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Upcoming Events

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 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

"YOUR WILLINGNESS TO LOOK AT
YOUR DARKNESS IS WHAT
EMPOWERS YOU TO CHANGE."

-IYANLA VANZANT



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

The overall rate of infections continues to decline in the US, even while some hot spots remain. Total cases are up to 44,671,658 with a seven-day average of 88,612, which is lower than it's been in well over two months and continues to drop. Hospitalizations are also well down—to 64,949 at midday today, also the lowest in over two months. Deaths are more stubborn, declining much more slowly—in fact, barely declining at all really. We are below a daily average of 2000 again at 1887, which is something; but this number represent a whole lot of preventable funerals.

It's beginning to look like Minnesota is the new Montana, the latest Midwestern/Western state with hospitals in trouble. Hospitalizations are sharply up, ICUs are getting close to full, and staff shortages are becoming an issue. The state is looking at cases, hospitalizations, and deaths higher than they've seen since vaccines rolled out last spring. The state's health commissioner reports there are fewer hospital staff now than there were during last year's surge, and two Twin Cities hospitals report staffing at "critical" levels. The New York Times reports CEO Dr. Keven Croston at North Memorial Health said "every element of our health system is incredibly stressed." They go on to report, "He also noted that all patients hospitalized with Covid were unvaccinated." Minnesota is ahead of the rest of the country with a vaccination rate above the national average. Unfortunately, that leaves a whole lot of Minnesotans available to report for Covid-19 duty, and this virus is finding them.

And never fear: Montana is still the old Montana too, still struggling. The highest ICU-bed utilization in the country is found in Montana, Idaho, and Wyoming, this little circle of trouble prominent on any heat map you care to consult. The high case rates occur basically in just a few clusters around the country. One is Alaska which is simply on fire, although we are seeing some signs things are abating there. Then we have this curving sweep through the Rocky Mountains, into eastern Nevada, Oregon, and Washington, and across North Dakota to Minnesota, Wisconsin, and now Michigan. It appears the case numbers are dropping slowly in the Mountain West, but growing in the Great Lakes region, so there's a place to watch. And there is a lingering cluster in the Appalachian Mountain states of Pennsylvania, Ohio, West Virginia, Kentucky, and Tennessee. Things appear to be letting up there, but the virus hasn't let go of these folks yet. The South continues to improve after its long siege. We're still not close to enough people vaccinated, so there are experts warning we might have one more surge in us this winter. Time will tell, but we're not out of this yet.

Moderna's application for an extension of its vaccine's emergency use authorization (EUA) to cover third doses for people beyond the immunocompromised currently authorized to receive them is under discussion in the FDA's Vaccines and Related Biologic Products Advisory Committee (VRBPAC) meeting today; they're underway now. Ahead of this meeting, the FDA has released the briefing documents submitted by the company in support of that application. Moderna is requesting authorization of a half-dose (50 micrograms) of its vaccine at least six months after the primary series is completed in people 65 and over, people 18 to 64 at high risk for severe disease, and people with occupational or institutional exposure that puts them at risk for complications or severe disease. These are precisely the same groups who were authorized to receive booster doses of the Pfizer/BioNTech vaccine last month. I will note that I've been seeing reports that FDA scientists are saying Moderna has not met all of the agency's criteria for approving a booster; the efficacy of this vaccine may not have declined enough at six months to justify the use of a third dose. Additionally, there is apparently a requirement for a booster to raise neutralizing antibody levels at least fourfold in 88.4 percent of recipients, and this one falls short by less than one percentage point. I guess we'll have to see whether the VRBPAC rounds up. Dr. Peter Hotez, vaccinologist at Baylor College of Medicine, told the New York Times, "Maybe we should wait a little bit longer on Moderna, let

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it drop off more first before we boost." He's not the only one talking like that. This adds an interesting wrinkle to today's deliberations. I guess we'll see what happens.

Janssen/Johnson & Johnson also has applied for an EUA extension for a second dose; that application will be considered by the VRBPAC tomorrow. Their briefing document, also released by the FDA earlier this week, indicates their data support a booster as soon as two months after the first dose is given depending on local conditions and after six months more generally. No side effects were noted that were common enough to present a "significant safety problem." There have been some questions raised about safety information, the protectiveness of a booster, and its timing; so we'll see how the Committee evaluates all of the data available to them. It does appear this one's more likely to receive a recommendation than Moderna's application; there is general agreement these folks need boosting, perhaps that this should be a two-dose vaccine in the primary dosing schedule. Whatever the recommendations that come out both of this week's meetings, the FDA commissioner will decide whether to sign off on those recommendations. If that happens, then the CDC's Advisory Committee on Immunization Practices will take these matters up in its October 20-21 meeting.

Another subject that's on the agenda for tomorrow's VRBPAC meeting is a discussion of what experts call heterologous boosting, known to the general public as mix-and-match. This is where you would give a booster dose of a vaccine other than the one used in the initial series, for example, the recipient of the Moderna vaccine receives a booster of Pfizer/BioNTech instead of another dose of the Moderna. The panel is not expected to act on this matter tomorrow; the scheduled discussion is an opportunity for the panel to assess the current state of knowledge and share their thoughts. Something that may (or may not) inform the discussion is a paper posted to a preprint server just yesterday from a small (458-case) NIH-sponsored clinical trial of heterologous boosting. Be aware that what we have here is an interim report on research which is still underway and that the work has not been peer-reviewed, also that the study is going to be too small to do inter-group comparisons. This is because these 450 participants were divided into nine groups averaging just 50 participants in size; those numbers are tiny for this sort of work. People who'd received a primary series of any given vaccine were divided into three groups, each of which received a different vaccine as a booster, so people who'd received two doses of the Pfizer/BioNTech vaccine were divided into three groups, one of which received another Pfizer/BioNTech, one a dose of Moderna, and the last a dose of the Janssen/Johnson & Johnson vaccine. The same sort of method was carried out for recipients of the Moderna vaccine and the Janssen/Johnson & Johnson vaccine, making nine groups in all.

It does appear from this study that heterologous boosting is well-tolerated, and there were no particular safety issues noted. These, of course, are important issues: Doesn't matter how well something works to immunize if it makes people really sick. Antibody levels were measured in all participants at the time of the boost and after two and four weeks. I'm seeing a lot of emphasis placed on the fact that the mRNA vaccines are looking pretty interchangeable (with Moderna having a slight edge) and Janssen/Johnson & Johnson coming in behind. If these findings hold up in larger groups, it may be that an mRNA boost makes the most sense for Janssen/Johnson & Johnson recipients, but it seems early to be drawing those kinds of conclusions. This was a very small study, and the follow-up period has been relatively short. The difference in antibody titers looks pretty large; but we have discussed other data that say the response to the Janssen/Johnson & Johnson vaccine seems to improve with time. You can check out that study at my Update #469 posted September 23 at <https://www.facebook.com/marie.schwabmiller/posts/5131924053490626>. I'm going to say a longer-duration study with many more participants seems needed.

There does appear to be some support here at least for the feasibility of heterologous boosting. The authors say, "Homologous boosts provided a wide range of immunogenicity responses, with heterologous boosts providing comparable or higher titers. . . . These data suggest that if a vaccine is approved or authorized as a booster, an immune response will be generated regardless of the primary Covid-19

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vaccination regimen." So it does appear heterologous boosting doesn't hurt anything; but from what I've seen, the whole subject is still very much up in the air—not a lot of data. We'll see how the discussion goes tomorrow. These folks are going to have access to and the ability to interpret research that I lack.

We have some new data from Israel on boosting with the Pfizer/BioNTech vaccine; we will note that this paper is still in preprint, so is not peer-reviewed. Israel is a great source for this kind of information because they have a nationalized health system, so they have centralized records that enable this sort of tracking and because they rolled out vaccination so successfully that they have millions of cases that have been followed for a fair period of time. Here, they looked at 4.6 million people who received boosters between July 30 and October 6, and the findings do grab your attention. At least 12 days after the third dose, infection rates were five- to 11-fold lower; severe illness rates were 6.5-fold lower and death rates were almost fivefold lower in those 60 and over. What this study lacks are longitudinal data: Because the boosters are recent development, the patients were followed for only two months at longest. It will take more time to see what happens at six months or a year out—whether the boost holds or protection drops off.

We've talked several times over the past few months about CureVac's vaccine candidate, first its promise and then its poor performance. This is an mRNA candidate which didn't live up to the billing mRNA vaccines have had so far. If you want to catch up on the previous news on this candidate, check out my Update #449 posted July 2, 2021, at <https://www.facebook.com/marie.schwabmiller/posts/4870105996339101>. The company had made application for approval to the European Medicines Agency (the EU's equivalent of our FDA), but they have now decided to withdraw that application, saying, "The pandemic window is closing." Their path was particularly problematic given their vaccine showed only 48 percent efficacy in clinical trials. Because efficacy was somewhat higher in younger people, they'd modified their application to include only people 18 to 60. Now they've given it up entirely. They are, however, staying in the vaccine business with their partnership with GlaxoSmithKline on a different vaccine. This one elicits a much higher antibody response in monkeys, so there is reason to begin trials in humans. We'll see what that brings.

Vaccination numbers for eligible children have been of concern as they've lagged the rest of the population. It appears parents who are OK with getting themselves vaccinated are balking at having their children receive vaccine. That situation seems to be improving as we now have 50 percent of 12-to-17-year-olds with at least one dose of vaccine. Children are overall more willing to be vaccinated than their parents are to give permission for that, but there are only a few states in which an older minor can consent to vaccination without their parents' agreement: Oregon, Alabama, Rhode Island, the District of Columbia, and South Carolina, as well as Arizona if there is a court order. Idaho, Arizona, and Tennessee also have a "mature minor doctrine" that permits children to give consent for medical care, but that may or may not include vaccination, depending who you ask. Generally speaking, across the country it is difficult or impossible for an adolescent to receive vaccine without parental consent; because younger people are overall more willing to be vaccinated than adults, this is setting up some conflicts within families.

I've seen a couple of studies relating to flu shots that are interesting. I was able to access the paper for the first one published in August in the journal PLOS One. A research group from the University of Miami Miller School of Medicine did a retrospective cohort analysis of almost 75,000 patients. This means they combed through the medical records of some 73 million Covid-19 patients in several countries to find two groups of 37,377, one group vaccinated for influenza six months to two weeks prior to the Covid-19 diagnosis and the other group not. Each case in one group was matched to a case in the other group for factors known to affect outcomes for Covid-19 infection, "age, race, ethnicity, gender, hypertension, diabetes, hyperlipidemia, chronic obstructive pulmonary disease (COPD), obesity, heart disease, and lifestyle habits such as smoking." This enabled them to eliminate, insofar as possible, other influences and see whether influenza vaccination had any effect on Covid-19 outcomes in a number of categories. This "matched-samples" design is an extremely strong research design and yielded a result that deserves

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attention: that patients who had not been vaccinated for influenza had significantly higher incidence of sepsis (45 percent higher), stroke (58 percent higher), deep-vein thrombosis (abnormal blood clotting) (40 percent higher), emergency department visits (58 percent higher), and ICU admissions (20 percent higher) while they had Covid-19.

We don't know for sure what's operating here, but the most popular theory has to do with innate (non-specific) immune responses, which generally show a boost after any vaccination. We've talked about innate responses before, albeit long ago; if you need to brush up, check out my Update #150 posted July 22, 2020, at <https://www.facebook.com/marie.schwabmiller/posts/3796230603726651>. I surely wouldn't want to substitute influenza vaccination for Covid-19 vaccination, but in parts of the world waiting for an adequate supply of vaccine, the cheaper and more readily available influenza vaccine may provide some cushion for those populations until Covid-19 vaccines become accessible. This looks like a good year to put a lot of effort into getting as many people as possible vaccinated for influenza—for more than the obvious reason. I have no idea whether this protective effect spills over into those who have received a Covid-19 vaccine, but given having a flu shot is a smart move anyhow, I would think it wouldn't hurt to hedge your bets.

The other study is from a group at the University of Missouri School of Medicine and published in the journal *Cureus*; I had a look at that paper too. The authors looked at pediatric medical records from the University of Arkansas Medical Sciences, Arkansas Children's Hospital Systems in February through August, 2020, and compared children with positive PCR tests for SARS-CoV-2 who had been vaccinated for influenza for the then-current flu season with those who had not been vaccinated. As with adults in the previous study, findings in children were also that vaccination for influenza was associated with lowered incidence of symptomatic disease with SARS-CoV-2. It would appear to be reasonable, especially for children too young to receive the Covid-19 vaccines, to vaccinate them for influenza in the hope of buying them some protection, and since influenza vaccination is a good plan at any rate, it seems like there's no real downside to doing so.

Also on the subject of flu shots, I will mention that we didn't really have a flu season last year; all those respiratory precautions and staying home undoubtedly had much to do with that. Even in the normal course of events, the flu fluctuates widely from year to year, some years much better than others. And something we know about a light flu season is that it is commonly followed by a whopper of a flu season in the next winter. That means public health experts are eyeing the upcoming months with some trepidation and encouraging the public to get vaccinated. Please remember that it is safe and effective to receive both a dose of Covid-19 vaccine and a dose of flu vaccine at the same visit. I noted over the weekend a discussion in which people were insisting it was not safe to do that, that we're supposed to wait two weeks between Covid-19 and influenza vaccinations. That earlier CDC recommendation to allow two weeks was so that we could accurately identify side effects of the new Covid-19 vaccines without any confusion about which vaccine caused which side effects; now that we're clear, millions of doses later, on what those side effects are, the CDC has changed that recommendation and encourages people to go ahead and have both vaccines at the same time. One thing to consider is that there is no evidence side effects from both together are any worse than side effects of either one individually, so if you do get side effects, better to suffer once than twice, right? And at any rate, together or separately, you are encouraged, more than usual, to receive flu vaccine.

Merck made it official on Monday. It has made application for EUA for its new antiviral, molnupiravir. We discussed this drug a couple of weeks ago; you will recall this is a course of treatment administered by mouth that can be taken at home and shows evidence it lessens severity of symptoms and speeds recovery from mild-to-moderate Covid-19 in those who are at risk for severe disease. This is the drug trial we

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talked about which was ended early because the results were so positive. You can check out that earlier discussion in my Update #471 posted October 1, 2021, at <https://www.facebook.com/marie.schwabmiller/posts/5159554904060874>. This would be significantly less expensive and easier to administer than the monoclonal antibody treatments which are about the best alternative at the moment. I am pleased to see that the company has signed licensing deals with generic drugmakers in India to produce low-cost versions of the drug for use in low-income countries. Some other similar drugs are also in development and testing, so we may have more alternatives like this as time goes on.

There's another antiviral on the horizon, this one a combination of two antivirals. One of these is a lab-produced version of the naturally-occurring interferon-alpha (IFN- α), one of that class of substances known as cytokines, signaling chemicals produced by immune cells during a response to viral infection. What it does is recruit and activate other immune cells to the lungs and stimulate more cytokine production to further enhance your response during infection. You can see how this can be helpful when administered, and it does have antiviral activity when given alone. (If you want a clearer understanding of how interferons work, check out my Update #190 posted August 31, 2020, at <https://www.facebook.com/marie.schwabmiller/posts/3924767334206310>. And if after reading that you were wondering, the last I've heard of the Synairgen treatment mentioned in that post was some pretty positive news about phase 2 trials last spring.) The version of IFN- α in this new drug has been modified so it hangs around longer than the natural kind. This part isn't new; it's already in use to treat viral hepatitis.

The other antiviral in this new combination, nafomostat, is also already in use; it treats pancreatitis and works as an anticoagulant (prevents blood clots). This one looks like high levels can be achieved in the lungs at very safe dosages and has the added advantage of anticoagulant properties which may help to counter the tendency for abnormal clotting in Covid-19 patients.

The two drugs in combination appear to enhance one another's effectiveness, enabling stronger effects compared to either one alone. Testing in cell cultures and hamsters has been promising, and attempts to sort out the precise mechanism of action of the combination have led to a discovery that may inform the development or identification of other antivirals which may be useful. Turns out the combination inhibits an enzyme in lung cells critical to viral replication which can potentially be targeted by other drugs as well. (For the curious, the enzyme is transmembrane protease serine 2 or TMPRSS2.) Better, since TMPRSS2 is a human enzyme, an inhibitor of its action doesn't drive viral mutation toward drug resistance and new variants are not likely to gain an advantage. Drugs that target viral proteins are far more likely to have that sort of effect than those which target human proteins. Clinical trials of the combination are in the planning stages, so we'll watch for further news.

