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Upcoming Events

Thursday, Oct. 14

High School LifeTouch Pictures, 8 a.m. to 11 a.m.
3:30 p.m.: Region 1A cross Country Meet in Webster
4:00 p.m.: Junior High Football Jamboree in Groton

Volleyball hosts Milbank (7th/C match at 6:55 p.m., 8th/JV at 6 p.m. with varsity to follow (Parent's Night)

Friday, Oct. 15

7 p.m.: Football at Sisseton

Saturday, Oct. 16

Oral Interp at Florence
State Soccer in Sioux Falls
Volleyball Tourney in Milbank (Groton vs. Sisseton at 9 a.m., vs. Sioux Valley at noon and Mobridge at 1 p.m. Finals are set for 3 p.m. and 4 p.m.)

Monday, Oct. 18

Volleyball at Langford. JV at 6:30 p.m. followed by varsity.

Tuesday, Oct. 19

Volleyball hosts Northwestern. 7th/C match at 5 p.m., 8th/JV at 6 p.m., Varsity to follow

Wednesday, Oct. 20

Senior Scholarship Info Night at GHS Library Conference Room, 6 p.m.

Thursday, Oct. 21

First Round Football Playoffs

Friday, Oct. 22

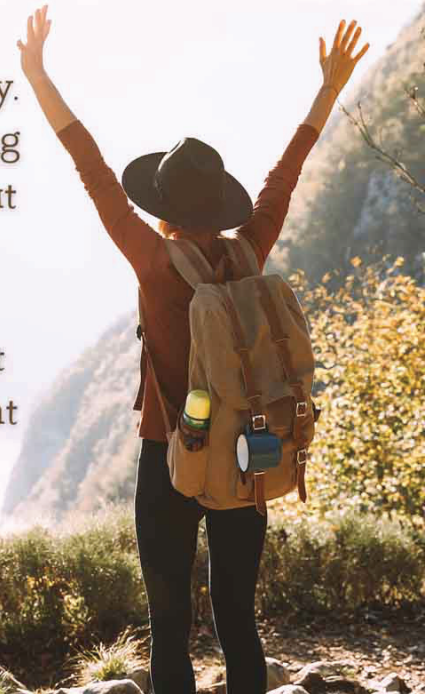
End of First Quarter

Volleyball at Aberdeen Roncalli. (7th at 5 p.m., 8th

"Yes to everything scary. Yes to everything that takes me out of my comfort zone. Yes to everything that feels like it might be crazy."

-Shonda Rhimes

Chicken Soup
for the Soul



at 6 p.m., JV at 6 p.m. followed by varsity.

Saturday, Oct. 23

State Cross Country at Yankton Trail Park in Sioux Falls.

Oral Interp at NSU Invitational

ACT Testing at GHS, 8 a.m. to Noon

Starting 10/24/21, you must dial the area code for all calls. This change supports 988 as the new 3-digit code to reach the National Suicide Prevention Lifeline.

OPEN: Recycling Trailer in Groton

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

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Social Security Recipients to see 5.9% Increase

Social Security and Supplemental Security Income (SSI) benefits for approximately 70 million Americans will increase 5.9 percent in 2022, the Social Security Administration announced yesterday.

The 5.9 percent cost-of-living adjustment (COLA) will begin with benefits payable to more than 64 million Social Security beneficiaries in January 2022. Increased payments to approximately 8 million SSI beneficiaries will begin on December 30, 2021. (Note: some people receive both Social Security and SSI benefits). The Social Security Act ties the annual COLA to the increase in the Consumer Price Index as determined by the Department of Labor's Bureau of Labor Statistics.

Some other adjustments that take effect in January of each year are based on the increase in average wages. Based on that increase, the maximum amount of earnings subject to the Social Security tax (taxable maximum) will increase to \$147,000 from \$142,800.

Social Security and SSI beneficiaries are normally notified by mail starting in early December about their new benefit amount. Most people who receive Social Security payments will be able to view their COLA notice online through their personal my Social Security account. People may create or access their my Social Security account online at www.socialsecurity.gov/myaccount.

Information about Medicare changes for 2022, when announced, will be available at www.medicare.gov. For Social Security beneficiaries receiving Medicare, Social Security will not be able to compute their new benefit amount until after the Medicare premium amounts for 2022 are announced. Final 2022 benefit amounts will be communicated to beneficiaries in December through the mailed COLA notice and my Social Security's Message Center.

The Social Security Act provides for how the COLA is calculated. To read more, please visit www.socialsecurity.gov/cola.

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Pumpkin Fest Photos



St. John's Lutheran youth group helped with pumpkin painting.

(Photo by April Abeln)



Alandra Graff with pumpkin fest shirt, random prize winner. (Photo by April Abeln)



Elowen Cutler with grandma Nancy Cutler, random prize winner, lots of prizes donated by local businesses and groups. (Photo by April Abeln)

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Hope Block face painter. (Photo by April Abeln)



Big pumpkin weighed 1195 pounds. (Photo by April Abeln)



Part of lunch crew, Lisa Adler, Suzie Easthouse, Zona Schanzenbach, and Jessica Adler, grain bin from Darrell Hillestad. (Photo by April Abeln)

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Volunteers- Kim Bell, April Abeln, Hope Block, and Valerie Baker. (Photo courtesy from April Abeln)



Dave McGannon organized Hay rides prior to event and during. (Photo by April Abeln)

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Karyn Babcock face painter. (Photo by April Abeln)



Kate's Confections sold baked goods and breakfast burritos. (Photo by April Abeln)



Jump Zone Inflatables sponsored by Groton Legion. (Photo by April Abeln)

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Katelyn Nehlich was 1 of the train drivers, other one was Steve Gebur. (Photo by April Abeln)



Part of lunch crew- Stacy Mayou and Kathy Gubin. (Photo by April Abeln)

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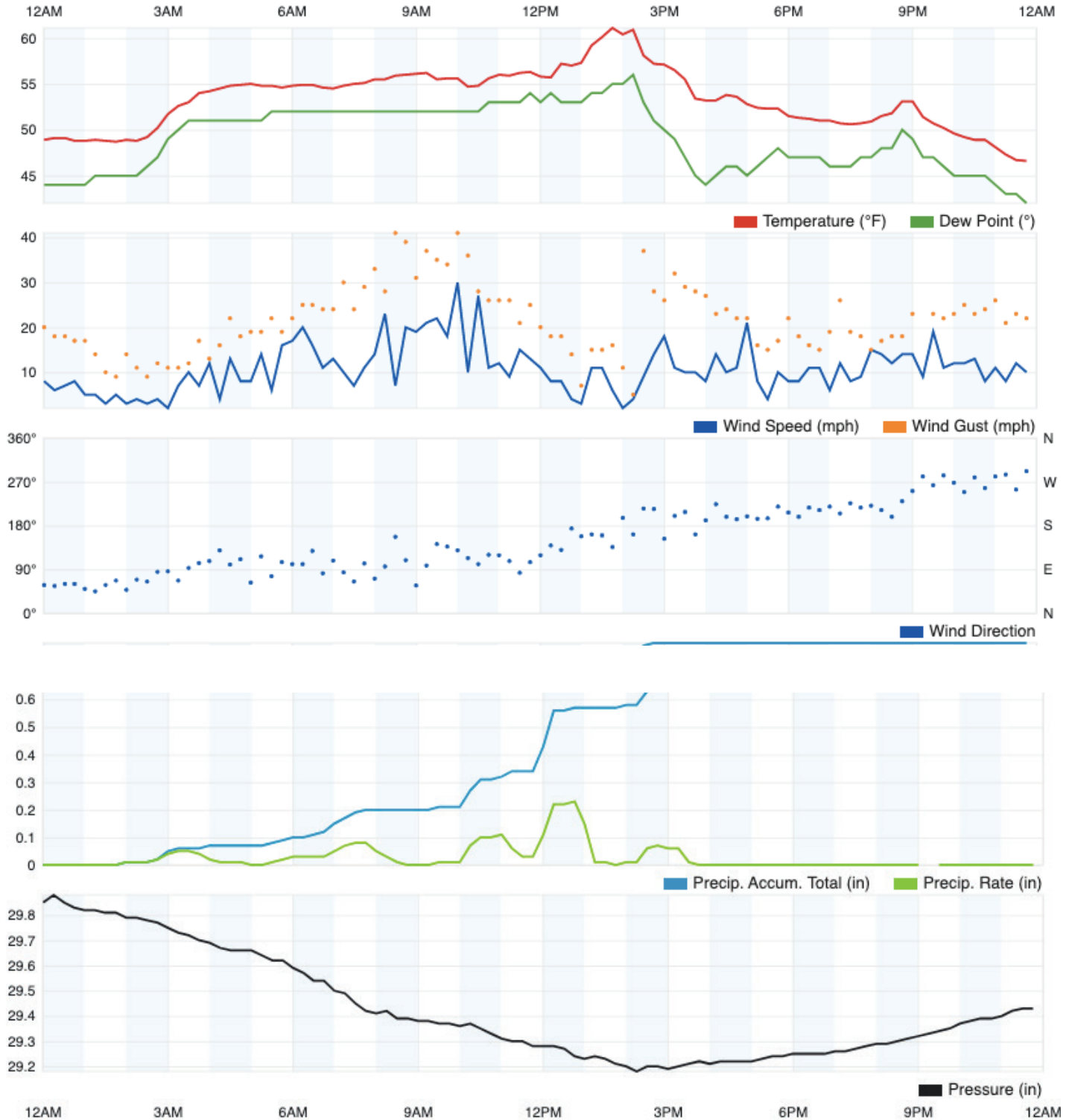


Aerial photo from Brett Anderson.

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Yesterday's Groton Weather Graphs



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Today



Decreasing
Clouds

High: 54 °F

Tonight



Partly Cloudy

Low: 34 °F

Friday



Mostly Sunny
then Mostly
Sunny and
Breezy

High: 55 °F

Friday
Night



Mostly Clear

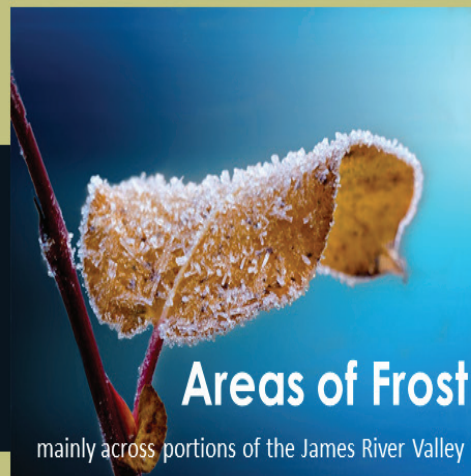
Low: 32 °F

Saturday



Frost then
Sunny

High: 61 °F



Areas of Frost

mainly across portions of the James River Valley

WEATHER OUTLOOK

Today



Breezy W winds

Tonight



Areas of Frost
mainly across portions of
the James River Valley

Friday



Friday Night



Areas to Widespread of Frost
mainly across portions of
the James River Valley

Highs in the 50s / Lows in the 30s



NWS Aberdeen, SD

Dry weather is expected through early next week. Temperatures falling into the low to mid 30s will result in areas of frost tonight and again Friday night, mainly across portions of the James River Valley. Friday night is when temperatures should drop a couple of degrees lower than tonight. These temperatures, combined with lighter winds, will result in a higher chance of frost.

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Today in Weather History

October 14, 1969: Cold air during the overnight produced lows from six degrees in Custer, Gillette, and Devils Tower to fifteen degrees in Dupree, Hot Springs, and the Rapid City Airport.

1909: An F3 tornado struck Pittsburg Landing and Stantonville, TN killing 23 people and injuring 80 others.

1941: America's first television weather forecast was broadcast on New York's WNBT (later WNBC). There weren't many televisions at that time, so viewers were limited to perhaps a few hundred people. The weathercast consisted of a sponsor's message followed by a text screen containing the next day's forecast.

1957 - Floodwaters roared through a migrant labor camp near the town of Picacho AZ flooding fifty cabins and a dozen nearby homes. 250 migrant workers lost their shelters. The month was one of the wettest Octobers in Arizona weather history. (The Weather Channel)

1965 - Heavy rains hit the coastal areas of southeastern Florida. In a 24 hour period rains of twenty inches were reported from Deerfield Beach to Fort Lauderdale, with 25.28 inches on the Fort Lauderdale Bahia-Mar Yacht Basin. Flooding that resulted caused considerable damage to roads and streets. The rains inundated numerous newly planted vegetable fields, and some residences. Ten miles away just 4.51 inches of rain was reported. (14th- 15th) (David Ludlum) (The Weather Channel)

1981 - Four days of heavy rain across northern Texas and southern Oklahoma came to an end. The heaviest rains fell in a band from southwest of Abilene TX to McAlester OK, with up to 26 inches reported north of Gainesville, in north central Texas. The heavy rains were the result of decaying Hurricane Norma, which also spawned thirteen tornadoes across the region. Seven deaths were attributed to the flooding. (Storm Data)

1984 - Dense fog contributed to a 118 vehicle accident on I-94, just south of Milwaukee WI. It was the seventh day of an eight day stretch of dense fog. At the time of the accident the visibility was reportedly close to zero. (Storm Data)

1987 - Sixteen cities, mostly in the Appalachian Region, reported record low temperatures for the date. Record lows included 43 degrees at Lake Charles LA, 35 degrees at Augusta GA, and 27 degrees at Asheville NC. Gale force winds buffeted the Carolina coast. Light snow fell across parts of Wyoming, Colorado, and western South Dakota. (The National Weather Summary)

1988 - Forty cities in the eastern U.S. reported record low temperatures for the date. Elkins WV was the cold spot in the nation with a record low of 18 degrees above zero. Thunderstorms in Arizona drenched Phoenix with nine inches of rain in nine hours, the fifth highest total for any given day in ninety-two years of records. Carefree AZ was soaked with two inches of rain. (The National Weather Summary)

1989 - Thunderstorms produced severe weather over Michigan during the morning, and over New York State and Connecticut during the afternoon and evening hours. Thunderstorms spawned two tornadoes, and there were ninety reports of large hail or damaging winds, including seventy reports of damaging winds in New York State. A tornado at McDonough NY killed one person and injured three other people. Strong thunderstorm winds gusted to 105 mph at Somerset. Temperatures warmed into the 80s and lower 90s over much of the nation east of the Rockies, with eleven cities reporting record high temperatures for the date. Afternoon highs of 81 degrees at Beckley WV and Bluefield WV equalled October records. (Storm Data) (The National Weather Summary)

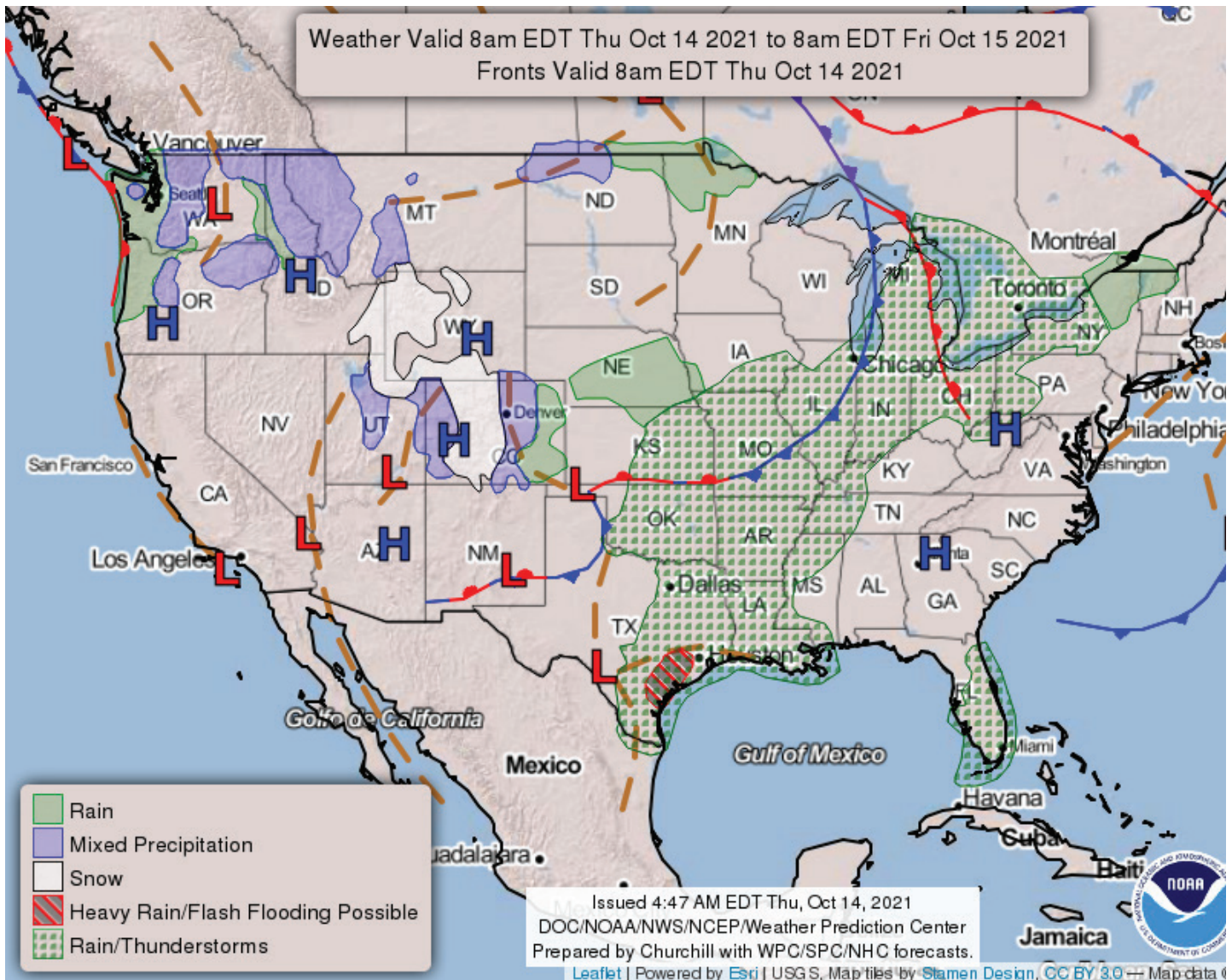
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Yesterday's Groton Weather Today's Info

High Temp: 61.1 °F at 1:45 PM
Low Temp: 46.6 °F at 11:45 PM
Wind: 41 mph at 10:00 AM
Precip: 0.64

Record High: 87° in 1962
Record Low: 10° in 1937
Average High: 61°F
Average Low: 34°F
Average Precip in Oct.: 1.05
Precip to date in Oct.: 1.94
Average Precip to date: 19.38
Precip Year to Date: 17.36
Sunset Tonight: 6:50:02 PM
Sunrise Tomorrow: 7:47:50 AM



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GOOD REASONS TO REJOICE!

Centuries ago, there was a legend that mystics would share with their followers. "The Lord, at one time," went the legend, "colored all the flowers green. But one day He dipped His finger in the pot at the bottom of the rainbow and when He took it out it was covered with many different colors. When He saw how beautiful the colors were, He decided to paint each of the flowers a different color and give each of them their name."

"One morning," the legend continues, "a beautiful flower with small blue, pink and white flowers was asked, 'What's your name?'" The flower hung its head, sighed and said, "Oh my, I forgot."

Embarrassed, the flower confessed to the Lord, "I'm so sorry, but I have forgotten my name." And the Lord said, "That's all right. Everyone forgets some things. But I have not forgotten you." Then He added, "Whatever else you do, 'For-Get-Me-Not,' for I am the God who created you!"

From that day until today, this lovely little flower has been called "For-Get-Me Not." Whenever we see it, we need to remember the words of David, "Praise the Lord, all my soul, and forget not all - or perhaps better stated - forget not any of His benefits."

We seldom think of the extensive range of God's gifts! Every beat of our heart, every breath we inhale, every sight we see or noise we hear, every step we take, every taste we enjoy, every friend we have, every blessing we receive, every promise of His that we claim - and mostly our salvation - are only the beginning of His benefits to us.

Prayer: Lord! How gracious You are to give us so many gifts - beginning with our salvation. Most importantly, though, give us thankful hearts. In Jesus' Name, Amen.

Scripture For Today: Praise the Lord, O my soul and do not forget all His benefits. Psalm 103:2

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2021 Community Events

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

News from the Associated Press

Attorney: Photo business that closed working with customers

BISMARCK, N.D. (AP) — An attorney for a North Dakota photography business that abruptly went out of business and left many wedding couples in limbo said Wednesday the company is working to release photos and images, It's unclear whether customers who paid in advance for uncompleted work will be refunded.

Two state agencies are investigating the shutdown of Glasser Images and the business owner is facing several lawsuits. The attorney general has received more than 450 complaints from customers and photographers who worked as contractors for the company. The Department of Labor and Human Rights has received claims from Glasser employees seeking unpaid wages.

Fargo attorney Tim O'Keeffe said the photos and videos are being secured and "kept safely" on hard drives, but it's a "logistical challenge" to get them to customers and it could take weeks. He declined to comment on the status of any potential refunds.

"As some of you know, this is a large photography studio, imaging studio, 150 subcontractors working with Glasser Images," O'Keeffe said. "There were weddings being shot throughout North Dakota and other states."

Glasser Images photographed weddings throughout the Dakotas, Minnesota and Colorado without charging for travel costs, according to the company website. Owner Jack Glasser said in a statement that the studio could not remain financially viable, due in large part to the coronavirus pandemic.

South Dakota newspaper sues House Speaker for open records

SIOUX FALLS, S.D. (AP) — The South Dakota House speaker is facing a lawsuit over his decision to withhold from a newspaper the names of lawmakers who petitioned for a special legislative session to consider impeaching the attorney general.

The Sioux Falls Argus Leader and the South Dakota Newspaper Association filed a lawsuit Wednesday alleging that Republican Rep. Spencer Gosch violated state open records laws by refusing requests for the names of lawmakers who signed on to a petition for the special session. Attorney General Jason Ravnsborg is facing potential impeachment next month for his conduct in a car crash that killed a pedestrian last year.

In order to call a special session, both the House and Senate had to gain support from two-thirds of their members. While the Senate leadership has released the names of lawmakers who signed the petition, Gosch has refused to release the names of House lawmakers who supported it. He has argued that information is exempted from open records laws because it falls under an exception that keeps "correspondence" from being released to the public.

"It's inexcusable for Speaker Gosch to continue hiding this information from the public," Argus Leader News Director Cory Myers said.

Gosch has recently declined to comment on the matter and referred questions to his attorney, the Sioux Falls Argus Leader reported. Gosch's attorney John Von Wald declined to comment on the lawsuit, saying he does not comment on pending litigation.

Gosch told the Argus Leader in September that the names of lawmakers who voted for the special session were not relevant to the actual articles of impeachment that the House may consider.

The lawsuit asks the Supreme Court to not only require Gosch to release the names of lawmakers who supported the special session, but stop the Legislature from convening until the litigation is resolved.

Editorial Roundup: South Dakota

By The Associated Press undefined
Yankton Press & Dakotan. October 12, 2021.

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Editorial: A New Use For The Mall, For Better And Worse

Members of the Yankton School Board heard some good news Monday night when they were told that River City Gymnastics and Cheer, which has been using facilities at Yankton High School (YHS), would be moving to a new training location: the former JC Penney space in the Yankton Mall.

It's good news because it will relieve some of the congestion at the high school's limited facilities. It would also allow the YHS gymnastics team to train at the new location and, according to the agreement approved Monday, hold this winter's three home meets there.

But, in a way, that's also the bad news.

It tells us that nothing is (or was) on the radar in terms of finding a new retail tenant for the former JC Penney site.

That's frustrating.

Mind you, this takes nothing away from the value of River City Gymnastics and Cheer getting a spacious new facility to stretch out and expand. The added room promotes both safety for the participants and allows for more kids to get involved.

However, we still can't help but see the site as 30,000 square feet of commercial space sitting vacant — space that this community could really use to address its need to expand its retail offerings and draw more customers and more revenue to town.

