special aluminum wrapping around the base of the General Sherman Tree, the world's largest by volume at 52,508 cubic feet (1,487 cubic meters), as well as some other sequoias and buildings.

The material can withstand intensive heat for short periods and has been used in national parks and forests for several years throughout the West to protect sensitive structures from flames.

Lower temperatures and a layer of smoke blanketing the area have been a benefit by helping suppress the flames. "It's been slow growth," fire information officer Katy Hooper said.

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A major element of the groves' defense is decades of prescribed burns — fires intentionally set to clear the forest floor of vegetation that could feed bigger blazes — and thinning projects to remove small trees that could become ladders carrying fire up to the crowns of the giants.

The tactic was no match for a fire in the region last year that killed thousands of sequoias, which grow as tall as high-rises at certain elevations on the western slope of the Sierra Nevada.

A historic drought tied to climate change is making wildfires harder to fight. Scientists say climate change has made the West much warmer and drier in the past 30 years and will continue to make weather more extreme and wildfires more frequent and destructive.

Lightning ignited two fires in the park on Sept. 9, officials said. The Colony Fire, closest to the Giant Forest, has grown to just under 5 square miles (13 square kilometers). The Paradise Fire has scorched nearly 13 square miles (34 square kilometers).

More than 400 firefighters were assigned to the blazes, which are being collectively managed as the KNP Complex. More resources have been requested, Hooper said.

To the south, the Windy Fire grew to nearly 11 square miles (28 square kilometers) on the Tule River Indian Reservation and in Giant Sequoia National Monument, where it has burned into one grove of sequoias and threatens others. Difficult terrain has prevented officials from assessing damage to the big trees.

Sequoia National Park is the second natural jewel to be threatened by wildfires in less than a month.

Lake Tahoe, the blue alpine lake perched high in the mountains on the California-Nevada line, was threatened by the explosive Caldor Fire until firefighters stopped its destructive march. Containment there has reached 71%.

Meanwhile, a big change in weather was taking shape in parts of the drought-stricken, fire-scarred West.

Forecasters said a storm heading in from the Pacific would bring rain to the Pacific Northwest and parts of Northern California through the weekend. The rain was not expected to come as far south as Sequoia National Park.

Ex-Algerian president Bouteflika, ousted amid protests, dies

ALGIERS, Algeria (AP) — Former Algerian President Abdelaziz Bouteflika, who fought for independence from France, reconciled his conflict-ravaged nation and was then ousted amid pro-democracy protests in 2019 after two decades in power, has died at age 84, state television announced Friday.

The report on ENTV, citing a statement from the office of current President Abdelmadjid Tebboune, did not provide the cause of death or information about funeral arrangements.

Bouteflika had suffered a stroke in 2013 that badly weakened him. Concerns about his state of health, kept secret from the Algerian public, helped feed public frustration with his 20-year, corruption-tarnished rule. Mass public protests by the Hirak movement led to his departure.

An astute political chameleon, Bouteflika had been known as a wily survivor ever since he fought for independence from colonial ruler France in the 1950s and 1960s.

He stood up to Henry Kissinger as Algeria's long-serving foreign minister, successfully negotiated with the terrorist known as Carlos the Jackal to free oil ministers taken hostage in a 1975 attack on OPEC headquarters, and helped reconcile Algerian citizens with each other after a decade of civil war between radical Muslim militants and Algeria's security forces.

"I'm a non-conformist politician. I'm a revolutionary," Bouteflika told The Associated Press on the eve of his first presidential victory in 1999, after a campaign tarnished by fraud charges that drove his six rivals to pull out of the vote.

Upon taking office, Bouteflika promised "to definitively turn the somber pages of our history to work for a new era."

Born March 2, 1937, to Algerian parents in the border town of Oujda, Morocco, Bouteflika was among Algeria's most enduring politicians.

In 1956, Bouteflika entered the National Liberation Army, formed to fight Algeria's bloody independence war. He commanded the southern Mali front and slipped into France clandestinely.

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After the war's end, Bouteflika became foreign minister at just 25, at a time when Algeria was a model of doctrinaire socialism tethered to the Soviet Union. Its capital, Algiers, was nicknamed "Moscow on the Med."

He kept that post for 16 years, helping to raise Algeria's influence and define the country as a leader of the Third World and the Non-Aligned Movements. He was active in the United Nations, and presided over the U.N. General Assembly in 1974.

In 1978, slipped from sight for nearly two decades, spending more than six years in exile to escape corruption charges that were later dropped.

Algeria's army held the reins of power throughout that time. The National Liberation Army had been transformed into a single party that ruled until 1989, when a multiparty system was introduced.

But as the Islamic Salvation Front party, or FIS, rapidly gained support, the army canceled Algeria's first multi-party legislative elections in 1992 to thwart a likely victory by the Muslim fundamentalists. An insurgency erupted that left an estimated 200,000 dead over the ensuing years.

Bouteflika took office in 1999, Algeria's first civilian leader in more than three decades. He managed to bring stability to a country nearly brought to its knees by the violence, unveiling a bold program in 2005 to reconcile the fractured nation by persuading Muslim radicals to lay down their arms.

Bouteflika and the armed forces neutralized Algeria's insurgency, but then watched it metastasize into a Saharan-wide movement linked to smuggling and kidnapping — and to al-Qaida.

Bouteflika stood with the United States in the fight against terrorism after the Sept. 11, 2001, attacks, particularly on intelligence-sharing and military cooperation. It marked a turnaround from the militantly anti-American, Soviet-armed Algeria of years past when figures like Black Panther leader Eldridge Cleaver took refuge there.

Bouteflika's powerful political machine had the constitution changed to cancel the presidency's two-term limit. He was then re-elected in 2009 and 2013, amid charges of fraud and a lack of powerful challengers.

His firebrand past dissolved as age and illness took its toll on the once-charismatic figure. Corruption scandals over infrastructure and hydrocarbon projects dogged him for years and tarnished many of his closest associates. His brother, two former prime ministers and other top officials are now in prison over corruption.

Bouteflika balked at the region-wide calls for change embodied by the 2011 Arab Spring revolutions that overthrew three dictators to his east. Bouteflika tamped down unrest through salary and subsidy increases, a vigilant security force and a lack of unity in the country's opposition. He also failed to restore civic trust or create an economy that could offer the jobs needed for Algeria's growing youth population despite the nation's vast oil and gas wealth.

Bouteflika was increasingly absent from view during his third and fourth presidential terms after suffering a stroke. The extent to which Bouteflika was controlled by the army remained unclear. He once told the AP that he turned down the job of president in 1994 because he was unable to accept conditions set by the military.

Algeria's Hirak protests erupted after he announced plans to run for a fifth term in 2019, and it was the then-army chief who sealed Bouteflika's fate by siding with the demonstrators. Bouteflika had no choice but to step down.

Despite new elections and some gestures toward the protesters, Algeria's leadership remains opaque and has recently cracked down on dissent, notably among Berber populations.

The secrecy surrounding Algeria's leaders is such that it's unclear whether Bouteflika ever married or had any survivors.

Elaine Ganley in Paris contributed to this report.

EXPLAINER: Why World Bank is under fire over set of rankings

By PAUL WISEMAN AP Economics Writer

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WASHINGTON (AP) — Under fire for allegations that it bowed to pressure from China and other governments, the World Bank has dropped a popular report that ranked countries by how welcoming they are to businesses.

The report is important to many companies and investors around the world: They use the World Bank's "Doing Business" report to help decide where to invest money, open manufacturing plants or sell products.

Eager to attract investment, countries around the world, especially developing economies, have sought to improve their rankings in the World Bank's report.

Sometimes, nations would pursue substantive policy changes — by, for example, making it easier for businesses to pay taxes, obtain loans or enforce contracts. Sometimes, they would take a more aggressive tack: Like pushy high schoolers cajoling a teacher for a higher grade, they would lobby the World Bank to provide a higher score on the "Doing Business" report.

Countries that have scored a high ranking have often touted their success. In 2017, for example, Prime Minister Narendra Modi took to Twitter to celebrate India's big improvement in 2017. In Rwanda, the country's development board employs a "Doing Business economist."

But the World Bank has long been accused of using sloppy methodology and of succumbing to political pressure in producing the rankings. This week, the bank dropped the report after investigators had reviewed internal complaints about "data irregularities" in the 2018 and 2020 editions of "Doing Business" and possible "ethical matters" involving World Bank staff members.

In an investigation conducted for the bank, the law firm WilmerHale concluded that staff members fudged the data to make China look better under pressure from Kristalina Georgieva, then the CEO of the World Bank and now head of the International Monetary Fund, and the office of Jim Yong Kim, then the World Bank's president.

Here is a closer look at the controversy:

WHAT IS THE WORLD BANK?

Founded in 1944, the 189-country World Bank makes grants and loans, often to finance big public works projects, and offers economic advice, mostly to developing nations. The bank, based in Washington, has also pledged to reduce poverty around the world.

WHAT IS THE "DOING BUSINESS" REPORT?

In 2002, the bank introduced the report, whose annual rankings highlight which countries have adopted policies favorable to businesses and which haven't — and how much they're improving or regressing. The bank, which collects information from tens of thousands of accountants, lawyers and other professionals in 190 countries, assesses how easy it is to do such things as start a business, obtain a construction permit or connect to the electrical grid. Last year, New Zealand ranked No. 1 and Somalia No. 190. The United States was No. 6.

WHY WAS THE REPORT IMPORTANT?

Though meant to measure how governments treat domestic businesses, the rankings have often been interpreted by the media and by investors as a proxy for how much countries welcome foreign investment.

"Any quantitative model of country risk has built this into ratings," says Timothy Ash, an emerging market strategist at the fixed income manager BlueBay Asset Management. "Money and investments are allocated on the back of this series."

WHY DID "DOING BUSINESS" COME UNDER FIRE?

Questions surrounding the report date back to at least 2018, when Paul Romer, then the chief economist of the World Bank, who would go on to win a Nobel Prize in economics for his earlier work, resigned after complaining about how "Doing Business" treated Chile.

As a result of methodological tinkering, the South American country had plunged in the rankings while socialist Michelle Bachelet occupied the presidency, rebounded under conservative Sebastian Pinera, then

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slumped again when Bachelet returned to power. The ups and downs occurred despite little actual change in policy, according to a summary of events by the Center for Global Development think tank, which called then for the bank to “ditch” the report.

Justin Sandefur, a senior fellow at the center, contends that the rankings have always reflected a bias against government intervention in the economy. He said, for example, that the rankings have failed to properly assess any benefits from state spending or worker and consumer protections.

“It came from a very strong anti-regulatory anti-tax, get-the-state-out-of-the-way-so-the-private-sector-can-thrive approach,” Sandefur said. “That was the original sin. It is deep in the DNA” of the report.

WilmerHale delivered another blow to the World Bank and the “Doing Business” rankings. World Bank staffers who were compiling the 2018 report were preparing to knock China down to No. 85 in the rankings from No. 78 the year before. The downgrade would have come at a time when the World Bank was trying to raise capital — an effort in which Beijing, the bank’s No. 3 shareholder, was expected to play a “key role,” according to the law firm’s report.

The investigation found that Georgieva “became directly involved in efforts to improve China’s ranking.”

According to the investigation, she also lambasted the bank’s China director for “mismanaging” the bank’s relations with Beijing and for failing to appreciate how important the “Doing Business” rankings were to the Chinese leadership. Under pressure from the top, the investigators found, the bank staff decided to give China more credit for a new law involving so-called secured transactions — typically, loans that involve collateral. The upshot was that China ended up back where it was the rankings — No. 78. (Other changes affected the rankings of Azerbaijan, the United Arab Emirates and Saudi Arabia.)

WilmerHale concluded that bank staffers knew that the changes to the report were “inappropriate” but feared retaliation — including dismissal — if they expressed concern. The law firm referred to a “toxic culture” at the bank.

In a statement, Georgieva rejected the report: “I disagree fundamentally with the findings and interpretations of the Investigation of Data Irregularities as it relates to my role in the World Bank’s Doing Business report of 2018.”

Eswar Prasad, a professor of trade policy at Cornell University, said the “Doing Business” report was already losing favor: “In recent years, the increasing politicization of the report’s presentation and analysis of data had already undercut its credibility and diminished its value to international investors.”

The incident also highlights China’s growing willingness to throw its weight around in international organizations such as the World Bank and the World Health Organization.

“China is clearly not shy about using its rising clout in international organizations to control the narrative about its economy and its government’s policy choices,” Prasad says. “For international institutions trying to remain relevant in a fast-changing world, keeping a major shareholder such as China happy can sometimes override more objective analytical considerations.”