The National Health Service in the UK released data a few days ago dealing with the most critical of the Covid-19 patients seen in England since July. These are patients requiring extracorporeal membrane oxygenation (ECMO), a lung bypass treatment used in those who are not helped sufficiently by a ventilator. Of those, nearly one in five were unvaccinated pregnant women, which means pregnant people are wildly overrepresented among the sickest of the sick. We've known for a long time that pregnancy is a risk factor for severe disease, but this puts numbers to the situation. Remaining unvaccinated during pregnancy looks more and more like an unacceptable risk, particularly when we note that there are no increased risks of the vaccine to the pregnant person or to the fetus. The gap between the risk of Covid-19 and the risk of the vaccines is extremely wide during pregnancy .

We've been seeing a sudden uptick in cases of multisystem inflammatory syndrome in children (MIS-C) over the past few weeks; these lagged the increase in pediatric Covid-19, which is expected since it follows the infection by a few weeks. This is a rare syndrome occurring in fewer than five percent of children

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diagnosed with Covid-19 and is characterized by inflammation in various tissues including the heart, lungs, kidneys, brain, skin, eyes, and gastrointestinal organs. It can be very serious, and deaths have occurred very infrequently. Still, the increase in deaths is by 12 percent over the past month, so there is some cause for concern. The syndrome appears typically after the child has seemed to have recovered from Covid-19 and can occur in children who were never symptomatic at all. Symptoms that should prompt a visit to a doctor include fever, fatigue, abdominal pain, diarrhea, vomiting, rash, neck pain, or bloodshot eyes. The condition can be successfully treated using fluids, respiratory support, anti-inflammatory drugs, and antibody infusions, but the sooner treatment commences, the better the outcome. We can hope that if we can get the incidence of Covid-19 down in the pediatric population, we can also reduce the incidence of MIS-C.

And that's it for today. We're a few hours from knowing how today's VRBPAC meeting goes and have another one tomorrow; I think I'll probably plan to do a short update late tomorrow or Saturday to pick up the news from these meetings rather than waiting a few more days to talk about it. In the meanwhile, stay safe. We'll talk soon.

Lady Tigers beat Milbank in four sets

Three players hit double figures as the Groton Area volleyball team defeated Milbank, 3-1. It was senior recognition night with the match being played in Groton.

The first set was tied eight times and there were five lead changes as the Tigers went on to win, 25-22. In that set, Madeline Fliehs had six kills and an ace serve, Sydney Liecht had five kills, Anna Fjeldheim three kills, Aspen Johnson had two kills and Maddie Bjerke had one. Rachel Schulte led Milbank with three kills and an ace serve and Skyler Skoog had two kills and an ace serve.

The second set was tied three times and Groton Area never trailed en route to a 25-18 lead. Leicht had four kills and an ace serve, Johnson had three kills, Madeline Fliehs had two kills and an ace serve, Alyssa Thaler had three ace serves, Fjeldheim had three kills, Elizabeth Fliehs had one ace serve and Bjerke had a kill. Skoog led Milbank with four kills and a block and Schulte had two kills.

Groton Area led for most of the third set in a close game. Groton Area held a 21-16 lead, but Milbank would rally to tie the set at 22 and 23 and then scored the last two points for the win, 25-23. Madeline Fliehs had six kills, Leicht had three kills, Fjeldheim had a kill and an ace serve, Johnson had a kill and a block, Elizabeth Fliehs had a kill, Thaler had an ace serve and Bjerke had a kill. Schulte led Milbank with five kills while Averie Engebretson had four kills, Skoog three kills and Addisyn Krause two kills and an ace serve.

Groton Area quickly jumped out to an early lead, leading 17-7, and went on to win the fourth set, 25-18. Leicht had six kills and two ace serves, Madeline Fliehs had three kills and an ace serve, Johnson and Fjeldheim each had three kills, and Bjerke had a kill. Schulte had two kills to lead Milbank in the final set.

Overall for the Tigers, Fjeldheim had 10 kills and an ace serve, Liecht had 18 kills and three ace serves, Madeline Fliehs had 17 kills and three ace serves, Johnson had nine kills and a block, Thaler had four ace serves, Bjerke had a kill in each set for a total of four, and Elizabeth Fliehs had a kill and an ace serve.

Schulte led Milbank with 12 kills and an ace serve, Skyler Skoog had nine kills, one ace serve and one block, Addisyn Kruase had two kills and an ace serve, Engebretson had four kills and an ace serve, Rylie Overby had three kills and a block, Camryn Wiese had one kill and Casside Seezs had two kills.

The match was broadcast live on GDILIVE.COM, sponsored by Milbrandt Enterprises Inc., Allied Climate Professionals with Kevin Nehls and Bary Keith at Harr Motors.

Milbank won the junior varsity match, 25-16 and 27-25. Lydia Meier had seven kills, Emma Kutter had five kills and two ace serves, Marlee Tollifson had six kills, Faith Traphagen four kills, Carly Guthmiller three ace serves, Hollie Frost two blocks and a kill and Laila Roberts had two kills. There was a sponsor for the junior varsity match on GDILIVE.COM.

Milbank won the C match, 25-21 and 26-24. Ashley Johnson had four kills, Emma Kutter had three kills, two ace serves and a block, Tallie Wrighthead three kills, Jerica Locke two ace serves and Ava Wienk and Cadence Feist each had a kill.

The match was broadcast live on GDLIVE.COM, sponsored by Greg and Kathy Scheinost of Page, Neb., with Anna Fjeldheim and Aspen Johnson being guest commentators.

Middle School Music Students Participate at Northwestern Middle School Music Festival

Middle School students from Groton and fourteen area schools participated in the Northwestern Middle School Music Festival on Tuesday October 12th in Mellette. The students rehearsed with guest directors and performed a concert that was open to the public that same evening.

Thirteen students participated in the Festival Chorus and eleven students were selected to play in the Festival Band. The band students are selected from nomination forms filled out by each school's director. Out of the fifteen nominations that were submitted by Mrs. Yeigh, eleven of those students were selected to participate in the festival.

Eighth graders Jayden Schwan and Garrett Schultz were recognized as three-year members of this event. Seventh grader Carlee Johnson was placed as the first chair horn section leader as well.

The festival choir was directed by Mrs. Kim Bruguier from Mitchell, SD. Bruguier is in her fifteenth year of teaching music. She teaches K-5 Music/Band at LB Williams Elementary in Mitchell. The festival band was directed by Mrs. Cherie Lunstrum. Lunstrum taught music for a total of thirty-three years and is now retired. Her last thirteen years were in the Redfield School District teaching K-6 Vocal and 5th Grade Band.

Congratulations to all the students for representing the Groton Middle School Music Department!



Band Festival

Front row from L to R: Mrs. Desiree Yeigh (Director), Teagan Hanten (Percussion), Natalia Warrington (Clarinet), Ashlynn Warrington (Flute)

Second row from L to R: Carlee Johnson (1st Chair Horn), Elizabeth Cole (Trombone), Gavin Kroll (Trombone), Brody Lord (Trombone)

Back row from L to R: Lincoln Krause (Percussion), Garrett Schultz (Baritone), Blake Lord (Tuba)

Not pictured is Jayden Schwan, Trumpet

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Festival Choir

Front row from L to R: Maggie Cleveland, Mrs. Kayla Duncan (Director), Addison Hoffman

Second row from L to R: Claire Schuelke, Halee Harder, Liza Krueger

Third row from L to R: Cambira Bonn, Emerlee Jones, Kira Clocksene, ReAnn Dennert

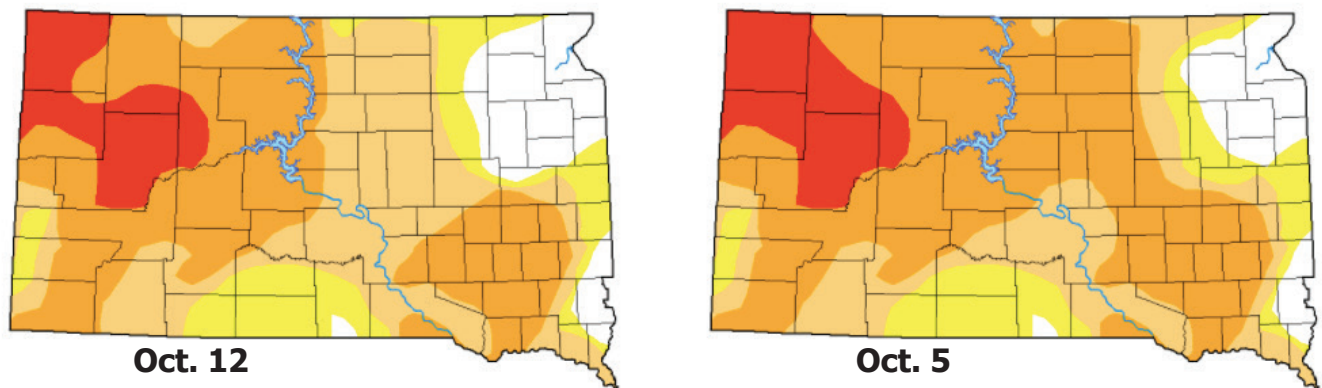
Fourth row from L to R: Jacob Tewksbury, Kolton Dockter, Jackson Hopfinger, Logan Clocksene

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Drought Monitor



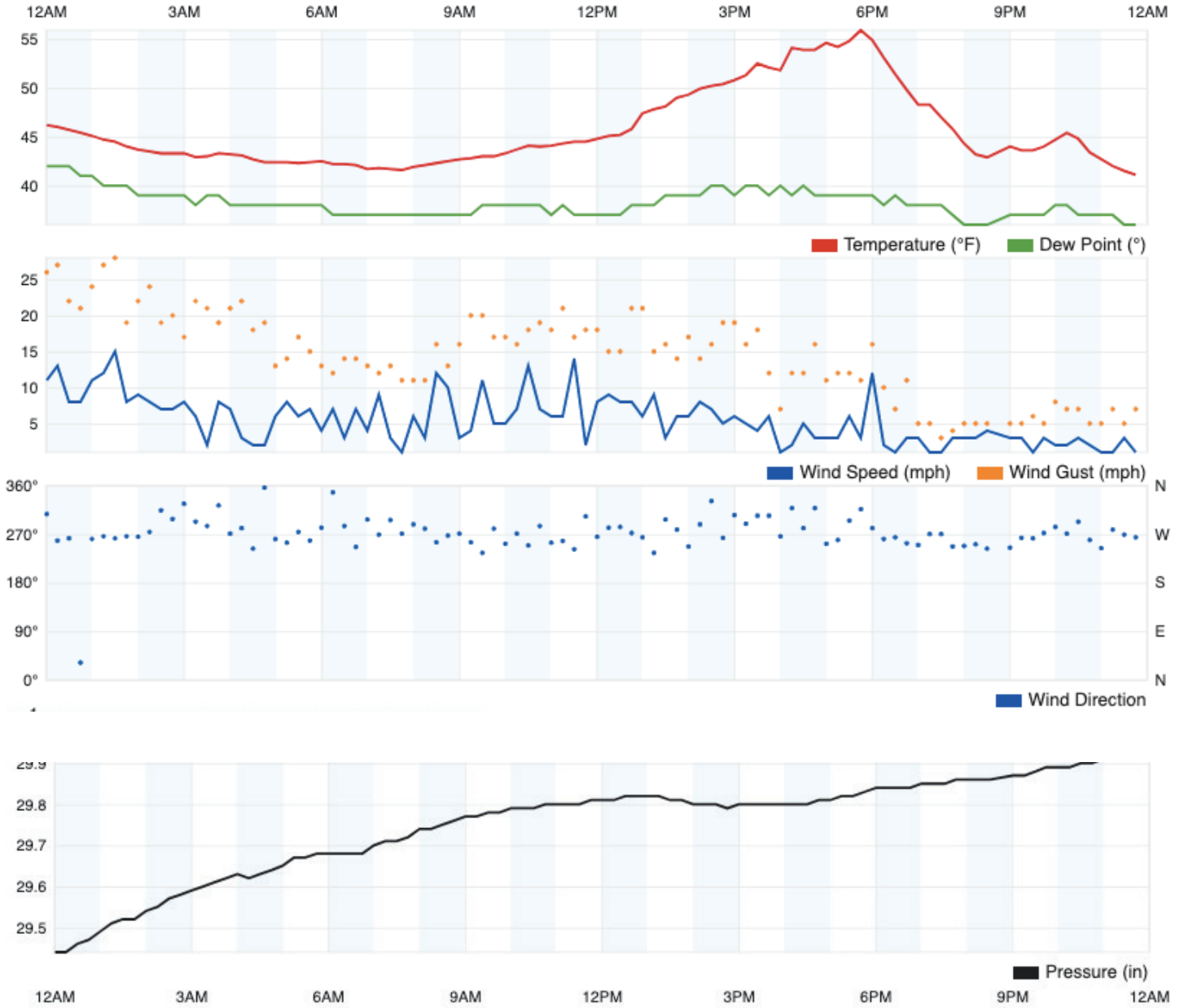
High Plains

Similar to the Southern Plains, much of the High Plains region is susceptible to extended periods of above-normal temperatures and high winds. In areas where little to no rain fell, these conditions helped to further degrade ongoing drought east of the Front Range across portions of Colorado, Wyoming, Kansas, and Nebraska, where many areas have seen drastic deterioration in topsoil moisture in recent weeks (widespread D1-D4 equivalent NASA SPoRT soil moisture percentiles down to 10 cm). Farther north over the Dakotas, a strong low pressure system brought widespread heavy rainfall over the weekend, where several areas received more than 2 inches of rain, with some localized areas of more than 4 inches. This warranted 1-category improvements across large portions of the Dakotas. However, improvements were targeted in nature due to the longer-term deficits and above-normal temperatures increasing the evaporative demand and slowing soil recharge. Farther south in the High Plains Region, surface low pressure developed late in the period in the wake of the system farther north and moved north-northeastward across the central U.S. Rainfall from this system mainly fell over drought-free areas of eastern Kansas before moving into the Midwest and Great Lakes. However, some locations did receive meaningful rainfall; enough to warrant 1-category improvements in northeastern and southeastern corners of the state. Another storm system began propagating across the western U.S. on the final day of the period (Monday-Tuesday), bringing precipitation in various forms to the eastern Rockies. However, given the intensity of drought in the higher-terrain areas of the High Plains Region, the late arrival of precipitation did little to warrant any improvements this week, given the duration and intensity of drought in those areas.

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Yesterday's Groton Weather Graphs



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Today	Tonight	Saturday	Saturday Night	Sunday
				
Mostly Sunny	Mostly Clear then Frost	Frost then Sunny	Clear	Sunny
High: 53 °F	Low: 32 °F	High: 62 °F	Low: 36 °F	High: 69 °F



Today	Tonight	Saturday	Saturday Night
			
49 to 55°	30 to 36°	57 to 65°	35 to 39°
			
15-20 mph gusts 35 mph	5-15 mph	5-15 mph	5-10 mph
Breezy	Cold		



NWS Aberdeen, SD

Breezy winds out of the northwest will continue today, with highs mainly in the low to mid 50s. The breezy winds will diminish quickly this evening, along with any lingering clouds. Expect temperatures to fall into the low to mid 30s tonight into Saturday morning, with the lowest temperatures over the James River Valley. Temperatures will rebound into the upper 50s to mid 60s Saturday afternoon.

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Today in Weather History

October 15, 1880: A violent early season blizzard devastated Minnesota and the Dakotas. Winds gusted to 70 mph at Yankton, SD, and snow drifts 10 to 15 feet high were reported in northwest Iowa and southeast South Dakota. Canby Minnesota reported 20 feet high snow drifts from this storm. Saint Paul, MN, reported a barometric pressure of 28.65 inches on the 16th. Piles of snow, which remained throughout the severe winter to follow, blocked railroads. The winter of 1880-81 is vividly portrayed in Laura Ingalls Wilder's Book: The Long Winter.

October 15, 1992: Snow fell throughout the day across the north-central and northwest part of the state with 2 to 6 inches occurring. There was a separate report of 7 inches near Harding in northwestern South Dakota.

1608: Evangelista Torricelli, the Italian physicist and mathematician who invented the barometer, was born on this day. In 1644, Evangelista Torricelli built the first barometer with mercury.

1954: By 11 pm on the 15th, Hurricane Hazel had reached and crossed the waters of Lake Ontario, still sporting sustained winds as high as 60 mph. Hazel took direct aim at the heart of Toronto as it roared past at 49 mph. Toronto saw heavy rainfall before Hurricane Hazel on the 14th. The previous storm, in combination with the hurricane, resulted in significant flooding.

1984: The Monday Night Football game in Denver, Colorado, was played in a raging blizzard. 15 inches of snow fell with up to 34 inches reported in the nearby mountains. The Air Force Academy canceled classes for the first time in its' recorded history.

1987: Beginning on the night of October 15th, an unusually strong weather system caused extremely high winds in the United Kingdom. This storm became known as the Great Storm of 1987. It was the worst storm to hit the UK since the Great Storm in 1703.