Perhaps that thinking no longer fits the current reality. These are challenging times for such things. Given the fallout from COVID-19 and the recent downward trend of brick-and-mortar businesses as primary retail drivers, drawing businesses to town — or promoting such development locally — are tough sells, especially when such businesses are more apt to be contracting than expanding. For instance, Sears (which left this town for good last year) announced another round of store closures a few weeks ago, including its last store in Illinois, the state where the business was founded. These are tough times, indeed.

In Yankton, the pandemic basically shut down the mall in general. While a couple of businesses still operate there, the facility is mostly a deserted shell. And since malls are struggling all across the country these days, perhaps it's foolish to even hope for a turnaround of fortunes there, at least at this point.

While turning the old JC Penney's slot into a gymnastics/dance facility takes what was, in theory, a potentially attractive piece of retail property off the boards — the River City group reportedly has an option to buy the space — there is still other unused retail space available, such as the former Dunham's location, where some hope to attract future prospects resides.

But that has been going slowly, if at all. The drastic changes in the retail economy, not to mention the problematic management of the Yankton Mall in general, has made that space virtually a graveyard.

Again, our disappointment in the news about the old JC Penney site has absolutely nothing to do with River City Gymnastics and Cheer or YHS gymnastics; it does have everything to do with this community's prospects for retail expansion. While the city's revenues have been chugging along, the lack of significant input from the mall site remains frustrating.

As for River City Gymnastics and Cheer's move to the Penney's site, it's better to have something there than to have nothing there, which is what has haunted that spot for the past couple years. It's a big step forward for them.

Meanwhile, we can still hope for a change in retail direction that's been too long in coming but may be too much to ask.

END

SD Lottery

By The Associated Press undefined

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

Dakota Cash

01-23-26-27-34

(one, twenty-three, twenty-six, twenty-seven, thirty-four)

Estimated jackpot: \$141,000

Lotto America

09-14-15-34-44, Star Ball: 8, ASB: 3

(nine, fourteen, fifteen, thirty-four, forty-four; Star Ball: eight; ASB: three)

Estimated jackpot: \$3.25 million

Mega Millions

Estimated jackpot: \$84 million

Powerball

23-29-47-59-60, Powerball: 15, Power Play: 2

(twenty-three, twenty-nine, forty-seven, fifty-nine, sixty; Powerball: fifteen; Power Play: two)

Estimated jackpot: \$50 million

Police in Sioux Falls searching for men in stabbing

SIoux FALLS, S.D. (AP) — Police in Sioux Falls are trying to find whoever stabbed a man and left him fighting for his life.

The Sioux Falls Argus Leader reported Tuesday that a 32-year-old man was stabbed Sunday night about 10:30 p.m. in the central portion of the city.

The man suffered life-threatening injuries, including cuts to his head, and was taken to a hospital. Police said Tuesday his condition hasn't improved and he could still die.

Surveillance video from a business shows two men possibly assaulted the man. Investigators say the men aren't considered suspects yet but police spokesman Sam Clemens said they're "people of interest."

Sioux Falls zoo says COVID may have killed snow leopard

SIoux FALLS, S.D. (AP) — Officials at a Sioux Falls zoo say COVID-19 may have killed one of their snow leopards.

The Sioux Falls Argus Leader reported Wednesday that the animal, named Baya, died at the Great Plains Zoo on Thursday of a respiratory illness that might have been COVID-19. Test results are pending.

The snow leopard began coughing on Oct. 3. By Oct. 4 she was acting lethargic and wouldn't eat. Zoo veterinarians gave Baya antibiotics on Thursday but she was in critical condition later in the day.

Baya was two-and-a-half years old and had been at the zoo since early 2021. Zoo officials had hoped she would mate with another snow leopard named Strut.

Zoo officials said Monday that a tiger at the zoo tested positive for COVID-19 on Oct. 6, the day before Baya died. Five other big cats at the zoo have shown COVID-19 symptoms, including Strut. Most of the animals have been on antibiotics and are improving, said Matt Eschenbrenner, the zoo's director of animal care and conservation.

He said the zoo hopes to bring in another snow leopard to replace Baya but it's unclear when that animal might arrive.

"We can't even think about bringing in another animal until we know everything has passed and our animals are healthy, 100%," Eschenbrenner said.

The AP Interview: Kerry says climate talks may miss target

By ELLEN KNICKMEYER Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — Crucial U.N. climate talks next month likely will end short of the global target for cutting coal, gas and oil emissions, U.S. climate envoy John Kerry says, after nearly a year of climate diplomacy that helped win deeper cuts from allies but has so far failed to move some of the world's biggest polluters to act fast enough.

In an interview with The Associated Press, Kerry credited the United States, the European Union, Japan and others that over the past year have pledged bigger, faster cuts in climate-wrecking fossil fuel emis-

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sions ahead of the talks in Glasgow, Scotland, under nudging from Kerry and the Biden administration. He expressed hope enough nations would join in over the next couple of years. "By the time Glasgow's over, we're going to know who is doing their fair share, and who isn't," he said.

Kerry also spoke of the impact if the U.S. Congress — under a slim Democratic majority — fails to pass legislation for significant action on climate by the United States itself, as the Biden administration aims to regain leadership on climate action. "It would be like President Trump pulling out of the Paris agreement, again," Kerry said.

Kerry spoke to the AP on Wednesday in a conference room down the hall from his office at the State Department, its upper corridors still eerily shy of people in the coronavirus pandemic. Kerry's comments came after nine months of intensive climate diplomacy by plane, phone and computer screen aimed at nailing down the most global commitments of action on climate possible ahead of the U.N. climate summit, which opens Oct. 31 in Scotland.

Kerry plans final stops in Mexico, and in Saudi Arabia, where he expected new, last-minute climate pledges ahead of the summit, before settling in Glasgow for two weeks of talks.

Kerry's efforts abroad, along with President Joe Biden's multibillion-dollar promises of legislation and support for cleaner-burning energy at home, come after President Donald Trump pulled the United States out of the Paris climate accord.

Kerry rejected a suggestion he was seeking to lower expectations for the summit, which became a deadline — but not a final one, leaders have begun stressing — for countries to announce how hard they will work to switch their economies from polluting to cleaner-burning. Kerry and others early on billed the Glasgow summit as "the last, best chance" to drum up momentum for the emissions cuts, investment in renewable energy, and aid to less-wealthy countries to allow them to switch from dirty-burning coal and petroleum in time to limit warming to 2.7 degrees Fahrenheit (1.5 degrees Celsius).

Scientists warn the damage is irreversible and headed to catastrophic levels absent major cuts in emissions.

When it comes to closing the divide between cuts promised by countries and the cuts needed, "We will hopefully be moving very close to that...though there will be a gap and...we've got to be honest about the gap, and we have to use the gap as further motivation to continue to accelerate as fast as we can," Kerry said Wednesday.

In the meantime, money pouring into developing cleaner technology such as battery storage will be spurring the advances that will make it easier for laggard countries to catch up, he contended.

A senior U.N. official separately briefing reporters Wednesday also spoke less stirringly than international leaders often have previously of the expected accomplishments of Glasgow. Speaking on condition of anonymity to discuss the matter, the official left open the door that some work on getting to the international goal of a 45% cut in emissions by 2030 may not be done by end of the Glasgow climate negotiations. The official stressed that the Paris accord allows countries to submit stronger pledges at any time.

Critically, Kerry's repeated trips to China and diplomatic efforts by other countries have failed so far to win public promises of faster emissions cuts from that key climate player, although China did newly pledge last month to stop financing coal-fired power plants overseas. China's enthusiasm for dirty-burning coal power at home and abroad help make it the world's biggest current climate polluter by far. China under President Xi Jinping shows no interest in being seen as following the U.S. lead on climate or anything else.

Kerry declined to single out China by name as one reason why Glasgow might not be as big a success as it could have been — although surprise announcements by China remain a possibility.

"It would be wonderful if everybody came and everybody hit the 1.5 degrees mark now," he said. "That would be terrific. But some countries just don't have the energy mix yet that allows them to do that."

For Biden at home, it's the lawmaker mix that's the problem. Holdouts from the president's own party so far are blocking the administration's multibillion-dollar climate legislation of the kind needed to make good on U.S. pledges to slash its emissions at least in half by 2030.

Asked how the administration's troubles delivering on its own climate promises affect his work rallying

climate action abroad, Kerry said, "Well, it hurts."

"I'm not going to pretend it's the best way to send the best message. I mean, we need to do these things," he said.

Kerry added he was optimistic Congress would step up. "I don't know what shape it'll take...or which piece of legislation, it'll be in, but I believe we're going to act responsibly" at home, he said.

Seth Borenstein contributed from Washington.

Norway bow-and-arrow suspect was flagged for radicalization

By PAAL NORDSETH, JAN M. OLSEN and MARK LEWIS Associated Press

KONGSBERG, Norway (AP) — A Danish man suspected of a bow-and-arrow attack on a small Norwegian town that killed five people and wounded two others is a Muslim convert who was previously flagged as having been radicalized, police said Thursday.

The man is suspected of having shot at people in a number of locations in the town of Kongsberg on Wednesday evening. Several of the victims were in a supermarket, police said.

"There earlier had been worries of the man having been radicalized," Police chief Ole B. Saeverud told a news conference. He added that there were "complicated assessments related to the motive, and it will take time before this is clarified." He didn't elaborate on what was meant by being radicalized.

Ann Iren Svane Mathiassen, the police attorney who is leading the investigation, told Norwegian broadcaster NRK that the suspect will be assessed by forensic psychiatric experts Thursday.

"This is not unusual in such serious cases," she was quoted as saying.

The victims were four women and one man between the ages of 50 and 70, Saeverud said.

Police were alerted at 6:12 p.m. on Wednesday to a man shooting arrows in Kongsberg, some 66 kilometers (41 miles) southwest of Oslo. Officers made contact with the suspect but he escaped and wasn't caught until 6:47 p.m., Saeverud said.

Officials believe that the man didn't start killing people until police arrived on the scene.

"From what we know now, it is reasonably clear that some, probably everyone, was killed after the police were in contact with the perpetrator," Saeverud said.

Speaking calmly and clearly after his arrest, the suspect told police, "I did this," said Svane Mathiassen. The suspect "clearly described what he had done. He admitted killing the five people," she told The Associated Press

The rampage happened in clear view of dozens of witnesses in this small town, which today is in hushed shock, according to onlookers. Police have already spoken to between 20 and 30 witnesses who saw the attacker wound and kill his victims, according to Svane Mathiassen.

"There are people who saw him in the city. Before the killings. That is when he injured people," she said.

Erik Benum, who lives on the same road as the supermarket that was one of the crime scenes, told the AP that he saw the escaped shop workers sheltering in doorways.

"I saw them hiding in the corner. Then I went to see what was happening, and I saw the police moving in with a shield and rifles. It was a very strange sight."

The following morning, the whole town was eerily quiet, he said. "People are sad and shocked."

The bow and arrows were just part of the killer's arsenal. Police are yet to confirm what other weapons he used. Weapons experts and other technical officers are being drafted in to help with the investigation.

Both the hospitalized victims are in intensive care. They include an off-duty police officer who was inside the store. Their condition was not immediately known.

The suspect is being held on preliminary charges, which is a step short of formal charges. He will formally face a custody hearing Friday. Police believe he acted alone.

"It goes without saying that this is a very serious and extensive situation, and it naturally affects Kongsberg and those who live here," Police spokesman Oeyvind Aas said earlier.

Norwegian media reported that the suspect previously had been convicted of burglary and possession of

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drugs, and last year a local court granted a restraining order ordering him to stay away from his parents for a six-month period after he threatened to kill one of them.

Newly appointed Prime Minister-Jonas Gahr Stoere called the attack "horrific."

"This is unreal. But the reality is that five people have been killed, many are injured and many are in shock," Gahr Stoere told Norwegian broadcaster NRK.

In a statement to the mayor of Kongsberg, Norwegian King Harald V said people have "experienced that their safe local environment suddenly became a dangerous place. It shakes us all when horrible things happen near us, when you least expect it, in the middle of everyday life on the open street."

U.N. Secretary-General Antonio Guterres wrote on Twitter that he was "shocked and saddened by the tragic news coming from Norway."

The main church in Kongsberg, a small town of some 26,000 inhabitants, was open to anyone in need of support.

"I don't think anyone expects to have these kinds of experiences. But nobody could imagine this could happen here in our little town," parish priest Reidar Aasboe told the AP.

Mass killings are rare in low-crime Norway.

The country's worst peacetime slaughter was on July 22, 2011, when right-wing extremist Anders Breivik set off a bomb in the capital, Oslo, killing eight people. Then he headed to tiny Utoya Island, where he stalked the mostly teen members of the Labor Party's youth wing and killed another 69 victims.

Breivik was sentenced to 21 years in prison, the maximum under Norwegian law, but his term can be extended as long as he's considered a danger to society.

Olsen reported from Copenhagen, Denmark, and Lewis from London.

Report: 3 killed in Beirut amid clashes over blast probe

By ZEINA KARAM and HASSAN AMMAR Associated Press

BEIRUT (AP) — At least three people were killed and many more injured Thursday during a protest in Beirut by the militant group Hezbollah and its allies against the lead judge probing last year's massive blast in the city's port, according to the National News Agency.

The exchanges of fire involving snipers, pistols, Kalashnikovs and rocket-propelled grenades were a dangerous escalation of tensions over the domestic probe.

Gunfire echoed in the capital and ambulances rushed to the scene, sirens wailing. Snipers shot from buildings. Bullets penetrated apartment windows in the area. Four projectiles fell near a private French school, Freres of Furn el Chebbak, causing panic, a security official said, speaking on condition of anonymity because he was not authorized to speak to the press.

The students huddled in the central corridors with the windows open to avoid major impact, in scenes reminiscent of the 1975-90 civil war.

The protest outside the Justice Palace was called for by the powerful Hezbollah group and its allies who are demanding the removal of Judge Tarek Bitar.

It was not immediately clear what triggered the gunfire, but tensions were high along a former civil war front-line between Muslim Shiite and Christian areas.

The right wing Christian Lebanese Forces mobilized supporters Wednesday evening after Hezbollah and its allies called for the protest at the Justice Palace, located in a Christian area. Videos circulating on social media showed supporters of the Christian Lebanese Forces marching in the streets, carrying large crosses.

A journalist with The Associated Press saw one man open fire with a pistol during the protest, as well as gunmen shooting in the direction of protesters from the balcony of a building. At least two men were seen injured and bleeding. The army deployed heavily and sent patrols to the area to search for the gunmen, following the exchanges of gunfire between the Muslim and Christian sides of the capital.

In a statement, Prime Minister Najib Mikati appealed for calm and urged people "not to be dragged into civil strife."

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Hundreds of tons of ammonium nitrates that had been improperly stored at a port warehouse detonated on August 4, 2020, killing at least 215 people, injuring thousands and destroying parts of nearby neighborhoods. It was one of the largest non-nuclear explosions in history and has further devastated the country already roiled by political divisions and unprecedented economic and financial meltdown.

Bitar, the second judge to lead the complicated investigation, has come up against formidable opposition from Lebanon's powerful Hezbollah group and its allies who accuse him of singling out politicians for questioning, most of them allied with Hezbollah.

None of Hezbollah's officials have so far been charged in the 14-month-old investigation.

The shooting continued even after army troops deployed to the area Thursday, with the sound of exchange of fire ringing over their heads. Residents and civilians in the area were ducking to avoid the shooting, some screaming: "Some martyrs on the ground!" People pulled one man who was apparently shot and down, away from the line of fire. Others pulled another body away.

The army then began firing at the crowd. The streets quickly became deserted, with only sounds of bullets. Shops were shut down.

The armed clash could derail the country's month-old government of Prime Minister Najib Mikati even before it begins tackling Lebanon's unprecedented economic crisis.

A Cabinet meeting was canceled Wednesday after Hezbollah demanded urgent government action against the judge. One Hezbollah-allied minister said he and other Cabinet members would stage a walkout if Bitar isn't removed.

Fire at southern Taiwan building leaves 46 dead, dozens hurt

By HUIZHONG WU Associated Press

TAIPEI, Taiwan (AP) — The death toll from a fire in southern Taiwan that engulfed a building overnight has further risen to 46, according to officials Thursday who said at least another 41 people were injured.

The 13-story building caught fire around 3 a.m. Thursday, fire officials in the city of Kaohsiung said. A fire department statement said the blaze was "extremely fierce" and destroyed many floors.

Authorities say that 32 bodies were sent straight to the morgue from the site of the blaze. Another 14 people who showed no signs of life were among 55 taken to hospital. In Taiwan, official confirmation of a death can only be made in the hospital.

Another search of the building was planned before sunset, according to officials.

Video shown on Taiwanese television showed orange flames and smoke billowing out of the lower floors of the building as firefighters sprayed water at it from the street. One woman, who was not identified, said her 60-to-70 year old parents were inside.

After daybreak, firefighters could be seen spraying water into the middle floors of the still smoldering building from elevated platforms.

The cause of the fire was unclear, but firefighters noted the flames burned most intensely where a lot of clutter had been piled up, the fire department statement said.

Eyewitnesses told Taiwan media that they heard an explosion around 3 a.m.

The building is about 40 years old with shops on the lower levels and apartments above. The lower floors were completely blackened.

Republicans report record fundraising for House campaigns

By JILL COLVIN Associated Press

NEW YORK (AP) — The Republican fundraising committee dedicated to flipping the House in next year's midterm elections said Thursday it raised more than \$105 million this year through September.

The record haul for the nine-month period marks a 74% increase over last cycle and includes \$25.8 million raised in the third quarter of the year. The group said it now has \$65 million cash on hand, nearly triple what it had at this time four years ago.

"House Democrats are sprinting toward the exits because they know their days in the majority are num-

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bered and we look forward to keeping up the pressure," National Republican Congressional Committee Chairman Tom Emmer said in a statement.

The numbers are the latest sign that Republicans are energized heading into the midterms, as President Joe Biden's popularity wanes and with history on their side. The president's party almost always loses seats in midterm elections, and Democrats currently hold only a narrow majority.

The Democrats' congressional fundraising arm has not yet released its total through September. But last month, the group announced it had raised \$10 million in August — besting the Republican House campaign committee's \$6.5 million.

The NRCC outraised the Democratic House committee \$45.4 million to \$36.5 million through the year's second quarter, which ended June 30.

The NRCC's total includes \$19.4 million transferred from House Minority Leader Kevin McCarthy, \$10.3 million from House Minority Whip Steve Scalise and \$1.2 million from Elise Stefanik, who earlier this year replaced Rep. Liz Cheney, a vocal critic of former President Donald Trump, as the House Republican Conference chair.

Strongest quake since volcano erupted shakes Spanish island

MADRID (AP) — A 4.5-magnitude earthquake shook La Palma in Spain's Canary Islands in what was the strongest recorded temblor since volcanic eruptions began 26 days ago, authorities said Thursday.

The quake was one of around 60 recorded overnight, Spain's National Geographic Institute said, as the Cumbre Vieja volcano continued to spew fiery rivers of lava that are destroying everything in their path and dumping molten rock into the Atlantic Ocean.

The flow from three rivers of molten rock broadened to 1.7 kilometers (about a mile), the La Palma government said.

Hard, black lava now covers 640 hectares (1,580 acres) on the western side of the island, authorities said, though most of la Palma is unaffected.

The lava has partially or completely destroyed more than 1,500 buildings, though prompt evacuations have so far avoided casualties. More than 6,000 people have had to abandon their homes.

La Palma is part of Spain's Canary Islands, an Atlantic Ocean archipelago off northwest Africa whose economy depends on tourism and the cultivation of the Canary plantain.

Bali reopens to foreign travelers as COVID-19 surge subsides

By FIRDIA LISNAWATI Associated Press

DENPASAR, Indonesia (AP) — The Indonesian resort island of Bali reopened for international travelers to visit its shops and white-sand beaches for the first time in more than a year Thursday — if they're vaccinated, test negative, hail from certain countries, quarantine and heed restrictions in public.

However, foreign visitors may be slow to arrive. No international flights to Bali were scheduled on the first day of the reopening and a tourism official forecast travel would pick up in November.

Bali's airport will welcome new foreign arrivals from 19 countries that meet World Health Organization's criteria such as having their COVID-19 cases under control, Luhut Binsar Pandjaitan, the government minister who leads the COVID-19 response in Java and Bali, said in a statement late Wednesday.

He said all international flight passengers must have proof they've been vaccinated two times, test negative for the coronavirus upon arrival in Bali and undergo a 5-day quarantine at designated hotels at their own expense. They'll also have to follow stringent rules at hotels, in restaurants and on beaches.

"We have to do this with caution because we need to stay alert," Pandjaitan said.

President Joko Widodo credited Bali's high vaccination rate for the decision to reopen. The country's COVID-19 caseload has also declined considerably; Indonesia has had around 1,000 cases a day in the past week after peaking around 56,000 daily in July.

Tourism is the main source of income on the idyllic "island of the gods" that is home to more than 4 million people, who are mainly Hindu in the mostly Muslim archipelago nation. Bali's tourist areas were

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deserted two decades ago after visitors were scared off by deadly terror attacks that targeted foreigners, but the island has worked to overcome that image.

More than 6 million foreigners arrived in Bali each year prior to the pandemic.

Foreign tourist arrivals dropped six-fold from 6.2 million in 2019 to only 1 million in 2020, while 92,000 people employed in tourism lost their jobs and the average room occupancy rate of classified hotels in Bali was below 20%. Statistics Indonesia data showed the island's economy contracted 9.31% year-on-year last year.

After closing the island to all visitors early in the pandemic, Bali reopened to Indonesians from other parts of the country in the middle of last year. That helped the island's gross domestic product grow a modest 2.83% in the second quarter this year, ending five consecutive quarters of contraction.

The July surge, fueled by the delta variant, again totally emptied the island's normally bustling beaches and streets. Authorities restricted public activities, closed the airport and shuttered all shops, bars, sit-down restaurants, tourist attraction spots and many other places on the island. It reopened to domestic travelers in August.

Sang Putu Wibawa, the general manager at Bali's Tandjung Sari Hotel, said only two of its 40 rooms were occupied on average and he hoped the reopening would help the occupancy rate back to normal.

"We have been waiting for this moment for so long," he said. "This outbreak has hammered the local economy ... we are very excited to welcome foreign guests by observing health protocols."

Widodo said deciding to reopen Bali was based on its high vaccination rate as well as wanting to revive its economy. He said more than 80% of the Bali population has been fully vaccinated.

"Based on this situation, I am optimistic and we have decided to reopen international flights to Bali," Widodo wrote in his official Instagram on Saturday.

Overall, 59.4 million of Indonesia's 270 million people are fully vaccinated and another 43.2 million are partially vaccinated. Indonesia has confirmed more than 4.2 million cases and 142,811 deaths from COVID-19, the most in Southeast Asia.

Tourists from 19 countries are now able to visit the Bali and Riau islands provinces — Saudi Arabia, United Arab Emirates, New Zealand, Kuwait, Bahrain, Qatar, China, India, Japan, South Korea, Liechtenstein, Italy, France, Portugal, Spain, Sweden, Poland, Hungary, and Norway.

The tight timing is one reason tourists were not immediately arriving, said Putu Astawa, head of the Bali Tourism Office

Airlines need time to schedule flights to Bali, while tourists need time to arrange travel documents such as tickets, insurance and virus tests as well as their five-day quarantine accommodations.

He predicted new visitors would start coming in early November.

Associated Press writers Niniek Karmini and Edna Tarigan in Jakarta, Indonesia, contributed to this report.

Women left behind: Gender gap emerges in Africa's vaccines

By KRISTA LARSON and MARIA CHENG Associated Press

SARE GIBEL, Gambia (AP) — The health outreach workers who drove past Lama Mballow's village with a megaphone handed out T-shirts emblazoned with the words: "I GOT MY COVID-19 VACCINE!"

By then, the women in Sare Gibel already had heard the rumors on social media: The vaccines could make your blood stop or cause you to miscarry. Women who took it wouldn't get pregnant again.