AP Economics Writer Martin Crutsinger contributed to this report.

Pelé in ‘semi-intensive’ care, daughter says he’s doing well

By MAURICIO SAVARESE AP Sports Writer

SAO PAULO (AP) — Brazilian soccer great Pelé “took a little step back” in his recovery from surgery to remove a tumor from his colon but he is “recovering well” at a Sao Paulo hospital, his daughter Kely Nascimento said Friday.

However, the Albert Einstein hospital said the 80-year-old Edson Arantes do Nascimento had returned to intensive care after “a brief breathing instability” Thursday night. Pelé was currently stable in “semi-intensive” care, the hospital said, and he “continues recovering.” It did not give further details.

Kely Nascimento posted a picture Friday with her father on Instagram which she said she had just taken in his room at the Albert Einstein hospital.

“He is recovering well and within normal range. Promise!” Kely Nascimento said. “The normal recovery scenario for a man of his age after an operation like this is sometimes two steps forward and one step

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back. Yesterday he was tired and took a little step back.”

“Today he took two forwards!” she added, without giving more details.

The hospital had not previously issued a new statement on Pelé’s health since Tuesday, when he was removed from intensive care.

Later Pelé confirmed on social media that he is feeling well and that he had been visited by family members during the day.

“I continue to smile every day. Thank you for all the love I get from you,” Pelé said.

The tumor was found when Pelé went for routine exams at the end of August. His surgery took place on Sept. 4.

Pelé won the 1958, 1962 and 1970 World Cups, and remains Brazil’s all-time leading scorer with 77 goals in 92 matches.

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

Protest for jailed Capitol rioters: Police ready this time

By COLLEEN LONG, MICHAEL BALSAMO and MICHAEL KUNZELMAN Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — Burned before, Capitol Police say they are taking no chances as they prepare for a Saturday rally at the U.S. Capitol in support of rioters imprisoned after the violent Jan. 6 insurrection.

Though it is unclear how big the rally will be, the Capitol Police and Metropolitan Police Department are fully activating in an effort to avoid a repeat of the pre-inauguration attack. Underprepared police were overwhelmed as hundreds of President Donald Trump’s supporters broke into the Capitol and interrupted the certification of Joe Biden’s victory.

Capitol Police Chief Tom Manger said at a news conference Friday it was difficult to say whether threats of violence at the event are credible, but he said that “chatter” online and elsewhere has been similar to intelligence that was missed in January.

A permit for the protest allows 700 people. Manger said he believes the most likely possibility for violence Saturday will involve clashes between the protesters and counter-protesters who may show up.

“We’re not going to tolerate violence, and we will not tolerate criminal behavior of any kind,” Manger said. “The American public and members of Congress have an expectation that we protect the Capitol. And I am confident that the plan we have in place will meet that expectation.”

After multiple missteps in January, law enforcement is out in full force. The fence around the Capitol is back up, temporarily. Police are preparing for the possibility that some demonstrators may arrive with weapons. The D.C. police department is at the ready, and U.S. Capitol Police have requested assistance from nearby law enforcement agencies.

The rally, organized by former Trump campaign strategist Matt Braynard, is aimed at supporting people who have been detained after the Jan. 6 insurrection — about 60 people held behind bars out of the more than 600 charged in the deadly riot. It’s the latest attempt to downplay and deny the January violence.

Illinois Rep. Adam Kinzinger, one of two Republicans serving on a House committee investigating the January attacks, said he supports the aggressive law enforcement efforts.

“Hopefully the overreaction of law enforcement is actually the thing that can keep this from getting out of hand,” Kinzinger said in an interview Thursday. He predicted that people will criticize the effort if the protest is small and nonviolent, “but that’s what needs to happen because January 6th obviously was an underreaction and it escalated.”

Intelligence collected ahead of Saturday’s rally has suggested that extremist groups such as the Proud Boys and Oath Keepers will turn up. But some prominent members of the groups have sworn they aren’t going and have told others not to attend. Far-right online chatter has been generally tame, and Republican lawmakers are downplaying the event.

Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin approved a request for about 100 members of the D.C. National Guard to be stationed at a city armory near the Capitol, to be called if needed as backup for other law enforce-

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ment agencies. They will primarily protect the Capitol building and congressional offices. They'll be without firearms, but will be equipped with batons and protective vests for self-defense.

Meanwhile, a Homeland Security intelligence report warned of social media posts that discussed possibly storming the Capitol the night before the rally. One user also "commented on kidnapping an identified member of Congress," the document said, though the lawmaker wasn't identified by name in the report. No lawmakers were expected to be in the building Saturday, as Congress is out of session.

"Other references to violence identified on social media include discussions of using the rally to target local Jewish institutions, elected officials, and 'liberal churches,'" the intelligence report said.

Many commenters on online platforms popular with the far right like Telegram disavowed the rally, saying they believed law enforcement was promoting the event to entrap Trump supporters. Some urged their followers not to attend what they said was a "false flag" event they believed was secretly organized by the FBI.

At the same time, however, some commenters continued to promote rallies planned for Saturday in cities and state capitals across the country.

In a notice to House members this week, Sergeant at Arms William Walker urged lawmakers to stay away from the Capitol complex on Saturday. And lawmakers who supported Trump's efforts to overturn his election defeat distanced themselves from the event.

"I don't know what it is," said Texas Sen. Ted Cruz said when asked about the rally.

Trump is still using his platform as the most popular leader in the GOP to express sympathy for those who were arrested and continue spreading election misinformation. In a statement Thursday, he said: "Our hearts and minds are with the people being persecuted so unfairly relating to the January 6th protest concerning the Riggged Presidential Election."

The Associated Press reviewed hundreds of court and jail records for the Capitol riot defendants to uncover how many were being detained and found about 60 held in federal custody awaiting trial or sentencing hearings. Federal officials are still looking for other suspects who could also wind up behind bars. Just Friday, a judge ordered the pretrial detention of a Pennsylvania woman who contends the court doesn't have jurisdiction over her.

At least 30 are jailed in Washington. The rest are locked up in facilities across the country. They have said they are being treated unfairly, and one defendant said he was beaten.

Federal authorities have identified several of those detained as extremist group leaders, members or associates, including nine defendants linked to the Proud Boys and three connected to the antigovernment Oath Keepers. Dozens are charged with conspiring to mount coordinated attacks on the Capitol to block Congress from certifying the 2020 Electoral College vote, among the most serious of the charges.

Some jailed defendants are charged with assaulting police officers, others with making violent threats. A few were freed after their arrests but subsequently detained again, accused of violating release conditions.

The U.S. Court of Appeals for the District of Columbia Circuit has set standards for judges to apply in deciding whether to jail a Capitol riot defendant. A three-judge panel of the appeals court ruled in March that rioters accused of assaulting officers, breaking through windows, doors and barricades, or playing leadership roles in the attack were in "a different category of dangerousness" than those who merely cheered on the violence or entered the building after it was breached.

Associated Press Writers Mary Clare Jalonick, Jacques Billeaud, David Klepper, Lisa Mascaro, Jake Bleiberg, Amanda Seitz and Robert Burns contributed to this report.

US panel backs COVID-19 boosters only for seniors, high-risk

By MATTHEW PERRONE and LAURAN NEERGAARD Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — Dealing the White House a stinging setback, a government advisory panel overwhelmingly rejected a plan Friday to give Pfizer COVID-19 booster shots across the board, and instead endorsed the extra vaccine dose only for those who are 65 or older or run a high risk of severe disease.

The twin votes represented a heavy blow to the Biden administration's sweeping effort, announced a

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month ago, to shore up nearly all Americans' protection amid the spread of the highly contagious delta variant.

The nonbinding recommendation — from an influential committee of outside experts who advise the Food and Drug Administration — is not the last word. The FDA will consider the group's advice and make its own decision, probably within days. And the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention is set to weigh in next week.

In a surprising turn, the advisory panel rejected, 16-2, boosters for almost everyone. Members cited a lack of safety data on extra doses and also raised doubts about the value of mass boosters, rather than ones targeted to specific groups.

Then, in an 18-0 vote, it endorsed extra shots for people 65 and older and those at risk of serious disease. Panel members also agreed that health workers and others who run a high risk of being exposed to the virus on the job should get boosters, too.

That would help salvage part of the White House's campaign but would still be a huge step back from the far-reaching proposal to offer third shots of both the Pfizer and Moderna vaccines to Americans eight months after they get their second dose.

The White House sought to frame the action as progress.

"Today was an important step forward in providing better protection to Americans from COVID-19," said White House spokesman Kevin Munoz. "We stand ready to provide booster shots to eligible Americans once the process concludes at the end of next week."

The CDC has said it is considering boosters for older people, nursing home residents and front-line health care workers, rather than all adults.

The FDA and CDC will most likely decide at some later point whether people who received the Moderna or Johnson & Johnson shots should get boosters.

During several hours of vigorous debate Friday, members of the panel questioned the value of offering boosters to almost everybody 16 and over.

"I don't think a booster dose is going to significantly contribute to controlling the pandemic," said Dr. Cody Meissner of Tufts University. "And I think it's important that the main message we transmit is that we've got to get everyone two doses."

Dr. Amanda Cohn of the CDC said, "At this moment it is clear that the unvaccinated are driving transmission in the United States."

In a statement, Kathrin U. Jansen, Pfizer head of vaccine research and development, said the company continues to believe that boosters will be a "critical tool in the ongoing effort to control the spread of this virus."

Scientists inside and outside the government have been divided recently over the need for boosters and who should get them, and the World Health Organization has strongly objected to rich nations giving a third round of shots when poor countries don't have enough vaccine for their first.

While research suggests immunity levels in those who have been vaccinated wane over time and boosters can reverse that, the Pfizer vaccine is still highly protective against severe illness and death, even amid the delta variant.

The unexpected turn of events could reinforce criticism that the Biden administration got out ahead of the science in its push for boosters. President Joe Biden promised early on that his administration would "follow the science," in the wake of disclosures of political meddling in the Trump administration's coronavirus response.

The FDA panel's overwhelming initial rejection came despite full-throated arguments about the need for boosters from both Pfizer and health officials from Israel, which began offering boosters to its citizens in July.

Sharon Alroy-Preis of Israel's Ministry of Health said the booster dose improves protection tenfold against infection in people 60 and older.

"It's like a fresh vaccine," bringing protection back to original levels and helping Israel "dampen severe cases in the fourth wave," she said.

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Representatives for Pfizer argued that it is important to start shoring up immunity before protection begins to erode. A company study of 44,000 people showed effectiveness against symptomatic COVID-19 was 96% two months after the second dose, but had dropped to 84% by around six months.

Both Pfizer and the Israeli representatives faced pushback from panelists. Several were skeptical about the relevance of Israel's experience to the U.S. Another concern was whether third doses would exacerbate serious side effects, including rare instances of heart inflammation in younger men.

Pfizer pointed to Israeli data from nearly 3 million boosters to suggest side effect rates would be similar to those already reported.

Dr. Paul Offit, a vaccine expert at Children's Hospital of Philadelphia, said he was supportive of a third dose for adults over 60 or 65, but "I really have trouble" supporting it for anyone down to age 16.

While an extra shot would probably at least temporarily reduce cases with mild or no symptoms, "the question becomes what will be the impact of that on the arc of the pandemic, which may not be all that much," Offit said.

Biden's top health advisers, including the heads of the FDA and CDC, first announced plans for wide-spread booster shots in mid-August, setting the week of Sept. 20 as an all-but-certain start date. But that was before FDA staff scientists had completed their own assessments of the data.

Earlier this week, two top FDA vaccine reviewers joined a group of international scientists in publishing an editorial rejecting the need for boosters in healthy people. The scientists said studies show the shots are working well.

On Friday, U.S. Surgeon General Dr. Vivek Murthy said the Biden administration announcement was not aimed at pressuring regulators to act but was instead an attempt to be transparent with the public and be prepared in the event that boosters won approval.

"We have always said that this initial plan would be contingent on the FDA and the CDC's independent evaluation," Murthy said.

The Biden plan has also raised major ethical concerns about impoverished parts of the world still clamoring for vaccine. But the administration argued that the plan was not an us-or-them choice, noting that the U.S. is supplying large quantities of vaccine to the rest of the globe.

The U.S. has already approved Pfizer and Moderna boosters for certain people with weakened immune systems, such as cancer patients and transplant recipients.

Some Americans, healthy or not, have managed to get boosters, in some cases simply by showing up and asking for a shot. And some health systems already are offering extra doses to high-risk people.