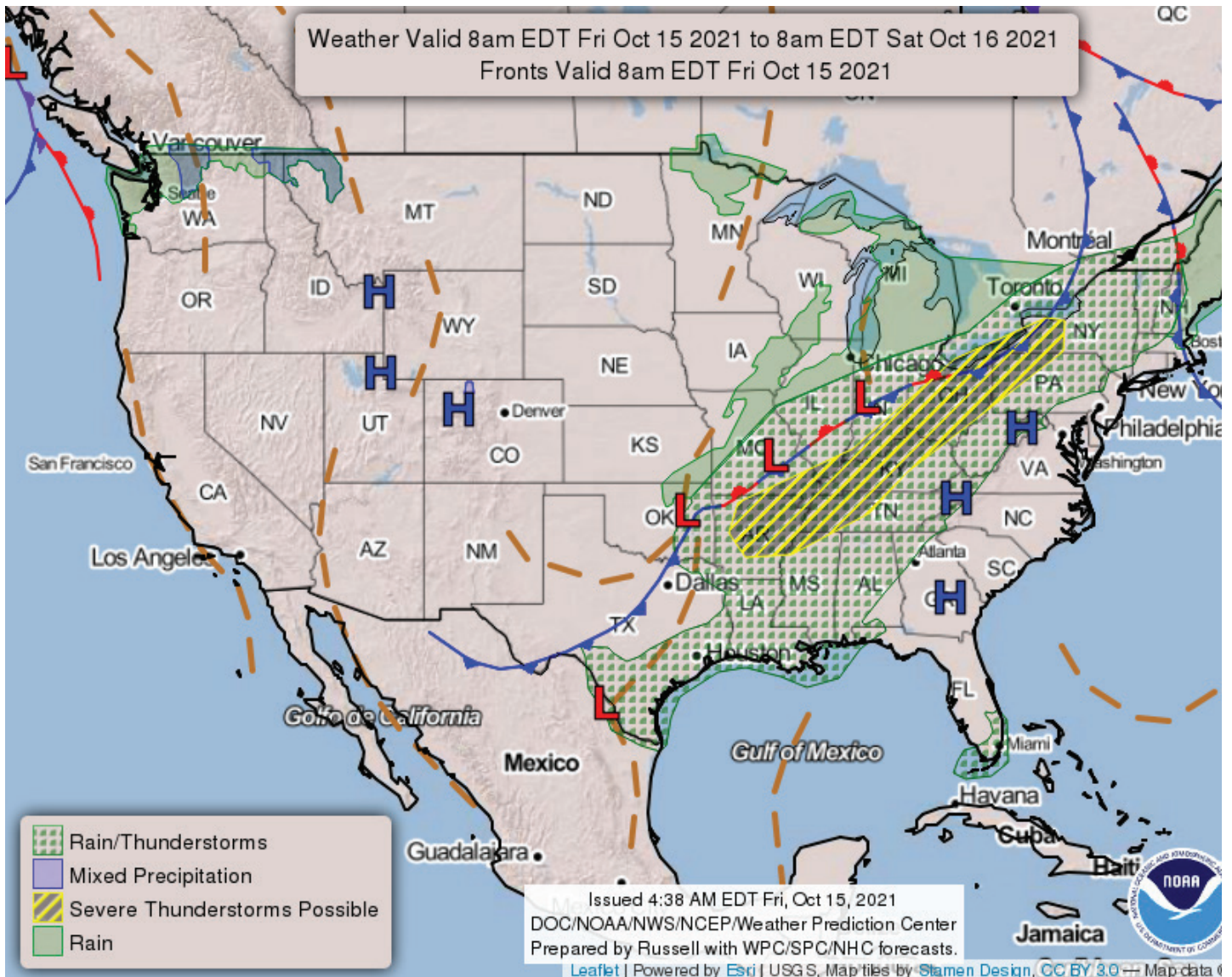
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Yesterday's Groton Weather Today's Info

High Temp: 56 °F at 5:42 PM
Low Temp: 40 °F at 11:58 PM
Wind: 28 mph at 1:24 AM
Precip: 0.64

Record High: 88° in 1958
Record Low: 15° in 2018
Average High: 60°F
Average Low: 34°F
Average Precip in Oct.: 1.13
Precip to date in Oct.: 1.94
Average Precip to date: 19.46
Precip Year to Date: 17.36
Sunset Tonight: 6:48:16 PM
Sunrise Tomorrow: 7:49:10 AM



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HEALING

A few years ago, I was sitting in the office of a dear friend and orthopedic surgeon. Because of his God-given skills, he was able to correct the misdiagnosis and prior operation of another physician which enabled me to walk once again.

As we sat and talked, he asked me how things had been going with my health. After explaining my ordeal with cancer and several other illnesses, he looked at me and said very seriously, "You have no reason to be alive!"

But he was wrong.

There was every reason for me to be alive. It was God who brought the healing to my body even though several physicians worked with Him along the way. It's what God does. David was certainly aware of God's role in the healing process when he wrote, "and (He) heals all your diseases." If God is the one who heals all our diseases, why does He do this? Who is the beneficiary of His healing? Us or Him?

There is no doubt in my mind that God heals us so that we might bring honor and glory to Him by giving Him the credit and recognition and serving Him faithfully. If He restores our health, we must realize that it is a gift of His grace, and we show our gratitude to Him by telling others what He did for us and working with Him in this, His world.

We demonstrate our gratitude to Him, after we thank Him, by what we do for Him. Gratitude is not sincere until we become involved in building His Kingdom. Working with Him and through Him is not an option if what He has done for us means nothing to us.

Prayer: Lord, we are not our own, but Yours. When You heal us, let us show how thankful we are by serving You with the healing You brought us. In Jesus' Name, Amen.

Scripture For Today: Who forgives all your sins and heals all your diseases. Psalm 103:3

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2021 Community Events

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

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News from the  Associated Press

Thursday's Scores

The Associated Press undefined

PREP VOLLEYBALL=

Aberdeen Central def. Harrisburg, 15-25, 32-30, 25-23, 19-25, 15-12

Aberdeen Christian def. Leola/Frederick, 24-13, 24-23, 24-11

Alcester-Hudson def. Menno, 25-18, 25-16, 25-11

Arlington def. Deubrook, 25-19, 25-16, 27-25

Avon def. Centerville, 25-11, 25-18, 23-25, 28-26

Baltic def. Sioux Valley, 25-13, 25-20, 25-19

Belle Fourche def. Red Cloud, 25-10, 25-3, 25-13

Bowman County, N.D. def. Bison, 19-25, 25-13, 25-11, 25-12

Bridgewater-Emery def. Gayville-Volin, 23-25, 25-10, 25-17, 25-10

Burke def. Gregory, 25-20, 25-18, 25-18

Chester def. Canistota, 25-17, 25-11, 25-13

Corsica/Stickney def. Winner, 11-25, 25-22, 25-11, 25-22

Dell Rapids St. Mary def. DeSmet, 25-23, 25-22, 21-25, 25-14

Elk Point-Jefferson def. Irene-Wakonda, 25-19, 25-17, 25-11

Estelline/Hendricks def. Castlewood, 25-18, 26-24, 28-30, 25-20

Ethan def. Hanson, 25-13, 25-21, 25-16

Garretson def. Tea Area, 25-18, 25-12, 26-24

Great Plains Lutheran def. Deuel, 25-19, 25-22, 25-21

Groton Area def. Milbank, 25-22, 25-18, 23-25, 18-25

Hamlin def. Sisseton, 25-15, 25-8, 25-22

Harding County def. McIntosh, 25-22, 25-20, 25-23

Highmore-Harrold def. Herreid/Selby Area, 22-25, 24-26, 25-18, 25-16, 15-10

Hitchcock-Tulare def. Ipswich, 25-22, 17-25, 25-20, 25-17

Hot Springs def. Douglas, 25-12, 25-14, 20-25, 26-24

Hulett, Wyo. def. Edgemont, 17-25, 25-15, 22-25, 25-17, 15-9

James Valley Christian def. Sunshine Bible Academy, 25-9, 25-15, 25-14

Jones County def. Kadoka Area, 25-21, 19-25, 28-26, 21-25, 15-10

Mobridge-Pollock def. Sully Buttes, 25-15, 20-25, 25-22, 25-15

Mt. Vernon/Plankinton def. West Central, 25-15, 25-20, 25-16

New England, N.D. def. Lemmon, 25-13, 25-10, 25-18

North Central Co-Op def. Wakpala, 25-5, 25-8, 25-11

Northwestern def. Potter County, 25-18, 25-13, 25-21

Parker def. Parkston, 28-26, 25-19, 25-19

Philip def. Lyman, 0-0, 25-11, 25-10

Pierre def. Yankton, 26-24, 25-21, 25-22

Platte-Geddes def. Chamberlain, 25-10, 25-17, 25-16

Rapid City Christian def. Gordon/Rushville, Neb., 25-21, 25-18, 25-18

Sanborn Central/Woonsocket def. Kimball/White Lake, 25-19, 25-17, 25-17

Sioux Falls Jefferson def. Huron, 25-18, 25-27, 25-21, 27-25

Sioux Falls Lincoln def. Brookings

Sioux Falls Lutheran def. Mitchell Christian, 25-9, 25-11, 25-13

Sioux Falls Washington def. Watertown, 25-12, 25-22, 25-15

St. Thomas More def. Custer, 25-20, 25-13, 25-20

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Sturgis Brown def. Lead-Deadwood, 25-14, 25-22, 25-15
Tripp-Delmont/Armour def. Scotland, 20-25, 22-25, 25-22, 25-12, 15-10
Vermillion def. Canton, 25-23, 25-17, 28-26
Wagner def. Andes Central/Dakota Christian, 25-18, 25-9, 25-13
Warner def. Faulkton, 25-17, 25-18, 25-6
Webster def. Tiospa Zina Tribal, 25-23, 25-21, 25-21
White River def. Colome, 25-20, 25-10, 25-19
Wolsey-Wessington def. Wessington Springs, 25-18, 25-13, 23-25, 25-13
Wyndmere-Lidgerwood, N.D. def. Wilmot, 25-19, 26-24, 25-11

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

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

Thursday's Scores

The Associated Press undefined
PREP FOOTBALL=
Aberdeen Roncalli 43, Mobridge-Pollock 14
Britton-Hecla 55, Langford 14
Cheyenne-Eagle Butte def. Takini, forfeit
Madison 27, West Central 7

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

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

Court again lets Texas continue banning most abortions

By PAUL J. WEBER Associated Press

AUSTIN, Texas (AP) — Texas can continue banning most abortions after a federal appeals court on Thursday rejected the Biden administration's latest attempt to stop a novel law that has become the nation's biggest curb to abortion in nearly 50 years.

The decision could push the law closer to returning to the U.S. Supreme Court, which has already once allowed the restrictions to take effect without ruling on its constitutionality. The Texas law bans abortions once cardiac activity is detected, usually around six weeks and before some women know they are pregnant.

Since the law took effect in early September, Texas women have sought out abortion clinics in neighboring states, some driving hours through the middle of the night and including patients as young as 12 years old. The law makes no exception in cases of rape or incest.

"We hope the Department of Justice urgently appeals this order to the Supreme Court to restore Texans' ability to obtain abortion care after six weeks in pregnancy," said Brigitte Amiri, deputy director of the ACLU Reproductive Freedom Project.

The Justice Department did not immediately react to the decision and a spokesperson had no comment late Thursday.

In a 2-1 decision, a three-judge panel of the 5th U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals granted Texas' request to keep the law in place as the court case proceeds. It marks the third time the conservative-leaning appeals court has sided with Texas and let the restrictions stand.

The panel said it would expedite the appeal and schedule oral arguments, but did not say when.

The Texas Attorney General's Office called the decision a "testament that we are on the right side of the law and life."

It marks another setback for the Justice Department and Texas abortion providers in their efforts to

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derail the law, which has thus far prevailed because of a unique structure that leaves enforcement up to private citizens. Anyone who brings a successful lawsuit against an abortion provider for violating the law is entitled to claim at least \$10,000 in damages, which the Biden administration says amounts to a bounty.

Despite numerous legal challenges both before and after the law took effect Sept. 1, only once has a court moved to put the restriction on hold — and that order only stood for 48 hours.

During that brief window, some Texas clinics rushed to perform abortions on patients past six weeks, but many more appointments were canceled after the 5th Circuit moved to swiftly reinstate the law last week.

Texas had roughly two dozen abortion clinics before the law took effect, and operators have said some may be forced to close if the restrictions stay in place for much longer.

Already the stakes are high in the coming months over the future of abortion rights in the U.S. In December, the new conservative majority on the Supreme Court will hear Mississippi's bid to overturn the landmark *Roe v. Wade* decision that guarantees a woman's right to an abortion.

A 1992 decision by the Supreme Court prevented states from banning abortion before viability, the point at which a fetus can survive outside the womb, around 24 weeks of pregnancy. But Texas' version has outmaneuvered courts so far due to the fact that it offloads enforcement to private citizens.

Texas Right to Life, the state's largest anti-abortion group, set up a tipline to receive allegations against abortion providers but has not filed any lawsuits. Kimberly Schwartz, a spokeswoman, said Thursday the group expected the Biden administration to go to the Supreme Court next and was "confident Texas will ultimately defeat these attacks on our life-saving efforts."

On Wednesday, 18 state attorneys generals from mostly GOP-controlled states threw new support behind the Texas law, urging the court to let the restrictions stand while accusing the federal government of overstepping in bringing the challenge in the first place.

U.S. Attorney General Merrick Garland has called the law "clearly unconstitutional" and warned that it could become a model elsewhere in the country unless it's struck down.

"The Attorney General has no authority to act as a roving reviser of state law, challenging as unconstitutional any rule with which he disagrees," Indiana Attorney General Theodore Rokita told the appeals court in a brief filed Wednesday.

Last month, more than 20 other states, mostly run by Democrats, had urged the lower court to throw out the law.

South Dakota readies to dial 10 digits for local calls

RAPID CITY, S.D. (AP) — South Dakota will soon shift to 10-digit dialing for all local calls as part of a federal plan to set aside a three-digit dialing code for suicide prevention and mental health crisis calls.

Starting Oct. 24, South Dakotans will need to dial the state's three-digit area code — 605 — before making local calls. The state is one of 35 that uses 988 for the first three digits of some phone numbers, and those digits will soon reach the National Suicide Prevention and Mental Health Crisis Lifeline, the Rapid City Journal reported.

"The biggest thing folks can do today is to go into their contacts list, go into alarm systems and any devices that may make automated calls and make sure the 605 area code is (programmed) in there," said South Dakota Public Utilities Commission Chairman Chris Nelson.

The 988 code to reach the suicide prevention and mental health resource hotline is expected to be available by July 16, 2022. Until then, the National Suicide Prevention and Mental Health Crisis Lifeline can be reached by calling 1-800-273-TALK (8255).

White House targeting economic risks from climate change

By JOSH BOAK Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — The Biden administration is taking steps to address the economic risks from climate change, issuing a 40-page report Friday on government-wide plans to protect the financial, insurance and housing markets and the savings of American families.

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The report lays out steps that could potentially alter the mortgage process, stock market disclosures, retirement plans, federal procurement and government budgeting.

It's a follow-up to a May executive order by President Joe Biden that essentially calls on the government to analyze how the world's largest economy could be affected by extreme heat, flooding, storms, wildfires and the broader adjustments needed to address climate change.

"If this year has shown us anything, it's that climate change poses an ongoing urgent and systemic risk to our economy and to the lives and livelihoods of everyday Americans, and we must act now," Gina McCarthy, the White House national climate adviser, told reporters.

A February storm in Texas led to widespread power outages, 210 deaths and severe property damage. Wildfires raged in Western states. The heat dome in the Pacific Northwest caused record temperatures in Seattle and Portland, Oregon. Hurricane Ida struck Louisiana in August and caused deadly flooding in the Northeast.

The actions being recommended by the Biden administration reflect a significant shift in the broader discussion about climate change, suggesting that the nation must prepare for the costs that families, investors and governments will bear.

The report is also an effort to showcase to the world how serious the U.S. government is about tackling climate change ahead of the United Nations Climate Change Conference running from Oct. 31 to Nov. 12 in Glasgow, Scotland.

Among the steps outlined is the government's Financial Stability Oversight Council developing the tools to identify and lessen climate-related risks to the economy. The Treasury Department plans to address the risks to the insurance sector and availability of coverage. The Securities and Exchange Commission is looking at mandatory disclosure rules about the opportunities and risks generated by climate change.

The Labor Department on Wednesday proposed a rule for investment managers to factor environmental decisions into the choices made for pensions and retirement savings. The Office of Management and Budget announced the government will begin the process of asking federal agencies to consider greenhouse gas emissions from the companies providing supplies. Biden's budget proposal for fiscal 2023 will feature an assessment of climate risks.