Lama Mballow and her sister-in-law, Fatoumata Mballow, never made the 3.4-mile trip (5.5 kilometers) to town for their vaccines, but the family kept the free shirt. Its lettering is now well-worn from washing, but the women's resolve has not softened. They share much — meal preparation duties, child care, trips to the well with plastic jugs, and their outlook on the vaccine.

"I definitely need a lot of children," said Lama Mballow, 24, who has a 4-year-old son, another child on the way and no plans to get vaccinated after giving birth. And Fatoumata Mballow, 29, struggling to get

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pregnant for a third time in a village where some women have as many as 10 children, quietly insists: "I don't want to make it worse and destroy my womb."

As health officials in Gambia and across Africa urge women to be vaccinated, they've confronted unwillingness among those of childbearing age. Many women worry that current or future pregnancies will be threatened, and in Africa, the success of a woman's marriage often depends on the number of children she bears. Other women say they're simply more afraid of the vaccine than the virus: As breadwinners, they can't miss a day of work if side effects such as fatigue and fever briefly sideline them.

Their fears are hardly exceptional, with rumors proliferating across Africa, where fewer than 4% of the population is immunized. Although data on gender breakdown of vaccine distribution are lacking globally, experts see a growing number of women in Africa's poorest countries consistently missing out on vaccines. Officials who already bemoan the inequity of vaccine distribution between rich and poor nations now fear that the stark gender disparity means African women are the least vaccinated population in the world.

This story is part of a yearlong series on how the pandemic is impacting women in Africa, most acutely in the least developed countries. AP's series is funded by the European Journalism Centre's European Development Journalism Grants program, which is supported by the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation. AP is responsible for all content.

"We do see, unfortunately, that even as COVID vaccines arrive in Africa after a long delay, women are being left behind," said Dr. Abdahalah Ziraba, an epidemiologist at the African Population and Health Research Center. "This could mean they will suffer a heavier toll during the pandemic."

The spread of vaccine misinformation is in large part to blame for the gender gap, officials say. Delays in getting vaccines to impoverished countries allowed misinformation to flourish, even in outlying villages where few people own smart phones. And with female literacy a challenge across Africa, women have long relied on word of mouth for information.

Despite the rampant concerns about pregnancy and fertility, there is no evidence that vaccines affect a woman's chances of getting pregnant. The U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention tracked tens of thousands of immunized women and found no difference in their pregnancy outcomes. The CDC, World Health Organization, and other agencies recommend pregnant women get vaccinated because they're at higher risk of severe disease and death.

In Gambia, like many African countries, AstraZeneca was the only vaccine available initially. Widespread publicity of the links between that shot and rare blood clots in women during a fumbled rollout in Europe set back vaccination efforts. Many Gambians believed the shot would stop their blood from flowing altogether, thanks to poor translation of news into local languages.

Officials also confronted a deep mistrust of government and a belief that Africans were getting shots no one else wanted. Rumors swirled that the vaccine was designed to control the continent's birth rate.

Health officials have since made strides getting Gambian women vaccinated; they now make up about 53 percent of those who've had the jabs, up several percentage points from just a few months ago. But there's been a lag among those of child-bearing age, despite how frequently they're in contact with maternity clinic workers.

Across Africa, officials report similar trends despite lacking wider data. In South Sudan, Gabon and Somalia, fewer than 30% of those who received at least one dose in the early stages of COVID-19 immunization campaigns were women.

In those countries — as elsewhere in the world, especially impoverished nations in parts of the Middle East and Asia — women face other obstacles accessing vaccines. Some need their husbands' permission, or they lack technology to make appointments, or vaccine prioritization lists simply didn't include them.

Dr. Roopa Dhatt, assistant professor at Georgetown University Medical Center, said it's not surprising African women have been left behind, but addressing the problem is urgent. "If they do not get vaccinated at the same rate as men, they will become this pocket for COVID-19, and it will make it more difficult for all of us to get out of the pandemic," she said.

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In Gambia, many women begin their day at dawn by starting a fire to cook breakfast, so Lucy Jarju rises and makes her way to the river after morning chores. She and other women spend hours paddling small boats on the open water in search of dinner. The oysters, crab or small fish that are left uneaten will be sold, making up the bulk of their household income.

Jarju, 53, isn't willing to be vaccinated against COVID-19 if it means missing even a day's work. Her husband died a decade ago, leaving her alone to provide for her seven children and three grandchildren.

"Every day I am running up and down to make ends meet. If I go and take the vaccine, it will be a problem for me," said Jarju, who often doesn't make it home until dark, washing dishes before finally heading to bed, ready to repeat her routine the next day. "If my arm gets heavy and I can't go to the water, who will feed my children?"

Jarju said she's gotten other vaccines, but has yet to make the 25-minute trek on foot to the nearest clinic for her COVID-19 shot.

"Maybe later," she demurred, heading off to prepare dinner with her share of the day's catch.

Only about half of the world's 200 countries and regions have reported COVID-19 vaccine data by gender, according to a global tracker at University College London. But since similar scenes play out across this country of 2.2 million people and its neighboring nations, experts fear the worst for women in these impoverished countries.

"In most countries in the world, we just don't have the data to tell us if there is a COVID-19 gender divide," said Sarah Hawkes, director of the Centre for Gender and Global Health at UCL. "But the few numbers that we do have suggest that it's a problem."

Gambia's fate has been intertwined with that of its much larger West African neighbor Senegal, which completely envelops the tiny enclave of a nation except for the coast. Most foreigners arrive by land at checkpoints where no proof of negative COVID-19 results are needed, which allowed the virus to intensify as Senegal faced a crushing third wave.

And the pandemic has devastated the Gambian economy, which is sustained by tourists from Europe and money sent home from Gambians abroad. Gambians now depend more than ever on fishing and farming. Increasing numbers are taking to rickety boats to flee Gambia — which emerged from more than two decades of dictatorship in 2017 — risking death for a chance to reach European countries.

Hawkes said some hope exists that any initial imbalances in COVID-19 immunization rates between men and women continue to even out in Gambia and other countries once they have steady vaccine supplies. In most rich countries where vaccines have been freely available — including Britain, Canada, Germany and the U.S. — there is a nearly even split between the numbers of men and women getting inoculated.

But it's particularly difficult to push vaccines in areas that haven't had explosive outbreaks of the virus, such as parts of Gambia and South Sudan.

"Women here are worried their children will get pneumonia or malaria," said nurse Anger Ater, who works on immunization campaigns in South Sudan. "They are not worried about COVID-19."

Reluctance to the coronavirus vaccine isn't limited to remote villages. At the Bundung hospital in Serrekunda, on the outskirts of Gambia's capital, the situation confounds chief executive officer Kebba Manneh, who has worked there for more than 20 years.

On a recent morning in the hospital's maternity clinic, Manneh asked a group of dozens of expectant mothers how many had been vaccinated against COVID-19. Just one raised her hand.

Footsteps away, other women brought in their babies and toddlers for routine immunizations — measles, diphtheria and tetanus.

"You take your child to get vaccinations. What is so special about this one?" Manneh asked. A pregnant woman pulled out her phone to show him a video claiming a person's body became magnetic after the COVID-19 shot, with a spoon stuck to the arm.

Initially, confusion stemmed from advice against vaccination for many women, said Marielle Bouyou

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Akotet, who leads the COVID-19 immunization plan in the central African nation of Gabon.

"As we did not know the effect of the vaccine on pregnant women, breastfeeding women and women who want to have a baby in the next six months, we recommended not to vaccinate this category," said Bouyou Akotet, a professor at the University of Health Sciences in Libreville.

That recommendation was updated after several months, but many women in Gabon and elsewhere have still decided to skip vaccination altogether.

"If I take this vaccine, can I still conceive?" patients ask Mariama Sonko, an infection control specialist at the Bundung hospital. "We tell them the research says it has nothing to do with that."

But many women listen to stories instead of research. They hear about a woman who miscarried after her vaccination, at 11 weeks, and the fear spreads, even though pregnancy losses are common in the first trimester.

"What makes me afraid is what I heard on social media," said Binta Balde, 29, who has been married for two years and has struggled to conceive. "That if you take the shot, you will not get pregnant."

She's visited the local health clinic and a traditional spiritual healer, who counseled her to swallow pieces of paper with Quranic verses and to drink tea made from herbs to boost fertility.

"When you get married and go to your husband's house, you have to have a child," she said. "If not, he could divorce you or leave you at any time. He may say, 'She cannot give me a child, so I should look for another.'"

The rumors about COVID-19 and fertility have been especially troublesome in predominantly Muslim countries such as Gambia and Somalia, where polygamy is common.

"For Somali women, it means a lot to them," said Abdikadir Ore Ahmed, a health specialist with CARE. "For you to stay in a family and a marriage, it's expected you should be able to give birth to more children. The more children you have, the more acceptance you get."

In Gambia, husbands must give permission for their wives' medical procedures. Most women tell health care workers they won't get the COVID-19 vaccine unless their spouse consents. But few husbands come to prenatal visits — only about half even attend their children's birth at the Bundung hospital.

The hospital recently held an information session for fathers, where Manneh tried to explain the vaccine's proven effectiveness.

"All the pregnant women coming here are not getting the vaccine because the husbands haven't given their authorization," he told the men. "Two of them have died. We are not forcing anybody, but lots of vaccine will expire soon."

Fatoumata Nyabally's job as a security officer puts her at heightened risk of contracting COVID-19, and she hasn't been vaccinated. She's seven months pregnant, but her husband did not attend Manneh's presentation. He's already refused to consent for his wife's vaccination.

So Nyabally declined the Johnson & Johnson vaccine, telling workers: "He's the head of the family, so I have to obey him in anything we do."

Of the 100 women approached that day at the hospital, only nine agreed to be vaccinated.

Cheng, an AP medical writer, reported from London. AP journalists Yves Laurent Goma in Libreville, Gabon; Cara Anna in Nairobi, Kenya; and Mohamed Sheikh Nor in Mogadishu, Somalia, contributed.

This story is part of a yearlong series on how the pandemic is impacting women in Africa, most acutely in the least developed countries. AP's series is funded by the European Journalism Centre's European Development Journalism Grants program, which is supported by the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation. AP is responsible for all content.

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the-eyes-of-africa

Japan PM dissolves lower house for Oct. 31 national election

By MARI YAMAGUCHI Associated Press

TOKYO (AP) — Japan's new Prime Minister Fumio Kishida dissolved the lower house of parliament Thursday, paving the way for elections Oct. 31 that will be Japan's first of the pandemic.

At stake will be how Japan faces a potential coronavirus resurgence and revives its battered economy, and if or how Kishida's government can leave the shadow of the nearly nine years of Abe-Suga rule some describe as dominating to the point of muzzling diverse views.

Kishida said he is seeking a mandate for his policies after being elected prime minister by parliament only 10 days ago.

He replaced Yoshihide Suga, who lasted just a year as prime minister and whose support was battered by his perceived high-handed approach in dealing with the coronavirus and insistence on holding the Tokyo Olympics despite rising virus cases.

Kishida, tasked with rallying support for the ruling party, has promised to pursue politics of "trust and empathy."

Four main opposition parties have agreed to cooperate on some policies, such as addressing gaps between the rich and the poor that they say widened during Shinzo Abe's government and were worsened by the pandemic.

After Tadamori Oshima, the speaker of the house, announced the dissolution, the 465 lawmakers in the more powerful lower chamber stood up, shouted "banzai" three times and left. Official campaigning for all 465 newly vacant seats begins Tuesday.

The last lower house election was held in 2017 under Abe, a staunch conservative who pulled the long-ruling conservative Liberal Democratic Party further to the right while serving as Japan's longest-serving prime minister.

In that vote, the LDP and its coalition partner New Komeito together won 310 seats, or two-thirds of the chamber.

Opposition parties have struggled to win enough votes to form a new government after the brief rule of the now-defunct Democratic Party of Japan in 2009-2012. But with weaker LDP support under Suga, the party lost three parliamentary by-elections and a local vote this year to opposition contenders.

Yukio Edano, head of the largest opposition Constitutional Democratic Party of Japan, told NHK public television that he hopes to make the election "a first step toward changing the politics."

In his first policy speech last week, Kishida promised to strengthen the country's pandemic response, revive the economy and bolster defenses against threats from China and North Korea. He also sought to gradually expand social and economic activities by using vaccination certificates and more testing.

Yuichiro Tamaki, head of the Democratic Party for the People, said Kishida was selfish for dissolving the lower house so early in his tenure. "It is unclear on what policies he is seeking a mandate from the voters," Tamaki said.

He said his party will propose economic policy that seeks higher pay for workers.

"We want to create a political situation where ruling and opposition blocs are in close competition," Tamaki said.

Taiwan tensions raise fears of US-China conflict in Asia

By DAVID RISING Associated Press

BANGKOK (AP) — After sending a record number of military aircraft to harass Taiwan over China's National Day holiday, Beijing has toned down the saber rattling but tensions remain high, with the rhetoric and reasoning behind the exercises unchanged.

Experts agree a direct conflict is unlikely at the moment, but as the future of self-ruled Taiwan increas-

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ingly becomes a powder keg, a mishap or miscalculation could lead to confrontation while Chinese and American ambitions are at odds.

China seeks to bring the strategically and symbolically important island back under its control, and the U.S. sees Taiwan in the context of broader challenges from China.

"From the U.S. perspective, the concept of a great power rivalry with China has driven this back up the agenda," said Henry Boyd, a Britain-based defense analyst with the International Institute for Strategic Studies.

"The need to stand up to China is a strong enough motivating factor that not taking this fight would also be seen as a betrayal of American national interests."

China claims Taiwan as its own, and controlling the island is a key component of Beijing's political and military thinking. Leader Xi Jinping on the weekend again emphasized "reunification of the nation must be realized, and will definitely be realized" — a goal made more realistic with massive improvements to China's armed forces over the last two decades.

In response, the U.S. has been increasing support for Taiwan and more broadly turning its focus to the Indo-Pacific region. U.S. State Department spokesman Ned Price on Tuesday emphasized that American support for Taiwan is "rock solid," saying "we have also been very clear that we are committed to deepening our ties with Taiwan."

Washington's longstanding policy has been to provide political and military support for Taiwan, while not explicitly promising to defend it from a Chinese attack.

The two sides came perhaps the closest to blows in 1996, when China, irked by what it saw as increasing American support for Taiwan, decided to flex its muscle with exercises that included firing missiles into the waters some 30 kilometers (20 miles) from Taiwan's coast ahead of Taiwan's first popular presidential election.

The U.S. responded with its own show of force, sending two aircraft carrier groups to the region. At the time, China had no aircraft carriers and little means to threaten the American ships, and it backed down.

Stung by the episode, China embarked upon a massive overhaul of its military, and 25 years later, it has significantly improved missile defenses that could easily strike back, and equipped or built its own aircraft carriers.

The U.S. Defense Department's recent report to Congress noted that in 2000, it assessed China's armed forces to be "a sizable but mostly archaic military" but that today it is a rival, having already surpassed the American military in some areas including shipbuilding to the point where it now has the world's largest navy.

Counting ships isn't the best way to compare capabilities — the U.S. Navy has 11 aircraft carriers to China's two, for example — but in the event of a conflict over Taiwan, China would be able to deploy almost the entirety of its naval forces, and also has land-based anti-ship missiles to add to the fight, said Boyd, a co-author of IISS's annual Military Balance assessment of global armed forces.

"China's concept of operations regarding Taiwan is that if they can delay the U.S. presence in the fight, or restrict the numbers that they're able to put into the fight because we're able to hold their forward assets at some level of risk, they can beat the Taiwanese before the Americans show up in enough force to do something about it," he said.

Taiwan's own strategy is the mirror image — delaying China long enough for the U.S. and its allies to show up in force. It has significant military forces itself, and the advantage of fighting on its home turf. A recent policy paper also notes the need for asymmetric measures, which could include things like missile attacks on mainland China ammunition or fuel dumps.

Taiwan's defense department's assessment of China's capabilities, presented to parliament in August and obtained by The Associated Press, says China already has the ability to seal Taiwan's ports and airports, but currently lacks the transport and logistical support for large-scale joint landing operations — though is improving by the day.

In a new strategic guidance policy last week, U.S. Navy Secretary Carlos Del Toro, identified China as the "most significant" long-term challenge.

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"For the first time in at least a generation, we have a strategic competitor who possesses naval capabilities that rival our own, and who seeks to aggressively employ its forces to challenge U.S. principles, partnerships and prosperity," the paper said.

China, over its National Day weekend at the beginning of the month, sent a record 149 military aircraft southwest of Taiwan in strike group formations — in international airspace but into the island's buffer zone, prompting Taiwan to scramble its defenses.

On Monday, China announced it had carried out beach landing and assault drills in the mainland province directly opposite Taiwan.

Ma Xiaoguang, spokesperson of the mainland government's Taiwan Affairs Office, justified the actions as necessary, saying Wednesday they were provoked by "Taiwan independence forces" colluding with "external forces."

"With every step the Chinese are trying to change the status quo and normalize the situation through this salami slicing," said Hoo Tiang Boon, coordinator of the China program at the S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies in Singapore. "They know Taiwan cannot do anything about it, and the danger is that possibility of miscalculations or mishaps do exist."

Taiwan and China split in 1949 amid a civil war, with Chiang Kai-shek's Nationalists fleeing to the island as Mao Zedong's Communists swept to power.

In a 2019 defense white paper, Beijing said it advocates "peaceful reunification of the country" — a phrase repeated by Xi over the weekend — but is also unequivocal in its goals.

"China must and will be reunited," the paper reads. "We make no promise to renounce the use of force, and reserve the option of taking all necessary measures."

Taiwanese President Tsai Ing-wen, meantime, has been making the case for more global support, writing in the most recent edition of Foreign Affairs magazine that "if Taiwan were to fall, the consequences would be catastrophic for regional peace and the democratic alliance system."

"A failure to defend Taiwan would not only be catastrophic for the Taiwanese," she wrote. "It would overturn a security architecture that has allowed for peace and extraordinary economic development in the region for seven decades."

U.S. law requires it to assist Taiwan in maintaining a defensive capability and to treat threats to the island as a matter of "grave concern."

Washington has recently acknowledged that U.S. special forces are on the island in a training capacity, and it has been stepping up multinational maneuvers in the region as part of a stated commitment to a "free and open Indo-Pacific." They included an exercise involving 17 ships from six navies — the U.S., Britain, Japan, Netherlands, Canada and New Zealand off the Japanese island of Okinawa earlier this month.

The so-called Quad group of nations — the U.S., Australia, India and Japan — on Thursday were concluding joint exercises in the Bay of Bengal, which Japan's Defense Ministry said showed their resolve to uphold "fundamental values such as democracy and the rule of law."

Washington also signed a deal last month in concert with Britain to provide Australia with nuclear-powered submarines, which China said would "seriously damage regional peace and stability."

"The Americans are trying to bring in the allies on a united front," said Hoo. "There's a growing internationalization of the Taiwan issue."

Right now, neither side's armed forces feels fully prepared for a conflict over Taiwan, but in the end it may not be their decision, Boyd said.

"It's not going to be up to the military," he said. "It's going to be up to the politicians."

Associated Press writers Matthew Lee in Washington and Huizhong Wu in Taipei, Taiwan, contributed to this report.

Many Afghans pack their bags, hoping for the chance to leave

By BERNAT ARMANGUE and LEE KEATH Associated Press

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KABUL, Afghanistan (AP) —

As their flight to Islamabad was finally about to take off, Somaya took her husband Ali's hand, lay her head back and closed her eyes. Tension had been building in her for weeks. Now it was happening: They were leaving Afghanistan, their homeland.

The couple had been trying to go ever since the Taliban took over in mid-August, for multiple reasons. Ali is a journalist and Somaya a civil engineer who has worked on United Nations development programs. They worry how the Taliban will treat anyone with those jobs. Both are members of the mainly Shiite Hazara minority, which fears the Sunni militants.

Most important of all: Somaya is five months pregnant with their daughter, whom they've already named Negar.

"I will not allow my daughter to step in Afghanistan if the Taliban are in charge," Somaya told The Associated Press on the flight with them. Like others leaving or trying to leave, the couple asked that their full names not be used for their protection. They don't know if they'll ever return.

Ask almost anyone in the Afghan capital what they want now that the Taliban are in power, and the answer is the same: They want to leave. It's the same at every level of society, in the local market, in a barbershop, at Kabul University, at a camp of displaced people. At a restaurant once popular with businessmen and upper-class teens, the waiter lists the countries to which he has applied for visas.

Some say their lives are in danger because of links with the ousted government or with Western organizations. Others say their way of life cannot endure under the hard-line Taliban, notorious for their restrictions on women, on civil liberties and their harsh interpretation of Islamic law. Some are not as concerned with the Taliban themselves but fear that under them, an already collapsing economy will utterly crash.

Tens of thousands of people were evacuated by the United States and its allies in the frantic days between the Aug. 15 Taliban takeover and the official end of the evacuation on Aug. 30. After that wave, the numbers slowed, leaving many who want to leave but are struggling to find a way out. Some don't have the money for travel, others don't have passports, and the Afghan passport offices reopened only recently.

The exodus is emptying Afghanistan of many of its young people who had hoped to help build their homeland.

"I was raised with one dream, that I study hard and be someone, and I'd come back to this country and help," said Popal, a 27-year-old engineer.

"With this sudden collapse, every dream is shattered. ... We lose everything living here."

When Popal was 5 years old, his father sent him to Britain with relatives to get an education. Growing up, Popal worked low-skill jobs, sending money back to his family, while studying engineering. He eventually gained British citizenship and worked in the nuclear sector.

A few weeks before the Taliban takeover, Popal returned to Afghanistan in hopes of getting his family out. His father once worked at a military base in Logar Province, where his mother was a teacher. His sisters have been studying medicine in Kabul.

The recent weeks have been tumultuous. His family's home in Logar was destroyed by the Taliban, and they moved to Kabul. They believe it was because they refused to give information to relatives who are linked to the Taliban. One of his sisters went missing as she commuted between Kabul and Logar, and has not been heard from in weeks. The family fears it could be connected to warnings they received from relatives to stop the daughters from studies, Popal told the AP.

Popal has been in contact for weeks with British officials trying to arrange evacuations. But he said they told him he could not bring his parents and siblings. In early October, Popal managed to get out to Iran. Complaining that he's had no help from the British Foreign Office, he is making his way back to Britain, where he will try to find a way to bring out his family.

The British Foreign Office said in a statement that it is working to ensure British nationals in Afghanistan are able to leave.

A former adviser to a senior Cabinet minister in Afghanistan's ousted government said he was searching

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for a way out. The decision came after years of sticking it out through mounting violence. He survived a 2016 suicide bombing that hit a protest march in Kabul and killed more than 90 people. Friends of his were killed in an attack later that year on the American University of Afghanistan, killing at least 13.

In the past, he had opportunities and offers to go to the United States or Europe. "I didn't take them because I wanted to stay and I wanted to work and I wanted to make a difference," he said, speaking on condition he not be named for his protection.

Now he is in hiding, waiting for his opportunity to escape.

The American University of Afghanistan, a private university in Kabul, is arranging flights out for many of its students.

One student, a 27-year-old, recounted one attempt by the school to get evacuees to Kabul airport on Aug. 29, the second-to-last day when U.S. troops were there. In the chaos, buses carrying the students drove for hours around the capital, trying to find a route to the airport, he said. They couldn't make it.

The student has been waiting for the past month for a spot on another flight arranged by the university for himself, his wife and two young children. He hopes that once out, he can apply for visas to the United States. His family has packed up everything in their house, covering their furniture with sheets to protect it from the dust. His parents are trying to get to the United Arab Emirates.

In Pakistan, at the Islamabad airport, a group of American University students, freshly arrived from Kabul, waited to cross through immigration. They will go on to sister schools in Central Asia.

But their families could not come with them, so they face the uncertain future alone for the moment.

Without her family for the first time ever, Meena, a 21-year-old political science student, cringed with humiliation as an airport official shouted rudely at the students.

"I don't know my future. I had a lot of dreams, but now I don't know," she said, starting to cry.

She showed the school pen she brought with her because it has the flag of her country on it, the one now replaced in Afghanistan by the Taliban flag.