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Pentagon reverses itself, calls deadly Kabul strike an error

By ROBERT BURNS AP National Security Writer

WASHINGTON (AP) — The Pentagon retreated from its defense of a drone strike that killed multiple civilians in Afghanistan last month, announcing Friday that a review revealed that only civilians were killed in the attack, not an Islamic State extremist as first believed.

"The strike was a tragic mistake," Marine Gen. Frank McKenzie, head of U.S. Central Command, told a Pentagon news conference.

McKenzie apologized for the error and said the United States is considering making reparation payments to the family of the victims. He said the decision to strike a white Toyota Corolla sedan, after having tracked it for about eight hours, was made in an "earnest belief" — based on a standard of "reasonable certainty" — that it posed an imminent threat to American forces at Kabul airport. The car was believed to have been carrying explosives in its trunk, he said.

For days after the Aug. 29 strike, Pentagon officials asserted that it had been conducted correctly, despite 10 civilians being killed, including seven children. News organizations later raised doubts about that ver-

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sion of events, reporting that the driver of the targeted vehicle was a longtime employee at an American humanitarian organization and citing an absence of evidence to support the Pentagon's assertion that the vehicle contained explosives.

The airstrike was the last of a U.S. war that ended as it had begun in 2001 — with the Taliban in power in Kabul. The speed with which the Taliban overran the country took the U.S. government by surprise and forced it to send several thousand troops to the Kabul airport for a hurried evacuation of Americans, Afghans and others. The evacuation, which began Aug. 14, unfolded under a near-constant threat of attack by the Islamic State group's Afghanistan affiliate.

McKenzie, who oversaw U.S. military operations in Afghanistan, including a final evacuation of U.S. forces and more than 120,000 civilians from Kabul airport, expressed his condolences to the family and friends of those killed.

"I am now convinced that as many as 10 civilians, including up to seven children, were tragically killed in that strike," McKenzie said. "Moreover, we now assess that it is unlikely that the vehicle and those who died were associated with ISIS-K or were a direct threat to U.S. forces," he added, referring to the Islamic State group's Afghanistan affiliate.

Prior to the strike, U.S. intelligence had indicated a likelihood that a white Toyota Corolla would be used in an attack against U.S. forces, McKenzie said. On the morning of Aug. 29, such a vehicle was detected at a compound in Kabul that U.S. intelligence in the preceding 48 hours had determined was used by the Islamic State group to plan and facilitate attacks. The vehicle was tracked by U.S. drone aircraft from that compound to numerous other locations in the city before the decision was made to attack it at a point just a couple of miles from Kabul airport, McKenzie said.

"Clearly our intelligence was wrong on this particular white Toyota Corolla," he said.

Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin, in a written statement, apologized for what he called "a horrible mistake."

"We now know that there was no connection" between the driver of the vehicle and the Islamic State group, and that the driver's activities that day were "completely harmless and not at all related to the imminent threat we believed we faced," Austin said.

Gen. Mark Milley, chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, told reporters two days after the attack that it appeared to have been a "righteous" strike and that at least one of the people killed was a "facilitator" for the Islamic State group's Afghanistan affiliate, which had killed 169 Afghan civilians and 13 American service members in a suicide bombing on Aug. 26 at the Kabul airport.

After McKenzie's remarks on Friday, Milley expressed regret.

"This is a horrible tragedy of war and it's heart wrenching," Milley told reporters traveling with him in Europe. "We are committed to being fully transparent about this incident."

"In a dynamic high-threat environment, the commanders on the ground had appropriate authority and had reasonable certainty that the target was valid, but after deeper post-strike analysis our conclusion is that innocent civilians were killed," Milley added.

Accounts from the family of the victims, 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 painted a picture of a family that had worked for Americans and were trying to gain visas to the United States, fearing for their lives under the Taliban.

The family said that 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 Hellfire missile incinerated the car, killing seven children and an adult son and nephew of Zemerai.

Amnesty International, the humanitarian aid group, called the U.S. military's admission of a mistake a good first step.

"The U.S. must now commit to a full, transparent, and impartial investigation into this incident," said Brian Castner, a senior crisis adviser with Amnesty International. "Anyone suspected of criminal responsibility should be prosecuted in a fair trial. Survivors and families of the victims should be kept informed of the progress of the investigation and be given full reparation."

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Rep. Adam Schiff, the California Democrat who is chairman of the House Intelligence Committee, said a fuller explanation must be provided.

"We need to know what went wrong in the hours and minutes leading up to the strike to prevent similar tragedies in the future," he said. "I am also concerned about the accuracy and completeness of public statements made in the immediate aftermath of the strike, and whether those accounted for all of the information possessed by the government at the time."

Tom Cruise gets sneak preview from SpaceX's 1st private crew

By MARCIA DUNN AP Aerospace Writer

CAPE CANAVERAL, Fla. (AP) — Tom Cruise got a sneak preview of what it's like to circle Earth in a SpaceX capsule.

Representatives for SpaceX's first privately chartered flight revealed Friday that the actor took part in a call with the four space tourists orbiting more than 360 miles up. Thursday's conversation, like the entire three-day flight, was private and so no details were released.

"Maverick, you can be our wingman anytime," came the announcement from the flight's Twitter feed. Cruise starred as Navy pilot Pete "Maverick" Mitchell in the 1986 film "Top Gun." A sequel comes out next year.

Last year, NASA confirmed it was in talks with Cruise about visiting the International Space Station for filming. SpaceX would provide the lift, as it does for NASA astronauts, and like it did Wednesday night for the billionaire up there now with his two contest winners and a hospital worker.

Their flight is due to end Saturday night with a splashdown in the Atlantic off the Florida coast.

The four showed off their capsule in a live broadcast Friday. They're flying exceedingly high in the automated capsule, even by NASA standards.

SpaceX got them into a 363-mile (585-kilometer) orbit following Wednesday night's launch from NASA's Kennedy Space Center. That's 100 miles (160 kilometers) higher than the International Space Station. It's so high that they're completing 15 orbits of Earth daily, compared with 16 for station astronauts.

Until this all-amateur crew, relatively few NASA astronauts had soared that high. The most recent were the shuttle astronauts who worked on the Hubble Space Telescope over multiple flights in the 1990s and 2000s.

To enhance the views, SpaceX outfitted the Dragon capsule with a custom, bubble-shaped dome. Photos of them looking out this large window were posted online, otherwise little else had been publicly released of their first day in space.

Besides talking space with Cruise, the four capsule passengers chatted Thursday with young cancer patients. Hayley Arceneaux, a childhood cancer survivor, led the conversation from orbit with patients from the hospital that saved her life almost 20 years ago: St. Jude Children's Research Hospital. A 6-year-old-boy wanted to know if there are cows on the moon — like in the nursery rhyme.

"I hope there will be one day. Right now, no, there aren't," replied another passenger, Sian Proctor. "We're going to go back to the moon soon and we're going to investigate all kinds of things about it."

The video linkup was not broadcast live, but shared by St. Jude on Friday. Seeing the Earth from so high is "so beautiful," Arceneaux told them.

Now a physician assistant at St. Jude, Arceneaux is the youngest American in space at age 29.

Pennsylvania entrepreneur Jared Isaacman, 38, purchased the entire flight for an undisclosed amount. He's seeking to raise \$200 million for St. Jude through the flight he's named Inspiration4, half of that coming from his own pocket.

The two other Dragon riders won their seats through a pair of contests sponsored by Isaacman: Chris Sembroski, 42, a data engineer, and Proctor, 51, a community college educator.

During the broadcast Friday afternoon, Sembroski played a ukulele that will be auctioned off for St. Jude. "You can turn your volume down if you wish, but I'll give it a shot," he said.

Proctor, who is an artist, showed off a drawing in her sketchbook of a Dragon capsule being carried by

a mythological dragon away from Earth.

All four share SpaceX founder Elon Musk's quest to open space to everyone.

"Missions like Inspiration4 help advance spaceflight to enable ultimately anyone to go to orbit & beyond," Musk tweeted Thursday after chatting with his orbiting pioneers.

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EXPLAINER: What are 'Crisis Standards of Care?'

By REBECCA BOONE, IRIS SAMUELS AND LINDSEY TANNER Associated Press

BOISE, Idaho (AP) — As the spread of the delta variant continues unabated in much of the U.S., public health leaders have approved health care rationing in Idaho and parts of Alaska and Montana.

At least five more states — Georgia, Kentucky, Mississippi, Arkansas and Texas — are nearing capacity with more than 90% of their intensive care unit beds full, according to data from the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services.

The move to ration healthcare comes amid a spike in the number of unvaccinated COVID-19 patients requiring hospitalization. Crisis standards of care allow health care providers to give scarce resources, like ventilators, to the patients most likely to survive.

But determining who gets what is no easy feat.

WHAT ARE 'CRISIS STANDARDS OF CARE?'

Crisis standards of care give legal and ethical guidelines to health care providers when they have too many patients and not enough resources to care for them all. Essentially, they spell out exactly how health care should be rationed in order to save the most lives possible during a disaster.

Some health care rationing steps have become commonplace during the pandemic, with hospitals postponing elective surgeries and some physicians switching to online visits rather than seeing patients in person. But more serious steps — such as deciding which patients must be treated in a normal hospital room or intensive care unit bed, and which patients can be cared for in a hospital lobby or classroom — have been rare.

At the extreme end of the spectrum, crisis standards of care generally use scoring systems to determine which patients get ventilators or other life-saving medical interventions and which ones are treated with pain medicine and other palliative care until they recover or die.

WHAT'S THE SCORING SYSTEM, AND WHAT ARE 'TIE-BREAKERS?'

States may use a combination of factors to come up with patient "priority scores." Idaho's and Montana's system both consider how well a patient's major organ systems are functioning. Patients with indications of liver or kidney damage, poor oxygen and blood clotting levels and an inability to respond to pain because they are in a coma have higher scores.

Both states also score people based on saving the highest number of "life-years," so if a person has cancer or another illness that is likely to impact their future survival, they get a higher score.

The lower a patient's score, the more likely they are to survive, moving them toward the front of the line for ventilators or other resources.

The plans also have "tie-breakers" that come into play if there aren't enough resources for all of the folks at the front of the line. Youth is the biggest tie-breaker, with children getting top priority.

In Idaho, pregnant women who are at least 28 weeks along with viable pregnancies come next. Both states also give consideration to younger adults ahead of older adults, and Idaho's fourth tie-breaker is if the patient performs a task that is vital to the public health crisis response. The final tie-breaker is a lottery system.

If someone at the front of the line is given a ventilator and doesn't show improvement within a set period of time, Idaho says they should be taken off so someone else can have a chance.

On Thursday, shortly after Idaho enacted crisis standards of care statewide, Dr. Steven Nemerson with

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Saint Alphonsus Regional Medical Center in Boise said that to his knowledge, no patient in the state had been removed from life support in order to provide the equipment to someone else. But he warned it would happen.

"It's bad today. It's going to get much worse," Nemerson said. "I'm scared for all of us."

DOES VACCINATION STATUS MATTER?

No.

In both Idaho and Montana, the crisis standards of care don't consider whether a person has been vaccinated against COVID-19. Likewise, patients aren't denied care if they are injured in a car accident because they failed to wear a seatbelt or drove while intoxicated.

"Vaccination status is not relevant to us when it comes to taking care of patients. We simply do what they need us to do within the constraints and the resources that we have," said Dr. Shelly Harkins, chief medical officer at St. Peters hospitals in Helena.

WHAT ELSE CHANGES WHEN A HOSPITAL IS OPERATING UNDER CRISIS STANDARDS OF CARE?

Nearly everything.

People will likely wait longer for care, not just in hospitals but at urgent care centers that will likely be dealing with more patients as well. Nurses will care for more patients than they normally would. Instead of hospital beds, some people might be placed on stretchers and cots. Patients will likely be sent home from the hospital as soon as possible, relying on friends, family and prescriptions for in-home medical equipment during their recovery.

And in some cases, physicians may not attempt to save a patient's life at all. Idaho's crisis standards of care plan calls for a "Universal Do Not Resuscitate Order" for all adults once the state has reached the point where there aren't enough ventilators to go around.

That means if a patient experiences cardiac arrest — where the heart stops suddenly — there will be no chest compressions, no attempts to shock the heart back into a normal rhythm, no chance at hooking them up to life support. That's partly because resuscitation requires a bunch of hospital staffers, a lot of time, and is frequently unsuccessful. It's also because if the patient has COVID-19, the process of attempting to revive sends aerosolized virus particles into the air, putting staffers at risk.