Federal agencies involved in lending and mortgages for homes are looking for the impact on the housing market, with the Department of Housing and Urban Development and its partners developing disclosures for homebuyers and flood and climate-related risks. The Department of Veterans Affairs will also look at climate risks for its home lending program.

The Federal Emergency Management Agency is updating the standards for its National Flood Insurance Program, potentially revising guidelines that go back to 1976.

"We now do recognize that climate change is a systemic risk," McCarthy said. "We have to look fundamentally at the way the federal government does its job and how we look at the finance system and its stability."

Protests greet debut of Italy's workplace COVID pass rule

By NICOLE WINFIELD Associated Press

ROME (AP) — Protests erupted in Italy as one of the most stringent anti-coronavirus measures in Europe went into effect Friday, requiring all workers, from magistrates to maids, to show a health pass to get into their place of employment.

Police were out in force, schools planned to end classes early and embassies issued warnings of possible violence amid concerns that the anti-vaccination demonstrations could turn violent, as they did in Rome last weekend.

The so-called "Green Pass" shows proof of vaccination, a recent negative test or of having recovered from COVID-19 in the past six months. Italy already required them to access all sorts of indoor environments, including restaurants, museums, theaters, and long-distance trains.

But the addition of the workplace requirement has sparked heated debate and opposition in a country

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that was a coronavirus epicenter early in the pandemic and where vaccination rates are among the highest in Europe.

"Today they are stepping on our Constitution," said an anti-vaccine protester, Loris Mazzarato. "I say NO to this discrimination."

He was among the hundreds of demonstrators in Trieste, where protests by port workers refusing to show a Green Pass to get to work threatened to affect commercial activities, though early reports suggested the ports were operational. Protesters shouted "Liberta" (Freedom) in a largely peaceful demonstration in Florence.

Implementation of the new requirement varies: Electronic scanners that can read cellphone QR codes with the Green Pass were set up at bigger places of employment, such as the office of Italian Premier Mario Draghi and the headquarters of state railway company Trenitalia.

But at smaller places of work, from restaurants to tennis clubs, employers and managers had to download an app that can scan the codes. While it was unclear how strictly Italy would enforce the requirement, the fear of spot checks drove employers to comply, at least initially.

Sanctions for employers who fail to check employees range from 400 to 1,000 euros. A worker who fails to show a Green Pass at work is considered to be absent without justification; if the worker shows up anyway without a valid Green Pass, he or she could face fines from 600 euros to 1,500 euros.

But there were some anomalies: Supermarket cashiers and hairdressers have to have a "Green Pass" to work, but their clients don't, and need only to wear a mask indoors.

The aim of the requirement is to encourage even higher vaccination rates in a country that has kept the latest delta variant-fueled resurgence largely under control, reporting around 67 cases per 100,000 inhabitants and a daily death toll that hasn't exceeded 70 for months.

In Italy, 80% of the population over age 12 has already been fully vaccinated. But for those people who can't or won't get their shots, the expanded pass requirement imposes a burden of getting tested every 48 hours just to be able to go to work, though people with a proven medical condition that prevents them being vaccinated are exempt.

Some employers are offering free tests at work, but the government has refused calls to make testing free across the board. Currently rapid tests run from 8 euros for children to 15 euros for adults.

Testing capacity proved to be Italy's Achilles' heel during the first wave of the pandemic, and the governor of the Veneto region, Luca Zaia, has warned it won't be able to keep up with the new demand. He has called for the government to let people secure Green Passes based on results from at-home test kits rather than having to go to a pharmacy for a rapid test.

"If the law says people have the right to work with a test every 48 hours, they have to guarantee this right," Zaia said.

Not even the Vatican was spared opposition to the new requirement: Three Swiss Guards quit and another three were suspended after they refused to get vaccinated before the Vatican's green pass requirement went into effect.

The Green Pass requirement is not a vaccine mandate, since a negative test or proof of being cured of COVID-19 are other ways to get it. In Italy, only health care workers are required to be vaccinated, and teachers and school administrators have had to have a Green Pass to work since Sept. 1.

The Green Pass requirement for all categories of workers though went beyond other European countries. France has had a "virus pass" since the summer to access indoor activities and events, but it isn't required for employees to get into work.

In Greece, employers are required by law to maintain a record of the vaccination status of staff who access work premises. Workers must carry a vaccination certificate that can be scanned using a government application or pay for weekly testing.

In the U.S., the Biden administration imposed sweeping rules in September mandating all employers with more than 100 workers to require them to be vaccinated or test for the virus weekly, affecting about 80 million Americans. Another 17 million workers at health facilities that receive federal Medicare or Medicaid

also have to be fully vaccinated, while vaccination is also required for employees of the executive branch and contractors who do business with the federal government — with no option to test instead.

Suicide attack on Shiite mosque in Afghanistan kills 7

By SAMYA KULLAB and TAMEEM AKHGAR Associated Press

KABUL, Afghanistan (AP) — Suicide bombers assaulted a Shiite mosque in southern Afghanistan that was packed with worshippers attending weekly Friday prayers, killing at least seven people and wounding more than a dozen, according to a hospital official and an eyewitness.

The attack on the Imam Barga mosque came a week after a bombing claimed by a local Islamic State affiliate killed 46 people at a Shiite mosque in northern Afghanistan.

Murtaza, an eye-witness who like many Afghans goes by one name, said four suicide bombers attacked the mosque. Two detonated their payloads at a security gate, allowing the other two to run inside and strike the congregation of worshippers.

Speaking to The Associated Press by phone, he said Friday prayers are typically attended by around 500 people.

Video footage from the scene showed bodies scattered across blood-stained carpets, with survivors walking around in a daze or crying out in anguish.

The extremist group, which is opposed to the ruling Taliban, views Shiite Muslims as apostates deserving of death. IS has claimed a number of deadly bombings across the country since the Taliban seized power in August amid the withdrawal of U.S. forces. The group has also targeted Taliban fighters in smaller attacks.

Taliban spokesman Bilal Karimi confirmed the explosion and said an investigation was underway, without providing further details.

An official in the provincial hospital said the facility received seven dead bodies and 13 wounded, adding that the death toll would likely rise. The official spoke on condition of anonymity because he was not authorized to brief media.

The Taliban have pledged to restore peace and security after decades of war. Both the Taliban and IS adhere to a rigid interpretation of Islamic law, but IS is far more radical, viewing itself as part of a worldwide Islamic caliphate that includes better-known branches in Iraq and Syria.

The Taliban and IS are Sunni Muslims, but they are bitterly split by ideology and have fought each other on numerous occasions.

That Taliban have pledged to protect Afghanistan's Shiite minority, which suffered persecution during the last period of Taliban rule, in the 1990s.

Akhgar reported from Istanbul.

Officials seek cause of Taiwan building fire that killed 46

By HUIZHONG WU Associated Press

KAOHSIUNG, Taiwan (AP) — Taiwanese officials set up an independent commission Friday to investigate the conditions at a run-down building in the port city of Kaohsiung where a fire killed 46 people, while authorities scoured the blackened ruins for the cause of the blaze.

Prosecutor Hong Rwei-fen told reporters at the scene she would seek to determine the cause of Thursday's fire as soon as possible, before donning a hard hat and walking into the cordoned-off building in the morning.

Outside, a Taoist priest in traditional robes chanted a prayer for those who died, many of whom were elderly or infirm residents unable to get out of the 13-story building after the fire broke out on the ground floor.

In the capital, Taipei, lawmakers held a moment of silence during a regular session of parliament to pay tribute to the victims.

Kaohsiung's city administration said the building had been required to follow fire codes and submit to

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inspections, but that inspectors had not been able to access the premises recently because the doors were always locked and they were unable to coordinate visits with the property owners.

Mayor Chen Chi-mai announced that he had ordered his deputy to set up an independent team to investigate whether negligence contributed to the tragedy, in which another 41 people were injured.

Of the 46 dead, Chen said that 21 still had not been identified. He said experts hoped to use fingerprint analysis to determine who the other 19 dead were, but for two others they would have to rely on other methods.

The building had commercial facilities on lower floors, a closed movie theatre, restaurants and a karaoke bar — most out of business — and some 120 housing units above.

The building once even boasted a skating rink in the basement and a department store, but has grown increasingly derelict in recent years as other parts of the city started developing and drew people away, local media reported.

The fire broke out in the lower area at about 3 a.m. Thursday, and witnesses reported hearing a loud sound like an explosion. It took firefighters until after 7 a.m. to fully extinguish the blaze.

Local media say police were questioning a female resident of the building who allegedly discarded a burning incense coil in a trash can inside an apartment where she had also stored small gas canisters. A man who carelessly discarded a cigarette outside the building and the possibility of a fire in the electrical system were also being investigated, the reports said.

According to neighborhood residents, the building was home to many poor, older and disabled people, and many appear to have been trapped in their apartments.

Lee Mao-sheng, 61, who lives across the street, said his friend Cheng Yong-kang used a wheelchair and died in the fire.

In the past, the two would play mahjong together but Lee said he hadn't seen his friend in a while because door in the building's elevator frequently didn't open and residents didn't have the money to maintain it.

"The people who lived inside, many of them were not in good health. Many of them had a disability," Lee said. Cheap rent was the main reason people lived there under less than ideal conditions, he said.

On Friday morning, a wire mesh fence and supporting scaffolding cordoned off the building and the street in front was open again to traffic. The building did not seem in immediate danger of collapse, though its lower floors were blackened and smoke marked the exteriors of the upper apartments.

Tsai Hsiu-chin, 70, who had lived in the building for 15 years, said she escaped with just the clothing on her back after hearing someone screaming "fire" at 3 a.m.

"I didn't bring anything. I just cared about saving my life," she said, sitting opposite the charred building on Thursday night, trying to process her experience over a beer with a friend.

The building's age and piles of debris blocking access to many areas complicated search and rescue efforts, officials said, according to Taiwan's Central News Agency.

The decades-old apartment building is one of many in the Yancheng district, an older part of Kaohsiung, a city of some 2.8 million people in southwestern Taiwan.

Fire extinguishers had been installed last month, but only three per floor because the residents could not afford to pay more, the United Daily News, a major newspaper, reported.

A 1995 fire at a nightclub in Taichung, Taiwan's third-largest city, killed 64 people in the country's deadliest such disaster in recent times.

Associated Press journalist Taijing Wu contributed to this report.

With latest mission, China renews space cooperation vow

BEIJING (AP) — Shortly ahead of sending a new three-person crew to its space station, China on Friday renewed its commitment to international cooperation in the peaceful use of space.

Foreign Ministry spokesperson Zhao Lijian said sending humans into space was a "common cause of mankind," and China would "continue to extend the depth and breadth of international cooperation and

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exchanges" in crewed spaceflight and "make positive contributions to the exploration of the mysteries of the universe."

China is to send two men and one woman to spend six months aboard the Tianhe core module of its space station, with liftoff from the Jiuquan Satellite Launch Center on the edge of the Gobi Desert in northwestern China scheduled for shortly after midnight Saturday.

It will be China's longest crewed space mission, a new milestone for a program that has advanced rapidly in recent years.

China was excluded from the International Space Station largely due to U.S. objections over the Chinese program's secretive nature and close military ties, prompting it to launch two experimental modules before starting on the permanent station.

U.S. law requires congressional approval for contact between the American and Chinese space programs, but China is cooperating with space experts from countries including France, Sweden, Russia and Italy. Chinese officials say they look forward to hosting astronauts from other countries aboard the space station once it becomes fully functional.

The Shenzhou-13 spaceship carrying the three astronauts will be launched by a Long March-2F rocket. Hours later, it is expected to dock with the Tianhe module, beginning the mission that will continue the work of the initial crew, who conducted two spacewalks and deployed a 10-meter (33-foot) mechanical arm before returning from their 90-day stay in mid-September.

The new crew has two veterans of space travel. Pilot Zhai Zhigang, 55, performed China's first spacewalk. Wang Yaping, 41, and the only woman on the mission, carried out experiments and led a science class in real-time while traveling on one of China's earlier experimental space stations. The third, Ye Guangfu, 41, has undergone training with the European Space Agency and will be traveling into space for the first time.

The crew's scheduled activities include up to three spacewalks to install equipment in preparation for expanding the station, assessing living conditions in the module and conducting experiments in space medicine and other fields.

China's military-run space program plans to send multiple crews to the station over the next two years to make it fully functional. Shenzhou-13 will be the fifth mission, including trips without crews to deliver supplies.

When completed with the addition of two more modules — named Mengtian and Wentian — the station will weigh about 66 tons, a fraction of the size of the International Space Station, which launched its first module in 1998 and will weigh around 450 tons when completed. The two additional modules are due to be launched before the end of next year during the stay of the yet-to-be-named Shenzhou-14 crew.

China has launched seven crewed missions with a total of 14 astronauts aboard since 2003, when it became only the third country after the former Soviet Union and the United States to put a person in space on its own. Two Chinese astronauts have flown twice.

Along with its crewed missions, China has expanded its work on lunar and Mars exploration, including placing a rover on the little-explored far side of the Moon and returning lunar rocks to Earth for the first time since the 1970s.

China this year also landed its Tianwen-1 space probe on Mars, whose accompanying Zhurong rover has been exploring for evidence of life on the red planet.

Other programs call for collecting soil from an asteroid and bring back additional lunar samples. China has also expressed an aspiration to land people on the moon and possibly build a scientific base there, although no timeline has been proposed for such projects. A highly secretive space plane is also reportedly under development.

Lebanon pauses amid tense calm after deadly gun battles

By SARAH EL DEEB Associated Press

BEIRUT (AP) — Schools, banks and government offices across Lebanon shut down Friday after hours of gun battles between heavily armed militias killed seven people and terrorized the residents of Beirut.

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The government called for a day of mourning following the armed clashes, in which gunmen used automatic weapons and rocket-propelled grenades on the streets of the capital, echoing the nation's darkest era of the 1975-90 civil war. The gun battles raised the specter of a return to sectarian violence in a country already struggling through one of the world's worst economic crises of the past 150 years.

The violence broke out Thursday at a protest organized by the two main Shiite parties - Hezbollah and the Amal Movement - calling for the removal of the lead judge investigating last year's massive explosion at Beirut port. Officials from both parties have suggested the judge's investigation is heading toward holding them responsible for the blast, which killed at least 215 people.

Many of the protesters had been armed. It was not clear who fired the first shot, but the confrontation quickly devolved into heavy exchanges of gunfire along a former civil war frontline separating predominantly Muslim and Christian areas of Beirut.

Gunfire echoed for hours, and ambulances rushed to pick up casualties. Snipers shot from buildings. Bullets penetrated apartment windows in the area. Schools were evacuated and residents hid in shelters.

The two Shiite groups said their protesters came under fire from snipers deployed over rooftops, accusing the Christian right-wing Lebanese Forces militia of starting the shooting.

The Health Ministry said an injured person died of his wounds Friday, raising the death toll to seven. Among the dead were two Hezbollah fighters and 45-year-old Mariam Farhat, a mother of five. Farhat was shot by a sniper bullet as she sat near the door of the balcony of her second floor apartment, her family said Friday.

"We started screaming, she was taken on a stretcher but did not reach the hospital," said Munira Hamdar, Farhat's mother-in-law said. She added that Farhat's youngest daughter does not know that her mother has passed away, and has been staying with her maternal aunt since Thursday.

"She is five years old. How is she going to understand?" Hamdar asked. "My son's family is ruined."

Residents in the Tayouneh area of Beirut were most of the fighting played out swept glass from the streets in front of shops and apartment buildings. Soldiers on armored personnel carriers deployed on the streets, and barbed wire was erected at some street entrances. Many cars were damaged.

Tayouneh has a huge roundabout that separates Christian and Muslim neighborhoods. Newly pockmarked buildings off the roundabout sat next to ones scarred from the days of the civil war.

Hezbollah and Amal were holding funerals for their dead later Friday.

Tensions over the port blast have contributed to Lebanon's many troubles, including a currency collapse, hyperinflation, soaring poverty and an energy crisis leading to extended electricity blackouts.

The probe centers on hundreds of tons of ammonium nitrate that were improperly stored at a port warehouse that detonated on Aug. 4, 2020. The blast killed at least 215 people, injured thousands and destroyed parts of nearby neighborhoods. It was one of the largest non-nuclear explosions in history and further devastated the country already beset with political divisions and financial woes.

Judge Tarek Bitar has charged and issued an arrest warrant for Lebanon's former finance minister, who is a senior member of the Amal Movement and a close ally of Hezbollah. Bitar also has charged three other former senior government officials with intentional killing and negligence that led to the blast.

Officials from both Shiite parties, Amal and Hezbollah, including Hezbollah leader Hassan Nasrallah, had attacked Bitar for days, accusing him of politicizing the investigation by charging and summoning some officials and not others.