"We just burned our dreams ... we are just broken people."

Keath reported from Cairo. Associated Press correspondent Danica Kirka in London contributed to this report.

Assailant with bow and arrows kills 5 people in Norway

By JAN M. OLSEN Associated Press

COPENHAGEN, Denmark (AP) — A man armed with a bow fired arrows at shoppers in a small Norwegian town Wednesday, killing five people before he was arrested, authorities said.

The police chief in the community of Kongsberg, near the capital of Oslo, said there was "a confrontation" between officers and the assailant, but he did not elaborate. Two other people were wounded and hospitalized in intensive care, including an officer who was off duty and inside the shop where the attack took place, police said.

"The man who carried out the act has been arrested by the police, and there is no active search for more people. Based on the information we have, there is one person behind this," Police Chief Oeyving Aas said.

Acting Prime Minister Erna Solberg described the attack as "gruesome" and said it was too early to speculate on a motive. The prime minister-designate, Jonas Gahr Stoere, who is expected to take office Thursday, called the assault "a cruel and brutal act" in comments to Norwegian news agency NTB.

Police were alerted to the attack around 6:15 p.m. and arrested the suspect about 30 minutes later. The community of some 26,000 inhabitants is about 66 kilometers (41 miles) southwest of Oslo.

According to police, the suspect walked around downtown Kongsberg shooting arrows. Aas declined to comment on reports that the man used a crossbow, saying only there were "several crime scenes."

The man has not been questioned yet, Aas said.

Norway's domestic security agency PST was informed of the assault.

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Town officials invited people who were affected by the attack and their relatives to gather for support at a local hotel.

Mass killings are rare in Norway. The country's worst peacetime slaughter was on July 22, 2011, when right-wing extremist Anders Breivik set off a bomb in the capital of Oslo, killing eight people. Then he headed to tiny Utoya Island, where he stalked the mostly teen members of the Labor Party's youth wing and killed another 69 victims.

Breivik was sentenced to 21 years in prison, the maximum under Norwegian law, but his term can be extended as long as he's considered a danger to society.

Weah, Dest spark US to 2-1 win over Costa Rica in qualifier

By RONALD BLUM AP Sports Writer

COLUMBUS, Ohio (AP) — Sixty seconds in, Costa Rica was celebrating and the U.S. World Cup campaign was spinning out of control.

Sergiño Dest and Tim Weah, two young Americans unscarred by the failure of four years ago, got them back on track.

Shoelaces untied, Dest curled an 18-yard, left-footed shot past Keylor Navas in the 25th minute. Weah's shot for the go-ahead goal deflected off the near post and then off backup goalkeeper Leonel Moreira in the 66th, and the U.S. exhaled with a 2-1 victory Wednesday night that eased pressure as qualifying neared the halfway point.

"We can't lose again," the 20-year-old Dest said. "We needed it really bad,"

Goalkeeper Zack Steffen, one of nine new starters inserted following Sunday's dismal 1-0 loss at Panama, made a costly headed clearance that led to Keysher Fuller's goal 60 seconds in, the fastest goal conceded by the U.S. in 23 years.

Dest ended a streak of eight straight first halves without an American goal following a pass from Yunus Musah on the right flank after Weah had switched the ball from the opposite side. Dest cut toward the center and curled the ball just beyond Navas' outstretched right hand into the upper corner.

Navas left at halftime because of a strained adductor muscle

Weah, a 21-year-old son of Liberia President and former FIFA Player of the Year George Weah, joined the lineup about five minutes before kickoff after Paul Arriola injured his right groin during warmups.

"Everything was kind of a rush. I had to warm up, get ready quick," Weah said.

With Matthew Hoppe on the touchline about to replace Weah, Weston McKennie passed to Dest, who dished to Weah. His 10-yard shot from an angle hit the post and ricocheted off a diving Moreira and in,

"It just so happened that the ball came out wide to Serge, and I saw the run," Weah said. "I just hit it one time, and it happened to go in."

Weah originally was credited with a goal, but it was changed to an own goal by Moreira.

"We'll talk to FIFA about that," U.S. coach Gregg Berhalter said.

Mexico leads with 14 points after a 2-0 win at El Salvador, and the U.S. has 11 after six of 14 matches going into its Nov. 12 meeting with El Tri at Cincinnati.

Canada has 10 after a 4-1 win over Panama, which has eight. The top three teams qualify for next year's World Cup, and the fourth-place team advances to a playoff.

Costa Rica (six), Jamaica and El Salvador (five each) and Honduras (three) trail.

Berhalter was criticized for resting many front-line players in Panama, wanting fresh legs against the Ticos. Teams that win their home games usually qualify.

Steffen, a former Columbus keeper getting his first start in qualifying over Matt Turner, got in trouble when he headed a clearance over Dest in the first minute.

Bryan Ruiz kept the ball in with a backheel pass to Ronald Mattarita, who dribbled down the side and crossed. Just outside the 6-yard box, Fuller volleyed with his right foot, and the ball went in on two bounces inside the far post for his second international goal.

"I felt like the guy was in front of me and I thought he was offside," Steffen said.

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Fuller scored the fastest goal against the U.S. since the Netherlands' Ronald de Boer on Feb. 21, 1998. "My initial thought was: 'Here we go. We got to respond,'" Berhalter said. "We challenged the guys to respond after a poor performance in Panama and this was going to be another element that we needed to respond to. It was early enough in the game that if we stayed calm and stuck to the game plan, I thought we'd be OK."

Before a pro-American crowd of 20,165 at the first international match in \$300 million-plus Lower.com Field, Costa Rica's starting lineup averaged more than 30 years old. Ticos coach Luis Fernando Suárez retained nine starters from Sunday's 2-1 win at El Salvador.

Berhalter fielded the youngest U.S. qualifying lineup at an average of 22 years, 229 days. He retained only 18-year-old Musah and Weah from Sunday's starters and gave 21-year-old defender Chris Richards his first competitive start.

Hoppe, 20, entered in the 73rd and 19-year-old Gianluca Busio five minutes later. They joined Steffen and Richards to increase U.S. qualifying debuts to 25 in this cycle, trailing only 1998 (29), and 2006 and 2010 (26 each).

Sprightly muscles overcame the inexperience.

"All of World Cup qualifying is difficult. All of World Cup qualifying is challenging, and sometimes I feel like people forgot that," Berhalter said. "People think it's a cakewalk, and we're going to play the youngest team in the history of U.S. soccer in a game and we're just going to breeze through these games. It's not realistic."

Notes: Héctor Moreno scored in the 30th minute and Raúl Jiménez got his 28th international goal in the third minute of second half stoppage time at San Salvador. ... After Rolando Blackburn put the visitors ahead in the fifth minute at Toronto, Amir Murillo's own goal tied the score in the 28th. Alphonso Davies scored in the 66th, Tajon Buchanan in the 71st and Jonathan David in the 78th, his sixth goal in qualifying. ... Jamaica won 2-0 as Kemar Roofe got his first international goal in the 38th minute and Oniel Fisher scored in the 79th at San Pedro Sula.

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

What's the latest advice on the type of mask I should wear?

By EMMA H. TOBIN Associated Press

NEW YORK (AP) — What's the latest advice on the type of mask I should wear?

It depends on your situation, but health officials say it should cover your nose and mouth, and fit snugly so there aren't any gaps on the sides of your face.

The U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention also says to pick masks with two or more layers and a nose wire to prevent air from leaking out the top. It suggests holding your mask up to check if it blocks light, which means the fabric will probably filter out more particles.

If you want added protection, experts also suggest wearing two masks or pairing them with a mask fitter to ensure they don't leave any gaps.

It's also important to find a mask that's comfortable so you actually wear it, says Laura Kwong, an assistant professor in environmental health sciences at the University of California, Berkeley.

If supplies are available, people can opt for disposable N95 masks for personal use, the CDC says in updated guidance. Such masks are considered most effective at blocking virus particles. The agency had previously said N95 masks should be reserved for health care workers, but supplies have since expanded.

For people who are deaf or have hearing difficulties, alternative face coverings such as clear masks or cloth masks with clear plastic panels are recommended. Health officials say transparent medical masks should be prioritized for health workers and patients who need them.

The AP is answering your questions about the coronavirus in this series. Submit them at: FactCheck@AP.org. Read more here:

Am I fully vaccinated without a COVID-19 vaccine booster?
Is the delta variant of the coronavirus worse for kids?
Do the COVID-19 vaccines affect my chances of pregnancy?

Durst faces day of reckoning in murder of best friend

By BRIAN MELLEY Associated Press

LOS ANGELES (AP) — The bitterly fought murder trial of Robert Durst stretched over the better part of two years. His sentencing will be comparatively brief and could lack the fireworks that erupted between the lead prosecutor and defense lawyer.

The eccentric New York real estate heir faces a mandatory term of life in prison without parole Thursday for the first-degree murder of his best friend, Susan Berman.

"Now that the jury has found whodunnit, the punishment is quite clear," Loyola Law School Professor Laurie Levenson said. "I'm not sure there's a lot more left for (the prosecutor) to say."

Durst, 78, was convicted last month in Los Angeles Superior Court of shooting Berman point-blank in the back of the head in her Los Angeles home just before Christmas 2000.

The trial began in March 2020 and was adjourned for 14 months as the coronavirus pandemic swept the U.S. and courts were closed. It resumed in May with the jury that reached its verdict Sept. 17.

Berman, the daughter of a Las Vegas mobster, was Durst's longtime confidante who was preparing to tell police she provided a phony alibi for him after his wife vanished in New York in 1982.

Kathie Durst has never been found. Robert Durst has never been charged with a crime related to her disappearance.

But following his conviction in Berman's death, which relied on evidence that he killed his wife, a New York prosecutor is prepared now to seek charges against him in her death, a person familiar with the matter told The Associated Press on condition of anonymity.

Durst testified in the LA case, denying he killed his wife or Berman, but he said he'd lie if he had done so.

Kathie McCormack Durst's family had hoped to present statements to the court Thursday about their loss, but prosecutors denied the request, according to emails sent to their lawyer.

Attorney Robert Abrams said the McCormack family was disappointed, and he was outraged. He said family members would not attend the sentencing.

"The family is not going to go travel 3,000 miles to be a prop in some Hollywood production and sit there and not be able to make their victim impact statements," Abrams said. "This is not some movie where it's gross spectacle. This is their lives, and they've suffered for 40 years."

A spokesman for the district attorney's office did not return a message seeking comment.

Levenson said it was questionable whether Kathie Durst was a victim in the Los Angeles case because Robert Durst wasn't charged with her killing. Allowing her siblings to speak at sentencing would create another issue for an appeal.

Defense lawyers plan to argue for a new trial Thursday, saying there was insufficient evidence to prove the case and listing 15 ways the judge erred.

The motion is mainly to preserve issues for appeal and likely to fail, Levenson said, though some of their claims could get a higher court's attention.

The defense said Judge Mark Windham should have declared a mistrial when the jury was sent home and the case adjourned. They said the length of the delay was unprecedented.

Many of the other issues revolve around admission of evidence, such as allowing prosecutors to present testimony that Durst killed a neighbor in Galveston, Texas, in 2001 and chopped up his body and tossed the parts out to sea. Durst was acquitted of murder after testifying that Morris Black pulled a gun on him and was killed in a struggle for the weapon.

They also objected to testimony and exhibits that showed when Durst was arrested in New Orleans in 2015, he had a mask, fake identification, drugs, \$40,000 cash and a loaded handgun in his hotel room.

They also objected to showing jurors a feature film based on Durst's life and the six-part documentary,

"The Jinx: The Life and Crimes of Robert Durst."

To limit the number of appellate issues, prosecutors may be more restrained in their sentencing presentation, Levenson said, particularly when the prison term is already set.

Deputy District Attorney John Lewin was asked by a reporter after the conviction what he had to say to Durst.

Lewin, who was aggressive and frequently scrapped with defense lawyer Dick DeGuerin over the six years it took from arrest to conviction, initially said he didn't have anything to say to the man he had pursued for years.

Then he called Durst a "narcissistic psychopath" who "killed his wife and ... had to keep killing to cover it up."

"He's 78 years old. He's been walking around for a long time," Lewin said. "He had a lot more of a life, you know, Kathie didn't make 30. On balance, considering what he's done, he got a lot more of a life than he was entitled to."

Associated Press writer Michael R. Sisak in New York contributed to this report.

In Mexico, children as young as 10 recruited by drug cartels

By MARK STEVENSON Associated Press

MEXICO CITY (AP) — Jacobo grew up in the western Mexico state of Jalisco, home to the Jalisco New Generation drug cartel. Never comfortable in school, he had an abusive childhood: at one point his mother held his hands over an open flame after he allegedly shoved a classmate.

Now 17, Jacobo claims he didn't do it. By 12, he was recruited to carry out his first murder for the cartel. "They go around looking for kids who are out on the streets and need money," he recalls. "At 12 years old, I became sort of a hired killer."

Jacobo told his story to Reinserta, a Mexican non-profit group that withheld the youths' full names because all are under age, are currently being held at facilities for youthful offenders and most are scared of retaliation by the gangs.

"A neighbor asked me, 'Do you want to earn money?'" Growing up in a household where his family could seldom make ends meet, the answer was obvious. "I said yes. Who doesn't want money?" But the \$1,500 he earned didn't last long; he picked up a meth habit, in part to quiet the psychological effects of what he was doing.

By his mid-teens he was torturing members of rival cartels for information, killing them and cutting up their bodies or dissolving them in acid, by now on the outskirts of Mexico City.

It was his last job that did him in; the cartel ordered him to carry out a killing in public, with lots of witnesses. Police came looking for him, and he went into hiding. The cartel contacted him to say it wanted to switch his hiding place, "but it was a trap," he recalls. No longer useful — like so many disposable teen street-level drug dealers, lookouts and hitmen — the cartel wanted to get rid of him.

"When I showed up to meeting place, they started shooting me," said Jacobo, whose last name was withheld because of his age. "I was shot in the head, in the back, in the abdomen." Left for dead, he somehow miraculously survived, and is now serving a four-year youthful offender sentence for murder.

Mexican laws allow sentences of between three and five years for most youthful offenders, meaning almost all get out before they are 21.

Reinserta works to prevent youths from getting recruited by drug cartels, and find ways to rehabilitate them if they already have.

That is a difficult job in Mexico; though he's alive, Jacobo is still afraid; he knows from his own work for the cartel that it is everywhere, and won't stop at anything. "Now I am just a target to be eliminated, a minor irritant for one of the most powerful cartels in the country."

Marina Flores, a researcher for Reinserta, said the study suggests some common myths about kids in drug cartels aren't true.

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While kids almost always engage in drug use and leaving — or being expelled from — school prior to joining a cartel, membership in local street gangs no longer appears to play much of a role. Cartels in Mexico are directly recruiting kids as soon as they leave school.

“Street gangs are not a previous step for them joining organized crime,” said Flores. “We are finding out that as soon as they are taken out of school, they immediately go into organized crime.”

The Network for Children’s Rights in Mexico says that, between 2000 and 2019 in Mexico, 21,000 youths under 18 were murdered in Mexico, and 7,000 disappeared.

The group estimates that some 30,000 youths had been recruited by drug gangs by 2019.

Inserta says kids are frequently recruited to cartels by other kids their own age; drug use is one way to recruit them, but the cartels also use religious beliefs and a sense of belonging kids can’t get elsewhere. Combinations of poverty, abusive homes and unresponsive schools and social agencies play a role.

In the report released Wednesday, Inserta interviewed 89 kids held at youthful offender facilities in three northern border states, two states in central Mexico and two southeastern states. Of the 89, 67 of the youths said they had been actively involved with the cartels. The average age at the time they came in contact with the cartels was between 13 and 15. All of them had dropped out of school and all eventually went on to use firearms.

Drug cartels find kids under 18 useful, because they can go unnoticed more easily and can’t be charged as adults. They are initially used for street-level drug sales and as lookouts, but often are quickly promoted to act as killers.

In the northern border states, kids are lured with a wider variety of drugs, get more weapons and other training from the cartels, engage in a wider range of criminal activities and accelerate faster into violent roles than do youths in more southern states.

For example, Orlando grew up in the streets of northern cities like Ciudad Juarez, after escaping from an orphanage. Between the ages of ten and 16 he estimates he killed 19 people, mostly on the orders of the Sinaloa cartel.

Now, at 17 and serving four years for homicide, he says “I don’t know any other way to live, other than killing people.”

Like Orlando, Iván grew up in a northern border town with a father who worked for a cartel.

But Iván didn’t suffer poverty or abuse; he made a conscious decision to join the same cartel his dad worked for.

“I was very influenced by the narco culture, I liked the corridos, the (television) series, the guns, the trucks,” he recalls.

By the age of 11 he was working as a killer for the cartel, hacking up or dissolving the bodies of his victims. His first sight of corpses scared him, but within a short time “I didn’t feel anything, not fear, not regret, not guilt, not anything.” Ivan is also serving a sentence for murder.

Inserta proposes possible solutions including more early attention for kids, more recreation and learning opportunities, and intervention to prevent domestic violence. The group also proposes creating a national registry of kids recruited by cartels, psychological attention for them and early and effective treatment of addictions.

Shifting winds challenge crews fighting California fire

SANTA BARBARA, Calif. (AP) — Shifting winds posed new challenges for firefighters battling a blaze in Southern California coastal mountains that threatened ranches and rural homes and kept a major highway shut down for days.

The Alisal Fire charred more than 24 square miles (62 square kilometers) of dense chaparral in the Santa Ynez Mountains west of Santa Barbara. Containment was just 5% Wednesday evening.

While the scenic region along the Pacific shoreline is lightly populated, the blaze was a threat to more than 100 homes, ranches and other buildings, fire officials said.

Fire crews were protecting Rancho del Cielo, which was once owned by Ronald and Nancy Reagan and

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was known as the Western White House during his presidency. The 688-acre (278-hectare) ranch where Reagan hosted world leaders sits atop the mountain range, above the flames feeding on dense chaparral and grasses.

Based on staff reports from the ranch, the fire was about a half-mile (0.8 kilometers) away Wednesday evening, but that section of the blaze was not as active as others, said Jessica Jensen, vice president and chief of staff of the Young America's Foundation, which now operates the ranch.

"We are thankful that there has been no fire activity on the actual Reagan Ranch property. The Ranch, itself, is still in a very defensible position," Jensen said in an email to The Associated Press.

The area hadn't burned since 1955, according to the conservative youth organization.

Fire engines were on the ranch property, and fire retardant will be sprayed around its structures, the foundation said in a statement. It noted that helicopters have filled up with water from one of the ranch's two lakes.

Crews also protected an Exxon Mobil Corp. gas processing facility in a canyon surrounded by flames.

The fire erupted Monday near the Alisal Reservoir, and powerful winds from the north swept the flames down through the mountains, forcing the closure of U.S. 101 in western Santa Barbara County. At one point, the fire jumped the four-lane highway and reached a beach. The closure has forced motorists to take a circuitous detour on smaller routes.

The highway could remain shut until the weekend, said Andrew Madsen, a spokesman for the U.S. Forest Service.

Firefighters working in steep, rugged terrain got help from more than a dozen water-dropping air tankers and helicopters that returned to the skies amid calmer daytime winds. But changing winds could keep aircraft grounded, said Los Padres National Forest Fire Chief Jim Harris.

"As the winds shift, it's the most dangerous time, and critical time, of the fire, because the fire will change direction on us," Harris said.

The National Weather Service said there would be a new round of south Santa Barbara County's notorious Sundowner winds Wednesday night, and other parts of California also were expected to experience increased fire danger.

Red flag warnings were expected to go into effect in the interior of Northern California on Thursday because of gusts and low humidity levels. Forecasters also planned to issue a fire weather watch Friday in parts of Southern California because of the predicted development of Santa Ana winds.

Pacific Gas & Electric said it would likely have to shut off electricity to targeted portions of 13 Northern California counties on Thursday to prevent wildfires from being ignited by wind damage to power lines. The utility just restored power to about 25,000 customers who had their electricity shut off due to Monday's windstorm.

California wildfires have scorched nearly 3,900 square miles (10,101 square kilometers) this year and destroyed more than 3,600 homes, businesses and other structures, according to the state Department of Forestry and Fire Protection.

A historic drought in the American West 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.

Chicago police union head urges cops to defy vaccine mandate

By DON BABWIN Associated Press

CHICAGO (AP) — The head of the Chicago police officers union has called on its members to defy the city's requirement to report their COVID-19 vaccination status by Friday or be placed on unpaid leave.

In the video posted online Tuesday and first reported by the Chicago Sun-Times, Fraternal Order of Police President John Catanzara vowed to take Mayor Lori Lightfoot's administration to court if it tries to enforce the mandate, which requires city workers to report their vaccine status by the end of the work

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week. After Friday, unvaccinated workers who won't submit to semiweekly coronavirus testing will be placed on unpaid leave.

Catanzara suggested that if the city does enforce its requirement and many union members refuse to comply with it, "It's safe to say that the city of Chicago will have a police force at 50% or less for this weekend coming up."

In the video, Catanzara instructs officers to file for exemptions to receiving the vaccine but to not enter that information into the city's vaccine portal.

He said that although he has made clear his vaccine status, "I do not believe the city has the authority to mandate that to anybody, let alone that information about your medical history."

During a news conference Wednesday, Lightfoot accused Catanzara of spreading false information and dismissed most of his statements as "untrue or patently false." She said COVID-19 vaccines are proven to be effective and that getting vaccinated would protect city workers and their families.

"What we're focused on is making sure that we maximize the opportunity to create a very safe workplace," Lightfoot said. "The data is very clear. It is unfortunate that the FOP leadership has chosen to put out a counter narrative. But the fact of the matter is, if you are not vaccinated, you are playing with your life, the life of your family, the life of your colleagues and members of the public."

She said the city is prepared to deal with any fallout related to the vaccination requirement.

Violent crime has spiked in the city this year, from expressway shootings to a rise in carjackings. Chicago police reported 629 homicides this year through early October, compared with 605 during the same period last year and 402 in the same time frame in 2019.

First responders around the country have been hit hard by the virus but have been resisting vaccine mandates. More than 460 law enforcement officers have died of COVID-19, including four members of the Chicago Police Department, according to the Officer Down Memorial Page. On Tuesday, Dean Angelo, who once held Catanzara's union position, died of the disease.

Los Angeles police and county sheriff, and Seattle police are among the departments either under vaccine mandates or facing one.

Catanzara has clashed with the mayor over a host of issues. After the city announced the vaccine mandate in August, the union head compared it to something that might happen to Nazi Germany, telling the Sun-Times, "This ain't Nazi ... Germany (saying) 'Step into the ... showers, the pills won't hurt you.'"

Lightfoot blasted Catanzara for his "offensive outburst" and Catanzara posted a video on the union's YouTube channel apologizing for his choice of words, saying he was not trying to link vaccinations to what happened during the Holocaust.

Associated Press writer Sophia Tareen contributed to this report.

Border residents rejoice as US says it will lift travel ban

By ZEKE MILLER and ELLIOT SPAGAT Associated Press

SAN DIEGO (AP) — Beleaguered business owners and families separated by COVID-19 restrictions rejoiced Wednesday after the U.S. said it will reopen its land borders to nonessential travel next month, ending a 19-month freeze.

Travel across land borders from Canada and Mexico has been largely restricted to workers whose jobs are deemed essential. New rules will allow fully vaccinated foreign nationals to enter the U.S. regardless of the reason starting in early November, when a similar easing of restrictions is set for air travel. By mid-January, even essential travelers seeking to enter the U.S., such as truck drivers, will need to be fully vaccinated.

Shopping malls and big box retailers in U.S. border towns whose parking spaces had been filled by cars with Mexican license plates were hit hard by travel restrictions.

San Diego Mayor Todd Gloria said the economic impact was hard to quantify but can be seen in the sparse presence of shoppers at a high-end outlet mall on the city's border with Tijuana, Mexico. The decision comes at a critical time ahead of the holiday shopping season.