Montana's plan is a bit different, in that it allows individual doctors to decide whether or not to resuscitate patients on a case-by-case basis.

HOW DOES THIS IMPACT HEALTH CARE WORKERS?

Talk to a health care provider in Idaho, and you're likely to hear the phrase "moral injury," a term that means the emotional trauma that health care providers experience when they lose a patient or are faced with being unable to provide life-saving treatment. Ideally, crisis standard of care plans reduce moral injury, but they are far from perfect.

Dr. Matthew Wynia, a University of Colorado professor of medicine and health ethics expert, said state authorities should be responsible for establishing strategies needed to make triage decision fairly, so doctors and nurses aren't left making those calls on their own at a patient's bedside.

That means making sure that transfer systems are in place and working well so that one hospital isn't making tragic decisions because they are out of a resource that is available at another facility, he said.

When facing critical shortages of staff or equipment, "You really can't say (to patients or their families), 'Would you like to go to the ER?' You have to go to the patient and say, 'We can't do it,' which is an incredibly hard situation," Wynia said.

"There's no way to look at this and say this is OK. It's not OK," he said. But it's necessary if hospitals are running out of resources, "which is happening right now," Wynia said.

WHAT CAN BE DONE TO GET BACK TO NORMAL?

Health experts say getting vaccinated is the best way to protect against needing hospitalization because of coronavirus. Idaho's hospital crisis is caused primarily by a massive increase in the number of coronavirus patients needing hospital care, Idaho Department of Health and Welfare Director Dave Jeppesen said Thursday.

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The Idaho Department of Health and Welfare is also advising people to be extra careful in every aspect of daily life, by wearing seatbelts, taking medications as prescribed and avoiding high-risk activities like mountain biking until the crisis has passed.

Lindsey Tanner contributed to this report from Chicago. Iris Samuels contributed to this report from Helena, Montana. Samuels is a corps member for the Associated Press/Report for America Statehouse News Initiative. Report for America is a nonprofit national service program that places journalists in local newsrooms to report on undercovered issues.

North Carolina judges strike down state's voter ID law

By GARY D. ROBERTSON Associated Press

RALEIGH, N.C. (AP) — North Carolina judges struck down the state's latest photo voter identification law on Friday, agreeing with minority voters that Republicans rammed through rules tainted by racial bias as a way to remain in power.

Two of the three trial judges declared the December 2018 law is unconstitutional, even though it was designed to implement a photo voter ID mandate added to the North Carolina Constitution in a referendum just weeks earlier. They said the law was rushed and intentionally discriminates against Black voters, violating their equal protections.

The law "was motivated at least in part by an unconstitutional intent to target African American voters," Superior Court Judges Michael O'Foghludha and Vince Rozier wrote in their 102-page order.

"Other, less restrictive voter ID laws would have sufficed to achieve the legitimate nonracial purposes of implementing the constitutional amendment requiring voter ID, deterring fraud, or enhancing voter confidence," the judges added.

The majority decision, which followed a three-week trial in April, will be appealed, Republicans at the legislature said. A state appeals court had previously blocked the law's enforcement last year. The law remains unenforceable with this ruling.

With a similar lawsuit in federal court set to go to trial this January and another state court lawsuit now on appeal, it's looking more unlikely that the current voter ID law will be enforced in the 2022 elections.

Allison Riggs, the plaintiffs' lead attorney, praised the decision. Riggs said the ruling reflects "how the state's Republican-controlled legislature undeniably implemented this legislation to maintain its power by targeting voters of color."

Republicans have said voter ID laws are needed to build public confidence in elections and to prevent voter fraud, which remains rare nationwide. Many Democrats see the mandates as attempts at voter suppression.

In July 2016, a federal appeals court struck down several portions of a 2013 North Carolina law that included a voter ID mandate, saying GOP lawmakers had written them with "almost surgical precision" to discourage voting by Black residents, who tend to support Democrats.

Lawyers for the voters who sued over the 2018 law said it suffered from similar racial defects as the 2013 law — following a long effort by North Carolina elected officials to weaken African American voting as a way to retain control the General Assembly. The 2013 law was carried out briefly in 2016 primary elections.

GOP legislative leaders and their attorneys disagreed, saying the latest ID rules were approved with noteworthy Democratic support and improved to retain ballot access while ensuring only legal citizens can vote.

The categories of qualifying IDs were greatly expanded compared to the 2013 law to include college student and government-employee IDs. Free IDs also were made available, and people without IDs can still vote if they fill out a form.

Sam Hayes, an attorney for House Speaker Tim Moore, said "liberal judges have defied the will of North Carolinians on election integrity" with the decision. Moore and Senate leader Phil Berger are among defendants in the lawsuit.

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"Photo voter ID laws are designed to bolster confidence in elections. Calling this law irredeemably racist does the exact opposite," Sen. Paul Newton of Cabarrus County said.

In the dissenting opinion, Judge Nathaniel Poovey wrote there was "not one scintilla of evidence" presented that any legislator acted with racially discriminatory intent.

The plaintiffs' evidence relied "heavily on the past history of other lawmakers and used an extremely broad brush to paint the 2018 General Assembly with the same toxic paint," Poovey wrote.

But the panel's majority wrote that while they found no legislator harboring racial animus toward Black voters, Republicans targeted voters "who, based on race, were unlikely to vote for the majority party" as the federal court also ruled in 2016.

About three dozen states have laws requesting or requiring voters to show some form of identification at the polls, and about half want photo ID only, according to the National Conference of State Legislatures.

Six voters — five Black and one biracial — sued in Wake County court on the same day GOP lawmakers overrode Democratic Gov. Roy Cooper's veto of the 2018 voter ID bill.

Some plaintiffs testified at trial about difficulties obtaining an ID or voting when the earlier photo ID law was in effect. Lawyers for the GOP said all voters would continue to be able to vote under the 2018 law.

The plaintiffs' case emphasized the state's history of discriminatory voting laws, as well as an analysis from a University of Michigan professor who said Black voters are 39% more likely to lack a qualifying photo ID than white registered voters. The analysis, however, left out data on some categories of qualifying IDs.

Changes to these and other voting procedures in North Carolina once needed federal preapproval. But a 2013 U.S. Supreme Court ruling meant such "preclearance" actions were no longer required. The 2013 voter ID law was approved shortly after that ruling.

Ex-deputy charged with manslaughter in white teen's death

By ANDREW DeMILLO Associated Press

RUSSELLVILLE, Ark. (AP) — A former Arkansas sheriff's deputy was charged Friday with manslaughter in the fatal shooting of a white teenager whose death has drawn the attention of national civil rights activists.

A special prosecutor announced the felony charge against Michael Davis, a former sergeant with the Lonoke County Sheriff's Office, in the fatal shooting of 17-year-old Hunter Brittain. Davis faces between three and 10 years in prison if convicted.

Davis shot Brittain during a June 23 traffic stop outside an auto repair shop along Arkansas Highway 89 south of Cabot, a city of about 26,000 people roughly 30 miles (48 kilometers) northeast of Little Rock.

Davis told investigators he shot Brittain once in the neck after the teen reached into the back of his truck and did not comply with his commands to show his hands, according to the arrest affidavit. Brittain was holding a container — which his family members have said held antifreeze — and no evidence of firearms were found in or near the truck, the affidavit said.

A passenger with Brittain said he and the teen had been working on the transmission for Brittain's truck. The passenger told investigators he never heard Davis tell the teen to show his hands.

Davis, who is white, was fired by Lonoke County Sheriff John Staley in July for not turning on his body camera until after the shooting occurred. Staley said there's no footage from the shooting, only the aftermath.

Several members of Brittain's family and friends shouted, "Thank you Jesus!" as Phillips announced the charge. Arkansas State Police said Davis surrendered Friday after the warrant was issued, and Phillips said a bond hearing would be held on Monday.

Jesse Brittain, the teen's uncle, said he was glad to see Davis charged with something, though he would have preferred a more serious charge.

"This is something," he told reporters after the announcement. "We're going to take this and see what else (Phillips) has got to say and hopefully this will stick. He won't be an officer no more and he can't kill no more kids."

An attorney for Davis said the former deputy would plead not guilty.

"While he has said all along it was a tragic event, there's no criminal act on his part," attorney Robert Newcomb said.

Brittain was eulogized by the Rev. Al Sharpton and two attorneys who represented George Floyd's family. They said the teen's death highlighted the need for interracial support for changes in policing. Brittain's family and friends have regularly demonstrated outside the Lonoke County sheriff's office, demanding more details on the shooting.

Floyd died in May last year when a white Minneapolis police officer used his knee to pin the handcuffed Black man's neck to the ground. His death sparked nationwide protests over policing and racial inequality.

Attorneys Ben Crump and Devon Jacob, who represent Floyd's family, joined with Brittain's family in calling the charge the "first step in the pursuit of justice for Hunter Brittain." And Brittain's family repeated its call for the Arkansas Legislature to require officers to wear body cameras that would be turned on as soon as their shift begins.

"Nothing will bring Hunter back, but we can honor his memory and legacy by calling for justice and change in his name," the attorneys and family said in a statement.

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Biden faces limits of \$1.9T COVID aid as some states resist

By JOSH BOAK and ZEKE MILLER Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — President Joe Biden entered the White House promising to stop the twin health and economic crises caused by COVID-19, but \$1.9 trillion and countless initiatives later he's confronting the limits of what Washington can achieve when some state and local governments are unwilling or unable to step up.

Six months after Congress passed the massive rescue plan, administration records show that more than \$550 billion has yet to be disbursed. The sum could help provide a key economic backstop as the coronavirus' delta variant continues to pose a threat. But in some cases, it's also led to frustration as aid for renters, testing and vaccines goes unused despite mass outreach campaigns.

Republican critics say the unspent money shows that Biden's relief package was too big and inflationary; the administration says the unspent funds reflect the extent of planning in case the recovery from the pandemic hits more snags with virus mutations and unexpected economic disruptions. By law, about \$105 billion of the state and local aid and more than half of the expanded child tax credits cannot be paid out yet.

"There are some things designed to address immediate hardship and others that are designed to allow for a multi-year policy response — they're not really bugs, they're features," said Gene Sperling, who is overseeing the rescue plan for Biden. "The fact that a solid portion of these funds can be used over a few year period is a good-news story for ensuring a durable recovery."

But some of the backlog stems from bottlenecks — or outright blockages — at the state or local level, beyond the influence of Washington. The extent of the challenge was apparent when Biden recently announced new vaccine requirements for federal workers and employers with 100 or more workers and emphasized the need for testing and keeping schools open.

"We're facing a lot of pushback, especially from some of the Republican governors," Biden said Thursday. "The governors of Florida and Texas — they're doing everything they can to undermine the lifesaving requirements that I've proposed."

The Department of Health and Human Services and the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention have stood up "Operation Expanded Testing" to work with schools, homeless shelters and care facilities to provide screening testing at no cost to most organizations, and CDC has offered its technical expertise — but that doesn't mean states will take them up on it.

Iowa and Idaho, for instance, have rejected tens of millions of dollars in federal assistance to boost virus testing in schools. In Texas and a handful of other GOP-controlled states, officials have moved to block schools from conducting contact tracing — for which they have been provided federal dollars — or requiring mask-wearing.

There have been some bright spots, the administration said, including Georgia and Massachusetts, where states have employed federal resources to help keep students safe.

White House officials harbor frustrations over the slow pace of distributing money for some of the programs, but contend what remains is largely out of their control.

Large pockets of money flowed through existing pathways — for instance, expanded tax credits, which required relatively minor adjustments by the IRS. But the federal government was also tasked with standing up entirely new initiatives from scratch, with few carrots or sticks to encourage local officials to join in.

Privately, some officials believe the country as a whole had the tools to avoid the brunt of the latest delta

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wave and its impact on the economy through vaccinations, robust testing and economic relief money — but didn't move quickly enough to use them.

The Biden administration can point to clear successes with its relief package. Economic growth has jumped sharply this year, with monthly job gains averaging 636,000 and demand outpacing the supply of autos, furniture, appliances and other goods. The president and his aides point to forecasts suggesting that U.S. economic growth could be the strongest in four decades.

Yet the delta variant has slowed economic activity as hiring slipped in August to just 235,000 added jobs. The slowdown overlapped with the lapse of expanded unemployment benefits, causing 8.9 million people to lose weekly benefit payments and another 2.1 million to lose a \$300-a-week supplemental unemployment payment.

The delta variant has spread as funds to combat COVID-19 go untapped.