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

Bitar is the second judge to lead the complicated investigation. His predecessor was removed following legal challenges.

Ali Haidar, a 23-year-old Shiite supporter of the group who took part in the Thursday's protest, said nearby residents first started throwing rocks, bottles and furniture, before snipers on rooftops opened fire on the protesters from two directions, leaving people stuck in the middle.

"Lots of people were martyred on the spot," Haidar said. He added that some politicians want to take the country to another civil war.

Echoing Hezbollah chief Hassan Nasrallah, he said Bitar was taking dictating from "foreign embassies" and working to eventually blame Hezbollah for the port blast.

In Nigeria's troubled northwest, phone blockades hurt locals

By CHINEDU ASADU Associated Press

LAGOS, Nigeria (AP) — Mobile phones have been lifelines for residents of northwestern Nigeria who have relied on warning calls to escape escalating bandit attacks.

But recent blockades on mobile telecommunications by authorities have left many rural people cut off and more vulnerable, say residents.

The bandits — armed groups who plunder villages and often kidnap, rape and kill — are increasing their attacks in Nigeria's northwestern and central states. At least 2,500 people were killed in the first half of 2021 in the northwest and central regions, according to the US Council on Foreign Relations, which collates daily media reports on such attacks.

The widespread banditry in the northwest is in addition to the 10-year Islamic extremist insurgency in northeast Nigeria.

Responding to the surging violence, the governors of five northwestern and central states have blocked mobile networks to prevent the outlaws from communicating with collaborators.

While the communications blackout has had some positive effects, it also hampers local communities, according to multiple interviews with residents, officials and security experts.

The telecommunications blockade was first imposed last month in Zamfara state for an initial period of two weeks. Mobile phone service has been restored to Zamfara's state capital, but its rural areas remain cut off. Katsina, Sokoto, Niger and Kaduna states have also banned mobile networks in recent weeks in areas where killings and abductions continue.

Authorities credit the blackouts for helping them to corner the bandits and free hostages including more than 180 captives freed in Zamfara earlier this month.

However, the killings of civilians have "worsened" in some areas since the start of the phone blackouts, local officials told The Associated Press. More than 100 people have been killed across northwest and central Nigeria in the last two weeks, according to the Council on Foreign Relations. Many other deaths have not been reported, say some officials.

"We are trapped," Amina Al-Mustapha, a state lawmaker from the violent hotspot of Sabon Birni in Sokoto state, told AP.

"Every day, they attack our people and we have no way to talk to our people," Al-Mustapha said. "No single village has not been attacked ... We are suffering now."

At least 32 people were killed in the Munya area of Niger state earlier this month when a band of gunmen stormed villages and ransacked them for hours while no help arrived.

The Munya area villagers could not send out alerts about the attacks because of the telecommunications blockade, Garba Mohammed, the area's chairman, said. Police and other security agencies only learned of the attacks hours after the killings had occurred, he said.

Previously communities would get phone warnings and people were able to "run for their lives," he said.

In addition to blocking telecommunications access, the northern states have also shut down markets, imposed night curfews, limited vehicular traffic, closed major roads and banned motorcycles as they battle to restore order.

Nnamdi Obasi, the International Crisis Group's Nigeria Senior Adviser, told AP that because the security situation in the northwest has been "deteriorating dangerously" and is "suffocating" on local economic activity, Nigeria's government and the military are pressed to "do something different."

"It was clear that if the tide wasn't reversed, then we could be heading from what we are calling banditry to a full-scale insurgency," he said. He added that the phone blackout and other security measures are "a two-edged sword" that is restricting the outlaws but is also crippling the economy and increasing the vulnerability of civilians.

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With major marketplaces closed, farmers aren't able to sell their produce. Banking by mobile phones has also been halted and bank ATMs are no longer operating, according to interviews with residents of the affected areas.

Some though believe blocking telecommunications access is a good strategy. Bashir Shehu, a trader in Zamfara, said that although his business has reduced as a result of the action, peace has returned to many areas and he can travel more safely.

Unfortunately, some gunmen have already found a way to evade the blockade by using telecommunications networks in the neighboring country of Niger, local authorities say.

It's not clear when life will return to normal in Nigeria's northwest and central states, according to government officials who told AP that they don't know when the phone blackouts and other security measures will end.

Lasting peace will be difficult to achieve as Nigeria's security forces are often outnumbered by the bandits as recently admitted by Katsina Governor Aminu Masari. They also have more sophisticated weapons purchased with ransom money, freed hostages have told AP.

The phone blackouts should be "brought to an end as quickly as possible," said Obasi of the Crisis Group, as part of the government's efforts to "improve the security presence and resources in the region ... and address the humanitarian crisis."

Custody hearing for Norway bow-and-arrow suspect

By NICOLAE DUMITRACE and JAN M. OLSEN undefined

KONGSBERG, Norway (AP) — The suspect in a bow-and-arrow attack that killed five people and wounded three in a quiet Norwegian town this week is facing a custody hearing Friday. He won't appear in court because he has confessed to the killings and has agreed to being held in custody.

Espen Andersen Braathen, a 37-year-old Danish citizen was arrested Wednesday night, 30 minutes after he began his deadly rampage targeting random people. Police have described the attack as an act of terror.

On a central square in Kongsberg, a town of 26,000 people surrounded by mountains and woods some 66 kilometers (41 miles) southwest of Oslo, people were laying flowers and lighting candles Friday.

"This is a small community so almost everybody knows each other, so it's a very strange and very sad experience for us," said teacher Ingeborg Spangelo, who brought her students to the impromptu memorial. "It's almost surreal or unreal."

Andersen Braathen was handed over to medical authorities, Norwegian news media reported Friday, saying he will be observed and assessed by two experts who will try to clarify whether he was sane at the time of the attack. If they reached the conclusion that he was not sane, he cannot be punished for the acts, but can be sentenced to compulsory mental health care.

Regional prosecutor Ann Iren Svane Mathiassen told Norwegian broadcaster NRK that the decision for his move was "an assessment of his health situation. She didn't elaborate.

Andersen Braathen used a bow and arrow and possibly other weapons to randomly target people at a supermarket and other locations in Kongsberg, where he lived.

Four women and a man between the ages of 50 and 70 were killed, and three other people were wounded, police said.

Police said they believe he acted alone. Norway's domestic security service PST said the attack "appears to be an act of terror," but didn't elaborate. It added that Andersen Braathen was known to the PST, but, again, declined to elaborate.

The suspect has been described by police as a Muslim convert and said there "earlier had been worries of the man having been radicalized," but authorities did not elaborate or say why he was previously flagged or what authorities did in response.

According to Norwegian media, Andersen Braathen has a conviction for burglary and drug possession, and last year a court granted a restraining order for him to stay away from his parents for six months after threatening to kill one of them.

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Norway's new prime minister, Jonas Gahr Stoere, and Justice Minister Emilie Enger Mehl, were expected later Friday in Kongsberg.

Olsen reported from Copenhagen, Denmark.

#MeToo, 4 years in: 'I'd like to think now, we are believed'

By JOCELYN NOVECK and MARYCLAIRE DALE Associated Press

NEW YORK (AP) — To Charlotte Bennett, the new book that arrived at her Manhattan apartment this week — Anita Hill's "Believing" — was more than just a look at gender violence.

It was a dispatch from a fellow member of a very specific sisterhood — women who have come forward to describe misconduct they suffered at the hands of powerful men.

Bennett's story of harassment by New York Gov. Andrew Cuomo helped lead to his resignation after an investigation found he'd harassed at least 11 women. And 30 years ago this month, Hill testified before a skeptical Senate Judiciary Committee that Clarence Thomas had sexually harassed her.

"I can't imagine what it was like doing that in 1991," said Bennett, 26. "I've thought about that a lot."

Hill's history obviously predates the #MeToo movement, the broad social reckoning against sexual misconduct that reaches its four-year mark this week. But Bennett's moment is very much a part of it, and she believes #MeToo is largely responsible for a fundamental change in the landscape since 1991, when Hill came forward.

"I'd like to think that now, we are believed," Bennett said in an interview. "That the difference is, we are not convincing our audience that something happened and trying to persuade them that it impacted us. I would really like to think we're in a place now where it's not about believability — and that we don't have to apologize."

But for Bennett, a former health policy aide in the Cuomo administration, what emboldened her to come forward — and bolster the claims of an earlier accuser — was also the feeling that she was part of a community of survivors who had each other's back.

"I was really scared to come forward," Bennett said. "But something that reassured me even in that moment of fear was that there were women before me ... (it wasn't) Charlotte versus the governor, but a movement, moving forward. And I am one small event and one small piece of reckoning with sexual misconduct, in workplaces and elsewhere."

There's evidence Bennett is not alone in feeling a shift. Four years after actor Alyssa Milano sent her viral tweet asking those who'd been harassed or assaulted to share stories or just reply "Me too," following the stunning revelations about mogul Harvey Weinstein, most Americans think the movement has inspired more people to speak out about misconduct, according to a new poll.

About half of Americans — 54% — say they personally are more likely to speak out if they're a victim of sexual misconduct, according to the poll from The Associated Press-NORC Center for Public Affairs Research. And slightly more, 58%, say they would speak out if they witnessed it.

Sixty-two percent of women said they are more likely to speak out if they are a victim of sexual misconduct as a result of recent attention to the issue, compared to 44% of men. Women also are more likely than men to say they would speak out if they are a witness, 63% vs 53%.

Sonia Montoya, 65, of Albuquerque, used to take the sexist chatter in stride at the truck repair shop where she's worked as the office manager — the only woman — for 17 years. But as news broke in 2016 about the crude way presidential candidate Donald Trump spoke about women, she realized she'd had enough. She demanded respect, prompting changes from her colleagues that stuck as the #MeToo movement took hold.

"It used to be brutal, the way people talked (at work). It was raw," said Montoya, a poll participant who describes herself as an independent voter and political moderate. "Ever since this movement and awareness has come out, the guys are a lot more respectful and they think twice before they say certain things."

Justin Horton, a 20-year-old EMT in Colorado Springs who attends a local community college, said he

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saw attitudes start to change as the #MeToo movement exploded during his senior year of high school. He thinks it's now easier for men like him to treat women with respect, despite a culture that too often objectifies them. And he hopes people realize that men can be sexually harassed as well.

"I feel like it's had a lasting impact," he said. "I feel like people have been more self-aware."

Close to half of Americans say the recent attention to sexual misconduct has had a positive impact on the country overall — roughly twice the number that say it's been negative, 45% vs. 24%, the poll shows. As recently as January 2020, Americans were roughly split over the impact of the movement on the country.

Still, there are signs the impact has been unequal, with fewer Americans seeing positive change for women of color than for women in general. That dovetails with frequent criticism that the #MeToo movement has been less inclusive of women of color.

"We haven't moved nearly enough" in that area, #MeToo founder Tarana Burke told The Associated Press in an interview last month.

The AP-NORC Poll also showed generational differences: More Americans under 30 said they're more likely to speak out if they are a victim, compared with older adults, 63% vs. 51%. And 67% of adults under 30 said they were they are more likely to speak out if they witness sexual misconduct, compared with 56% of those older.

There is a price for speaking out. Bennett said Cuomo, despite having resigned, is still not taking true responsibility for his actions, and so her struggle goes on.

"He's still willing to try and discredit us," she said. "And I am at a point where I'm exhausted. This has been a horrible experience."

Bennett has said the 63-year-old Cuomo, among other comments, asked if her experience with sexual assault in college had affected her sex life, asked about her sexual relationships, and said he was comfortable dating women in their 20s. Cuomo denies making sexual advances and says his questions were an attempt to be friendly and sympathetic to her background as a survivor. He's denied other women's allegations of inappropriate touching, including an aide who accused him of groping her breast.

How is Bennett doing, two months after the resignation? She replies haltingly: "I'm doing OK. Every day is hard. It's sad. It takes a piece of you a little bit. But ... I would make the same decision every single time. The reason I was in public service was to be a good citizen and give back and do the right thing and contribute. I didn't see my role like this, but that's what it turned into. And that's OK. I'm proud of myself for coming forward, and I will get through it."

She muses about where the country might be in three more decades.

"I think reflecting on Anita Hill's experience is a great way to understand how long 30 years is," she said.

"So what do I feel like the next big change will be? I think it's just not apologizing for being inconvenient. I could sit here and apologize. But I want to get to a place ... where we're not apologizing, where it's our job to come forward if we have the means and ability to do so."

And the #MeToo movement, she said, should be not only a community, not only "a soft landing place" for women who come forward.

"It should be where leaders come from," Bennett said. "We know how institutions act. We know the underbelly of these institutions better than anyone. We have a lot of solutions to fix it and we should be at the table.

"It should be OUR table."

Dale reported from Philadelphia. Associated Press writers Hannah Fingerhut and Emily Swanson contributed to this report.

The AP-NORC poll of 1,099 adults was conducted Sept. 23-27 using a sample drawn from NORC's probability-based AmeriSpeak Panel, which is designed to be representative of the U.S. population. The margin of sampling error for all respondents is plus or minus 4.2 percentage points.

India reopens for foreign tourists as virus infections ebb

NEW DELHI (AP) — India reopened to fully vaccinated foreign tourists traveling on chartered flights on Friday in the latest easing of its coronavirus restrictions as infection numbers decline.

Foreign tourists on regular flights will be able to enter India starting Nov. 15.

It is the first time India has allowed foreign tourists to enter the country since March 2020 when it imposed its first nationwide coronavirus lockdown.

It is unclear whether arriving tourists will have to quarantine but they must be fully vaccinated and test negative for the virus within 72 hours of their flight.

The decision, announced earlier this month by India's home ministry, comes as the country's daily infections have dropped below 20,000 from a peak of 400,000 in May and more people have been vaccinated.

India has administered more than 970 million vaccine doses. Nearly 70% of the eligible adult population has had at least one dose.

The easing of restrictions on foreign tourists visiting the country, however, coincides with India's domestic tourist and festive season. Already, it has prompted concerns by health officials who have warned against complacency.

Earlier this month, the Indian Council of Medical Research, India's premier medical body, cautioned that "revenge tourism" could lead to a surge in COVID-19 infections if tourists don't strictly adhere to safety protocols.

According to official data, less than 3 million foreign tourists visited India in 2020, which was a dip of more than 75% as compared to 2019.

Russia struggles to meet global orders for Sputnik V vaccine

By REGINA GARCIA CANO, DARIA LITVINOVA and JUAN PABLO ARRAEZ Associated Press

CARACAS, Venezuela (AP) — Esperita García de Perez got her first vaccination against COVID-19 in May. That, along with her Catholic faith, made her feel better protected against the virus, and she had hoped to get her second shot of the Russian-developed Sputnik V vaccine a few weeks later.

But the 88-year-old is still waiting. She was infected with the virus last month, and now her hopes for survival are pinned on the host of medications and home care she is receiving.

Millions in developing nations from Latin America to the Middle East also are waiting for more doses of Sputnik V after manufacturing woes and other issues have created huge gaps in vaccination campaigns. One firm estimates that Russia has only exported 4.8% of the roughly 1 billion doses it promised.

The head of the Russian state-controlled fund that invested in the vaccine insisted Wednesday the supply problems have been resolved.

Venezuela, which designated Sputnik for those over 50, ordered 10 million doses in December 2020 but has gotten slightly less than 4 million. Argentina, the first country in the Western Hemisphere to administer Sputnik, got its first shipment Dec. 25 but it is still waiting for many of the 20 million it purchased.

"I had a long time now, many months, anguished because (the vaccine) was going to arrive, then it was not going to arrive, then I was going to have to wait, then I was not going to have to wait," García de Perez said, adding that "you want the certainty and hope that the thing is going to come."

Launched in August 2020 and proudly named after the world's first satellite to symbolize Russia's scientific prowess, Sputnik V has been approved in some 70 countries. Russian state media earlier this year broadcast triumphant reports about it "conquering the world" as Moscow aggressively marketed it after wealthy nations kept supplies of Western-developed vaccines for themselves.

For a while it was "the only game in town," said Judy Twigg, a professor specializing in global health at Virginia Commonwealth University, but adds that Russia's window of opportunity "to really stake a claim as the savior" in the pandemic is gone.

Unlike other COVID-19 vaccines, Sputnik's first and second shots are different and not interchangeable. Manufacturing in Russia has been marred by reports of production difficulties, particularly in making its second component. Experts have pointed to limited production capacity as well as the fact that the pro-

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cess is very complicated.

Sputnik is a viral vector vaccine, which uses a harmless virus that carries genetic material to stimulate the immune system. Manufacturers can't guarantee stable output because working with biological ingredients involves a lot of variables in terms of the quality of the finished product.

Airfinity, a life science data analytics firm, estimates that 62 countries have supply agreements for about 1 billion doses of Sputnik V, with only 48 million doses exported so far. It said it isn't clear whether these doses are supposed to be delivered in 2021 or over a longer period.