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In Nogales, Arizona, travel restrictions forced about 40 retail businesses to close on the main strip in the city of 20,000 people, said Jessy Fontes, board member of the Nogales-Santa Cruz County Chamber of Commerce and owner of Mariposa Liquidation Store, which sells household appliances. His sales fell 60%, and he considered closing but instead cut his staff from seven to two.

In Del Rio, Texas, Mexican visitors account for about 65% of retail sales, said Blanca Larson, executive director of the chamber of commerce and visitors bureau in the city of 35,000 people.

"Along the border, we're like more of one community than two different communities," she said.

The ban has also had enormous social and cultural impact, preventing family gatherings when relatives live on different sides of the border. Community events have stalled even as cities away from U.S. borders have inched toward normalcy.

In Sault Ste. Marie, Michigan, where hockey and ice skating are ingrained, the Soo Eagles haven't had a home game against a Canadian opponent in 20 months. The players, 17 to 20 years old, have been traveling to Canada since border restrictions were lifted there two months ago. Now the U.S. team can host.

"I almost fell over when I read it," said Ron Lavin, co-owner of the Eagles. "It's been a long frustrating journey for people on a lot of fronts far more serious than hockey, but we're just really pleased. It's great for the city."

Fully vaccinated U.S. citizens and permanent residents have been allowed into Canada since August, provided they have waited at least two weeks since getting their second vaccine dose and can show proof of a recent negative COVID-19 test. Mexico has not enforced COVID-19 entry procedures for land travelers.

The latest move follows last month's announcement that the U.S. will end country-based travel bans for air travel and instead require vaccination for foreign nationals seeking to enter by plane.

The new rules only apply to legal entry. Those who enter illegally will still be subject to expulsion under a public health authority that allows for the swift removal of migrants before they can seek asylum.

Travelers entering the U.S. by vehicle, rail and ferry will be asked about their vaccination status as part of the standard U.S. Customs and Border Protection inspection. At officers' discretion, travelers will have their proof of vaccination verified in a secondary screening process.

Unlike air travel, for which proof of a negative COVID-19 test is required before boarding a flight to enter the U.S., no testing will be required to enter the U.S. by land or sea, provided the travelers meet the vaccination requirement.

According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, the U.S. will accept travelers who have been fully vaccinated with any of the vaccines approved for emergency use by the World Health Organization, not just those in use in the U.S. That means that the AstraZeneca vaccine, widely used in Canada, will be accepted.

Officials said the CDC was still working to formalize procedures for admitting those who received doses of two different vaccines, as was fairly common in Canada.

U.S. Homeland Security Secretary Alejandro Mayorkas said he was "pleased to be taking steps to resume regular travel in a safe and sustainable manner" and lauded the economic benefits of it.

Mexico, Canada and elected officials from U.S. border regions have pressured the Biden administration for months to ease restrictions.

"This is a win for families who've been separated and businesses and tourism industries whose operations have been blocked since the start of the pandemic," said U.S. Sen. Jeanne Shaheen of New Hampshire, echoing reactions of other federal, state and local officials.

Mexico President Andres Manuel López Obrador said it took "many meetings to achieve the opening of the border." Bill Blair, Canada's minister of public safety, called the announcement "one more step toward returning to normal."

Cross-border traffic has plummeted since the pandemic, according to U.S. Department of Transportation figures.

The number of vehicle passengers entering the U.S. in Niagara Falls, New York — the busiest land crossing on the Canadian border — fell 83% to 1.7 million in 2020 and has remained low this year.

"Losing those customers over the last 18 months has been one of the primary reasons our hotels,

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restaurants and attractions have been suffering," said Patrick Kaler, president and chief executive of Visit Buffalo Niagara, the area's tourism agency.

At San Diego's San Ysidro border crossing, the nation's busiest, crossings dropped 30% last year to 18 million. Taxi drivers were largely idled Wednesday on a nearby bridge, including one who did exercises.

COVID-19 cases in the U.S. have dropped to about 85,000 per day, the lowest level since July. Per capita case rates in Canada and Mexico have been markedly lower than the U.S. for the duration of the pandemic, which amplified frustrations about the U.S. travel restrictions.

Miller reported from Washington. Associated Press writers Rob Gillies in Toronto; Juan A. Lozano in Houston; Wilson Ring in Montpelier, Vermont; Ed White in Detroit, Anita Snow in Phoenix, Carolyn Thompson in Buffalo, New York, Alexis Tribouard in Mexico City and Julie Watson in San Diego contributed.

Lawyer who aided Trump subpoenaed by Jan. 6 committee

By JILL COLVIN, MICHELLE R. SMITH, ERIC TUCKER and MARY CLARE JALONICK Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — The House committee investigating the Jan. 6 riot at the U.S. Capitol has issued a subpoena to a former Justice Department lawyer who positioned himself as an ally of Donald Trump and aided the Republican president's efforts to challenge the results of the 2020 election.

The subpoena to Jeffrey Clark, revealed Wednesday, came amid signs of a rapidly escalating congressional inquiry. At least three of the people who were involved in organizing and running the rally that preceded the violent riot are handing over documents in response to subpoenas from the committee.

The demands for documents and testimony from Clark reflect the committee's efforts to probe not only the deadly insurrection but also the tumult that roiled the Justice Department in the weeks leading up to it as Trump and his allies leaned on government lawyers to advance his baseless claims that the election results were fraudulent. Trump loyalists who wrongly believed the election had been stolen stormed the Capitol in an effort to disrupt the congressional certification of Democrat Joe Biden's victory.

Clark, an assistant attorney general in the Trump administration, has emerged as a pivotal character in that saga. A Senate committee report issued last week shows how he championed Trump's efforts to undo the election results and clashed as a result with Justice Department superiors who resisted the pressure, culminating in a dramatic White House meeting at which Trump ruminated about elevating Clark to attorney general.

"The Select Committee's investigation has revealed credible evidence that you attempted to involve the Department of Justice in efforts to interrupt the peaceful transfer of power," the chairman of the committee, Democratic Rep. Bennie Thompson of Mississippi, wrote in a letter to Clark announcing the subpoena.

While Trump ultimately did not appoint Clark acting attorney general, Clark's "efforts risked involving the Department of Justice in actions that lacked evidentiary foundation and threatened to subvert the rule of law," Thompson added.

The committee has scheduled a deposition for Oct. 29 and demanded documents by the same date. A lawyer for Clark declined to comment.

The Jan. 6 panel has so far sought testimony from a broad cast of witnesses, but its demands of Trump aides and associates are potentially complicated by Trump's vow to fight their cooperation on grounds of executive privilege.

Already one witness, Steve Bannon, has told the committee he will not cooperate based on Trump's directive, though lawmakers have said they were "engaging" with two other Trump officials — former White House chief of staff Mark Meadows and former Defense Department official Kashyap Patel. It is also unclear whether Dan Scavino, Trump's longtime social media director and one of his most loyal aides, will cooperate.

Biden has formally rejected Trump's claim of executive privilege surrounding a tranche of documents requested from the former president's time in the White House, and set up their potential release to Congress in mid-November. White House counsel Dana Remus wrote to the National Archives in a let-

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ter released Wednesday that Biden believes that "an assertion of executive privilege is not in the best interests of the United States."

Others, though, are cooperating, including some of the 11 who organized or staffed the Trump rally that preceded the riot. They were given a Wednesday deadline to turn over documents and records, and have also been asked to appear at separate depositions the committee has scheduled.

Among those responding was Lyndon Brentnall, whose firm was hired to provide event security that day. "All the documents and communications requested by the subpoena were handed in," he told The Associated Press.

Brentnall had previously said his firm had "every intention" of complying. "As far as we're concerned, we ran security at a legally permitted event run in conjunction with the U.S. Secret Service and the Park Police," he said.

Two longtime Trump campaign and White House staffers, Megan Powers and Hannah Salem, who were listed on the Jan. 6. rally permit as "operations manager for scheduling and guidance" and "operations manager for logistics and communications," have also provided documents or are planning to do so.

Powers, who served as the Trump reelection campaign's director of operations, intends to provide the requested documentation and to meet with the committee — though it remains unclear what form such meetings will take, according to a person familiar with her response who spoke on condition of anonymity.

Many of the rioters who stormed the Capitol on Jan. 6 marched up the National Mall after attending at least part of Trump's rally, where he repeated his meritless claims of election fraud and implored the crowd to "fight like hell."

The results of the election were confirmed by state officials and upheld by the courts. Trump's own attorney general, William Barr, had said the Justice Department found no evidence of widespread fraud that could have overturned the results.

It remains unclear whether the others who were subpoenaed intend to cooperate. A committee spokesperson declined to comment Wednesday on the responses it had received and how many of the 11 were complying.

Members of the committee, including Wyoming Rep. Liz Cheney, the panel's Republican vice chairwoman, have threatened to pursue criminal contempt charges against subpoenaed witnesses who refuse to comply. A House vote would send those charges to the Justice Department, which would then decide whether to prosecute.

The subpoena to Clark follows the release last week of a Senate Judiciary Committee report that documented extraordinary tensions within the senior ranks of the Justice Department in December and January as Trump and his allies prodded the law enforcement agency to help him in undoing the election.

The report from the committee's Democratic majority depicts Clark as a relentless advocate inside the building for Trump's efforts, even presenting colleagues with a draft letter pushing Georgia officials to convene a special legislative session on the election results. Clark wanted the letter sent, but superiors at the Justice Department refused.

"We need to understand Mr. Clark's role in these efforts at the Justice Department and learn who was involved across the administration," Thompson wrote.

Two additional rally organizers, Ali Alexander and Nathan Martin, as well as their "Stop the Steal" organization, were also subpoenaed for documents, which are due Oct. 21.

Alexander wrote in a Telegram post Monday that the committee was "subpoenaing people in bad faith." "So maybe this Select Committee is bogus?" he added. "Everyone is waiting to see what I'll do."

Colvin reported from New York and Smith from Providence, Rhode Island. Associated Press writers Farnoush Amiri and Zeke Miller in Washington contributed to this report.

Facebook expands harassment policy to protect public figures

By DAVID KLEPPER Associated Press

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Facebook will expand its policies on harassment to remove more harmful content, the company said Wednesday in its latest change following congressional testimony from a whistleblower who faulted the social media giant for not doing enough to stop harmful content.

Under the new, more detailed harassment policy, Facebook will bar content that degrades or sexualizes public figures, including celebrities, elected officials and others in the public eye. Existing policies already prohibit similar content about private individuals.

Another change will add more protections from harassment to government dissidents, journalists and human rights activists around the world. In many nations, social media harassment has been used in efforts to silence journalists and activists.

Lastly, the company based in Menlo Park, California, announced it will ban all coordinated harassment, in which a group of individuals work together to bully another user. That change will apply to all users.

"We do not allow bullying and harassment on our platform, but when it does happen, we act," Antigone Davis, Facebook's head of global safety, wrote in a blog post.

The changes come amid mounting criticism of the company's handling of hate speech, misinformation and negative content. Concerns about harassment range from teenagers bullying each other on Instagram to the coordinated abuse of journalists and dissidents by groups linked to authoritarian governments.

Last week, former Facebook data scientist Frances Haugen told Congress that the company has done too little to address its responsibility for spreading harmful content, and too often chooses profit over its users' best interests.

Days later, the company announced that it would introduce new features designed to protect kids, including one encouraging them to take a break from the platform.

Celebrities, even those who profit handsomely off Facebook and Instagram, haven't been shy about criticizing the company.

In an interview earlier this year with The Associated Press, singer and actress Selena Gomez said she began pressing tech companies like Facebook to clean up their sites in 2017 after a 12-year-old commented on one of Gomez's Instagram posts: "Go kill yourself."

"That was my tipping point," she said. "I couldn't handle what I was seeing."

Amanda Seitz in Columbus, Ohio, contributed to this report.

Now question in NFL is: Does Gruden reflect broader culture?

By HOWARD FENDRICH AP National Writer

When Shad Khan set out more than a decade ago to become the first member of an ethnic minority to own an NFL team, the Pakistani-American heard the scuttlebutt.

"The conjecture was, 'You will never get approved, because you're not white,'" Khan, now the owner of the Jacksonville Jaguars, told The Associated Press in a telephone interview this week.

His attempt to purchase a 60% stake in one club fell through, so "the narrative that people had been giving to me kind of got reinforced," Khan said.

Undaunted — and, he says, encouraged by Commissioner Roger Goodell — Khan moved on and soon reached an agreement to buy the Jaguars. "Got approved unanimously," Khan noted. "The conjecture and what was going on — and the reality — turned out to be different."

Current and former players and others around the league have varying opinions about a key question that arose in light of the racist, homophobic and misogynistic thoughts expressed by Jon Gruden in emails he wrote from 2011-18, when he was an ESPN analyst between coaching jobs, to then-Washington club executive Bruce Allen: Just how pervasive are those sorts of attitudes around the sport these days?

It's certainly been a topic of conversation in locker rooms.

"I'm not surprised those ideas exist. ... I guess I was a little bit surprised by that comfort level, sending an email like that to somebody. I would assume you're pretty assured that they're not going to be offended by it or surprised by it or have them say anything to you about the nature of those emails," said Corey

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Peters, an Arizona Cardinals defensive lineman in his 11th year in the NFL. "But I think it's good for the league to have that come out, and guys be held accountable for the things that they say, even in private."

Gruden resigned as coach of the Las Vegas Raiders on Monday night following reports in The Wall Street Journal and The New York Times about messages he wrote demeaning Goodell, union chief DeMaurice Smith and others, using offensive terms to refer to Blacks, gays and women.

Some saw Gruden's words as indicative of a behind-the-scenes culture that could persist in an industry where about 70% of the players are Black while more than 80% of head coaches (27 of 32) and general managers (also 27 of 32) are white — and all are men.

Among principal owners, only Khan and Buffalo's Kim Pegula are members of minorities.

"The bigger issues aren't unique to the NFL, but I think they are stark in the NFL: Who's in positions of power? And who's making decisions? When that is only one group, particularly people who are privileged, who are from the dominant group, then those are going to likely be skewed decisions and skewed world views," said Diane Goodman, an equity consultant.

"It's easy to point to Gruden and go, 'Oh, isn't he terrible?' and 'Look at the terrible things he did.' But that doesn't look at that larger culture, where people were participating with him. People were allowing these emails to exist. It really is about the whole culture and that sense, that I'm sure people have cultivated, to feel like, 'I can say these things and they will be, at best, appreciated and reciprocated or, at worst, people may not appreciate them but nothing's going to happen.' And that is about privilege and entitlement," Goodman said. "There is the assumption that 'I can say these things to another white man who is going to think they're OK.'"

Some, such as Seahawks six-time All-Pro linebacker Bobby Wagner or Hall of Fame safety Brian Dawkins, found the whole episode more reflective of the country than the NFL.

"I hate to say it like this, but that's just the world we live in. That's America," said Dawkins, whose first two seasons in Philadelphia coincided with Gruden's last two as the Eagles' offensive coordinator. "I believe if (the emails were known about) in 2011, then maybe the backlash is not as severe as it is now. I think where we are in the climate that we're in, the things that we've gone through in the last, maybe, three years with social injustice and all those things, a lot of people are waking up to some of the things that have been normal for too long."

Said Wagner: "There are people out there like that, that speak that way, that have that mindset, that have not grown. It's not just football, it's not just NFL ownership or coaches or anything like that."

Denver Broncos safety Justin Simmons raised the point that representation matters: "You get different backgrounds, you get different opinions."

He also thinks his job's workplace culture is improving.

"Progress has been made. Whether it's good enough or not good enough, I won't go into details about that," said Simmons, who entered the NFL in 2016. "I'm a firm believer that as long as we're taking steps in the right direction, that has to be positive, right?"

Former defensive end Mike Flores figures the sentiments found in the emails, which were gathered during an investigation into sexual harassment and other workplace misconduct at the Washington Football Team, do not represent merely one man's mindset.

"I know how people talk and joke around in locker rooms. Most people in the NFL would be highly scrutinized if the 'politically correct police' examined everyone's emails," Flores — who played college football at Louisville with Gruden's brother, Jay, before spending five seasons with the Eagles, 49ers and Washington — said in a phone interview.

Hugh Douglas, a defensive end with the Jets, Eagles and Jaguars from 1995-2004, told the AP that Black athletes are "conditioned" to hearing "the racial stuff" and hypothesized that owners wouldn't want their emails made public.

But Pat Hanlon, senior VP of communications for the New York Giants, tweeted, "Been in league 35 yrs. Have never heard that language in writing or verbally. I'm not naïve. Sure it has been there." He wrote "it is not commonplace" in a second tweet.

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Reigning NFL MVP Aaron Rodgers sees a generational gap between the folks in charge and those taking the field.

"I can say with real honesty and pride that I don't feel like those are opinions that are shared by players. I feel like, in the locker room, it's a close-knit group of guys. And we don't treat people differently based on the way that they talk, where they're from, what they're into, what they look like," the Packers quarterback said on The Pat McAfee Show.

"I know that there's probably opinions similar to (Gruden's), but I feel like they're few and far between. I really do," Rodgers said. "I feel like the player and the coach of today is a more empathetic, advanced, progressive, loving, connected type of person. ... Hopefully we can all, as a league, learn and grow from this and hopefully it puts people on notice who have some of those same opinions, like, 'Hey, man, it's time to grow and evolve and change and connect.'"

Miami Dolphins coach Brian Flores, who is Black, was among those echoing that sentiment.

"From my standpoint, what I love about the game is that it brings people together. It really brings people from all walks of life together," Flores said. "So you hate to see anything that brings any type of division."

Speaking about what happened with Gruden, in particular, Jacksonville's Khan said, "Obviously, these emails are disturbing," and quickly added: "My personal experience has not been that way."

In the time since Khan agreed to purchase the Jaguars in 2011, he's seen a change in the league's culture, particularly with regard to social justice causes.

"One hundred percent, I think the league is at the forefront," he said, "and they're going to be doing more."

AP Pro Football Writers Dave Campbell, Schuyler Dixon, Josh Dubow, Mark Long, Rob Maaddi, Arnie Stapleton, Teresa M. Walker, Dennis Waszak Jr. and Barry Wilner, and AP Sports Writers Greg Beacham, Tim Booth, David Brandt, Tom Canavan, Larry Lage, Steve Megargee, Tim Reynolds and Tom Withers contributed to this report.

More AP NFL coverage: <https://apnews.com/hub/nfl> and https://twitter.com/AP_NFL

William Shatner, TV's Capt. Kirk, blasts into space

By MARCIA DUNN and RICK TABER Associated Press

VAN HORN, Texas (AP) — Hollywood's Captain Kirk, 90-year-old William Shatner, blasted into space Wednesday in a convergence of science fiction and science reality, reaching the final frontier aboard a ship built by Jeff Bezos' Blue Origin company.

The "Star Trek" actor and three fellow passengers hurtled to an altitude of 66.5 miles (107 kilometers) over the West Texas desert in the fully automated capsule, then safely parachuted back to Earth. The flight lasted just over 10 minutes.

"What you have given me is the most profound experience," an exhilarated Shatner told Bezos after climbing out the hatch, the words spilling from him in a soliloquy almost as long as the flight. "I hope I never recover from this. I hope that I can maintain what I feel now. I don't want to lose it."

He said that going from the blue sky to the utter blackness of space was a moving experience: "In an instant you go, 'Whoa, that's death.' That's what I saw."

Shatner became the oldest person in space, eclipsing the previous record — set by a passenger on a similar jaunt on a Bezos spaceship in July — by eight years. The flight included about three minutes of weightlessness and a view of the curvature of the Earth.

Sci-fi fans reveled in the opportunity to see the man best known as the brave and principled commander of the starship Enterprise boldly go where no star of American TV has gone before. The internet went wild, with Trekkies quoting favorite lines from Kirk, including, "Risk: Risk is our business. That's what this starship is all about."

"This is a pinch-me moment for all of us to see Capt. James Tiberius Kirk go to space," Blue Origin

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launch commentator Jacki Cortese said before liftoff. She said she, like so many others, was drawn to space by shows like "Star Trek."

NASA sent best wishes ahead of the flight, tweeting: "You are, and always shall be, our friend."

The flight brought priceless star power to Bezos' space-tourism business, given its built-in appeal to baby boomers, celebrity watchers and space enthusiasts. Shatner starred in TV's original "Star Trek" from 1966 to 1969, when the U.S. was racing for the moon, and went on to appear in a string of "Star Trek" movies.

Bezos is a huge "Star Trek" fan — the Amazon founder had a cameo as an alien in one of the later movies — and Shatner rode free as his invited guest.

As a favor to Bezos, Shatner took up into space some "Star Trek" tricorders and communicators — sort of the iPhones of the future — that Bezos made when he was a 9-year-old Trekkie. Bezos said his mother had saved them for 48 years.

Bezos himself drove the four crew members to the launch pad, accompanied them to the platform high above the ground and cranked the hatch shut after they climbed aboard the 60-foot rocket. He was there to greet them when the capsule floated back to Earth under its brilliant blue-and-red parachutes.

"Hello, astronauts. Welcome to Earth!" a jubilant Bezos said as he opened the hatch of the New Shepard capsule, named for first American in space, Alan Shepard.

Shatner and the others wore close-fitting, flame-retardant, royal-blue flight suits, not exactly the tight, futuristic-for-the-'60s V-necks that the crew of the Enterprise had on TV.

The actor said he was struck by the vulnerability of Earth and the relative sliver of its atmosphere.

"Everybody in the world needs to do this. Everybody in the world needs to see," he said. "To see the blue color whip by, and now you're staring into blackness, that's the thing. The covering of blue, this sheath, this blanket, this comforter of blue that we have around, we say, 'Oh, that's blue sky.' And then suddenly you shoot through it all, and you're looking into blackness, into black ugliness."

Shatner said the return to Earth was more jolting than his training led him to expect and made him wonder whether he was going to make it back alive.

"Everything is much more powerful," he said. "Bang, this thing hits. That wasn't anything like the simulator. ... Am I going to be able to survive the G-forces?"

Passengers are subjected to nearly 6 G's, or six times the force of Earth's gravity, as the capsule descends. Blue Origin said Shatner and the rest of the crew met all the medical and physical requirements, including the ability to hustle up and down several flights of steps at the launch tower.

Shatner going into space is "the most badass thing I think I've ever seen," said Joseph Barra, a bartender who helped cater the launch week festivities. "William Shatner is setting the bar for what a 90-year-old man can do."

The flight comes as the space tourism industry finally takes off, with passengers joyriding aboard ships built and operated by some of the richest men in the world.

Virgin Galactic's Richard Branson went into space in his own rocket ship in July, followed by Bezos nine days later on Blue Origin's first flight with a crew. Elon Musk's SpaceX made its first private voyage in mid-September, though without Musk on board.

Last week, the Russians launched an actor and a film director to the International Space Station for a movie-making project.

Blue Origin said it plans one more passenger flight this year and several more in 2022. Sounding like the humane and idealistic Captain Kirk himself, the company said its goal is to "democratize space."

Shatner strapped in alongside Audrey Powers, a Blue Origin vice president and former space station flight controller for NASA, and two paying customers: Chris Boshuizen, a former NASA engineer, and Glen de Vries of a 3D software company. Blue Origin would not divulge the cost of their tickets.

The flight brought to 597 the number of humans who have flown in space.

"Today's launch is a testimony to the power of the imagination, and we should not lose sight of that power," University of Rochester astrophysicist Adam Frank said in an email.

"William Shatner may be 'just an actor,' but Captain James T. Kirk represents a collective dream of

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a hopeful future in space that 'Star Trek,' and science fiction in general, gave us all," Frank continued. "Bezos gave Shatner a seat on his rocket because he, like millions of others, fell in love with 'Star Trek' and its vision of a boundless frontier for humanity."

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Dunn reported from Cape Canaveral, Fla. Associated Press video journalist Cody Jackson contributed to this story.

New wind farms would dot US coastlines under Biden plan

By MATTHEW DALY Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — Seven major offshore wind farms would be developed on the East and West coasts and in the Gulf of Mexico under a plan announced Wednesday by the Biden administration.

The projects are part of President Joe Biden's plan to deploy 30 gigawatts of offshore wind energy by 2030, generating enough electricity to power more than 10 million homes.