Of the \$51 billion for testing, monitoring and research and development in Biden's plan, the administration said \$13.9 billion has yet to be distributed and will be used to combat the delta variant. Just 10% of the money for homeowner assistance has gone out to states, and aid to renters has been so unevenly distributed that the Treasury Department announced Tuesday that "high-performing" states and cities will access the next round of \$13 billion even as other locales have yet to release funds.

"Absolutely it was too large," said Marc Goldwein, senior vice president of the private Committee for a Responsible Federal Budget. "But it was also poorly designed in terms of timing and composition — there were some places we should have spent more or longer."

Goldwein said unemployment benefits should have been tapered down gradually. Direct checks could have been split into multiple rounds, instead of a single \$1,400 payment for each eligible person. State and local funds could have been disbursed in conditional tranches.

Administration officials said the government generally succeeded when providing direct payments to individuals, child tax credits and forgivable loans to businesses. The roughly \$400 billion in direct payments all went out quickly, as did the \$28.6 billion in aid for restaurants that lost revenues during the pandemic. They noted that the administration is set to meet or exceed forecasts for spending by the Congressional Budget Office for this fiscal year.

Routing funds through state and local governments was more of a challenge. Administration officials said the Trump administration left them without a decent infrastructure for these programs despite approving roughly \$4 trillion in aid before Biden became president.

The Biden administration changed guidance to release rental aid at a faster pace to limit evictions, yet it found an outreach campaign that involved coordinating 437 distinct jurisdictions led to uneven results. Not enough cities could replicate the programs seen in Houston, Philadelphia and Louisville, Kentucky.

But in many cases, the federal government was willing to let states, counties and cities take a more patient approach with \$350 billion in direct aid, of which \$105 billion has yet to be distributed.

Even the money that has been disbursed has not necessarily been spent. State and local governments have until 2024 to spend it.

"It's still too early to judge whether the program has been successful," said Alan Berube, a senior fellow at the Brookings Institution. "The administration and Congress want cities to be thoughtful about using the funds not only for immediate recovery, but also for ensuring an inclusive and sustainable rebound."

Apple, Google remove opposition app as Russian voting begins

By DARIA LITVINOVA and KELVIN CHAN Associated Press

MOSCOW (AP) — Facing Kremlin pressure, Apple and Google on Friday removed an opposition-created smartphone app that tells voters which candidates are likely to defeat those backed by Russian authorities, as polls opened for three days of balloting in Russia's parliamentary election.

Unexpectedly long lines formed at some polling places, and independent media suggested this could show that state institutions and companies were forcing employees to vote. The election is widely seen as an important part of President Vladimir Putin's efforts to cement his grip on power ahead of the 2024

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presidential polls, in which control of the State Duma, or parliament, will be key.

Russian authorities have sought to suppress the use of Smart Voting, a strategy designed by imprisoned opposition leader Alexei Navalny, to curb the dominance of the Kremlin-backed United Russia party.

Apple and Google have come under pressure in recent weeks, with Russian officials telling them to remove the Smart Voting app from their online stores. Failure to do so will be interpreted as interference in the election and make them subject to fines, the officials said.

Last week, Russia's Foreign Ministry summoned U.S. Ambassador John Sullivan over the issue.

On Thursday, representatives of Apple and Google were invited to a meeting in the upper house of Russia's parliament, the Federation Council. The Council's commission on protecting state sovereignty said in a statement afterward that Apple agreed to cooperate with Russian authorities.

Apple and Google did not respond Friday to a request from The Associated Press for comment.

Google was forced to remove the app because it faced legal demands by regulators and threats of criminal prosecution in Russia, according to a person with direct knowledge of the matter who also said Russian police visited Google's Moscow offices Monday to enforce a court order to block the app. The person spoke on condition of anonymity because of the sensitivity of the issue.

Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov said Friday the presidential administration "definitely, of course" welcomes the companies' decision, because the app was "outside the law" in Russia.

In recent months, authorities have unleashed a sweeping crackdown against Navalny's allies and engaged in a massive effort to suppress Smart Voting.

Navalny is serving 2½-year prison sentence for violating parole over a previous conviction he says is politically motivated. His top allies were slapped with criminal charges and many have left the country. Navalny's Foundation for Fighting Corruption, as well as a network of regional offices, have been outlawed as extremist organizations in a ruling that exposes hundreds of people associated with them to prosecution.

About 50 websites run by his team have been blocked, and dozens of regional offices have been closed. The authorities have moved to block the Smart Voting website as well, but some users can still access it. Navalny's team also created a Smart Voting chat bot on the messaging app Telegram and published a list of candidates Smart Voting endorses in Google Docs and on YouTube.

Close Navalny ally Ivan Zhdanov on Friday tweeted a screenshot of what appears to be an email from Apple, explaining why the app should be removed from the store. The screenshot cites the extremism designation for the Foundation for Fighting Corruption and allegations of election interference. "Google, Apple are making a big mistake," Zhdanov wrote.

Leonid Volkov, Navalny's top strategist, wrote on Facebook that the companies "bent to the Kremlin's blackmail." He noted that the move doesn't affect users who have already downloaded the app, and that it should be functioning correctly.

Volkov told the AP last month that at some point in August, the app ranked third on Google Play in Russia among social networking apps and fourth on the App Store in the same category.

Peskov on Friday called Smart Voting "another attempt at provocations that are harmful for the voters."

The long lines at some polling stations in Moscow, St. Petersburg and some other cities raised concerns of forced voting.

David Kankiya from the Golos independent election monitoring group told AP that it was easier for state institutions and companies to force people to vote on Friday because there was less attention from observers.

"Some observers are busy with work, some with university studies, as it's a work day and not a weekend," he said. "Monitoring is harder to organize, ergo, there are fewer risks for the administrative machine."

Peskov dismissed the allegations and suggested that those at polling stations were there voluntarily because they had to work on the weekend or wanted to "free up" Saturday and Sunday.

Putin, who has been self-isolating since Tuesday after dozens of people in his inner circle got infected with COVID-19, voted online Friday — an option that is available in seven Russian regions this year. Kremlin critics have said that leaves room for manipulation.

Dr. Anna Trushina, a radiologist at a Moscow hospital, told AP she went to a polling station "to be hon-

est, because we were forced (to vote) by my work. Frankly speaking.”

She added: “And I also want to know who leads us.”

Media in St. Petersburg reported on suspected cases of “carousel voting,” in which voters cast ballots at several different polling stations. An AP video journalist saw the same voters, believed to be military school students, at two different polling stations; one of them said the group had first gone to the wrong polling station.

A local elections commission member posted video in which a man appeared to have tried to cast several ballots and then was confronted by a poll worker. The man in the video said he had obtained his ballots at a subway station.

Although Google and Apple do not report their revenue in Russia, they have a lot at stake there, said Ruben Enikolopov, a political economy professor at the New Economic School in Moscow.

“It’s a very sizable market, 140 million people,” he said. “Losing such a market for them, that’s not negligible at all. It will not really dent their financial performance, but it’s a big blow so they will put a lot of effort not to lose.”

Both companies also might be trying to avoid difficulties for their Russia-based employees, Enikolopov said.

Western tech giants such as Twitter, Facebook and Google have come under pressure this year from the Russian government over their role in amplifying dissent. Authorities accused the platforms of allegedly failing to remove calls for protests and levied hefty fines against them.

The companies face similar challenges elsewhere. In India, the government is in a standoff with Twitter, which it accuses of failing to comply with new internet regulations that digital activists say could curtail online speech and privacy.

Turkey passed a law last year that raised fears of censorship, giving authorities greater power to regulate social media companies that also were required to establish local legal entities — a demand that Facebook and Twitter have met.

Twitter has been banned in Nigeria since June, when the company took down a controversial tweet by the country’s president, although the government has promised to lift it soon.

—
Chan reported from London. Matt O(backslash)Brien in Providence, R.I. and Vladimir Kondrashov and Anna Frants in Moscow contributed.

Many faith leaders say no to endorsing vaccine exemptions

By PETER SMITH Associated Press

As significant numbers of Americans seek religious exemptions from COVID-19 vaccine mandates, many faith leaders are saying: Not with our endorsement.

Leaders of the Greek Orthodox Archdiocese of America said Thursday that while some people may have medical reasons for not receiving the vaccine, “there is no exemption in the Orthodox Church for Her faithful from any vaccination for religious reasons.”

The Holy Eparchial Synod of the nationwide archdiocese, representing the largest share of Eastern Orthodox people in the United States, urged members to “pay heed to competent medical authorities, and to avoid the false narratives utterly unfounded in science.”

“No clergy are to issue such religious exemption letters,” Greek Orthodox Archbishop Elpidophoros said, and any such letter “is not valid.”

Similarly, the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America issued a recent statement encouraging vaccine use and saying that “there is no evident basis for religious exemption” in its own or the wider Lutheran tradition.

The Roman Catholic Archdiocese of New York laid out its own stance during the summer, saying that any priest issuing an exemption letter would be “acting in contradiction” to statements from Pope Francis that receiving the vaccine is morally acceptable and responsible.

Both the Vatican and the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops have said Catholics can receive the vaccines in good conscience given the lack of alternatives and the goal of alleviating suffering — even while

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objecting to research with even a remote connection to abortion.

A number of dioceses have adopted policies similar to New York's, and bishops in El Paso, Texas, and Lexington, Kentucky, have mandated vaccines for employees.

But other Catholic jurisdictions are more accommodating of exemptions. The Colorado Catholic Conference, the policy arm of the state's bishops, has posted online a template for a letter that priests can sign saying an individual parishioner may draw on Catholic values to object to the vaccines. South Dakota's bishops have also taken that stance.

At issue for many Catholics and other abortion opponents is that the most widely used COVID-19 vaccines were tested on fetal cell lines developed over decades in laboratories, though the vaccines themselves do not contain any such material.

The issue is becoming more heated as public- and private-sector employers increasingly impose mandates. A clerical letter wouldn't necessarily be needed for someone to be granted an exemption — federal law requires employers make reasonable accommodations for "sincerely held" religious beliefs — though a clergy endorsement could help bolster a person's claim.

The Rev. Robert Jeffress of First Baptist Dallas, a Southern Baptist megachurch, said he and his staff "are neither offering nor encouraging members to seek religious exemptions from the vaccine mandates."

"There is no credible religious argument against the vaccines," he said via email. "Christians who are troubled by the use of a fetal cell line for the testing of the vaccines would also have to abstain from the use of Tylenol, Pepto Bismol, Ibuprofen, and other products that used the same cell line if they are sincere in their objection."

The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints does not provide religious exemptions for vaccines for members, according to church spokesman Eric Hawkins. Leaders of the Utah-based faith have made pleas for members to get vaccinated even as doctrine acknowledges it's up to individual choice.

The church's Brigham Young University has asked students to report their vaccination status but is not requiring vaccinations, and the church is also requiring U.S. missionaries serving in foreign countries to be vaccinated.

Some other religious groups, such as the Orthodox Union, an umbrella organization for Orthodox Judaism, and the United Methodist Church, have encouraged people to get vaccines but have not issued policy statements on exemptions.

The Fiqh Council of North America, made up of Islamic scholars, has advised Muslims to receive the Pfizer or Moderna vaccines and to debunk "baseless rumors and myths" about them.

Associated Press writers Brady McCombs in Salt Lake City and David Crary in New York contributed to this report.

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Illegal marijuana farms take West's water in 'blatant theft'

By ANDREW SELSKY Associated Press

LA PINE, Ore. (AP) — Jack Dwyer pursued a dream of getting back to the land by moving in 1972 to an idyllic, tree-studded parcel in Oregon with a creek running through it.

"We were going to grow our own food. We were going to live righteously. We were going to grow organic," Dwyer said. Over the decades that followed, he and his family did just that.

But now, Deer Creek has run dry after several illegal marijuana grows cropped up in the neighborhood last spring, stealing water from both the stream and nearby aquifers and throwing Dwyer's future in doubt.

From dusty towns to forests in the U.S. West, illegal marijuana growers are taking water in uncontrolled amounts when there often isn't enough to go around for even licensed users. Conflicts about water have long existed, but illegal marijuana farms — which proliferate despite legalization in many Western states

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— are adding strain during a severe drought.

In California, which legalized recreational marijuana in 2016, there are still more illegal cannabis farms than licensed ones, according to the Cannabis Research Center at the University of California, Berkeley.

"Because peak water demand for cannabis occurs in the dry season, when streamflow is at its lowest levels, even small diversions can dry streams and harm aquatic plants and animals," a study from the center said.