The Russian Direct Investment Fund, which bankrolls and markets the vaccine abroad and has production contracts with 25 manufacturing sites in 14 countries, says it "is in full compliance of the Sputnik V supply contracts, including of the second component, after a successful production ramp-up in August and September."

The fund's CEO, Kirill Dmitriev, said in an interview with The Associated Press that all supply issues "have been fully resolved. All the issues with the second component are resolved in all of the countries."

"There is not one vaccine manufacturer in the world that didn't have vaccine delivery issues," he said.

Although the West largely relied on vaccines made in the U.S. and Europe, such as Pfizer-BioNTech, Moderna and AstraZeneca, many developing nations have sought easier-to-get vaccines from China and Russia. The World Health Organization and the European Medicines Agency have not yet approved Sputnik V for use.

In Argentina, the delays in shipments of Sputnik and a virus surge in March led to public pressure on the government to speed up negotiations with other pharmaceutical companies.

An initial agreement was for 20 million doses, of which the country had received about 14.2 million as of Tuesday. A later agreement was signed for a local laboratory to produce the vaccine with the active ingredient shipped from Russia. It has produced about 1.2 million first doses and some 3.6 million second doses.

This month, Argentinian officials said the fund's requested the return of 1.3 million doses for packaging reasons. The doses have been replaced.

Virus-battered Iran has received only about 1.3 million doses from Russia out of 60 million doses it had been promised. The Iranian news agency IRNA quoted the country's ambassador to Russia as saying in April that the doses were expected to be shipped between May and November.

There are indications that Iran also has struggled with a shortage of Sputnik's second component. Deputy Health Minister Alireza Raisi last month urged those who received the first dose to get a second shot of AstraZeneca, citing the "uncertainty" of when Russia will come through.

A similar problem appears to have prevented Turkey from rolling out Sputnik altogether. Officials announced a deal to get 50 million doses in April, with news reports saying the vaccines would be delivered within six months. As of June, only 400,000 had arrived.

"Russia squandered that opportunity," said Twigg, the VCU professor. "I think in some cases, it's actually left Russia's reputation in Iran, Guatemala, Argentina, maybe Mexico, perhaps even a little worse off than it would have been if it had done nothing, or if it had waited and made more fulfillable promises from the very beginning, because people are disappointed."

Turkish Health Minister Fahrettin Koca said in August that Turkey has not been able to roll out Sputnik because it didn't have the second doses in hand. It's unclear if Turkey still hopes to receive the second doses or if it has simply abandoned the rollout.

"The whole process is a black box. There is no transparency," opposition lawmaker Murat Emir said last month in questioning Koca about the fate of the Sputnik rollout, including whether Turkey would get a refund for the 400,000 unused doses.

India was promised 125 million two-dose sets of Sputnik but had administered fewer than 1 million by Oct. 6.

The Sputnik delays in Argentina and Venezuela have prompted some people to get a different vaccine for their second dose, even though scientists are still studying the effects of such mixing and matching.

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Dr. Chris Beyrer, public health and human rights professor at Johns Hopkins University, noted that the early purchases of highly effective vaccines by wealthiest nations has made it harder for developing countries to protect their populations.

"One dose is better than no dose. So, I think, for countries that have already started with Sputnik, it does make sense to go for the second dose, even if there's been a delay," he said. "But if they're not getting that vaccine at all, then they absolutely should be looking at other vaccines."

Litvinova reported from Moscow and Garcia Cano from Mexico City. Associated Press writers Jorge Rueda in Caracas, Venezuela; Debora Rey in Buenos Aires, Argentina; Nasser Karimi in Tehran, Iran; Suzan Fraser in Ankara, Turkey; Tanya Titova in Moscow; and Aniruddha Ghosal in New Delhi, India, contributed.

More repression, fewer jobs: Jordanians face bleak outlook

By KARIN LAUB Associated Press

AMMAN, Jordan (AP) — As a poorly paid public school teacher, Khaled Jaber always needed a side hustle, working as a private tutor and using his car as a taxi to help pay the bills. For unexpected needs, such as medical expenses, he has had to borrow money from relatives.

Somehow, the 44-year-old muddled through life, sustained by his love of teaching high school Arabic and the respect his job earned him in the community.

But his fragile equilibrium has been upended by the government's harsh treatment of tens of thousands of teachers over the past two years. Their union, leveraging mass protests and a one-month strike, obtained a 35% salary increase, only to then be dissolved by the government. Thirteen union leaders were dragged to court and each faces a one-year prison term pending appeal.

The increased authoritarianism — noted in the downgrade of Jordan from "partly free" to "not free" this year by the U.S. advocacy group Freedom House — stands in contrast to monarchy's image of having embraced liberal Western values and being a reliable ally in a turbulent region.

In Jaber's case, the heavy-handed silencing of protests leaves him feeling disrespected, while the salary increase has barely made a dent because of exploding prices.

Even the right to complain has been taken away, he said.

"Allow the space for me to speak, to go out to the street and scream, as long as the stance is peaceful," he said, speaking in his small apartment on the edge of Amman, as if appealing to the authorities. "Allow the space for me to express my distress."

The crackdown on expression has contributed to a growing malaise in the kingdom.

A years-long economic downturn, accelerated by the coronavirus pandemic, means more than half of young Jordanians are now unemployed and the country is sinking deeper into debt.

Recent revelations that King Abdullah II secretly amassed more than \$106 million in luxury properties abroad have further undermined public trust. News of the offshore acquisitions came just months after the king's half-brother, Prince Hamzah, alleged corruption at the very top, engulfing the typically discreet royal family in a rare scandal.

Anger at this trifecta of increased repression, a worsening economy and perceived corruption is bubbling just under the surface, several activists said. Only fear of being jailed or inadvertently igniting self-destructive chaos, akin to events in Syria, is keeping a lid on mass protests, they said.

"There is no doubt that this generates pressure," Maisara Malas, 59, an engineer and union activist, said of the widening gap between a detached, high-living elite and the vast majority of Jordanians. "The people are getting poorer, and the ruling regime is getting richer."

Any hint of instability should worry Jordan's Western allies, foremost the United States, who value the kingdom for its help in the fight against Islamic extremists, its security ties with Israel and its willingness to host refugees.

But the focus of the Biden administration has shifted to the Indo-Pacific, with Middle East policy in maintenance mode and the approach to Jordan seemingly on autopilot, said Seth Binder of the Project

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on Middle East Democracy, a Washington-based advocacy group.

In comparison to troubled Syria or Yemen, U.S. officials apply to Jordan "this tired trope of an Arab regime that is a moderate regime," he said. "That misses what is really happening and raises some real concerns."

Jordan is the second-largest recipient of bilateral U.S. aid in the region, after Israel. In a 2018 memorandum, the U.S. assured Jordan that it would receive at least \$1.3 billion a year for five years. Congress, where Jordan enjoys bipartisan support, has gone beyond that. In 2021, it appropriated \$1.7 billion, including \$845 million in direct budget support. For the upcoming fiscal year, the Biden administration proposes \$1.3 billion, including \$490 million in budget support, or money not earmarked for specific programs.

In a report circulated among Washington decision-makers in September, Binder's group called for more stringent conditions to be attached to direct cash transfers, and to eventually phase them out. Aid should be leveraged in a push for economic and political reforms, it said.

"A cash transfer to the government is a privilege that should be reserved for U.S. partners committed to democracy and human rights and not known for rampant corruption," the report said.

The State Department said in a response that aid to Jordan is in the direct national security interest of the U.S., describing the kingdom as an "invaluable ally." It said the U.S. carefully monitors its aid programs to Jordan and that the U.S. routinely engages the Jordanian government on a wide range of issues, including human rights.

Jordanian officials pushed back against corruption allegations. "Every (aid) dollar that is provided is accounted for," Foreign Minister Ayman Safadi told The Associated Press last week. Direct cash transfers are "accounted for in the budget the government executes, and it's subject to audit."

Safadi also defended the king's purchase of luxury homes, revealed earlier this month in a massive leak of documents dubbed the Pandora Papers. Safadi said the monarch used private funds and cited security and privacy needs as a reason for keeping the transactions secret.

Former Information Minister Mohammed Momani said he regretted Jordan's downgrade to "not free," but argued that the kingdom still did better than most countries in the region.

"We know that Jordan is not Sweden, but we also know that we are among the very few best countries when it comes to freedom of expression in the Middle East," he said. "So the situation is not as we hoped we would have, but it is not as dark as some people would paint it."

All power in Jordan rests with the king, who appoints and dismisses governments. Parliament is compliant because of a single-vote electoral system that discourages the formation of strong political parties. Abdullah has repeatedly promised to open the political system, but then pulled back amid concerns of losing control to an Islamist surge.

After the Prince Hamzah scandal in the spring, the king appointed a committee of experts who now propose reserving one-third of seats in the 2024 parliament election for political parties. The quota would rise to two-thirds in a decade and eventually reach 100%, said Momani, a member of the committee.

Momani said this is the most significant reform attempt in three decades, though the latest ideas generated little excitement in Jordan, where many view promises of change with skepticism.

Jaber, the Arabic teacher, is among those with a bleak outlook. He said he expects his four children to be worse off than he is, citing high unemployment and rising prices.

"When a student goes to university, he and his family will owe thousands (of dinars). How long does he need to get a job? When will he be able to get married? When will he build a house?" he said. "I don't see that there is a positive or rosy future, as some officials say. Things are getting worse and more desperate for me and for others."

Associated Press writers Omar Akour in Amman and Matthew V. Lee in Washington contributed to this report.

MIT grapples with early leader's stance on Native Americans

By PHILIP MARCELO Associated Press

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CAMBRIDGE, Mass. (AP) — As the third president of the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, Francis Amasa Walker helped usher the school into national prominence in the late 1800s.

But another part of his legacy has received renewed attention amid the nation's reckoning with racial justice: his role in shaping the nation's hardline policies toward Native Americans as a former head of the U.S. office of Indian Affairs and author of "The Indian Question," a treatise that justified forcibly removing tribes from their lands and confining them to remote reservations.

MIT is now grappling with calls from Native American students and others to strip Walker's name from a campus building that is central to student life — part of a broader push for the nation's higher education institutions to atone for the role they played in the decimation of Native American tribes.

"Walker might be the face of Indian genocide and it is troubling that his name is memorialized at MIT," says David Lowry, the school's newly-appointed distinguished fellow in Native American studies and a member of the Lumbee Tribe of North Carolina.

MIT President L. Rafael Reif wrote in a recent column in MIT Technology Review that addressing Walker's legacy is an "essential step" in the school's commitment to its Native American community. Native students account for 155 of the school's nearly 3,700 students this year.

"The question we are working through now is what to do with these facts, as well as other aspects of the history of MIT and Native communities," wrote Reif, who stopped short of weighing in on the name change debate in his column and declined to be interviewed.

Built in 1816, Walker Memorial houses student group offices, the college radio station and a campus pub. Its focal point is a great hall decorated with soaring murals meant to depict scientific learning and experimentation.

Alvin Harvey, a doctoral student and president of the MIT Native American Student Association, says the classical-style building overlooking the Charles River is one of the most visible reminders of the school's white, Western-centric past.

"As a Native American individual, you feel the full brunt of what MIT built its foundations on," said Harvey, a 25-year-old New Mexico native and member of Navajo Nation. "The ideology that Western men, white men are going to lead the United States and the world into a new utopia of technological development."

MIT was among the nation's first colleges to benefit from the Morrill Act, a 1862 law that helped create the U.S. public higher education system. The law allowed for the transfer and sale of federal lands to colleges to help establish their campus, or bolster an existing one. But many millions of those acres were actually confiscated from Native American tribes.

In MIT's case, it received at least 366 acres scattered across California and a number of Midwest states, High Country News reported last year. At the time, their sales helped generate nearly \$78,000, or more than \$1.6 million in today's dollars, the magazine said.

Lowry cautions those land and revenue estimates are likely conservative and that some students in his course on the "Indigenous History of MIT" are working on a fuller accounting.

Simson Garfinkel, an MIT alum who wrote a recent article on Walker's life and legacy in MIT Technology Review, worries that renaming Walker Memorial would only serve to erase the contributions of a singular figure in MIT history.

"Without Walker there would be no MIT. He was pivotal to making it the institution it is today," Garfinkel said. "He placed it on vastly better financial footing, dramatically expanded enrollment and brought a discipline to the school that was really needed."

As president from 1881 until his death in 1897, the former Union Army general and Boston native helped improve student life and oversaw the introduction of the first female and Black students on campus.

Garfinkel also argued that "The Indian Question" offered significant and lasting contributions to the wider understanding of indigenous peoples, even if its analysis and policy recommendations were ultimately racist and "problematic."

The book, published in 1874, included detailed descriptions of American tribes, their populations and the offenses incurred against them, mainly by white people illegally settling on their lands and instigating violence.

But Walker also described Native Americans as “an obstacle to the national progress” and concluded the country was justified in pushing Native Americans off their ancestral lands. He recommended confining them to reservations and forcing them to adopt European farming and production methods.

Rather than remove Walker’s name from the building, Garfinkel suggests providing more historical context by installing an informational marker on site.

“Walker was an amazing person who we need to understand in all of his complexity,” he said. “It’s easy to rename buildings, but much harder to learn about the past.”

Harvey said MIT has taken promising steps, such as appointing Lowry, recognizing Indigenous Peoples Day and providing a new campus space for Native American student groups.

But it still needs to hire more Native faculty and provide other support for Native students, he said. As for Walker Memorial, Harvey suggests not only renaming it, but turning it into a center for indigenous sciences.

“MIT is missing out on this huge swath of indigenous knowledge,” he said. “Indigenous people are practicing their own valuable sense of science, engineering and knowledge of the natural world, and it’s being completely shut out.”

Hearing set abruptly in 2018 Florida school massacre case

By TERRY SPENCER and CURT ANDERSON Associated Press

FORT LAUDERDALE, Fla. (AP) — A last-minute court hearing is set Friday in Florida for Nikolas Cruz, the man police said has confessed to the 2018 massacre of 17 people at a suburban high school.

The hearing in Broward County Circuit Court was scheduled abruptly Thursday and does not describe the purpose. But WSVN-TV reported without citing sources by name that Cruz would plead guilty to all 17 murder counts against him. Cruz’s attorneys did not respond to calls, texts and emails from The Associated Press.

Cruz also would plead guilty to 17 counts of attempted murder at Marjory Stoneman Douglas High in Parkland, according to the report. The hearing is before Circuit Judge Elizabeth Scherer, court records show. No trial date had been set.

The South Florida Sun Sentinel, also without citing sources by name, reported that lawyers would be present for a status hearing before the judge on Friday, but Cruz would not be present and the pleas would be entered at a later date.

Cruz would still face a jury to determine whether he gets the death penalty or life in prison, the report said. Prosecutors have always insisted that Cruz deserves death for the slayings.

The Broward County state attorney’s office issued a statement Thursday night saying Cruz’s lawyers would have to comment on any possible guilty plea.

“We have to refer all of your questions to the defense,” the state attorney’s statement said. “There have been no plea negotiations with the prosecution. If he pleads guilty, there would still be a penalty phase.”

Preparations have been ongoing for what would be the biggest murder trial in Broward County history, and one of the most infamous crimes ever in Florida.

Cruz, 23, was arrested about an hour after the attack with an AR-15 semiautomatic rifle on Valentine’s Day 2018.

His lawyers have repeatedly offered to plead guilty in return for a guaranteed sentence of life in prison, but prosecutors have refused to drop their pursuit of the death penalty. A guilty plea would both avoid a traumatic, lengthy trial and still allow a jury to decide Cruz’s fate.

Much of the penalty phase would likely focus on Cruz’s mental condition at the time of the slayings, with prosecutors emphasizing their horrific nature and Cruz’s intensive planning beforehand.

Tony Montalto, president of the Stand With Parkland group that represents the families of the victims, said Thursday night that neither he nor any parent he has spoken to has been informed that Cruz would plead guilty, but he is not surprised. Montalto’s 14-year-old daughter died in the shooting.

“There is very little doubt he murdered my beautiful daughter, Gina, or the 16 other victims. There is very little doubt he shot the other 17 people and terrorized all the other students at the school. We just

hope the system gives him justice," Montalto said.

When asked if he believes Cruz deserves the death penalty, Montalto said, "As a society, we need to disincentivize to the maximum extent possible anyone from attacking our schools, whatever form that takes."

Anderson reported from St. Petersburg, Florida.

Southern Baptist leader resigns amid abuse review division

By HOLLY MEYER Associated Press

NASHVILLE, Tenn. (AP) — A top Southern Baptist Convention administrator is resigning after weeks of internal division over how best to handle an investigation into the denomination's response to sexual abuse reports.