Interior Secretary Deb Haaland said her department hopes to hold lease sales by 2025 off the coasts of Maine, New York and the mid-Atlantic, as well as the Carolinas, California, Oregon and the Gulf of Mexico. The projects are part of Biden's plan to address global warming and could avoid about 78 million metric tons of planet-warming carbon dioxide emissions, while creating up to 77,000 jobs, officials said.

"The Interior Department is laying out an ambitious road map as we advance the administration's plans to confront climate change, create good-paying jobs and accelerate the nation's transition to a cleaner energy future," Haaland said. "We have big goals to achieve a clean energy economy and Interior is meeting the moment."

In addition to offshore wind, the Interior Department is working with other federal agencies to increase renewable energy production on public lands, Haaland said, with a goal of at least 25 gigawatts of onshore renewable energy from wind and solar power by 2025.

Haaland and Amanda Lefton, director of department's Bureau of Ocean Energy Management, said officials hope to reduce potential conflicts with fishing groups and other ocean users as much as possible. "This means we will engage early and often with all stakeholders prior to identifying any new wind energy areas," Lefton said in a statement.

Commercial fishing businesses have said planned offshore wind projects off the East Coast would make it difficult to harvest valuable seafood species such as scallops and lobsters. Some conservation groups also fear that big turbines will kill thousands of birds

Biden has set a goal to deploy 30 gigawatts, or 30,000 megawatts, of offshore wind power in the United States by 2030. Meeting the target could mean jobs for more than 44,000 workers and for 33,000 others in related employment, the White House said.

The bureau completed its review of a construction and operations plan for the Vineyard Wind project 15 miles off the Massachusetts coast earlier this year. The agency is reviewing nine additional projects, including the South Fork wind farm near New York's Long Island and the Ocean Wind project off New Jersey.

Vineyard Wind is expected to produce about 800 megawatts of power and South Fork about 132 megawatts. Ocean Wind, the largest project, has a total capacity of 1,100 megawatts, enough energy to power 500,000 homes across New Jersey.

The administration has committed to processing the 13 other projects currently under federal review by 2025.

The ocean energy agency has said it is targeting offshore wind projects in shallow waters near Long Island and New Jersey. A recent study shows the area can support up to 25,000 development and construction jobs by 2030, the Interior Department said.

Heather Zichal, a former climate adviser to President Barack Obama who now leads the American

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Clean Power Association, a renewable energy group, said Biden's goal for offshore wind was "ambitious but achievable." Wind power is an essential part of the goal to reach 100 percent carbon pollution-free electricity by 2035, she said.

In a related announcement, the Energy Department said it is spending \$11.5 million to study risks that offshore wind development may pose to birds, bats and marine mammals, and survey changes in commercial fish and marine invertebrate populations at an offshore wind site on the East Coast.

The department will spend \$2 million on visual surveys and acoustic monitoring of marine mammals and seabirds at potential wind sites on the West Coast.

"In order for Americans living in coastal areas to see the benefits of offshore wind, we must ensure that it's done with care for the surrounding ecosystem by coexisting with fisheries and marine life – and that's exactly what this investment will do," Energy Secretary Jennifer Granholm said in a news release.

Unsupported 'sickout' claims take flight amid Southwest woes

By DAVID KOENIG and ALI SWENSON Associated Press

DALLAS (AP) — When Southwest Airlines canceled more than 2,000 flights over the weekend, citing bad weather and air traffic control issues, unsupported claims blaming vaccine mandates began taking off.

Conservative politicians and pundits, including Republican Sen. Ted Cruz of Texas, alleged the flight disruptions resulted from pilots and air traffic controllers walking off their jobs or calling in sick to protest federal vaccination requirements.

The airline, its pilots' union and the Federal Aviation Administration denied that.

"The weekend challenges were not a result of Southwest employee demonstrations," Southwest spokesman Chris Mainz said Monday.

Still, Twitter posts claiming airline employees were "standing up to medical tyranny" and participating in a "mass sickout" amassed thousands of shares. Vague and anonymous messages on social media speculated that Southwest was hiding the real reason for its disruptions. And anti-vaccine rallying cries such as #DoNotComply, #NoVaccineMandate and #HoldTheLine were among the 10 most popular hashtags tweeted in connection to Southwest over the weekend, according to a report from media intelligence firm Signal Labs.

Even as flights appeared to be running closer to normal on Tuesday, the Texas-based airline remained at the center of the latest front in the vaccine mandate culture war, its challenges exploited by opponents of vaccine requirements.

Neither the company nor its pilots' union has provided evidence to back up their explanations for why nearly 2,400 flights were canceled from Saturday through Monday. Southwest has only said that bad weather and air traffic control issues in Florida on Friday triggered cascading failures in which planes and pilots were trapped out of position for their next flight.

The crisis peaked on Sunday, when the airline canceled more than 1,100 flights, or 30% of its schedule. By Tuesday evening, it had canceled fewer than 100 flights, or 2% of its schedule, although more than 1,000 flights were delayed, according to tracking service FlightAware.

"When you get behind, it just takes several days to catch up," CEO Gary Kelly said Tuesday on CNBC. "We were significantly set behind on Friday."

Southwest struggled all summer with delays and cancellations. A senior executive admitted to employees Sunday that the airline is still understaffed and might need to reduce flights in November and December.

Despite repeated requests, the company and the union have declined to say how many employees missed work during the crisis. They have said that absentee rates were similar to those over a typical summer weekend, but they have not put out numbers to support that argument. It is also unclear how many Southwest pilots are unvaccinated.

"We don't know, and the company doesn't know," said Casey Murray, president of the Southwest Airlines Pilots Association.

Meanwhile, speculation from prominent conservative politicians and pundits has flooded into the void.

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Many shared the unsubstantiated theory, but few provided details, facts or examples of employees walking off the job to protest the vaccine.

"Joe Biden's illegal vaccine mandate at work!" Cruz tweeted Sunday. "Suddenly, we're short on pilots & air traffic controllers. #ThanksJoe."

The Republican senator wrote in another tweet Monday that he met last week with leaders of pilot unions who "expressed deep concern over the vaccine mandates." A spokeswoman for Southwest pilots said no one at the union had talked to Cruz. A spokesperson for Cruz did not respond to emailed questions from The Associated Press about whether the Republican senator had any firsthand knowledge of pilots or air traffic controllers skipping work.

Republican U.S. Rep. Andy Biggs of Arizona and U.S. Sen. Ron Johnson of Wisconsin also posted the rumors on social media, without offering proof.

Vague, familiar-looking "friend of a friend" stories are a dangerous form of misinformation because they "feel like insider information being shared by individuals directly involved in the action," according to Rachel Moran, a misinformation scholar at the University of Washington.

Similar unsupported claims circulated online in August, when social media users falsely claimed that flight delays and cancellations out of Fort Lauderdale-Hollywood International Airport were the result of vaccine mandates. In September, false internet rumors swirled that 40% of employees at defense contractor General Dynamics had declined the vaccine and threatened to quit.

Some Twitter users connected Southwest's flight problems to news that on Friday the Southwest Airlines Pilots Association had asked a federal judge in Dallas to block the airline's vaccine mandate. The union said under federal labor law, Southwest must bargain with the union before making changes affecting working conditions. The judge has not ruled yet.

Asked on Tuesday to respond to claims that vaccine mandates have reduced the workforce and contributed to supply-chain disruptions, White House press secretary Jen Psaki took a jab at Cruz — sarcastically labeling him a "world-renowned business, travel and health expert" — before defending Biden's policy.

"I know there was a little hubbub over the course of the last few days about Southwest Airlines," Psaki said. "We now know that some of those claims were absolutely false and actually the issues were completely unrelated to vaccine mandates."

Biden's order, which is still being finalized, would require employers with 100 or more workers to get vaccinated or tested weekly for COVID-19. Airlines, however, are government contractors because they perform work such as emergency flights for the Defense Department that carried Afghanistan refugees to the U.S. in August. That makes airlines subject to a tougher standard under the Biden order: mandatory vaccinations with no opt-out for getting tested.

Following the lead of other airlines, Southwest told employees last week that it would require them to be vaccinated by Dec. 8.

While some staff at airlines and other large companies have spoken out against vaccine requirements, comments on social media have created an exaggerated sense of the dissent, according to Moran, the misinformation scholar at the University of Washington.

"In reality, it's quite a small number of people who are protesting employment-based mandates for the vaccine," Moran said. "People are more vulnerable to misinformation in times of crisis, and these labor shortages and supply-chain delays either create a real sense of crisis or are manipulated by misinformation spreaders to make it appear like we are heading towards crisis."

Swenson reported from New York. Amanda Seitz in Columbus, Ohio, contributed to this report. David Koenig can be reached at www.twitter.airlinewriter

More questions for J&J vaccine boosters ahead of FDA review

By MATTHEW PERRONE and LAURAN NEERGAARD Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — The Food and Drug Administration is wrestling with whether and when to offer

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another dose of the single-shot Johnson & Johnson COVID-19 vaccine, while a new study out Wednesday raises the prospect that using a different brand as the booster might work better.

In an online review posted Wednesday, FDA scientists didn't reach a firm conclusion about whether there's enough evidence for J&J boosters, citing shortcomings with the company's data and little information on protection against the extra-contagious delta variant of the coronavirus.

The review comes ahead of meetings Thursday and Friday when an FDA advisory panel will recommend whether to back booster doses of both the J&J and Moderna vaccines. That's one step in the government's vaccine review process: Next week, the FDA will make a final decision on authorizing those boosters and then the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention will debate who actually should get them.

Adding to the complexity is whether it's OK to use a booster that's a different brand than someone's initial shots. Preliminary results of a U.S. government study suggest that mixing and matching boosters will work at least as well — and maybe far better for J&J recipients. Those people had a stronger immune response if they got either a Moderna or Pfizer shot as their booster than if they received another dose of the J&J vaccine, according to results posted online Wednesday. Mix-and-match is also up for discussion by the FDA panel this week.

Health authorities say all the vaccines used in the U.S. continue to provide strong protection against severe disease or death from COVID-19. But amid signs that protection against milder infections may be waning, the government already has cleared booster doses of the Pfizer vaccine for certain people starting at six months after their last shot.

Aiming for uniform recommendations, Moderna likewise asked the FDA to clear its booster dose at six months. But J&J complicated the decision by proposing a second shot over a range of two to six months.

FDA reviewers wrote that a study of the two-month booster plan suggests "there may be a benefit," while pointing to only small numbers of people who got another shot at six months instead.

Overall, the J&J vaccine "still affords protection against severe COVID-19 disease and death," the FDA's reviewers concluded. But data about its effectiveness "are consistently less" than the protection seen with Pfizer and Moderna shots.

For its part, J&J filed data with the FDA from a real-world study showing its vaccine remains about 80% effective against hospitalizations in the U.S.

J&J's single-dose vaccine was highly anticipated for its one-and-done formulation. But its rollout was hurt by a series of troubles including manufacturing problems and some rare but serious side effects including a blood clot disorder and a neurological reaction called Guillain-Barre syndrome. In both cases, regulators decided the shot's benefits outweighed those risks.

Rival drugmakers Pfizer and Moderna have provided the vast majority of U.S. COVID-19 vaccines. More than 170 million Americans have been fully vaccinated with those companies' two-dose shots while less than 15 million Americans got the J&J shot.

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'We have to be heard': Texas women travel to seek abortions

By SEAN MURPHY Associated Press

SHREVEPORT, La. (AP) — The 33-year-old Texas woman drove alone four hours through the night to get to the Louisiana abortion clinic for a consultation. She initially planned to sleep in her car, but an advocacy group helped arrange a hotel room.

Single and with three children ranging from 5 to 13, she worried that adding a baby now would take time, food, money and space away from her three children. She doesn't have a job, and without help from groups offering a safe abortion, she said, she probably would have sought another way to end her pregnancy.

"If you can't get rid of the baby, what's the next thing you're going to do? You're going to try to get rid

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of it yourself. So I'm thinking: 'What could I do? What are some home remedies that I could do to get rid of this baby, to have a miscarriage, to abort it?' And it shouldn't be like that. I shouldn't have to do that. I shouldn't have to think like that, feel like that, none of that.

"We have to be heard. This has got to change. It's not right."

She was one of more than a dozen women who arrived Saturday at the Hope Medical Group for Women, a single-story brick building with covered windows just south of downtown Shreveport. Some came alone. Others were accompanied by a friend or a partner. Some brought their children because they were unable to get child care.

All were seeking to end pregnancies, and most were from neighboring Texas, where the nation's most restrictive abortion law remains in effect. It prohibits abortions once cardiac activity is detected, after about six weeks, before many women even know they are pregnant. It makes no exceptions for rape or incest. As a result, abortion clinics in surrounding states are being inundated with Texas women.

The women agreed to speak to The Associated Press on the condition of anonymity so they could talk openly about their experiences.

Like many of the others, the 33-year-old Texas mother said she tried to schedule an abortion closer to home, but she was too far along. By the time she arrived at the clinic for the abortion on Saturday, she was just past nine weeks and had to undergo a surgical abortion rather than using medication. She said the ordeal left her angry with the Texas politicians who passed the law.

"If I had to keep this baby, ain't no telling what would've happened. I probably would've went crazy, and they don't understand that," she said, her voice filled with emotion.

A 25-year-old woman made the 70-mile trip south from Texarkana, on the border of Texas and Arkansas. She said she was already five weeks along before she realized she was pregnant, and she knew it would be impossible to schedule the required two visits at a Texas clinic. By the time she was able to make an appointment in Shreveport, her pregnancy was almost too advanced for a medication abortion.

"Luckily I found out when I did, because then I was still able to take the pill rather than the surgery," she said.

While she was at the clinic, her husband waited for hours in the car with her young son, who is a toddler and is still breastfeeding. They had no one to watch him.

The Texas law has been bouncing between courts for weeks. The Biden administration urged the courts again Monday to suspend it. That effort came three days after a federal appeals court reinstated the law following a blistering lower-court ruling that created a brief 48-hour window last week in which Texas abortion providers rushed to bring in patients again.

The anti-abortion campaign that fueled the law aims to reach the U.S. Supreme Court, where abortion opponents hope the conservative coalition assembled under President Donald Trump will end the constitutional right to abortion established by the landmark 1973 *Roe v. Wade* ruling.

As most of the women entered the clinic's parking lot, they were met by anti-abortion protesters, mostly from East Texas, who regularly make the trip to Shreveport.

John Powers, 44, a machinist from Jacksonville, Texas, said he typically makes the nearly two-hour drive twice a month with the goal of getting any woman to change her mind. In the 13 years he's been protesting outside clinics, he says he's convinced two women not to go through with their abortions, which he calls "turnarounds."

"I'm not going to say it happens a lot," said Powers, who has six children and supports any law that makes it harder for women to get an abortion. "Let's say I never have another turnaround, that one baby that can now grow up and marry and have her own children, go to school and maybe become a journalist. That'd be worth it, easily worth it to me."

Once inside the clinic, women are greeted by staff members who offer assurance and understanding. The clinic director put her arm around one woman as she escorted her to the back of the clinic. A television in a corner of the waiting room is tuned to Black Entertainment Television. A separate "chill room" with soft music and large leather couches offers patients a chance to rest before their procedure.

Many of the women's stories are troubling for Kathaleen Pittman, the clinic administrator who started

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working in an abortion clinic 30 years ago. She said she recently spoke to a mother in Texas trying to get an abortion for her 13-year-old daughter, who was sexually assaulted.

"She's a child," Pittman said. "She should not have to be on the road for hours getting here. It is absolutely heartbreaking."

Before the Texas law went into effect, Pittman said, about 20% of her clients were from Texas, mostly the eastern part of the state close to a three-state region called the Ark-La-Tex of about 1.5 million people, with Shreveport at its geographic center. Now that number is closer to 60%, and the women come hundreds of miles from Austin, Houston or San Antonio.

About 55,440 abortions were performed in Texas in 2017, according to the most recent data available from the Guttmacher Institute, a research organization that supports abortion rights, although some of those patients may have been women from out of state. Abortions performed in Texas account for more than 6% of all abortions in the U.S., Guttmacher reported.

With an estimated 1,000 women per week in Texas seeking an abortion, clinics in nearby states report being overwhelmed.

The Trust Women clinic in Oklahoma City, which is about a three-hour drive from Dallas-Fort Worth, saw about 11 patients from Texas in August. In September, after the Texas law went into effect, that number jumped to 110, and phones at the clinic are ringing constantly, said Rebecca Tong, co-executive director of Trust Women, which also operates a clinic in Wichita, Kansas.

"Many of them are trying to literally drive through the night and then show up at 8 a.m. for their appointment, having not rested," Tong said. "It's just not a good situation to go into an outpatient surgery having driven through the evening and think you can just go right home afterward."

The Texas law and the difficulty in scheduling out-of-state appointments also force women to wait longer, which means greater expense, more risk and fewer options for terminating the pregnancy, Tong said.

Legislators in some states surrounding Texas hope to implement a similar law that would prevent most abortions. In Oklahoma, Republican state Sen. Julie Daniels wrote or sponsored four separate measures to further restrict the practice. All four laws are being challenged in court.

When asked to respond to the Texas women, Daniels said her calculation is not complicated.

"The calculus is simple and straightforward: An unborn child is a child. It's a life. It's simply that, and so it's not any more complicated than that," she said. "I'm concerned first and foremost with the life of the unborn child."

Winter heating bills set to jump as inflation hits home

By STAN CHOE AP Business Writer

NEW YORK (AP) — Get ready to pay sharply higher bills for heating this winter, along with seemingly everything else.

With prices surging worldwide for heating oil, natural gas and other fuels, the U.S. government said Wednesday it expects households to see their heating bills jump as much as 54% compared to last winter.

Nearly half the homes in the U.S. use natural gas for heat, and they could pay an average \$746 this winter, 30% more than a year ago. Those in the Midwest could get particularly pinched, with bills up an estimated 49%, and this could be the most expensive winter for natural-gas heated homes since 2008-2009.

The second-most used heating source for homes is electricity, making up 41% of the country, and those households could see a more modest 6% increase to \$1,268. Homes using heating oil, which make up 4% of the country, could see a 43% increase — more than \$500 — to \$1,734. The sharpest increases are likely for homes that use propane, which account for 5% of U.S. households.

This winter is forecast to be slightly colder across the country than last year. That means people will likely be burning more fuel to keep warm, on top of paying more for each bit of it. If the winter ends up being even colder than forecast, heating bills could be higher than estimated, and vice-versa.

The forecast from the U.S. Energy Information Administration is the latest reminder of the higher inflation ripping across the global economy. Earlier Wednesday, the government released a separate report

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showing that prices were 5.4% higher for U.S. consumers in September than a year ago. That matches the hottest inflation rate since 2008, as a reawakening economy and snarled supply chains push up prices for everything from cars to groceries.

The higher prices hit everyone, with pay raises for most workers so far failing to keep up with inflation. But they hurt low-income households in particular.

"After the beating that people have taken in the pandemic, it's like: What's next?" said Carol Hardison, chief executive officer at Crisis Assistance Ministry, which helps people in Charlotte, North Carolina, who are facing financial hardship.

She said households coming in for assistance recently have had unpaid bills that are roughly twice as big as they were before the pandemic. They're contending with more expensive housing, higher medical bills and sometimes a reduction in their hours worked.

"It's what we know about this pandemic: It's hit the same people that were already struggling with wages not keeping up with the cost of living," she said.

To make ends meet, families are cutting deeply. Nearly 22% of Americans had to reduce or forego expenses for basic necessities, such as medicine or food, to pay an energy bill in at least one of the last 12 months, according to a September survey by the U.S. Census Bureau.

"This is going to create significant hardship for people in the bottom third of the country," said Mark Wolfe, executive director of the National Energy Assistance Directors' Association. "You can tell them to cut back and try to turn down the heat at night, but many low-income families already do that. Energy was already unaffordable to them."

Many of those families are just now getting through a hot summer where they faced high air-conditioning bills.

Congress apportions some money to energy assistance programs for low-income households, but directors of those programs are now watching their purchasing power shrink as fuel costs keep climbing, Wolfe said.

The biggest reason for this winter's higher heating bills is the recent surge in prices for energy commodities after they dropped to multi-year lows in 2020. Demand has simply grown faster than production as the economy roars back to life following shutdowns caused by the coronavirus.

Natural gas in the United States, for example, has climbed to its highest price since 2014 and is up roughly 90% over the last year. The wholesale price of heating oil, meanwhile, has more than doubled in the last 12 months.

Another reason for the rise is how global the market for fuels has become. In Europe, strong demand and limited supplies have sent natural gas prices up more than 350% this year. That's pushing some of the natural gas produced in the United States to head for ships bound for other countries, adding upward pressure on domestic prices as well.

The amount of natural gas in storage inventories is relatively low, according to Barclays analyst Amarpreet Singh. That means there's less of a cushion heading into winter heating season.

Heating oil prices, meanwhile, are tied closely to the price of crude oil, which has climbed more than 60% this year. Homes affected by those increases are primarily in the Northeast, where the percentage of homes using heating oil has dropped to 18% from 27% over the past decade.

AP Writer David Sharp contributed from Portland, Maine.

Social Security checks getting big boost as inflation rises

By RICARDO ALONSO-ZALDIVAR and CHRISTOPHER RUGABER Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — Millions of retirees on Social Security will get a 5.9% boost in benefits for 2022. The biggest cost-of-living adjustment in 39 years follows a burst in inflation as the economy struggles to shake off the drag of the coronavirus pandemic.

The COLA, as it's commonly called, amounts to an added \$92 a month for the average retired worker,

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according to estimates Wednesday from the Social Security Administration. It's an abrupt break from a long lull in inflation that saw cost-of-living adjustments averaging just 1.65% a year over the past 10 years.

With the increase, the estimated average Social Security payment for a retired worker will be \$1,657 a month next year. A typical couple's benefits would rise by \$154 to \$2,753 per month.

But that's just to help make up for rising costs that recipients are already paying for food, gasoline and other goods and services.

"It goes pretty quickly," retiree Cliff Rumsey said of the cost-of-living increases. After a career in sales for a leading steel manufacturer, Rumsey lives near Hilton Head Island, South Carolina. He cares at home for his wife of nearly 60 years, Judy, who has advanced Alzheimer's disease. Since the coronavirus pandemic, Rumsey said he has also noted price increases for wages paid to caregivers who occasionally spell him and for personal care products for Judy.

The COLA affects household budgets for about 1 in 5 Americans. That includes Social Security recipients, disabled veterans and federal retirees, nearly 70 million people in all. For baby boomers who embarked on retirement within the past 15 years, it will be the biggest increase they've seen.

Among them is Kitty Ruderman of Queens in New York City, who retired from a career as an executive assistant and has been collecting Social Security for about 10 years. "We wait to hear every year what the increase is going to be, and every year it's been so insignificant," she said. "This year, thank goodness, it will make a difference."

Ruderman says she times her grocery shopping to take advantage of midweek senior citizen discounts, but even so price hikes have been "extreme." She says she doesn't think she can afford a medication that her doctor has recommended.

AARP CEO Jo Ann Jenkins called the government payout increase "crucial for Social Security beneficiaries and their families as they try to keep up with rising costs."

Policymakers say the adjustment is a safeguard to protect Social Security benefits against the loss of purchasing power, and not a pay bump for retirees. About half of seniors live in households where Social Security provides at least 50% of their income, and one-quarter rely on their monthly payment for all or nearly all their income.

"You never want to minimize the importance of the COLA," said retirement policy expert Charles Blahous, a former public trustee helping to oversee Social Security and Medicare finances. "What people are able to purchase is very profoundly affected by the number that comes out. We are talking the necessities of living in many cases."

This year's Social Security trustees report amplified warnings about the long-range financial stability of the program. But there's little talk about fixes in Congress, with lawmakers' consumed by President Joe Biden's massive domestic legislation and partisan machinations over the national debt. Social Security cannot be addressed through the budget reconciliation process Democrats are attempting to use to deliver Biden's promises.