Some jurisdictions are fighting back. California's Siskiyou County Board of Supervisors in May banned trucks carrying 100 gallons or more of water from using roads leading to arid tracts where some 2,000 illegal marijuana grows were purportedly using millions of gallons of water daily.

The illegal grows are "depleting precious groundwater and surface water resources" and jeopardizing agricultural, recreational and residential water use, the county ordinance says.

In Oregon, the number of illegal grows appears to have increased recently as the Pacific Northwest endured its driest spring since 1924.

Many are operating under the guise of being hemp farms, legalized nationally under the 2018 Farm Bill, said Mark Pettinger, spokesman for the Oregon Liquor and Cannabis Commission. Under the law, hemp's maximum THC content — the compound that gives cannabis its high — must be no greater than 0.3%. Fibers of the hemp plant are used in making rope, clothing, paper and other products.

Josephine County Sheriff Dave Daniel believes there are hundreds of illegal grows in his southern Oregon county alone, many financed by overseas money. He believes the financiers expect to lose a few grows but the sheer number of them means many will last until the marijuana is harvested and sold on the black market outside Oregon.

None of the new sites has been licensed to grow recreational marijuana, Pettinger said. Regulators, confronted in 2019 by a backlog of license applications and a glut of regulated marijuana, stopped processing new applications until January 2022.

The illegal grows have had "catastrophic" consequences for natural water resources, Daniel said. Several creeks have dried up far earlier than normal and the water table — the underground boundary between water-saturated soil and unsaturated soil — is dropping.

"It's just blatant theft of water," Daniel said.

Last month, Daniel and his deputies, reinforced by other law enforcement officers, destroyed 72,000 marijuana plants growing in 400 cheaply built greenhouses, known as hoop houses.

The water for those plants came through a makeshift, illicit system of pumps and hoses from the nearby Illinois River, which belongs to the Wild and Scenic Rivers System, created by Congress to preserve certain rivers with outstanding natural, cultural, and recreational values.

Daniel said another illegal grow that had 200,000 plants was drawing water from Deer Creek using pumps and pipes. He called it "one of the most blatant and ugly things I've seen."

"They had actually dug holes into the ground so deep that Deer Creek had dried up ... and they were down into the water table," the sheriff said.

Dwyer has a water right to Deer Creek, near the community of Selma, that allows him to grow crops. The creek can run dry late in the year sometimes, but Dwyer has never seen it this dry, much less this early in the year.

The streambed is now an avenue of rocks bordered by brush and trees.

Over the decades, Dwyer created an infrastructure of buried water pipe, a dozen spigots and an irrigation system connected to the creek to grow vegetables and to protect his home against wildfires. He uses an old well for household water, but it's unclear how long that will last.

"I just don't know what I will do if I don't have water," the 75-year-old retired middle school teacher said.

Marijuana has been grown for decades in southern Oregon, but the recent explosion of huge illegal grows has shocked residents.

The Illinois Valley Soil and Water Conservation District, where Dwyer lives, held two town halls about the issue recently. Water theft was the main concern, said Christopher Hall, the conservation district's

community organizer.

"The people of the Illinois Valley are experiencing an existential threat for the first time in local history," Hall said.

In the high desert of central Oregon, illegal marijuana growers are also tapping the water supply that's already so stressed that many farmers, including those who produce 60% of the world's carrot-seed supply, face a water shortage this year.

On Sept. 2, Deschutes County authorities raided a 30-acre (12-hectare) property in Alfalfa, just east of Bend. It had 49 greenhouses containing almost 10,000 marijuana plants and featured a complex watering system with several 15,000- to 20,000-gallon cisterns. Neighbors told detectives the illegal grow has forced them to drill a new well, Sheriff Shane Nelson said.

The Bend area has experienced a population boom, putting more demands on the water supply. The illegal grows are making things worse.

In La Pine, south of Bend, Rodger Jincks watched a crew drill a new well on his property. The first sign that his existing well was failing came when the pressure dropped as he watered his tiny front lawn. Driller Shane Harris estimated the water table is dropping 6 inches (15 centimeters) per year.

Sheriff's deputies last November raided an illegal grow a block away that had 500 marijuana plants.

Jincks' neighbor, Jim Hooper, worries that his well might fail next. He resents the illegal grows and their uncontrolled use of water.

"With the illegals, there's no tracking of it," Hooper said. "They're just stealing the water from the rest of us, which is causing us to spend thousands of dollars to drill new wells deeper."

Follow Andrew Selsky on Twitter at <https://twitter.com/andrewselsky>

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

Mackenzie Scott dominates donations to racial equity

By HALELUYA HADERO AP Business Writer

Shock.

That's what Ruth Simmons, the president of a historically Black university in Texas, felt in December when she received a call informing her that the school would be gifted \$50 million — many times the size of the previous largest contribution it has received. Simmons, who leads Prairie View A&M University, thought she misheard the caller, so she asked for the amount to be repeated: "Five-Zero."

The donor this time was Mackenzie Scott, who has reset the philanthropic agenda for racial equity while barely saying a word. Similar stories of surprise have flooded in from across the country in the past year as colleges and nonprofits received unexpected gifts from Scott and her husband, Dan Jewett.

Scott, a 51-year-old novelist, received the bulk of her fortune from her 2019 divorce from Amazon founder Jeff Bezos. After the police killing of George Floyd, she funded the top recipients of racial equity donations in 27 states, according to an AP analysis of preliminary data from the philanthropy research organization Candid. The data, which includes only contributions from institutional funders, shows that Scott was responsible for \$567 million distributed to such organizations. (Two organizations declined to say how much they received from the philanthropist.)

In at least 11 states, Scott provided the majority of racial equity-oriented contributions to the top recipients. She was the sole major donor to these groups in 10 other states, with donations for education dominating her giving.

Scott's impact in some states could be larger still, because it remains unclear how all of the \$8.7 billion she has donated since 2020 has been distributed to individual organizations. The impact of the donations per state is also difficult to analyze because some of them, like those given to schools and national organizations, may have broader benefits.

"There's no question in my mind that anyone's personal wealth is the product of a collective effort, and

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of social structures which present opportunities to some people, and obstacles to countless others," Scott wrote in a July 2020 post announcing \$1.7 billion in contributions. She said her funding decisions were "driven by a deep belief in the value different backgrounds bring to problem-solving on any issue."

Scott, later joined by Jewett, backed those words with hundreds of millions of dollars in donations to HBCU powerhouses like Morehouse College and Hispanic-Serving Institutions, to little-known groups like Yee Ha' ólníi Doo's Navajo & Hopi Families COVID-19 Relief Fund and to chapters of international groups like United Way.

Many organizations say Scott's gifts were the largest they've ever received.

After Scott's split with Bezos, she pledged to give most of her wealth away, echoing the vows of other mega-donors like Bill Gates and Warren Buffett. Since then, her donations have flowed into the hands of organizations focused on racial equity, COVID relief and other issues. Because of the extraordinary growth in the value of Amazon stock, Scott's wealth is even larger today — about \$60 billion, according to Forbes — than it was when she started giving her money away.

That means Scott's ability to influence philanthropy will continue for the foreseeable future. Her intention, she has said, is to keep giving "until the safe is empty." And because her gifts come with no strings attached and allow organizations to set their own priorities, it's been a welcome change for many who feel hamstrung by donor pet projects.

"The most cherished gifts are definitely those that are unrestricted because a complex university has a wide variety of needs," said Simmons, who notes those gifts allow universities to deal with their "meat-and-potatoes" issues.

When Prairie View A&M received Scott's \$50 million gift last fall, it created a \$10 million scholarship fund for students most vulnerable to dropping out because of a job loss or some other financial stress brought on by the COVID-19 pandemic. So far, Simmons said, the school has given more than \$5 million in scholarships from that fund, with the rest set to be awarded by the middle of next year.

"It helped immensely in terms of addressing the pressing needs of students who could not meet their financial obligations," said Simmons, adding that many Prairie View A&M students work to supplement their financial aid.

A large chunk of Scott's donation — \$35 million — was put in the school's endowment, which now stands at \$143 million.

"This is just a stark contrast to what we've seen, particularly in recent decades, as donors have asserted themselves not only through the gifts, but also (by) wanting to be on boards or being able to get as close to the things that they're funding as possible," said Tyrone Freeman, a professor at Indiana University's Lilly Family School of Philanthropy. (The AP and the Lilly School receive funding from the Lilly Endowment.)

Yet Scott's donations have also prompted some calls for greater transparency. As an individual, she isn't subject to the same disclosure requirements that apply to mega-donors who contribute through charitable foundations. Nor do her announcements reveal how much she gives to individual groups. That means the amounts that these organizations receive are known only if they announce it themselves. Many have not.

"By providing such sizable donations to nonprofit organizations, Scott took on the role as a leading benefactor of the U.S. nonprofit sector," said Maribel Morey, executive director of the Miami Institute for the Social Sciences. "Asking for greater transparency is just giving more agency to the public, so they know how and why decisions are being made about the public good."

A spokesperson for The Bridgespan Group, the philanthropic consultancy firm that advises Scott on her donations, told the AP that the company doesn't comment on its clients but encourages unrestricted donations.

Some of Scott's racial equity contributions intersected with COVID-19 relief because the effects of the pandemic were disproportionately felt in minority communities. Around the same time that Prairie View A&M received millions, Ethel Branch, a former attorney general of the Navajo Nation who started a COVID relief fund for Native American Navajo and Hopi families in the early days of the pandemic, received a call informing her that \$10 million was coming her way.

"It was at a time when we had pretty much exhausted all of our GoFundMe dollars," said Branch, who

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leads the Utah-based Navajo & Hopi Families COVID-19 Relief Fund. "I couldn't even go on social media because there were too many people posting about losing family members. And it was just a really dark time."

The group, and its 1,300 volunteers, used the funding to provide water, personal protective equipment and food to Navajo and Hopi families in Arizona, Utah and New Mexico, Branch said. All told, they reached over half a million people.

But nearly a year since Scott's gift, Branch says the relief fund's resources are dwindling — a result, perhaps, of pandemic donor fatigue and an assumption that the group might no longer need money because of Scott's gift.

By contrast, Prairie View A&M has had more contributions from other donors after Scott's donation. At universities, big donors commonly have buildings or centers named after them. Yet there isn't going to be a Scott Center at Prairie View. She didn't want that, Simmons said.

So the HBCU head came up with a "little secret" and established a writing program named after Toni Morrison, the Nobel Prize-winning Black novelist who taught Scott during her college days at Princeton University and who hired her as a research assistant on the 1992 novel "Jazz."

"That's as far as we could go in demonstrating our gratitude for her generosity," Simmons said.

AP Business Writer Glenn Gamboa contributed to this report.

The Associated Press receives support from the Lilly Endowment for coverage of philanthropy and nonprofits. The AP is solely responsible for all content. For all of AP's philanthropy coverage, visit <https://apnews.com/hub/philanthropy>.

House to try suspending cap on borrowing authority next week

By JOSH BOAK Associated Press

House Democrats said Friday they planned to take action next week to suspend the cap on the government's borrowing authority, and the White House ratcheted up pressure on Republicans by warning state and local governments that severe cuts lie ahead if the measure fails in the Senate.

Disaster relief, Medicaid, infrastructure grants, school money and other programs face drastic cuts if the debt limit stays in place, the White House warned in a fact sheet to local governments aimed at putting pressure on Senate Republican Leader Mitch McConnell, who has vowed to block an increase.

Democrats in the House are plowing forward despite the uncertainty. House Majority Leader Steny Hoyer of Maryland sent a letter Friday to colleagues saying the chamber would move to suspend the debt limit, instead of raising it. He did not specify whether the action would be tied to a resolution to keep the government operating after the fiscal year ends this month.

The Treasury Department has engaged in extraordinary measures to keep the government running after the suspended debt limit was reinstated in August at a level of \$22 trillion, about \$6 trillion less than the current total debt load. Treasury's extraordinary measures will be exhausted by October, creating the potential for default.

The debt limit is the amount of money Congress allows the Treasury to borrow. It was suspended three times during the Trump administration and has been lifted dozens of times since 1960. Created at the start of World War I so Congress would no longer need to approve each bond issuance, the debt limit has evolved into a political weapon as borrowing has sharply escalated over the past two decades.

McConnell has said he will not sanction further increases and that the Democrats have the ability to go it alone.

"With a Democratic President, a Democratic House, and a Democratic Senate, Democrats have every tool they need to raise the debt limit," the Kentucky senator tweeted on Wednesday. "It is their sole responsibility. Republicans will not facilitate another reckless, partisan taxing and spending spree."