Ronnie Floyd, president and CEO of the SBC's Executive Committee, announced his departure Thursday in a statement critical of recent decisions related to the third-party review that is getting underway. He said he will leave the post at the end of the month.

"Due to my personal integrity and the leadership responsibility entrusted to me, I will not and cannot any longer fulfill the duties placed upon me as the leader of the executive, fiscal, and fiduciary entity of the SBC," Floyd said.

An investigative firm funded by the Executive Committee is conducting the review of allegations that the committee mishandled abuse reports and mistreated survivors. Following multiple meetings and mounting pressure from across the convention, a divided Executive Committee voted Oct. 5 to waive its attorney-client privilege for the probe, agreeing to turn over legally protected records to investigators.

Supporters of the waiver said it fulfilled a key demand of thousands of Southern Baptist delegates who set the third-party review into motion. Opponents said it could jeopardize the convention's insurance policies and was financially risky.

In his statement, Floyd said the Executive Committee has been committed to the review, but it could have been done "without creating these potential risks relating to the Convention's liability."

For years, the largest Protestant denomination in the U.S. has been grappling with a sex abuse scandal. It came under heightened scrutiny following a 2019 report by the Houston Chronicle and the San Antonio Express-News, documenting hundreds of cases of abuse in Southern Baptist churches, including several in which alleged perpetrators remained in ministry.

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Texas abortion law shutting down court avenue for teens

By ASTRID GALVAN and LINDSAY WHITEHURST Associated Press

PHOENIX (AP) — Veronika Granado anxiously stood before the judge knowing that if she said something wrong, things could end badly for her.

But the 17-year-old hadn't committed a crime. She had not filed a lawsuit. Granado was in a Texas court that day to ask permission to get an abortion.

She was among thousands of teens burdened with additional hurdles to legal abortion care, especially if they are of color or live in states where abortion access is already severely limited. Thirty-eight states require some form of parental consent or notice for anyone under 18 to get an abortion. Of those, nearly all including Texas, offer an alternative: pleading with a judge for permission to bypass that consent.

But the latest restrictions in Texas that essentially ban abortion past the six-week pregnancy mark have made such requests almost impossible; the process to go before a judge includes a required sonogram and setting a hearing can take weeks. By then, women are often past the six-week mark. And as other states capitalize on the success of the Texas law and set their own restrictions, those few avenues are

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getting shut off.

Supporters of parental-consent laws say parents should have a say in the medical procedure. But teens seeking abortions often face abuse or threats of homelessness if they tell their parents or guardians they are pregnant, said Rosann Mariappuram, executive director of Jane's Due Process, the nation's first organization dedicated to helping youths navigate the process of going through a judge, and one of only a few nationwide. They work with about 350 women a year in Texas. Roughly 10% are in foster care and 80% percent are youths of color.

Most are past six weeks when they first come in. Young girls who have only had their period for a few years are not likely to track it. Athletes tend to have irregular periods. And sometimes when girls go on birth control, they experience spotting, which they may confuse for a period. All of these factors often lead to minors — and adults, too — to miss early signs of pregnancy.

Kenzie Reynolds was 17 and a high-school junior when she found out she was pregnant. Her relationship was toxic and deeply controlling, and she couldn't tell her family about being pregnant or wanting to get an abortion because they are devout Christians and opposed to the procedure, she said. She'd tried before to tell her mother she wanted to be on birth control, but her mom consistently avoided the conversation.

She found Jane's Due Process, but it would be four weeks before she could even see a judge to make her case.

"The worst part of the entire thing was how terrible I felt and how isolated I felt," she said.

A month later, she stood before the judge and told him about her toxic relationship, her desperation and terror.

But the judge denied the request.

"He walked by me like I wasn't even there," she said. "I felt like he didn't see me as a person."

While she could have appealed, she was 10 weeks along at that point, too late to take an abortion pill, and the appeal was still uncertain. Instead, she connected with the group Lilith Fund for a flight to New Mexico where she got the procedure, and flew back the same day.

"At the end of all it, I realized I was considered too young to have an abortion, but old enough to raise a child," said Reynolds, who shared her story through WeTestify, a group dedicated to representing people who have had abortions. Now 21, Reynolds was eventually able to break free of her relationship, something she might not have been able to do if they shared a child, and go to college.

Already, calls to the group have plummeted, while requests for the birth control services they provide have tripled, said Mariappuram.

Each state has its own rules governing how teenagers can bypass consent through a judge. Fifteen require judges to use standard of "clear and convincing evidence" to determine whether a teen is mature and that the abortion is in their best interest, according to the Guttmacher Institute, which advocates for reproductive rights. Some states require judges to make a decision within 48 hours, while others get several days.

Judges have full discretion to make a decision and they can ask pretty much anything they want, she said. Sometimes they ask invasive questions like the number of sexual partners, Mariappuram said.

"We argue that every time you send someone to court for this, it's traumatic because you're basically making them think they broke the law," she said.

A few states are reconsidering their policies. Massachusetts lowered its age for required parental consent last year to 16. In Illinois, lawmakers who support abortion rights are pushing to repeal a parental notification law in order to ensure people have access to safe abortion services.

On the other hand, Cathi Herrod, president of Center for Arizona Policy, which advocates for abortion restrictions, said abortion is a life-changing medical procedure that parents should have a say in. While she opposes the option to bypass consent, she says courts have repeatedly upheld it.

"Parents should not be denied the ability to oversee that decision by their daughter," Herrod said. "A young girl deserves the guidance of their parents in making this decision."

Making the decision to end the unplanned pregnancy wasn't the difficult part for Granado, whose own mother had birthed her at 17. She knew how trying being a teen mom would be. She yearned to be the

first in her family to graduate from college.

But she feared her mom would kick her out if she found out about her pregnancy and decision to get an abortion. She stumbled upon Jane's Due Process while researching her options, met with an attorney, got the required sonogram and a court date.

Granado was the first of four people to arrive at a small room in a courthouse in the Rio Grande Valley of Texas. She stood directly in front of the judge, an older Hispanic man, who wanted to know why her parents couldn't be involved, why she couldn't raise this child and what her future plans were.

"Basically my life was in the hands of this judge," Granado said.

He told her his religion frowned upon abortion, but he had to be impartial as a judge.

He granted the request. A week and a half later, she ended the pregnancy.

Lindsay Whitehurst reported from Salt Lake City. Galván covers issues impacting Latinos in the U.S. for the AP's Race and Ethnicity team. Follow her on Twitter: <https://www.twitter.com/astridgalvan>

Jill Biden out to flex political muscle in governors' races

By WILL WEISSERT Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — First Lady Jill Biden is set to campaign Friday for Democrats in governors' races in Virginia and New Jersey, trying to boost the party's political fortunes in her most overt way since arriving at the White House nine months ago.

Her involvement is the latest sign that Democrats are pulling out the stops in the upcoming elections, particularly in Virginia, where Democrat Terry McAuliffe appears to be in a tighter race than expected. Jill Biden will be followed by other high-profile party voices in the coming days, including former President Barack Obama and former candidate for Georgia governor Stacey Abrams.

The return to the campaign trail will be Jill Biden's first since stumping for her husband in last year's presidential campaign. However, she has regularly traveled the country to promote such issues as improving public education and community college, reopening schools amid the pandemic and urging people to get vaccinated against the coronavirus.

That includes visiting reliably red states, like on Tuesday, when Biden met with Hispanic community leaders in Kansas, which hasn't backed a Democrat for president since Lyndon B. Johnson in 1964.

She's due at a Friday afternoon early voting rally at Middlesex College in Edison, New Jersey, where Democratic incumbent Gov. Phil Murphy is thought to be comfortably ahead. Biden will later attend an event in suburban Richmond, Virginia's capital, alongside McAuliffe, a former governor who is running to regain the post.

In New Jersey, Murphy has sought to tie his Republican opponent, ex-state Assembly member Jack Ciattarelli, to former President Donald Trump's hesitancy about the COVID vaccine and mask-wearing, as well as lies about last year's presidential election being stolen by widespread fraud.

The first lady's visit will be even more watched nationally in Virginia, though, where McAuliffe, a longtime Democratic Party powerbroker and friend of Bill and Hillary Clinton, is squaring off with former businessman and political newcomer, Republican Glenn Youngkin.

Tammy R. Vigil, a professor of media science at Boston University, said first ladies have routinely traveled to boost their party's leading candidates since Laura Bush — who like many presidential spouses often had higher approval ratings than her husband — began frequently campaigning for key Republicans during midterms and other races.

"You get a lot more emotional bang for the buck," said Vigil, author of a 2019 book on Melania Trump and Michelle Obama which details how a "new era" of first ladies have expanded their political influence. "You get the positivity of her favorability compared to her husband. You get her being able to talk about issues in different kinds of ways than an elected official might be able to. And you get a lot of that relatability factor."

Biden holds a doctorate in English and has continued to teach writing and English at Northern Virginia

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Community College where she's held a position since 2009 — the first first lady to leave the White House to log hours at a full-time job.

McAuliffe says that the president, who carried Virginia by a comfortable 10 percentage points last year, will also be campaigning for him in coming days. In the meantime, President Biden's approval ratings have fallen to some of the lowest levels of his White House tenure.

"The president of course wants former Gov. McAuliffe to be the future governor of Virginia," said White House press secretary Jen Psaki.

But she also appeared to be attempting to lower expectations about whether what happens in Virginia next month could be an indicator of national Democratic struggles heading into next year's midterm elections — when the party's narrow control of both chambers of Congress is at stake.

"I will leave it to other outside analysts to convey that off-year elections are often not a bellwether," Psaki said. "We're going to do everything we can to help former Gov. McAuliffe."

McAuliffe is counting on women, especially those in the suburbs where Republican candidates saw their support wane during the Trump administration. Vigil said that is precisely "the constituency you bring the first lady in for."

"Their whole persona is often built on the idea of connecting with constituents. Especially female constituents," she said, calling the dynamic "annoying to me that that's the case because these first ladies are political actors and citizens in and of themselves, and yet they get pushed into this narrow corner of, 'Oh, the woman vote.'"

"It does make sense," Vigil added "it's just kind of uncomfortable in the modern era to have that be so limited."

The first lady's travels come as the president is set to spend his Friday in Connecticut promoting a massive spending plan that Democrats are trying to muscle through Congress despite deep divisions within their own ranks over the final price tag. As both candidate and president, he has introduced himself at some events as "Jill's husband," which draws frequent laughs and applause.

Jan. 6 panel moves against Bannon, sets contempt vote

By MARY CLARE JALONICK, ERIC TUCKER and LISA MASCARO Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — A congressional committee investigating the Jan. 6 Capitol insurrection has moved aggressively against close Trump adviser Steve Bannon, swiftly scheduling a vote to recommend criminal contempt charges against the former White House aide after he defied a subpoena.

The chairman of the special committee, Rep. Bennie Thompson, D-Miss., said the panel will vote Tuesday to recommend charges against Bannon, an adviser to Donald Trump for years who was in touch with the president ahead of the most serious assault on Congress in two centuries.

"The Select Committee will not tolerate defiance of our subpoenas," Thompson said in a statement Thursday. Bannon, he said, is "hiding behind the former president's insufficient, blanket and vague statements regarding privileges he has purported to invoke. We reject his position entirely."

If approved by the Democratic-majority committee, the recommendation of criminal charges would go to the full House. Approval there would send them to the Justice Department, which has final say on prosecution.

The showdown with Bannon is just one facet of a broad and escalating congressional inquiry, with 19 subpoenas issued so far and thousands of pages of documents flowing to the committee and its staff. Challenging Bannon's defiance is a crucial step for the panel, whose members are vowing to restore the force of congressional subpoenas after they were routinely flouted during Trump's time in office.

The committee had scheduled a Thursday deposition with Bannon, but his lawyer said that Trump had directed him not to comply, citing information that was potentially protected by executive privileges afforded to a president. Bannon, who was not a White House staffer on Jan. 6, also failed to provide documents to the panel by a deadline last week.

Still, the committee could end up stymied again after years of Trump administration officials refusing

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to cooperate with Congress. The longtime Trump adviser similarly defied a subpoena during a GOP-led investigation into Trump's Russia ties in 2018, but the House did not move to hold him into contempt.

Even though President Joe Biden has been supportive of the committee's work, it is uncertain whether the Justice Department would choose to prosecute the criminal contempt charges against Bannon or any other witnesses who might defy the panel. Even if it the department does prosecute, the process could take months, if not years. And such contempt cases are notoriously difficult to win.

Members of the committee are pressuring the department to take their side.

House Intelligence Committee Chairman Adam Schiff, who also sits on the Jan. 6 panel, said he expects the Justice Department to prosecute the cases.

"The last four years have given people like Steve Bannon the impression they're above the law," Schiff said during an interview for C-SPAN's Book TV that airs next weekend. "But they're going to find out otherwise."

Schiff said efforts to hold Bannon and others in contempt during the Russia investigation were blocked by Republicans and the Trump administration's Department of Justice.

"But now we have Merrick Garland, we have an independent Justice Department, we have an attorney general who believes in the rule of law -- and so this is why I have confidence that we will get the answers," Schiff said.

While Bannon has outright defied the Jan. 6 committee, other Trump aides who have been subpoenaed appear to be negotiating. A deposition by a second witness that had been scheduled for Thursday, former Defense Department official Kashyap Patel, was delayed, but Patel is still engaging with the panel, a committee aide said. The aide requested anonymity to discuss the confidential talks.

Two other men who worked for Trump — former White House chief of staff Mark Meadows and longtime Trump social media director Dan Scavino — were scheduled for depositions Friday, but they have both been pushed back as well. Meadows, like Patel, has been given a "short postponement" as he is also engaging with the panel, the aide said, and Scavino's deposition has been rescheduled because there were delays in serving his subpoena.

It is unclear to what extent Trump has tried to influence his aides, beyond his lawyers' attempts to assert executive privilege. In a statement Thursday, the former president said the members of the committee should "hold themselves in criminal contempt" and that "the people are not going to stand for it!"

Other witnesses are cooperating, including some who organized or staffed the Trump rally on the Ellipse behind the White House that preceded the riot. The committee subpoenaed 11 rally organizers and gave them a Wednesday deadline to turn over documents and records. They have also been asked to appear at scheduled depositions.

Among those complying was Lyndon Brentnall, whose firm was hired to provide Ellipse event security that day, and two longtime Trump campaign and White House staffers, Megan Powers and Hannah Salem. It is uncertain whether any of the others subpoenaed have complied.

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." Dozens of police officers were injured as the Trump supporters overwhelmed them and broke through windows and doors to interrupt the certification of Biden's victory.

The rioters repeated Trump's claims of widespread fraud as they marched through the Capitol, even though the results of the election were confirmed by state officials and upheld by courts. Trump's attorney general, William Barr, had said the Justice Department found no evidence of widespread fraud that could have overturned the results.

The panel has also issued a subpoena to a former Justice Department lawyer who positioned himself as Trump's ally and aided the Republican president's efforts to challenge the results of the 2020 election.

The demands for documents and testimony from that lawyer, Jeffrey Clark, announced Wednesday, reflect the committee's efforts to probe not only the 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 election claims.

Clark, an assistant attorney general in the Trump administration, has emerged as a pivotal character. A

Senate committee report issued last week showed that he championed Trump's efforts to undo the election results and clashed as a result with department superiors who resisted the pressure, culminating in a dramatic White House meeting at which Trump ruminated about elevating Clark to attorney general.

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

'Soul-consuming': Victim's family reflects on Durst case

By BRIAN MELLEY Associated Press

LOS ANGELES (AP) — New York real estate heir Robert Durst was sentenced Thursday to life in prison without a chance of parole for the murder of his best friend more than two decades ago.

Durst, 78, was convicted in Los Angeles Superior Court last month of first-degree murder for shooting Susan Berman point-blank in the back of the head at her home in December 2000.

The killing had been a mystery that haunted family and friends for 15 years before Durst was arrested in 2015 following his unwise decision to participate in a documentary that unearthed new evidence and caught him in a stunning confession.

Berman's death left a permanent hole in the lives of family members who remembered her Thursday for her adventurousness, creativity and deep love and loyalty.

"It has been a daily, soul-consuming and crushing experience," said Sareb Kaufman, who considered Berman his mother after his father dated her. "I've lost everything many times over because of him."

Durst, who has numerous medical issues and sat in a wheelchair wearing brown jail scrubs, said nothing. His eyes were wide open, and he had a catatonic stare when he entered the courtroom and barely looked over at Kaufman and three of Berman's cousins when they spoke.

Durst silenced Berman to prevent her from incriminating him in the reopened investigation of his wife's 1982 disappearance in New York, prosecutors said.

Berman provided a phony alibi for Durst when Kathie Durst vanished, prosecutors said.

Durst testified he didn't kill either woman, but he said on cross-examination that he would lie if he had.