Social Security's turn will come, said Rep. John Larson, D-Conn., chairman of the House Social Security subcommittee and author of legislation to tackle shortfalls that would leave the program unable to pay full benefits in less than 15 years. His bill would raise payroll taxes while also changing the COLA formula to give more weight to health care expenses and other costs that weigh more heavily on the elderly. Larson said he intends to press ahead next year.

"This one-time shot of COLA is not the antidote," he said.

Although Biden's domestic package includes a major expansion of Medicare to cover dental, hearing and vision care, Larson said he hears from constituents that seniors are feeling neglected by the Democrats.

"In town halls and tele-town halls they're saying, 'We are really happy with what you did on the child tax credit, but what about us?'" Larson added. "In a midterm election, this is a very important constituency."

The COLA is only one part of the annual financial equation for seniors. An announcement about Medicare's Part B premium they pay for outpatient care is expected soon. It's usually an increase, so at least some of any Social Security raise gets eaten up by health care. The Part B premium is now \$148.50 a

month, and the Medicare trustees report estimated a \$10 increase for 2022.

Economist Marilyn Moon, who also served as public trustee for Social Security and Medicare, said she believes the current spurt of inflation will be temporary, due to highly unusual economic circumstances.

"I would think there is going to be an increase this year that you won't see reproduced in the future," Moon said.

But policymakers should not delay getting to work on retirement programs, she said.

"We're at a point in time where people don't react to policy needs until there is a sense of desperation, and both Social Security and Medicare are programs that benefit from long-range planning rather short-range machinations," she said.

Social Security is financed by payroll taxes collected from workers and their employers. Each pays 6.2% on wages up to a cap, which is adjusted each year for inflation. Next year the maximum amount of earnings subject to Social Security payroll taxes will increase to \$147,000.

The financing scheme dates to the 1930s, the brainchild of President Franklin D. Roosevelt, who believed a payroll tax would foster among average Americans a sense of ownership that would protect the program from political interference.

That argument still resonates. "Social Security is my lifeline," said Ruderman, the New York retiree. "It's what we've worked for."

COVID-19 hospital visitor rules: Families want more access

By ADRIANA GOMEZ LICON Associated Press

MIAMI (AP) — Banned from the Florida hospital room where her mother lay dying of COVID-19, Jayden Arbelaez pitched an idea to construction employees working nearby.

"Is there any way that I could get there?" Arbelaez asked them, pointing to a small third-story window of the hospital in Jacksonville.

The workers gave the 17-year-old a yellow vest, boots, a helmet and a ladder to climb onto a section of roof so she could look through the window and see her mother, Michelle Arbelaez, alive one last time.

A year and a half into a pandemic that has killed 700,000 people in the U.S., hospitals in at least a half-dozen states have loosened restrictions governing visits to COVID patients. Others, however, are standing firm, backed by studies and industry groups that indicate such policies have been crucial to keeping hospital-acquired infections low.

Some families of COVID-19 patients — and doctors — are asking hospitals to rethink that strategy, arguing that it denies people the right to be with loved ones at a crucial time.

"We need to get people thinking about that risk-benefit equation," said Dr. Lauren Van Scoy, a pulmonary and critical care physician at Penn State Health who has researched the effects of limited visits on the relatives of COVID-19 patients. "The risk of getting COVID versus the risk of what we know these families are going through, the psychological and emotional harm."

Van Scoy said many of the family members she has interviewed have shown signs of post-traumatic stress disorder. In newspaper op-ed pieces, doctors have shared conversations with patients who declined or postponed crucial treatments because of the visiting restrictions.

And studies conducted before the pandemic have shown that older patients in intensive care units that restricted visits developed delirium at higher rates than those in units with more flexibility.

Van Scoy agrees it made sense at the beginning of the pandemic to restrict visits because protective equipment and COVID-19 tests were in short supply and there weren't any vaccines. But now, testing and vaccinations have vastly expanded, and doctors say screening mechanisms and personal protective equipment can keep the virus at bay.

Nonetheless, the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention still recommends against in-person visits for infected patients.

"We do not take lightly the sacrifices we are asking individuals and their loved ones to make. We would not do so unless it was absolutely necessary," said Nancy Foster, vice president of quality and patient

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safety policy at the American Hospital Association.

Ann Marie Pettis, president of the Association for Professionals in Infection Control and Epidemiology, acknowledged that patients benefit from having visitors but said the group still discourages it in most cases.

"I don't know of any place that doesn't try very hard because families are incredibly important for the patients' well-being," Pettis said. "These are heartbreaking decisions that have to be made."

Jeremy Starr, a 36-year-old electric utility lineman from Jacksonville, is familiar with such heartbreak.

Starr, who contracted the virus in the summer, remembers being thirsty, alone and unable to sleep while hospitalized for 14 days in an ICU.

"The non-breathing was bad enough, but not to see your loved ones is the worst," he said. "It felt like you were not a human."

Kirsten Fiest, an associate professor of critical care medicine at the University of Calgary who is studying the effect of isolation on COVID-19 patients, said family members are also caregivers who can lighten the burden of stressed-out health care workers in ICUs.

"By not having families there, nurses have to go out of their way to call them. They have to play a new role, even holding up a phone when someone says goodbye," Fiest said.

Inspired by the stories of Starr, Arbelaez, and others like them, Darlene Guerra of Jacksonville started an online petition asking Florida Gov. Ron DeSantis to push for more access. DeSantis was an early proponent of reopening nursing homes to visitors, saying he felt banning them contributed to the suffering of families.

"It's heartbreaking for all these families," Guerra said. "We are going to work, we are going to church, we are going to the store, but we can't go to the hospital and be with our loved ones?"

Justin Senior, head of the Florida Safety Net Hospital Alliance, which represents some of the largest medical facilities in the state, said that when establishing the rules for visits, hospitals take into consideration transmission levels of COVID, vaccination rates and the prevalence of heart and lung diseases in the community.

Some doctors say health networks are worried about nurse shortages and keep restrictions in place to avoid adding stress to already exhausted health care workers. Others say the process of screening visitors and instructing them how to wear protective equipment also takes time from health care staff.

"I think the position is coming from a place of fatigue and burnout rather than what is good for patients," Van Scoy said.

Some hospitals have allowed people to visit coronavirus patients. The University of Utah Health earlier this year announced its hospitals would allow up to two adult visitors for the entire hospital stay, provided they remained in the patient's room and wore personal protective equipment at all times, did not have symptoms and were either vaccinated or had recently recovered from COVID-19.

Many have made exceptions only for coronavirus patients who are about to die, which was the case at the Jacksonville hospital caring for Arbelaez's mother. The family says the rules were inconsistent: On some days, administrators allowed only one family member to visit; on others, several visitors were permitted. On the last day, only Arbelaez's father, Mitch Arbelaez, was allowed. It happened to be his birthday.

From her perch on the hospital roof, the distraught teen picked up her cellphone, called her dad and sang "Happy Birthday" to him as she peered through the window and gazed at her mother, unconscious on a ventilator.

Hours later, her mom died, alone.

This story has been edited to clarify that Dr. Lauren Van Scoy is a physician at Penn State Health, not Penn State.

Russia, WHO differ on when approval will come for Sputnik V

By VLADIMIR ISACHENKOV and TANYA TITOVA Associated Press

MOSCOW (AP) — Russia is ready to provide up to 300 million doses of its Sputnik V vaccine to the U.N.-

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backed COVAX initiative, a top Russian official promoting the shot says, even though the World Health Organization hasn't yet signed off on it and production issues have fanned customers' concerns worldwide.

Russian Direct Investment Fund CEO Kirill Dmitriev and the World Health Organization had vastly different takes Wednesday on when the Russian vaccine would get WHO's stamp of approval.

Sputnik V has been authorized for use in 70 countries around the world despite not yet being approved by the U.N. health agency even for emergency use. Some countries, especially in Latin America, have expressed fears lately that they are not getting the vaccine's second shot in time to properly inoculate their people from COVID-19.

Dmitriev told The Associated Press that the Russian vaccine will be made available to COVAX, the U.N.-backed program designed to share vaccines more evenly around the world, once the shot is approved by the WHO. He said he expects WHO's approval to come in the next two months. The COVAX program cannot use a vaccine that is not approved by the WHO.

"We believe that we can supply COVAX around 200 million doses a year, 200 to 300 million," Dmitriev said in an interview. "We just need the WHO approval to work with COVAX."

But Dr. Mariangela Simao, the WHO's assistant director-general for access to health products, wouldn't make any commitment to that timetable. She said the approval process for Sputnik V is currently on hold, and once the legal procedures are sorted out, "we will reopen the assessment, which includes the submission of the data in the dossier — it's still incomplete — and resuming the inspections in the sites in Russia."

"The timeline will depend when we get these legal procedures done and then we will be able to assess, with the applicant and the manufacturer, what would be the next step and how long it will take," Simao said at a briefing in Geneva. "So we don't know yet."

Dmitriev's comments came even as Russia has run into delays in providing the contracted amounts of Sputnik V to countries in Latin America and is facing a surge in infections and record-breaking daily virus deaths at home amid a slow vaccination rate.

Dmitriev, however, insisted that Sputnik shipments to Latin American nations are back on track.

"All those issues have been fully resolved," Dmitriev told the AP. "All of the issues with the second component are resolved in all of the countries."

Despite his assurances, countries such as Argentina and Venezuela said they are still waiting for the promised vaccine shipments.

Dmitriev argued that "there is not one vaccine manufacturer in the world that didn't have vaccine delivery issues." including Russian plants making Sputnik V.

He claimed that by year's end, there will be the capacity to produce 700 million doses of Sputnik V and its one-shot version, Sputnik Light. He said 50% of the output will come from abroad through partnerships with more than 20 manufacturers in more than 10 countries.

Dmitriev said a new study conducted by the vaccine's developer shows that Sputnik Light, a one-shot version of Sputnik V, was 70% effective against infection with the delta variant of the coronavirus during the first three months after vaccination. But the study he cited was not made available and has not been reviewed by outside experts, so it is not possible to verify the results. Dmitriev's fund said the study was submitted for eventual publication online.

Dmitriev noted that Russia has a three-month vaccine stockpile, allowing it to boost exports now, and hailed Sputnik V's reported efficacy and the lack of side effects.

The European Medicines Agency's expedited approval for Sputnik V began in March. Experts from the EMA visited some of Sputnik V's manufacturing sites earlier this year and the agency said further visits could be required depending on additional data submitted.

The EMA's head of vaccines strategy, Marco Cavaleri, said last month the agency was still waiting for some outstanding data from Russia. He noted that the timeline for a decision was "uncertain," but estimated the EMA might make a decision on Sputnik V by the end of the year.

Russia, meanwhile, reported another record daily coronavirus deaths amid a slow vaccination rate and authorities' reluctance to tighten restrictions to stem the spread of the virus.

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The government coronavirus task force reported 984 coronavirus deaths over the past 24 hours, the pandemic's new high. Russia has repeatedly marked record daily death tolls over the past few weeks as infections soared to near all-time highs, with 28,717 new cases reported Wednesday.

The Kremlin has attributed the mounting contagion and deaths to a lagging vaccination rate. Prime Minister Mikhail Mishustin said Tuesday that about 43 million Russians, or 29% of the country's nearly 146 million people, were fully vaccinated. Experts say vaccine skepticism and vaccine disinformation are widespread in Russia.

Dmitriev attributed the low vaccination uptake to Russians widely underestimating the danger of COVID-19, which is already straining hospitals in some regions.

"Russia was a little bit victim of its own success, because early on it was very successful in fighting COVID," Dmitriev said. "Many people basically assumed that COVID is already defeated, but then the delta variant came and it's a big challenge."

Russian President Vladimir Putin has emphasized the need to speed up the vaccination rate, but he also has cautioned against forcing people to get vaccine shots. The Kremlin has also ruled out a new nationwide lockdown like the one during the first months of the pandemic, which badly crippled the economy and dented Putin's ratings.

Some Russian regions have restricted attendance at large public events and limited access to theaters, restaurants and other places. But life remains largely normal in Moscow, St. Petersburg and many other Russian cities.

Overall, Russia's coronavirus task force has confirmed 219,329 deaths — the highest death toll in Europe. The state statistics agency Rosstat, which also counts deaths where the virus wasn't considered the main cause, has reported a much higher toll — about 418,000 deaths of people with COVID-19.

Both those numbers put Russia among the top five hardest-hit nations in the pandemic, along with the United States, Brazil, India and Mexico.

Jamey Keaten in Geneva and AP Medical Writer Maria Cheng in London contributed.

Follow AP's coverage of the coronavirus pandemic at <https://apnews.com/hub/coronavirus-pandemic>

Prosecutor: Foreigner fueled Giuliani associate's donations

By LARRY NEUMEISTER and TOM HAYS Associated Press

NEW YORK (AP) — Lawyers opened the trial of an associate of Rudy Giuliani on Wednesday with plenty of talk about \$1 million from a Russian financier that prosecutors contend was aimed at illegally influencing U.S. politicians, but there was little mention of Giuliani and other prominent political figures whose names will arise later in the trial.

As it turns out, only about \$100,000 of the \$1 million ever made it into the hands of U.S. politicians, prosecutors say.

The trial of Lev Parnas and Andrey Kukushkin began a day after jury selection with claims by Assistant U.S. Attorney Aline Flodr that the men conspired to hide illegal foreign campaign contributions made with money from Andrey Muraviev.

She called Muraviev a "Russian tycoon" and said Parnas referred to Muraviev as "Big Andrey" as he "made connections with movers and shakers in the political world."

"That is what secret foreign money infiltrating American elections looks like. That is why we are here. That is what this trial is all about," Flodr told the Manhattan federal jury.

The first trial witness, Wesley Duncan — a Republican candidate for attorney general in Nevada in 2018 — testified that he returned \$10,000 that Parnas had donated to his campaign because his campaign believed it was illegal.

"As soon as we found that out, we sent it back," he said. Duncan also testified he once turned down an invitation from Parnas to fly to an event in a private jet.

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Flodr portrayed Parnas, 49, as a man who tried to live large on the money of others, passing himself off as a wealthy and connected political donor.

Attorney Joseph Bondy said that Parnas, his client, was not guilty and that some of his work was on behalf of a natural gas pipeline deal he pursued.

"That's what the evidence in this case will show you. He didn't knowingly, willfully violate any federal election laws," he told jurors.

Kukushkin's attorney, Gerald Lefcourt, also said the prosecutor had it wrong, telling jurors that if they follow the evidence, "you'll have no trouble in finding Mr. Kukushkin not guilty."

He said Kukushkin, born in Ukraine in 1973, was primarily interested in expanding his legal marijuana business in California and had teamed up with Muraviev to do so after the pair met while both were studying at a U.S. school.

Kukushkin, who became a U.S. citizen at age 26 and settled in San Francisco, was thought of by his supposed co-conspirators as a "rube, unsophisticated, inexperienced, not knowing what he's doing," Lefcourt said.

Throughout the openings, prosecutors and defense lawyers made few references to Giuliani, whom Parnas aided in his effort to persuade the government of Ukraine to investigate the son of then-presidential candidate Joe Biden.

Bondy did cite Parnas' "relationship with America's mayor," a reference to Giuliani's years as New York City's mayor, and he noted that Parnas, a Florida businessman, had traveled to campaign events with Giuliani.

Giuliani is not charged in the case, and prosecutors haven't alleged that he knew anything about illegal campaign contributions.

But Manhattan federal authorities seized his electronic devices in an April raid and are looking into his activities related to Ukraine to see if he violated a law requiring a person to register as a foreign agent for certain activities. Giuliani has maintained anything he did was in his capacity as a personal attorney to then-President Donald Trump.

Ransomed and beaten: Migrants face abuse in Libyan detention

By SAMY MAGDY Associated Press

ONBOARD THE GEO BARENTS OFF LIBYA (AP) — Osman Touré was crying from the pain of repeated beatings and torture as he dialed his brother's cellphone number.

"I'm in prison in Libya," Touré said in that August 2017 call. "They will kill me if you don't pay 2,500 dinars in 24 hours."

Within days, Touré's family transferred the roughly \$550 demanded to secure his freedom from a government detention center in Libya. But Touré was not let go — instead, he was sold to a trafficker and kept enslaved for four more years.

Touré is among tens of thousands of migrants who have endured torture, sexual violence and extortion at the hands of guards in detention centers in Libya, a major hub for migrants fleeing poverty and wars in Africa and the Middle East, hoping for a better life in Europe.

The 25-year-old Guinean, along with two dozen other migrants, spoke to The Associated Press aboard the Geo Barents, a rescue vessel operated by the medical aid group Doctors Without Borders in the Mediterranean Sea off Libya. Most had been held in trafficking warehouses and government detention centers in western Libya over the past four years.

They were among 60 migrants who fled Libya on Sept. 19 in two unseaworthy boats and were rescued a day later by the Geo Barents. The AP also obtained testimonies from many others collected in recent months by the aid group, known by its French acronym MSF.

The European Union has sent 455 million euros to Libya since 2015, largely channeled through U.N. agencies and aimed at beefing up Libya's coast guard, reinforcing its southern border and improving conditions for migrants.

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However, huge sums have been diverted to networks of militiamen and traffickers who exploit migrants, according to a 2019 AP investigation. Coast guard members are also complicit, turning migrants intercepted at sea over to detention centers under deals with militias or demanding payoffs to let others go.

The practice continues unabated and U.N.-commissioned investigators said in a 32-page report last week that "policies meant to push migrants back to Libya to keep them away from European shores ultimately lead to abuses," including possible crimes against humanity.

Hundreds of thousands of migrants hoping to reach Europe have made their way through Libya, where a lucrative trafficking business has flourished in a country without a functioning government, split for years between rival administrations in the east and west, each backed by armed groups and foreign governments.

The migrants, mostly from sub-Saharan Africa, told the AP that detention center guards beat and tortured them, then extorted money from their relatives, supposedly in exchange for their freedom. Their bodies showed traces of old and recent injuries, and signs of bullet and knife wounds on their backs, legs, arms and faces.

On paper, the detention centers are run by the Directorate for Combating Illegal Migration, which is overseen by the Interior Ministry and Libya's interim authorities, who took power earlier this year under U.N. auspices to carry out national elections in December. But on the ground, notorious militias remain in control, according to migrants and the U.N. investigators.

"Migrants are detained for indefinite periods without an opportunity to have the legality of their detention reviewed, and the only practical means of escape is by paying large sums of money to the guards or engaging in forced labor or sexual favors inside or outside the detention," the U.N. report said.

Spokespeople for Libya's government, the Interior Ministry, the directorate and the coast guard did not answer phone calls or respond to messages seeking comment.

Touré, the youngest of seven siblings abandoned by their father, said that as an adolescent he watched others from his small Guinean town of Kindia make it to Europe and help pull their families out of poverty.

He began his own attempt in March 2015, taking odd jobs along the way to finance the trip. Traffickers held him captive for months twice, in Niger and Algeria, before he crossed into Libya in April 2017, he said.

Four months later, Touré embarked from Libya, only to be intercepted by the coast guard and returned to Tripoli. At the port, he and other migrants attempted to flee but were caught by security forces and taken to the al-Nasr Martyrs detention center in Zawiya.

That's when the torture started. He described how guards would hang them upside down and whip their bare feet. At times other migrants were forced or given incentives to take part in the violence.

"A migrant from Ghana refused to beat us, but there was a Cameroonian who was really cruel," Touré said.

His second week in prison, six guards approached him. One slapped him hard on the right side of his face. The rest kicked and beat him. Then he was handed a cellphone and ordered to call his family.

Ten others in the cell were forced to do the same. Three were taken out by the guards in the next few days. He doesn't know what became of them, he said.

The money sent by captives' relatives was usually transferred via Western Union or an informal system of personal accounts to a trafficker in coordination with the guards. In some cases, like Touré's, families sent money to the detained migrants and guards took them to withdraw it.

Touré was taken from his cell three days after the phone call. He thought he would walk free. Instead, the guards sold him to a trafficker in Zawiya. He spent the next four years enslaved, working in the trafficker's warehouse.

Finally his luck changed in September when the trafficker's wife took pity on him and persuaded her husband to set him free, he said. Within days he was on a small inflatable boat with 55 others attempting the Mediterranean crossing.

Overladen, the boat did not make it far. Those onboard were rescued by the Geo Barents 48 nautical miles off Libya's coast. They were taken to Sicily, where Italian authorities permitted the rescue ship to dock on Sept. 27 and let the migrants apply for asylum. They could still be returned to their home coun-

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tries if their requests are denied.

Touré and other migrants said that besides plain cruelty, there was racism behind their abuse in Libya. The U.N. report found the same — that Black sub-Saharan Africans were likely to be subjected to harsher treatment than others.

“Libya isn’t a safe place for Black Africans,” Touré said.

The point of arrival at one of Libya’s ports was the first opportunity for Libya’s security forces to extract payment from migrants trying to reach Europe.

For some, particularly Arab migrants, the ordeal ended there without detention, as long as they paid. Waleed, a Tunisian, told the AP he bribed guards four times at the Tripoli port and walked free. Three other times he was taken to detention centers, where he found a way to get enough money to the guards and was released.

Mohammed, a Moroccan, also said he was released at port in 2020 by handing over 3,000 dinars (\$660). Both men gave only their first names out of fear for the safety of family members still inside Libya.

The Libyan coast guard, which is trained and equipped by the European Union, has intercepted some 87,000 migrants in the Mediterranean since 2016, including about 26,300 so far this year, according to U.N. figures. But only about 10,000 are in detention centers, according to the U.N. migration agency, raising concerns that many are in the hands of criminal groups and traffickers, and that others are dead.

Not all have enough money to pay bribes. Mohammed Salah, a 20-year-old migrant from the Ivory Coast, told the AP he was intercepted and returned to Libya in January 2020. He didn’t have the 3,000 dinars (\$660) demanded for his freedom.

After he argued over the bribe, he was beaten at the police station and suffered a broken leg. Detention center guards then handed him over to a trafficker, who enslaved him for over a year, he said.

Valentin Najang of Cameroon was detained in the Zawiya detention center after being captured early last month. The guards repeatedly beat him and other migrants with sticks and plastic tubing, the 18-year-old told the AP. Once, he watched two guards beat a young migrant from Mauritius unconscious. A week into his detention, his family paid 500,000 Cameroonian francs (over \$880) for his freedom.

At the heart of the abuses against migrants remains the question of who can be held accountable. The U.N. report did not name suspects, saying more investigation is needed to determine who was culpable.

But migrants and others inside Libya say the issue is clear cut: It’s the militias and warlords who have become powerful government figures in many areas.

The coastal town of Zawiya, where the al-Nasr Martyrs detention center is located, is controlled by the Nasr Martyrs militia, which have “the final word on all the town’s security and military matters,” said a former senior official at the Directorate for Combating Illegal Migration, who spoke on condition of anonymity for fear of reprisals.

The militia is led by Mohammed Kachlaf, who was sanctioned in 2018 by the U.N. Security Council, which called his network “one of the most dominant in the field of migrant smuggling and the exploitation of migrants in Libya.”

Zawiya’s coast guard unit is commanded by Abdel-Rahman Milad, who was also sanctioned in 2018 by the U.N. Security Council for human trafficking. U.N. experts said Milad and other coast guard members “are directly involved in the sinking of migrant boats using firearms.” Milad has denied any links to human smuggling.

And Tripoli’s Abu Salim neighborhood, where a detention center with the same name is located, is controlled by a militia led by Abdel-Ghani al-Kikli. Though Amnesty International has accused him of war crimes and other serious rights violations, he was named this year as the head of the government’s so-called Stability Support Authority with even broader arrest powers.

“It is a well-connected mafia with influence in each corner of the government,” the former Directorate for Combating Illegal Migration official said.

AP video journalist Ahmed Hatem contributed from aboard the Geo Barents.

Film TV workers union says strike to start next week

By ANDREW DALTON AND LINDSEY BAHR Associated Press

LOS ANGELES (AP) — The union representing film and television crews says its 60,000 members will begin a nationwide strike on Monday if it does not reach a deal that satisfies demands for fair and safe working conditions.

A strike would bring a halt to filming on a broad swath of film and television productions and extend well beyond Hollywood, affecting productions in Georgia, New Mexico and other North American shoots.