President Joe Biden has countered that Republicans are to blame for the rising deficit and that his plans

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for child care, schooling, health care, infrastructure and adapting to climate change will be fully paid for in the long term.

"Let me remind you, these are the same folks who just four years ago passed the Trump tax cut," Biden said in Thursday remarks at the White House. "It just ballooned the federal deficit."

With the total debt standing at \$28.4 trillion, the government would be forced to cut deeply into programs unless the restrictions on borrowing are lifted or suspended. The risk of a recession and turmoil in the financial market would make it harder for states and cities to borrow, while also playing havoc with public pension investments.

The U.S. Conference of Mayors on Friday called for a debt ceiling increase, embracing Biden's stance that the issue should be bipartisan.

"Both parties in Washington have added to our debt, and both parties have an obligation to make sure the United States can continue to pay its bills," said Nan Whaley, the Democratic mayor of Dayton, Ohio, and president of the conference. "This is one of the most basic responsibilities of Congress, and there is no good reason for lawmakers to create a crisis that undermines the full faith and credit of the United States."

The Biden administration's fact sheet makes the case that the pain would be spread among the states because many programs rely on federal dollars. The government's ability to respond to natural disasters such as hurricanes, earthquakes or wildfires would be curtailed.

States would face severe Medicaid shortfalls because the federal government covers two-thirds of the costs. About 20% of Americans get their health insurance through Medicaid and the Children's Health Insurance Program.

Roughly \$100 billion in infrastructure grants for highways, airports and public transit would be jeopardized. The more than \$50 billion for special education, school districts serving poorer students and other programs would also be threatened, as would \$30 billion in food assistance and \$10 billion for public health.

NOT REAL NEWS: A look at what didn't happen this week

By The Associated Press Associated Press

A roundup of some of the most popular but completely untrue stories and visuals of the week. None of these are legit, even though they were shared widely on social media. The Associated Press checked them out. Here are the facts:

Biden is not withholding benefits from unvaccinated veterans

CLAIM: President Joe Biden has ordered the Department of Veterans Affairs to withhold health care benefits from unvaccinated veterans.

THE FACTS: Social media posts falsely suggested that a supposed order from Biden would keep veterans who receive assistance from the Department of Veterans Affairs from accessing health care benefits unless they received at least one dose of a COVID-19 vaccine by Nov. 1. But the worries proved to be unfounded as no such directive or executive order exists. In a statement to The Associated Press, the Department of Veterans Affairs confirmed the claims were untrue. "The President has not and will not withhold benefits to Veterans who choose not to be vaccinated," Veterans Affairs Press Secretary Terrence L. Hayes wrote in a statement. "The spread of this misinformation is extremely detrimental to our Veterans and their families and should cease immediately." The claims were spread through an article on a website that describes its stories as "parodies, satire, fiction, fake, not real." The blog includes a disclaimer explaining that "everything on this website is made up" and warning readers not to "rely on anything said here." But many social media users who shared the story seemed to think it was a real news report. U.S. Rep. Mariannette Miller-Meeks, a Republican from Iowa, was among those who tweeted a link to the satirical article, writing in her tweet: "If true, this is insane!" While Biden did issue an executive order Sept. 9 introducing sweeping new federal vaccine requirements for as many as 100 million Americans in an effort to curb the surging COVID-19 delta variant, that order makes no specific mention of veterans and does not extend to their government health care benefits or to people who receive assistance from the

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Department of Veterans Affairs to cover medical expenses. The rules apply to private-sector employees, health care workers and federal contractors. The order mandates that all employers with more than 100 workers require them to be vaccinated or test for the virus weekly. The Department of Veterans Affairs announced in July that all its health care personnel who work in Veterans Health Administration facilities, visit those facilities or provide direct care to those the VA serves would need to get vaccinated. However, that rule does not extend to non-employees who may utilize the department's services.

— Associated Press writer Sophia Tulp in Atlanta contributed this report.

Nicki Minaj tweet shares unfounded claims about vaccine side effects

CLAIM: COVID-19 vaccines cause impotency and swollen testicles.

THE FACTS: There is no evidence from available research to suggest COVID-19 vaccines cause erectile dysfunction, swelling of the testicles or male infertility. The unfounded claims received considerable attention Monday after Trinidadian-born rapper Nicki Minaj tweeted to her more than 22.6 million followers an unverified story about a cousin's friend in Trinidad. Minaj asserted the unidentified individual "became impotent" and "his testicles became swollen" after receiving the shot. The specifics of the claim aren't clear. A representative for Minaj did not return requests for more information. But experts say there is no data to support the idea that the vaccines cause erectile dysfunction or swollen testicles. "We have never seen that," said Dr. Ranjith Ramasamy, director of male reproductive medicine and surgery at the University of Miami's health system. Orchitis, a condition that can result in swollen testicles, can follow a bacterial infection, such as a sexually transmitted infection. Ramasamy said that while orchitis and erectile dysfunction have not been linked to coronavirus vaccines, there is some evidence suggesting they could be associated with a COVID-19 infection. Dr. Ashley Winter, a urologist specializing in sexual dysfunction at Kaiser Permanente in Portland, Oregon, agreed there is no indication that the vaccine negatively impacts male sexual function or the testicles overall. "On a population level, hundreds of millions of men have gotten this vaccine and there's no study showing reduced erectile function in men who have been vaccinated," she said. "Fundamentally, we just have no study linking the vaccine to either swollen testicles or erectile dysfunction." Furthermore, experts say there is no established link between COVID-19 vaccines and male infertility or lower sperm counts. In the days since Minaj's tweet, Dr. Anthony Fauci, the leading U.S. infectious disease expert, and Trinidad's health minister have both publicly dismissed the claim. The White House also offered to connect Minaj with one of the Biden administration's doctors to address her questions about the COVID-19 vaccine, the AP reported.

— Associated Press writers Angelo Fichera in Philadelphia and Sophia Tulp in Atlanta contributed this report.

False claims about Sharpie pens bubble up again around California recall

CLAIM: There was fraud in California's recall election because voters were given Sharpie pens or other permanent markers, which is illegal and will invalidate ballots.

THE FACTS: As voters cast their ballots across California on Tuesday and rejected an effort to recall Gov. Gavin Newsom, social media users revived a months-old falsehood that marking your vote in Sharpie or marker was illegal, would render the ballot unreadable or would "force an invalid ballot." One widely viewed post expressed horror that Bay Area voters were given a "black magic marker" at the polls. Similar claims about Sharpie pens invalidating ballots also emerged after the 2020 election and were swiftly debunked then by both election officials and election technology firms. "Sharpie pens are safe and reliable to use on ballots, and recommended due to their quick-drying ink," reads a Nov. 5 statement from Dominion Voting Systems. "Regarding potential ink bleed-through, Dominion's systems never allow for the creation of ballots with overlapping vote bubbles between the front and back pages of a ballot." Many California counties used Dominion Voting Systems technology to tabulate ballots cast in Tuesday's recall election. The company confirmed to The Associated Press on Wednesday that its earlier statements still applied. Jenna Dresner, spokesperson for California's Office of Election Cybersecurity, told the AP that "using a

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Sharpie will not invalidate a ballot." While the Secretary of State's office recommends using blue or black ink, Dresner said there is no law that states what kind of writing utensil must be used to fill out a ballot. "In the event the voting tabulation system is unable to determine the voter's selections, the tabulator is designed to sort the ballots into a separate pile to be reviewed manually to determine voter intent," Dresner said. John Arntz, the director of elections in San Francisco, said the Dominion scanners his office uses are programmed to identify where the voting targets are on each ballot and can determine which bubbles are filled in by detecting pixels. "The system is very sensitive. You could use a Sharpie, you could use a felt-tip pen, a ballpoint pen, a pencil, just about any color except red will get picked up well by this system," Arntz said. He said it has long been considered a best practice to have voting targets staggered on the two sides of a ballot so that ink bleed-through will not be a factor, and Dominion scanners only work with ballots designed that way. "If someone were to, let's say, use a Sharpie and just lay that Sharpie on that voting target and let it bleed for a minute, there is no overlap with the target on the other side," Arntz said.

— Associated Press writers Ali Swenson in New York and Jude Joffe-Block in Phoenix contributed this report.

Video clip misrepresents Biden's comments on hurricane preparedness

CLAIM: A video clip shows Biden stating that individuals should get vaccinated to protect themselves against hurricanes.

THE FACTS: Biden didn't say getting vaccinated would protect against hurricanes. The video clip, first posted on TikTok, was edited to remove key portions of his comments. A review of his full statement shows he said getting vaccinated against COVID-19 is a vital step in hurricane preparedness, necessary to protect people should they have to evacuate or stay in shelters. Biden spoke on Aug. 10 before a White House briefing by FEMA administrator Deanne Criswell, representatives from the Department of Homeland Security and COVID-19 response teams. The briefing was in anticipation of what Biden called the peak of hurricane season in the Atlantic region. On Tuesday, an Instagram user shared a clip of Biden's comments in which he says, "Let me be clear: If you're in a state where hurricanes often strike — like Florida or the Gulf Coast or into Texas — a vital part of preparing for hurricane season is to get vaccinated now." The video then cuts to insulting comments from the movie "Billy Madison." Underneath the video, text was also added. "Get vaccinated to protect yourselves from hurricanes y'all," the post said, adding a laughing emoji. But the caption mischaracterizes Biden's comments, which looked at the importance of vaccines in reducing risks in the event of a natural disaster. He highlighted how crises can compound one another as the Delta variant spreads, with wildfires in the West and peak Atlantic hurricane season approaching. "Everything is more complicated if you're not vaccinated and a hurricane or a natural disaster hits," Biden said after encouraging individuals to get vaccinated. "If you wind up having to evacuate, if you wind up having to stay in a shelter, you don't want to add COVID-19 to the list of dangers that you're going to be confronting."

— Associated Press writer Terrence Fraser in New York contributed this report.

Fake news report makes false claim about Taliban edict

CLAIM: A CNN article reports that the Taliban banned menstrual hygiene products in Afghanistan, saying it goes against Sharia law.

THE FACTS: The article, which was made to look like it was published by CNN, is fabricated. CNN did not publish such a story and no credible reports can be found to support any such action by the Taliban. "Taliban bans sanitary napkins in Afghanistan, says it's not a Sharia complaint practice," says the falsified post, which has multiple spelling errors. A closer look at the post shows that the CNN logo was flipped and the font does not match the cable news network's logo. The post also features a photo that has been circulating online since at least 2015, showing a person standing in front of a shelf full of menstrual hygiene products. A spokesperson for CNN confirmed in an email to The Associated Press that the post was bogus. AP reporters in Afghanistan found no evidence of any such Taliban edict.

— Associated Press writer Arijeta Lajka in New York contributed this report.

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Boston's famous Skinny House sells for a nice fat price

BOSTON (AP) — Boston's famous Skinny House has sold for a nice fat price.

The home in the city's North End hit the market in August for \$1.2 million, and the deal was closed Thursday for \$1.25 million, according to Zillow.

The home "received multiple offers and went under agreement for over list price in less than one week," real estate agency CL Properties posted on Facebook.

The four-story home built in 1862, according to a plaque on the facade, is about 1,165 square feet (108 square meters) — even though it is about 10 feet (3 meters) wide at its widest point and narrows in the back to about 9.25 feet (2.8 meters).

It has two bedrooms and one bathroom and includes a private deck with a view of Boston Harbor. The home does not have a front door. Instead, residents enter through a side door.

It was last sold in 2017 for \$900,000.

It is also known as the Spite House, according to the plaque. According to local lore, two brothers inherited some land. When one of them joined the Army, the other built a large house that took up most of the land. When the soldier brother returned, he built the Skinny House to block his brother's view and sunlight.

UN: Climate pledges put world on 'catastrophic pathway'

By FRANK JORDANS Associated Press

BERLIN (AP) — The world is on a "catastrophic pathway" toward a hotter future unless governments make more ambitious pledges to cut greenhouse gas emissions, the head of the United Nations said Friday.

A new U.N. report reviewing all the national commitments submitted by signatories of the Paris climate accord until July 30 found that they would result in emissions rising nearly 16% by 2030, compared with 2010 levels.

Scientists say the world must start to sharply curb emissions soon and add no more to the atmosphere by 2050 than can be absorbed if it is to meet the most ambitious goal of the Paris accord — capping global temperature rise at 1.5 Celsius (2.7 Fahrenheit) by 2100.

"The world is on a catastrophic pathway to 2.7 degrees (Celsius) of heating," U.N. Secretary-General Antonio Guterres said.

Experts say the planet has already warmed by 1.1 C since pre-industrial times.

"We need a 45% cut in emissions by 2030 to reach carbon neutrality by mid-century," Guterres said.

Some 113 countries including the United States and the European Union submitted updates to their emissions targets, also known as nationally determined contributions or NDCs, by the end of July. Their pledges would result in a 12% drop in emissions for those countries by the end of the decade — a figure that could more than double if some governments' conditional pledges and assurances about aiming for carbon neutrality by 2050 are translated into action.

"That's the positive side of the picture," said U.N. climate chief Patricia Espinosa, whose office compiled the latest report. "The other one is more sobering."

Dozens of countries, including major emitters such as China, India and Saudi Arabia, failed to submit new pledges in time for the report.

Espinosa called for leaders at next week's annual U.N. gathering in New York to put forward stronger commitments in time for the global body's upcoming climate summit in Glasgow.

"Leaders must engage in a frank discussion driven not just by the very legitimate desire to protect na-

tional interest, but also by the equally commanding goal of contributing to the welfare of humanity," she said. "We simply have no more time to spare, and people throughout the world expect nothing less."

Espinosa added that some public pledges, such as China's aim to be carbon neutral by 2060, haven't yet been formally submitted to the U.N. and so weren't taken into account for the report. An update, which would include any further commitments submitted by then, will be issued shortly before the Glasgow summit, she said.

Still, environmental campaigners and representatives of some vulnerable nations expressed their disappointment at the findings.

"We must ask what it will take for some major emitters to heed the scientific findings and deliver our world from a point of no return," said Aubrey Webson of Antigua and Barbuda, who chairs the Association of Small Island States. "The findings are clear – if we are to avoid amplification of our already devastating climate impacts, we need major emitters and all G20 countries to implement and stick to more ambitious NDCs and make strong commitments to net-zero emissions by 2050."

Jennifer Morgan, the executive director of Greenpeace International, said meeting the Paris goal would only be possible with "courageous leadership and bold decisions."

"Governments are letting vested interests call the climate shots, rather than serving the global community," she said. "Passing the buck to future generations has got to stop — we are living in the climate emergency now."

Follow AP's climate coverage at <https://apnews.com/Climate>

Milley: Calls to China were 'perfectly' within scope of job

By LOLITA C. BALDOR Associated Press

ATHENS, Greece (AP) — The top U.S. military officer said Friday that calls he made to his Chinese counterpart in the final stormy months of Donald Trump's presidency were "perfectly within the duties and responsibilities" of his job.

In his first public comments on the conversations, Gen. Mark Milley said such calls are "routine" and were done "to reassure both allies and adversaries in this case in order to ensure strategic stability." The chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff spoke to The Associated Press and another reporter traveling with him to Europe.

Milley has been at the center of a firestorm amid reports he made two calls to Gen. Li Zuocheng of the People's Liberation Army to assure him that the United States was not going to suddenly go to war with or attack China.

Descriptions of the calls made last October and in January were first aired in excerpts from the forthcoming book "Peril" by Washington Post journalists Bob Woodward and Robert Costa. The book says Milley told Li that he would warn Li in the event of an attack.

Milley on Friday offered only a brief defense of his calls, saying he plans a deeper discussion about the matter for Congress when he testifies at a hearing later in September.

"I think it's best that I reserve my comments on the record until I do that in front of the lawmakers who have the lawful responsibility to oversee the U.S. military," Milley said. "I'll go into any level of detail Congress wants to go into in a couple of weeks."

Milley and U.S. Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin are scheduled to testify Sept. 28 before the Senate Armed Services Committee, in what initially was going to be a hearing on the U.S. military withdrawal from Afghanistan and the chaotic evacuation of Americans, Afghans and others from that country.

Now, however, Milley is expected to face tough questioning on the telephone calls, which came during Trump's turbulent last months in office as he challenged the results of the 2020 election. The second call, on Jan. 8, came two days after a violent mob attacked the U.S. Capitol in an effort to prevent Congress from certifying Joe Biden's White House victory.

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A special House committee that is investigating the Jan. 6 riot at the Capitol has asked for details about Milley's calls. U.S. Reps. Bennie Thompson, D-Miss., and Liz Cheney, R-Wyo., leaders of the committee, have also sought records related to the November election, the transfer of power from Trump to Biden and the riot.

Milley was appointed Joint Chiefs chairman by Trump in 2019 and has remained in that post in the Biden administration. As chairman, Milley is the top military adviser to the president and to the defense secretary.

The White House and the Pentagon chief have said they continue to have full trust and confidence in Milley.

The new book says Milley, fearful of Trump's actions late in his term, twice called his Chinese counterpart to assure him that the U.S. was not going to attack China. One call took place on Oct. 30, four days before the American election. The second call was on Jan. 8, less than two weeks before Biden's inauguration and two days after the insurrection at the Capitol by supporters of Trump.

Some U.S. lawmakers have said Milley overstepped his authority, and they have called for Biden to fire him. Trump blasted Milley as treasonous, called him "a complete nutjob" and said Milley "never told me about calls being made to China."

Biden told reporters after the disclosures in the book that "I have great confidence in Gen. Milley."

Milley's office, in a statement this week, said the calls were intended to convey "reassurance" to the Chinese military and were in line with his responsibilities as Joint Chiefs chairman.

The statement from Milley spokesman Col. Dave Butler also said that the calls were "staffed, coordinated and communicated" with the Pentagon and other federal agencies.

According to the book, which the AP obtained, Milley assured his Chinese counterpart in the first call that "the American government is stable and everything is going to be okay." It said he told Li, "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.

Milley spoke with a number of other military leaders around the world after the Jan. 6 riot; they included leaders from the United Kingdom, Russia and Pakistan. A description of those calls in January referred to "several" other counterparts that Milley 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."

In response to the book, U.S. Sen. Marco Rubio, R-Fla., urged Biden to fire Milley, saying the general worked to "actively undermine" the American commander in chief, Trump.

France's Macron unveils model of new, green high-speed train

PARIS (AP) — French President Emmanuel Macron on Friday unveiled a mock-up of the next generation of greener super high-speed trains, known in France as TGVs — four decades after the first TGV was launched.

At a presentation at Paris' Gare de Lyon railway station, Macron played up the new train's eco-friendly aspect.

"This decade for the TGV will be about innovation," Macron said, adding that France must "respond to the challenge of moving around by emitting less and promoting new energy forms."

Macron spoke in front of a full-scale model of the new TGV M. It will carry more passengers — 740 compared to the current train's 600 — and is planned to enter service in 2024. It will also use one fifth less electricity than the current model, while maintaining its top speed of 320 kilometers per hour (199 miles per hour).

The ceremony took place 40 years after another French president, François Mitterrand, launched his bold new gamble in technology at the same station — the first TGV, or "Train a Grande Vitesse" (Very

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Fast Train).

With a line speed of over 270 km/h, according to France's SNCF railway company, that train went on to change the face of modern train travel. It has since been emulated around the world, including recently in the U.K.'s highly anticipated HS2 project.

Macron's government has promised 6.5 billion euros (\$7.6 billion) in new investments this year to expand high-speed train lines, and boosting train use has been part of his government's strategy to reduce emissions.

Today in History

By The Associated Press undefined

Today in History

Today is Saturday, Sept. 18, the 261st day of 2021. There are 104 days left in the year.

Today's Highlight in History:

On Sept. 18, 1975, newspaper heiress Patricia Hearst was captured by the FBI in San Francisco, 19 months after being kidnapped by the Symbionese Liberation Army.

On this date:

In A.D. 14, the Roman Senate officially confirmed Tiberius as the second emperor of the Roman Empire, succeeding the late Augustus.

In 1850, Congress passed the Fugitive Slave Act, which created a force of federal commissioners charged with returning escaped slaves to their owners.

In 1851, the first edition of The New York Times was published.

In 1927, the Columbia Phonograph Broadcasting System (later CBS) made its on-air debut with a basic network of 16 radio stations.

In 1947, the National Security Act, which created a National Military Establishment and the position of Secretary of Defense, went into effect.

In 1961, United Nations Secretary-General Dag Hammarskjöld (dahg HAWM'-ahr-shoold) was killed in a plane crash in northern Rhodesia.

In 1965, the situation comedies "I Dream of Jeannie" and "Get Smart" premiered on NBC.

In 1970, rock star Jimi Hendrix died in London at age 27.

In 1990, the organized crime drama "GoodFellas," directed by Martin Scorsese, had its U.S. premiere in New York.

In 2001, a week after the Sept. 11 attack, President George W. Bush said he hoped to "rally the world" in the battle against terrorism and predicted that all "people who love freedom" would join. Letters postmarked Trenton, N.J., that later tested positive for anthrax were sent to the New York Post and NBC anchorman Tom Brokaw.

In 2010, despite Taliban rocket strikes and bombings, Afghans voted for a new parliament in the first election since a fraud-marred ballot cast doubt on the legitimacy of the embattled government.

In 2014, voters in Scotland rejected independence, opting to remain part of the United Kingdom in a historic referendum. The Royal and Ancient Golf Club at St. Andrews, Scotland, ended years of male-only exclusivity as its members voted overwhelmingly in favor of inviting women to join.

Ten years ago: Dominique Strauss-Kahn, former head of the International Monetary Fund, broke his silence four months after a New York hotel maid accused him of sexual assault, calling his encounter with the woman a "moral failing" he deeply regretted, but insisting in an interview on French television that no violence was involved. A magnitude 6.9 earthquake shook northeastern India and Nepal, resulting in some 100 deaths. For a second year, Emmy Awards for drama and comedy went to "Mad Men" and "Modern Family."

Five years ago: At the United Nations, the United States, Japan and South Korea roundly condemned North Korea's latest nuclear test and called for tough new measures to further isolate the communist state. The Los Angeles Rams defeated the Seattle Seahawks 9-3 at the Los Angeles Memorial Coliseum

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in a game that marked the return of pro football to the nation's second-largest market for the first time in nearly 22 years. "Game of Thrones" was honored at the Emmy Awards as top drama for the second consecutive year; "Veep" repeated as best comedy series.

One year ago: Supreme Court Justice Ruth Bader Ginsburg, a towering women's rights champion who became the court's second female justice, died at her home in Washington at the age of 87 of complications from pancreatic cancer; her death set off a battle over whether President Donald Trump should nominate a successor, or the seat should remain vacant until the outcome of the election six weeks away. (Trump would nominate Amy Coney Barrett, who was confirmed by the Republican-led Senate days before the election.) The Commerce Department said it would ban Chinese-owned TikTok and WeChat from U.S. app stores, citing national security and data privacy concerns. (Courts temporarily blocked the attempted ban, and the Biden administration in 2021 dropped those Trump-era executive orders.)

Today's Birthdays: Actor Robert Blake is 88. Gospel singer Bobby Jones is 83. Singer Frankie Avalon is 81. Actor Beth Grant is 72. Rock musician Kerry Livgren is 72. Actor Anna Deavere Smith is 71. Former U.S. Secretary of Housing and Urban Development Ben Carson, is 70. Basketball Hall of Fame coach Rick Pitino is 69. Sen. Tommy Tuberville, R-Ala., is 67. College Football Hall of Famer and retired NFL player Billy Sims is 66. Movie director Mark Romanek is 62. Baseball Hall of Famer Ryne Sandberg is 62. Alt-country-rock musician Mark Olson is 60. Singer Joanne Catherall (Human League) is 59. Actor Holly Robinson Peete is 57. R&B singer Ricky Bell (Bell Biv DeVoe and New Edition) is 54. Actor Aisha Tyler is 51. Former racing cyclist Lance Armstrong is 50. Opera singer Anna Netrebko is 50. Actor Jada Pinkett Smith is 50. Actor James Marsden is 48. Actor Emily Rutherford is 47. Actor Travis Schuldt is 47. Rapper Xzibit is 47. Comedian-actor Jason Sudeikis is 46. Actor Sophina Brown is 45. Actor Barrett Foa is 44. Talk show host Sara Haines (TV: "GMA3: Strahan, Sara & Keke") is 44. Actor/comedian Billy Eichner is 43. Actor Alison Lohman is 42. Designer Brandon Maxwell is 37. Congressman and former NFL player Anthony Gonzalez, R-Ohio, is 37. Actors Brandon and Taylor Porter are 28. Actor Patrick Schwarzenegger is 28. Country singer Tae Dye (Maddie and Tae) is 26. Actor C.J. Sanders is 25.