International Alliance of Theatrical Stage Employees International President Matthew Loeb said Wednesday that the strike would begin at 12:01 a.m. Monday unless an agreement is reached on rest and meal periods and pay for its lowest-paid workers.

Loeb cited a lack of urgency in the pace of negotiations for setting a strike date.

"Without an end date, we could keep talking forever," Loeb said in a statement. "Our members deserve to have their basic needs addressed now."

A strike would be a serious setback for an industry that had recently returned to work after long pandemic shutdowns and recurring aftershocks amid new outbreaks.

"There are five whole days left to reach a deal," said Jarryd Gonzales, a publicist for the group representing the studios. "Studios will continue to negotiate in good faith in an effort to reach an agreement for a new contract that will keep the industry working."

As in other industries, many behind-the-scenes people started reevaluating their lives and the demands of their professions during the pandemic. And now that production is ramping up again, union leaders say the "catch-up" is resulting in worse working conditions.

"Folks have reported working conditions deteriorating and being aggravated," Jonas Loeb, IATSE's director of communication told the AP last week. "And these 60,000 behind the scenes workers that are under these contracts are really at a breaking point."

It would be the first nationwide strike in the 128-year history of IATSE, whose members include cinematographers, camera operators, set designers, carpenters, hair and makeup artists, animators and many others.

Union members say they are forced to work excessive hours and are not given reasonable rest via meal breaks and sufficient time off between shifts. Leaders say the lowest paid crafts get unlivable wages. And streamers like Netflix, Apple and Amazon are allowed to pay even less under previous agreements that allowed them more flexibility when they were up-and-comers.

"We've continued to try and impress upon the employers the importance of our priorities, the fact that this is about human beings, and the working conditions are about dignity and health and safety at work," said Rebecca Rhine, national executive director of the Cinematographers Guild, IATSE Local 600. "The health and safety issues, the unsafe hours, the not breaking for meals, those were the exception for many years in the industry, which is a tough industry. But what they've become is the norm."

The union reported on Oct. 4 that its members had voted overwhelmingly to allow its president to authorize a strike, but negotiations, and hopes to avert a walkout, resumed after the vote.

The Alliance of Motion Picture and Television Producers, which represents the studios and other entertainment companies in negotiations, said its members value their crew members and were committed to avoiding a shutdown in a still-recovering industry.

"A strike is always difficult for everybody. Everybody suffers, it's hard, but I believe that our members have the will and the resolve to do what's necessary to be heard and to have their voices translated into actual change in the industry," Rhine said. "What we learned from the pandemic is the employers can change the way they do business if it's in their interest to do so."

Neo-fascists exploit 'no-vax' rage, posing dilemma for Italy

By FRANCES D'EMILIO Associated Press

ROME (AP) — An extreme-right party's violent exploitation of anger over Italy's coronavirus restrictions is forcing authorities to wrestle with the country's fascist legacy and fueling fears there could be a replay

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of last week's mobs trying to force their way to Parliament.

Starting Friday, anyone entering workplaces in Italy must have received at least one vaccine dose, or recovered from COVID-19 recently or tested negative within two days, using the country's Green Pass to prove their status. Italians already use the pass to enter restaurants, theaters, gyms and other indoor entertainment, or to take long-distance buses, trains or domestic flights.

But 10,000 opponents of that government decree turned out in Rome's vast Piazza del Popolo last Saturday in a protest that degenerated into alarming violence.

It's the mixing and overlap of the extreme right and those against Italy's vaccine mandates that are causing worries, even though those opposed to vaccines are still a distinct minority in a country where 80% of people 12 and older are fully vaccinated.

Incited by the political extreme right at the rally, thousands marched through the Italian capital on Saturday and hundreds rampaged their way through the headquarters of the left-leaning CGIL labor union. Police foiled their repeated attempts to reach the offices of Italy's premier and the seat of Parliament.

The protesters smashed union computers, ripped out phone lines and trashed offices after first trying to use metal bars to batter their way in through CGIL's front door, then breaking in through a window. Unions have backed the Green Pass as a way to make Italy's workplaces safer.

CGIL leader Maurizio Landini immediately drew parallels to attacks a century ago by Benito Mussolini's newly minted Fascists against labor organizers as he consolidated his dictatorship's grip on Italy.

To some watching the violence unfold, the attack also evoked images of the Jan. 6 assault by angry mob of the U.S. Capitol as part of protests over President Donald Trump's failed reelection bid.

"What we witnessed in the last days was something truly shocking," said Ruth Dureghello, president of the Jewish Community of Rome.

Premier Mario Draghi told reporters that his government is "reflecting" on parliamentary motions lodged or backed by leftist, populist and centrist parties this week urging the government to outlaw Forza Nuova, the extreme-right party whose leaders encouraged the attack on the union office.

On Monday, upon the orders of Rome prosecutors, Italy's telecommunications police force took down Forza Nuova's website for alleged criminal instigation.

Hours after the CGIL attack, scores of anti-vaccine protesters also invaded a hospital emergency room where a demonstrator, feeling ill, had been taken, frightening patients and leaving two nurses and three police officers injured.

In response, Rome will see two more marches this Saturday: one by opponents of the Green Pass and another to show solidarity for CGIL and provide what Landini describes as an "antidote to violence."

Police and intelligence officials huddled Wednesday on how to handle possible violence due to the start of the workplace virus mandate and the twin demonstrations.

Sunday will also see a runoff mayoral election in Rome between a center-left candidate and a right-wing candidate chosen by the leader of a fast-growing national opposition party with neo-fascist roots.

Among the dozen people arrested in Saturday's violence are a co-founder of Forza Nuova (New Force) and its Rome leader. Also jailed are a founder of the now-defunct extreme-right militant group Armed Revolutionaries Nuclei, which terrorized Italy in the 1980s, and a restaurateur from northern Italy who defied a national lockdown early in the COVID-19 pandemic.

Dureghello described the "thuggery" in Rome as a "grave, painful phenomenon, organized by those who want to create disorder on one hand and orient consensus" by drawing on prejudice in Italian society. In a tweet, she called for an urgent investigation into "neo-fascist movements and the network that supports them."

Also upsetting Italy's tiny Jewish community have been antisemitic comments by a Rome mayoral candidate selected by Giorgia Meloni, leader of the far-right Brothers of Italy, Parliament's main opposition party. It recently emerged that Enrico Michetti in 2020 wrote that the Holocaust receives so much attention because Jews "possess banks." He has since apologized for "having hurt the feelings" of Jews.

In the first round of municipal balloting in Rome, Rachele Mussolini, a granddaughter of the dictator, won the highest number of votes for a council post.

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Meloni has long dodged demands by opponents that she unequivocally denounce the legacy of Mussolini's Fascist rule.

On Wednesday, speaking in Parliament, Meloni distanced her party from Forza Nuova while criticizing the Green Pass workplace rule.

"We are light years distant from any kind of subversive movement, in particular Forza Nuova," she said. She then accused Draghi's broad coalition, assembled earlier this year to lead the country through the pandemic, of "pretending not to see that Saturday in the street there were people demonstrating their dissent about not having a government (Green) pass and not recognizing their right to work."

Meloni "lives on ambiguity, she has one foot in the legacy of fascism," said Antonio Parisella, a retired professor of contemporary Italian history.

Prevalent in much of Italian society is the idea "that Mussolini did good things," such as the common "myth" that he made the trains run on time and eradicated malaria, said Parisella, who directs Rome's Liberation Museum.

"The hostility toward the (Green) pass, the aversion to the vaccine" are something that "the post-fascist right well knows how to utilize," Donatella Di Cesare, a Rome university philosophy professor, wrote on the front page of the La Stampa newspaper.

Milan anti-terrorism prosecutor Alberto Nobili told Radio 24 this week that in addition to the extreme right demonstrating "under the no-vax symbol," investigators in that city have found that "anarchist groups and extreme left groups" are also trying to exploit public anger.

Elsewhere in Europe, from Slovenia to Greece, some far-right parties have joined forces with the anti-vaccine movement.

In France, the situation is more complicated. Some far-right leaders teamed up with anti-vaccine protesters. But firebrand Marine Le Pen's far-right National Rally party in France did not call for such protests and she is vaccinated. Many anti-vaccine protesters in France have refused to march with the far right.

Colleen Barry contributed from Milan and Sylvie Corbet contributed from Paris.

EXPLAINER: Why the Social Security COLA is jumping next year

By RICARDO ALONSO-ZALDIVAR Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — Rising inflation has triggered a sizable increase in Social Security's annual cost-of-living adjustment, or COLA, for 2022. The Social Security Administration announced the 5.9% COLA on Wednesday after a Labor Department report on inflation during September.

Over the last 10 years, the Social Security COLA has averaged about 1.7% annually as inflation remained low. But the economic recovery from the coronavirus pandemic has triggered rising prices for a wide range of goods and services, and that will translate to bigger checks for retirees.

WHY ARE SOCIAL SECURITY BENEFITS ADJUSTED?

Policymakers say the COLA works to preserve the purchasing power of Social Security benefits and shouldn't be seen as a pay hike for retirees.

At one time Congress had to approve inflation increases, but starting in the mid-1970s lawmakers turned that function over to nonpartisan experts within the government bureaucracy. The annual review is now tied to changes in an official measure of inflation and proceeds automatically and with no political brinkmanship.

HOW DOES THE COLA FOR 2022 MEASURE UP?

The Great Recession saw a COLA increase of 5.8% for 2009, and next year's number is just a notch above that.

But one has to go back nearly 40 years to find a bigger COLA boost, the 7.4% awarded for 1983.

Next year's number won't come close to that, but it's still the biggest Social Security hike the vast majority of baby boomer retirees have seen. Up to now, they've collected meager to modest annual adjustments, not counting three years for which there was no COLA because inflation barely showed a pulse.

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A 5.9% COLA will increase the average Social Security payment for a retired worker by about \$92 a month, to \$1,657 next year. Compare that with this year's COLA, worth only about \$20 a month.

WHAT'S CHANGED OVER THE PAST YEAR?

As the economy recovers from the shock of coronavirus shutdowns, prices are rising at a pretty good clip. Gas serves as an ever-present reminder, above \$3 a gallon in most states, \$4 a gallon in California and Hawaii. But food had already been going up and so are labor costs as employers compete to hire choosy workers seeking higher pay and better benefits. Add to the mix supply chain problems that have slowed deliveries of everything from refrigerators to running shoes.

All that gets sifted into the prices that consumers pay for their everyday needs.

WHO'S AFFECTED?

The COLA is big enough to have an impact on the overall economy.

It affects the household budgets of about 1 in 5 Americans, including Social Security recipients, disabled veterans and federal retirees, about 70 million people.

About half of seniors live in households where Social Security benefits account for at least 50% of their income, and one-quarter rely on their monthly payment for all or nearly all their earnings. For this latter group, the COLA can literally make a difference in what they're able to put on the table.

DO PRIVATE PENSIONS ALSO PROVIDE A COLA?

Inflation protection is central to Social Security's benefit design, but it's not so common among traditional private pensions. Benefits paid by most employer plans gradually lose some of their purchasing power over the years.

Social Security not only increases retiree checks to compensate for inflation, but it then adds that amount to a person's underlying benefit so it grows with compounding as future COLAs are factored in.

CAN SOCIAL SECURITY AFFORD TO KEEP PAYING COLAS?

Proposals have been floated both to increase or trim back COLAs in the context of a broader Social Security overhaul. Many advocates for older people argue that the inflation index currently used does not adequately reflect the higher health care costs faced by the aging.

On the other side, groups pressing to reduce federal deficits urge switching to an alternate inflation measure that factors in consumers' habit of substituting cheaper goods when prices rise. That would yield slightly lower estimates of cost-of-living changes.

Social Security trustees said in their report this year that the program's long-term fiscal imbalance is casting a longer shadow.

For the first time in 39 years, the cost of delivering benefits will exceed Social Security's total income from payroll tax collections and interest. From here on in, Social Security will have to tap its savings to pay full benefits.

The report also moved up the exhaustion date for Social Security's massive trust fund by one year, to 2034. At that point, the program will be able to pay only 78% of scheduled benefits, the report said.

Such a reduction would represent a major hardship for most people who depend on Social Security, even middle-class retirees.

But hardly anyone with political power in Washington is talking about fixes.

"Social Security is an issue that really needs to be addressed together by both parties," said David Certner, legislative policy director at AARP. "It is very difficult to do bipartisan work on something as big and important as Social Security in what is a very partisan atmosphere."

The AP Interview: NZ climate chief to aim higher at UN talks

By NICK PERRY Associated Press

WELLINGTON, New Zealand (AP) — The coronavirus pandemic has shown that humans are very good at responding to an immediate crisis, says New Zealand's Climate Change Minister James Shaw. But when it comes to dealing with a slower-moving threat like climate change, he says, we're "terribly bad."

Shaw spoke to The Associated Press on Wednesday ahead of a key climate summit that starts in

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Glasgow, Scotland, on Oct. 31. Many environmentalists say the U.N. summit, known as COP26, represents the world's final chance to avert a climate catastrophe.

Shaw said that at Glasgow, he intends to announce a more ambitious target for New Zealand's emissions reductions over the coming decade, and he hopes many other countries also aim higher.

He said a top priority will be to ensure that a promise made by wealthier nations to provide \$100 billion a year to help poorer countries switch to cleaner energy is fulfilled.

"The developed world so far has not delivered on that promise," Shaw said.

That has led to a breakdown in trust and a fraying of the consensus reached with the 2015 Paris Agreement, he said. It's also giving an excuse to authoritarian regimes to disrupt international cooperation, he added.

Shaw said the pandemic had accelerated the transition to cleaner energy in some countries. But in many developing nations it had slowed improvements, he said, because they were struggling simply to cope with the massive financial and social impacts from the disease.

Shaw said he has doubts whether some of the positive environmental changes made by people during the pandemic — like working from home more and driving less — will endure.

"I think those are possibilities, but I also think human beings tend to revert to type," Shaw said. "I know when we're in the middle of it, it feels like the world has changed fundamentally."

New Zealand's government has promised the country will become carbon-neutral by 2050. But it has also faced criticism for talking a lot about climate change and not taking action quickly enough. Greenhouse gas emissions in the nation of 5 million reached an all-time high just before the pandemic hit.

Shaw said lawmakers have passed many new bills in recent years that will have a positive impact over time, including a ban on new offshore oil and gas exploration, tougher emissions standards for cars, a subsidy scheme for electric vehicles, and the establishment of a climate change commission.

"Is it enough? No. And the thing is, it never will be enough," Shaw said. "We know that every single year, we are going to have to continue to take new and further actions on climate change because this is a multi-generational battle over the course of the next 30 years and beyond. It's going to involve every part of our economy, every part of our society."

Climate scientist James Renwick said he thinks New Zealand and other nations need to bring more urgency to their actions.

"The countries of the world have talked about this issue for many years, but we still haven't really seen the action, and time has got extremely short now," said Renwick, a professor at the Victoria University of Wellington. "We've got to see emissions reduction starting immediately, 2022, and we have to get emissions down really fast in the next decade."

Almost half of New Zealand's greenhouse gas emissions come from agriculture — think millions of cows burping methane gas — in an economy that relies on exporting food. Many environmentalists say farmers are essentially getting a free pass from lawmakers.

Shaw said farmers will be subject to new emissions rules that will come into effect by 2025, and that many are finding innovative ways to reduce their carbon footprints.

He said an important part of his trip to Glasgow will be to stand alongside colleagues from low-lying Pacific islands who are already feeling extensive effects from climate change through more severe cyclones and rising sea levels.

He said the Cook Islands, for instance, spends about a quarter of its national budget on mitigating the effects of climate change.

Shaw acknowledges the irony that thousands of people from around the world will be burning many tons of fossil fuels to fly to Glasgow for the talks.

"Unfortunately, it's the only way that we can practically get there and proactively participate," Shaw said.

Renwick said that aspect didn't bother him too much.

"We all live in the world we live in, the one that's been created over the last century or more," Renwick said. "I think it's just the way it is. You have to burn a bit of fossil fuel to work out how to stop doing that."

US talks global cybersecurity without a key player: Russia

By BEN FOX Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — Amid an epidemic of ransomware attacks, the U.S. is discussing cybersecurity strategy this week with 30 countries while leaving out one key player: Russia.

The country that, unwittingly or not, hosts many of the criminal syndicates behind ransomware attacks was not invited to a two-day meeting starting Wednesday to develop new strategies to counter the threat.

White House national security adviser Jake Sullivan called it a gathering of "like-minded" governments in agreement on the urgency of the need to protect citizens and businesses from ransomware. "No one country, no one group can solve this problem," he said in opening remarks.

The virtual discussions will focus in part on efforts to disrupt and prosecute ransomware networks like the one that attacked a major U.S. pipeline company in May, a senior administration official said. The attack on Colonial Pipeline, which led to gas shortages along the East Coast, was attributed to a Russia-based gang of cybercriminals.

The exclusion of a country so closely tied to the global ransomware phenomena reflects the overall poor relations between Moscow and Washington.

Despite that, the U.S. has used a "dedicated channel" to address cybersecurity with Russia, said the official, who briefed reporters on the condition of anonymity to preview this week's meeting with around 30 countries and the European Union.

Since President Joe Biden raised the issue directly with President Vladimir Putin this summer in a summit and later phone call, there have been "candid discussions" about cybercriminals operating within Russia's borders, the official said.

"We've had several, and they continue, and we share information regarding specific criminal actors within Russia, and Russia has taken initial steps," the official said.

It is unclear what steps Putin's government has taken. Russia does not extradite its own citizens, and FBI Deputy Director Paul Abbate told a security forum last month that he has seen "no indication that the Russian government has taken action to crack down on ransomware actors that are operating in the permissive environment that they've created there."

The issue was expected to be on the agenda this week in Moscow as Undersecretary of State Victoria Nuland met for talks with Russian Deputy Foreign Minister Sergei Ryabkov.

The Biden administration took office amid a massive cyberespionage campaign known as the Solar Winds attack, which U.S. officials have linked to Russian intelligence operatives. Ransomware attacks, perpetrated generally by criminal hacker gangs rather than state-sponsored groups, have caused tens of billions of dollars in losses to businesses and institutions and become a major source of tension between the two nations.

Ransomware payments reached more than \$400 million globally in 2020 and topped \$81 million in the first quarter of 2021, according to the U.S. government.

Actions taken by the Biden administration include imposing sanctions on a Russia-based virtual currency brokerage that officials say helped at least eight ransomware gangs launder virtual currency and issuing security directives that require pipeline companies to improve their cyber defenses.

In addition, the State Department has announced rewards of millions of dollars for information on people who engage in state-sponsored malicious cyber activities aimed at transnational criminal networks that Sullivan said operate "across multiple countries, multiple jurisdictions to carry out their attacks."

Most of this week's ransomware meeting is expected to be private as participants attend sessions led by India, Australia, Britain and Germany and will focus on themes such as developing resilience to withstand ransomware attacks.

Other participants include Israel, the United Arab Emirates, Bulgaria, Estonia, France, the Dominican Republic, Mexico, New Zealand, Singapore and Kenya.

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Today in History

By The Associated Press undefined

Today in History

Today is Thursday, Oct. 14, the 287th day of 2021. There are 78 days left in the year.

Today's Highlight in History:

On Oct. 14, 1947, U.S. Air Force Capt. Charles E. ("Chuck") Yeager (YAY'-gur) became the first test pilot to break the sound barrier as he flew the experimental Bell XS-1 (later X-1) rocket plane over Muroc Dry Lake in California.

On this date:

In 1066, Normans under William the Conqueror defeated the English at the Battle of Hastings.

In 1586, Mary, Queen of Scots, went on trial in England, accused of committing treason against Queen Elizabeth I. (Mary was beheaded in February 1587.)

In 1933, Nazi Germany announced it was withdrawing from the League of Nations.

In 1939, a German U-boat torpedoed and sank the HMS Royal Oak, a British battleship anchored at Scapa Flow in Scotland's Orkney Islands; 833 of the more than 1,200 men aboard were killed.

In 1944, German Field Marshal Erwin Rommel took his own life rather than face trial and certain execution for allegedly conspiring against Adolf Hitler.

In 1964, civil rights leader Martin Luther King Jr. was named winner of the Nobel Peace Prize. Soviet leader Nikita S. Khrushchev was toppled from power; he was succeeded by Leonid Brezhnev as First Secretary and by Alexei Kosygin as Premier.

In 1968, the first successful live telecast from a manned U.S. spacecraft was transmitted from Apollo 7.

In 1981, the new president of Egypt, Hosni Mubarak (HOHS'-nee moo-BAH'-rahk), was sworn in to succeed the assassinated Anwar Sadat. Mubarak pledged loyalty to Sadat's policies.

In 2001, as U.S. jets opened a second week of raids in Afghanistan, President George W. Bush sternly rejected a Taliban offer to discuss handing over Osama bin Laden to a third country.

In 2008, a grand jury in Orlando, Fla. returned charges of first-degree murder, aggravated child abuse and aggravated manslaughter against Casey Anthony in the death of her 2-year-old daughter, Caylee. (She was acquitted in July 2011.)

In 2014, a second nurse at Texas Health Presbyterian Hospital Dallas came down with Ebola after contracting it from a dying patient. (The nurse, Amber Joy Vinson, was later declared free of the disease.)

In 2017, a truck bombing in Somalia's capital killed more than 500 people in one of the world's deadliest attacks in years; officials blamed the attack on the extremist group al-Shabab and said it was meant to target Mogadishu's international airport, but the bomb detonated in a crowded street after soldiers opened fire.

Ten years ago: President Barack Obama cast himself as a savior of the U.S. auto industry as he stood in a once-shuttered Michigan assembly plant with South Korean President Lee Myung-bak to boast of a new trade deal and the auto bailout he'd pushed through Congress. In Tokyo, Japan's Kohei Uchimura (koo-hay oo-chee-mur-uh) gave the home fans what they wanted, becoming the first man to win three titles at the world gymnastics championships.

Five years ago: A judge in Connecticut dismissed a wrongful-death lawsuit by Newtown families against the maker of the rifle used in the Sandy Hook Elementary School shooting massacre, citing a federal law that shielded gun manufacturers from most lawsuits over criminal use of their products.

One year ago: Facebook and Twitter took steps to limit the spread of an unverified political story about the son of Democratic presidential nominee Joe Biden that was published by the conservative-leaning New York Post; the moves led to cries of censorship from the right. The U.S. Postal Service agreed to reverse changes that slowed mail service, settling a lawsuit filed by Montana Gov. Steve Bullock amid a pandemic that was prompting many more people to vote by mail. The Supreme Court ruled that the Trump administration could end census field operations early, in a blow to efforts to make sure minorities were properly counted. First lady Melania Trump said 14-year-old Barron Trump had tested positive

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at one point for the coronavirus but subsequently tested negative. Post Malone won nine honors at the 2020 Billboard Music Awards.

Today's Birthdays: Classical pianist Gary Graffman is 93. Movie director Carroll Ballard is 84. Country singer Melba Montgomery is 84. Former White House counsel John W. Dean III is 83. Fashion designer Ralph Lauren is 82. Singer Sir Cliff Richard is 81. Singer-musician Justin Hayward (The Moody Blues) is 75. Actor Greg Evigan is 68. TV personality Arleen Sorkin is 66. World Golf Hall of Famer Beth Daniel is 65. Singer-musician Thomas Dolby is 63. Actor Lori Petty is 58. Philadelphia Phillies manager Joe Girardi is 57. Actor Steve Coogan is 56. Singer Karyn White is 56. Actor Edward Kerr is 55. Actor Jon Seda is 51. Country singer Natalie Maines (The Chicks) is 47. Actor-singer Shaznay Lewis (All Saints) is 46. Actor Stephen Hill is 45. Singer Usher is 43. TV personality Stacy Keibler is 42. Actor Ben Whishaw is 41. Actor Jordan Brower is 40. Director Benh Zeitlin is 39. Actor Skyler Shaye is 35. Actor-comedian Jay Pharoah is 34. Actor Max Thieriot is 33.