Prosecutors also presented evidence that he intentionally killed a neighbor in Galveston, Texas, in 2001, though he had been acquitted of murder in that case after testifying that he shot the man in self-defense and then panicked and chopped up the corpse and tossed it out to sea.

Defense lawyer Dick DeGuerin said Durst will appeal, and he refrained from making other remarks.

Judge Mark Windham denied a motion for a new trial, rejecting arguments there was insufficient evidence or that he ruled incorrectly on 15 issues.

"You said the court erred so many times it made me feel self-conscious," Windham joked.

Windham there was overwhelming evidence and prosecutors proved guilt beyond a reasonable doubt at least five ways, including devastating revelations during Durst's cross-examination and an admission he made in the climax of the six-part documentary, "The Jinx: The Life and Crimes of Robert Durst."

After being caught in a lie about a note he penned directing police to Berman's lifeless body, Durst went into a bathroom and muttered to himself on a live microphone, "You're caught." He later said, "Killed them all, of course."

Filmmakers confronted him with a note police received that had Berman's address and only the word "cadaver." It was addressed in block letters and misspelled Beverly Hills as "Beverley."

Durst said only the killer could have written it, and it wasn't him. He was then shown a letter he once wrote Berman in the same handwriting and Beverly misspelled the same way.

Durst testified that he regretted participating in the documentary.

Kaufman's life was derailed in his mid-20s when Berman was killed and he found himself responsible for taking care of her estate. He said he spent months packing up her house, returning to the murder scene where her matted hair was still on the floor amid the bloody paw prints of her dogs.

He spoke bitterly of the experience and having to store her belongings in his tiny apartment, but didn't mention it was there that crucial piece of evidence — the letter confirming a match with the "cadaver

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note" was found.

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.

Seven of the jurors returned to witness the sentencing.

Berman, the daughter of a Las Vegas mobster and a writer, was Durst's longtime confidante from college days. She told friends and Durst she was preparing to speak with police about the reinvestigation of his wife's disappearance shortly before she was killed.

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 — but who was not authorized to speak publicly about an ongoing investigation and did so on condition of anonymity — told The Associated Press.

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, who showed up at the hearing, said the McCormack family was disappointed, and he was outraged.

"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."

Deputy District Attorney John Lewin, Kaufman and others pleaded with Durst now to tell the McCormack family where she was buried.

"I hope in your final days and hours you will ... give the McCormacks what little they are asking for: to find Kathie, to lay her to rest appropriately, finally and at long last," Kaufman said. "This is the most important question that still haunts us."

Durst is the grandson of Joseph Durst, who founded the Durst Organization, one of Manhattan's largest commercial real estate firms, and is said to have a \$100 million fortune.

Davy Berman, whose family took in his his cousin after her father died, said he had gone to see her grave before the sentencing.

"I visited her and told her she could rest easy," he said as his voice cracked. "That justice has been done."

Associated Press writers Christopher Weber and Stefanie Dazio in Los Angeles and Michael R. Sisak in New York contributed to this report.

Aging equipment, spills test ties between oil, California

By MICHAEL R. BLOOD and MATTHEW BROWN Associated Press

LOS ANGELES (AP) — Hoping to recover a lost anchor chain, a work boat dragged a grappling hook along the seabed near an oil platform off the Southern California coast. But it hooked something else -- a pipeline carrying crude oil from the towering rig to shore.

Once snagged, the 197-foot (60-meter) boat dragged the pipeline until it snapped on one of the drilling platform's legs. The gushing oil created a slick that ran for miles along the Ventura County coast northwest of Los Angeles.

The May 1991 accident provides a snapshot of the environmental dangers and trade-offs that come with the network of oil platforms and pipelines off Southern California's world-famous coastline. The uneasy relationship is being tested again after a leaking undersea pipeline off Huntington Beach fouled beaches and killed seabirds and fish this month.

In the latest case, investigators believe it's likely a cargo ship's massive anchor struck and dragged the 16-inch (41-centimeter) pipeline up to a year ago. It's suspected the damage led to the pipeline cracking and spilling about 25,000 gallons (94,635 liters) of crude.

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The incident has renewed calls to end drilling in coastal waters and comes amid a societal reckoning over climate change and continued reliance on fossil fuels. It's also raising questions about the soundness of old equipment, limits on government safety oversight, how willing companies are to make needed investments in repairs and whether it makes sense to have drilling rigs and pipelines near one of the world's busiest port complexes.

The latest spill involved a pipeline that serves a cluster of three oil platforms several miles off the coast, south of Los Angeles. Original owner Shell Oil began operating the "Beta Unit" in 1980 and anticipated the operation would last about 35 years, "at which time the platform and other offshore facilities will be removed and the wells sealed."

They are now operating into a fourth decade.

The platforms and pipeline are owned by Houston-based Amplify Energy Corp., which emerged after prior owner Memorial Production Partners went bankrupt in 2017. Subsidiary Beta Offshore operates the platforms and the pipeline.

In 2011, Beta sought and received approval to replace two pipelines running between its platforms -- one for oil that previously was taken out of service because of corrosion damage, and one for water deemed "at the end of its usable life" in documents submitted to federal regulators.

Miyoko Sakashita of the Center for Biological Diversity, which opposes offshore drilling, said the removal of the old pipelines should have been a signal that the one that failed also was at risk.

"I'm very concerned that they recognized the corrosion and age of the pipes between the platform, yet this one went ignored," she said. "California's offshore oil infrastructure is old and decrepit and needs to be decommissioned instantly."

There are 27 oil and gas platforms off the California coast. Federal officials have jurisdiction over 23, which range from almost 30 years old to more than 50 and are in water depths from 95 feet (29 meters) to almost 1,200 feet (366 meters) according to a report released last year by the Aquarium of the Pacific co-sponsored by the California State Lands Commission, which oversees pipelines in state waters.

About half the platforms are still producing oil, which goes from wells to the platforms to refineries via a network of pipes like the one in the recent spill.

Environmentalists have long complained about poor federal oversight of pipeline companies. In April, a scathing report from the congressional watchdog Government Accountability Office found fundamental problems with how officials monitor those lines -- an issue first recognized in 2007.

The report focused on about 8,600 miles (13,840 kilometers) of lines in the Gulf of Mexico. It said the Interior Department's Bureau of Safety and Environmental Enforcement allows companies to use unreliable methods to detect leaks and has not systematically tracked whether pipelines move or become exposed because of strong currents or changes on the seafloor.

A top aide to Interior Secretary Deb Haaland acknowledged the problems, and officials said new rules could be finalized next year. Those will include significant changes to requirements for detecting leaks, inspections, repairs to pipelines and other areas, Laura Daniel-Davis, the agency's principal deputy assistant secretary for land and mineral management, said in a letter to the GAO released last month.

The fewer pipelines present in the Pacific versus the Gulf means federal regulators can keep closer watch off the California coastline, said John Smith, who spent more than three decades with the agency that manages oil and gas production, the Bureau of Ocean Energy Management, and its predecessor, the Minerals Management Service.

But he added that the Amplify spill will test whether that oversight has been sufficient for something forecast decades ago.

In 1991, the federal Minerals Management Service predicted a 94% chance of a major oil spill off Southern California over 30 years. That estimate was released not long after a tanker spill blackened coastline in Huntington Beach and Newport Beach, and the pipeline break that created the slick off Ventura County.

The oil industry -- the source of 150,000 jobs in California and hundreds of millions of state tax dollars over the years -- has long been an awkward partner with the environmentally minded state, a national leader

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in renewable energy that will ban the sale of new gasoline-powered passenger cars and trucks in 2035. A moratorium was placed on new oil and gas leases in state waters after a devastating 1969 spill in Santa Barbara that helped spur the modern environmental movement. Now, U.S. Rep. Michelle Steel, an Orange County Republican, wants to temporarily ban cargo ships from anchoring or idling off the county's coastline, calling the backlog of ships waiting to unload "an environmental and public health crisis." Oil production in federal waters in the Pacific is down 90% since 1995, with no new drilling leases sold since the early 1980s. As crude reservoirs beneath California's offshore platforms get depleted, that means thinner industry profits.

"It's very difficult for them to make major investments in equipment and pipelines," Smith said.

Officials have identified a narrow crack in the Amplify pipeline as the source of the recent spill. What caused the break remains a mystery that might never be unraveled.

Coast Guard investigators suspect the line was hit by a multi-ton anchor from one of thousands of cargo ships that annually use the twin ports of Long Beach and Los Angeles. The pipe was bent and dragged as far as 105 feet (32 meters), its concrete sheath cracked, then possibly hit again by other anchors.

Safety inspections in 2015, 2017 and 2019 found anomalies in Amplify's pipeline, including instances of metal loss and three dents that were previously repaired. But several experts who reviewed the reports said the metal loss -- which can be a sign of a pipe wall thinning as it corrodes with age -- was relatively minor. The dents were not in the same area as the spill.

"It's one of the cleanest lines I've ever seen," said engineer Chris Fox with State Lands Commission, which oversees pipelines through state waters.

The inspection reports were obtained by The Associated Press through a public records request.

A grappling hook is unlikely the culprit in the Amplify case because the pipeline is much larger and heavier than the pipeline that failed after being hooked in 1991, said Smith, now a consultant for the oil and gas industry.

"That's much harder to move. You need a much bigger impact to drag it 100 feet," he said.

Brown reported from Billings, Montana. Associated Press writer Brian Melley contributed from Los Angeles.

Former Boeing pilot involved in Max testing indicted

By DAVID KOENIG AP Airlines Writer

DALLAS (AP) — A former Boeing pilot was indicted Thursday by a federal grand jury on charges of deceiving safety regulators about the 737 Max jetliner, which was later involved in two deadly crashes.

The indictment charges Mark A. Forkner with giving the Federal Aviation Administration false and incomplete information about an automated flight-control system that played a role in the crashes, which killed 346 people.

Prosecutors said that because of Forkner's alleged deception, the system was not mentioned in pilot manuals or training materials.

An attorney for Forkner did not immediately respond for comment. Boeing and the FAA declined to comment.

Forkner, 49, was charged with two counts of fraud involving aircraft parts in interstate commerce and four counts of wire fraud. Federal prosecutors said he is expected to make his first appearance in court on Friday in Fort Worth, Texas. If convicted on all counts, he could face a sentence of up to 100 years in prison.

The indictment charges that he hid information about a flight-control system that activated erroneously and pushed down the noses of Max jets that crashed in 2018 in Indonesia, and 2019 in Ethiopia. The pilots tried unsuccessfully to regain control, but both planes went into nosedives minutes after taking off.

Forkner was Boeing's chief technical pilot on the Max program. Prosecutors said that Forkner learned about an important change to the Maneuvering Characteristics Augmentation System flight-control system in 2016, but withheld the information from the FAA. That led the agency to delete reference to MCAS

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from a technical report and, in turn, it didn't appear in pilot manuals. Most pilots didn't know about MCAS until after the first crash.

Prosecutors suggested that Forkner downplayed the power of the system to avoid a requirement that pilots undergo extensive and expensive retraining, which would increase training costs for airlines. Congressional investigators suggested additional training would have added \$1 million to the price of each plane.

"In an attempt to save Boeing money, Forkner allegedly withheld critical information from regulators," said Chad Meacham, acting U.S. attorney for the northern district of Texas. "His callous choice to mislead the FAA hampered the agency's ability to protect the flying public and left pilots in the lurch, lacking information about certain 737 MAX flight controls."

Forkner told another Boeing employee in 2016 that MCAS was "egregious" and "running rampant" when he tested it in a flight simulator, but he didn't tell that to the FAA.

"So I basically lied to the regulators (unknowingly)," Forkner wrote in a message that became public in 2019.

Forkner, who lives in a Fort Worth suburb, joined Southwest Airlines after leaving Boeing, but left the airline about a year ago.

Chicago-based Boeing agreed to a \$2.5 billion settlement to end a Justice Department investigation into the company's actions. The government agreed to drop a criminal charge of conspiracy against Boeing after three years if the company carries out terms of the January 2020 settlement. The settlement included a \$243.6 million fine, nearly \$1.8 billion for airlines that bought the plane and \$500 million for a fund to compensate families of the passengers who were killed.

Dozens of families of passengers are suing Boeing in federal court in Chicago.

Crash investigations highlighted the role of MCAS but also pointed to mistakes by the airlines and pilots. Max jets were grounded worldwide for more than a year and a half. The FAA approved the plane for flying again late last year after Boeing made changes to MCAS.

David Koenig can be reached at www.twitter.com/airlinewriter

Made in India virus kits boost testing, and local industry

By RISHABH R. JAIN Associated Press

NEW DELHI (AP) — As the first wave of the pandemic began to take hold in India, Sanchi Jawa and her 59-year-old father, Harish Jawa, realized that they had the symptoms of a COVID-19 infection. They decided to isolate and get tested — but this was no easy task during the spring of 2020.

The father and daughter had to make multiple calls to several private labs in the capital of New Delhi before they could arrange for the gold standard in COVID-19 testing — a real-time reverse transcriptase-polymerase chain reaction test, or RT-PCR.

It cost nearly \$70 per test. A price Sanchi, 29, a digital marketer, and her father, a successful business owner, could afford but was out of reach for the majority of Indians, who have a per capita income of less than \$160 per month, according to the World Bank.

"It (RT-PCR tests) should be accessible to the common man, and everybody should be able to get it done," Sanchi said.

Over a year later, most Indians can access PCR tests at a fraction of the cost — due to a large-scale public-private partnership, known as InDx, that set up the local know-how and infrastructure to manufacture these tests within India.

Soon after the pandemic broke out, India's government, with funding from The Rockefeller Foundation, tasked the country's most advanced bioscience innovation hub — the publicly funded Centre for Cellular and Molecular Platforms, or C-CAMP — with quickly finding a way to locally produce virus test kits.

But that was not a simple task as most components of the RT-PCR test — including the mixers required to analyze samples — were not manufactured in India and had to be imported from China and South Korea, driving the price up.

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With global trade almost at a standstill, and huge demand for test kits from the U.S. and U.K., delivery was also extensively delayed.

Reagents, primers, and other chemical components — like amidites and deoxyribonucleotide triphosphates, which are essential for the chemical analysis used to detect the virus' presence — had never been widely manufactured in the country and had to be imported. Even accessory parts, like plastic vials used in the testing process, were mostly imported.

Working with Indian manufacturers of medical technologies, along with support from Tata Consultancy Services, the C-CAMP-led program pushed through a rapid change.

India expanded from 14 laboratories capable of conducting COVID-19 tests in February 2020 to more than 1,500 over the next six months. The country now has nearly 3,000 such labs.

The price of RT-PCR tests has fallen to as little as \$7 in some parts of the country, a near tenfold decrease from when they were first made available.

The availability of locally made testing components has allowed the government to procure test kits for as cheap as 50 cents per unit when buying in bulk from manufacturers. Indian authorities can now dole out free RT-PCR tests for those who can't afford the fees, and set low price ceilings for paid RT-PCR tests at private labs.

Lalith Kishore, chief operating officer of COVID-19 Scale Up Program at C-CAMP, says the public-private partnership has helped more than 160 Indian companies to innovate, create mechanisms and collectively manufacture more than a million RT-PCR test kits per day.

"A lot of these companies have enabled the complete reversal in terms of our dependence on imports with regards to diagnostics," Kishore said.

India's ramping up of COVID-19 testing capacity has enabled the country to conduct more than 580 million tests to date.

More than a million tests are still being administered in the country daily, and 80% of the test kits used are now completely manufactured in India.

Manisha Bhinge, managing director of Programs and Health Initiative at The Rockefeller Foundation, which pumped \$3.5 million into the initiative, said she believes the increase in availability of COVID-19 tests allowed the country to implement a robust testing program that helped public health experts devise more effective policies to handle the virus outbreak.

This was especially important during the deadly second wave of infections in the country that peaked in May 2021 with more than 400,000 cases being detected each day.

"The scope of the crisis would've been significantly more, if we did not have the testing capacity in place to guide public health officials to understand how the outbreak was rolling out," Bhinge said.

She added that while the scale up in production of test kits and other components of diagnostics have aided India in battling the pandemic and enabled self-sufficiency in molecular diagnostics, it has also created a new market for countries looking to procure diagnostic technologies and test kits.

Middle and low income countries now have "more stability and security and access to affordable medical technologies," she said.

Cheap, and sometimes free RT-PCR tests have allowed millions of Indians like Mohit Dabla, 23, a driver who earns \$300 a month, a chance to access world class virus testing.

When he first got symptoms in September 2021, his employer asked him to get a RT-PCR test. He was in luck as a government dispensary around the corner from his home in New Delhi offered the test free of charge.

"There is no way I could have paid \$70 for a test," Dabla said.

Hearing set abruptly in 2018 Florida school massacre case

By TERRY SPENCER and CURT ANDERSON Associated Press

FORT LAUDERDALE, Fla. (AP) — A last-minute court hearing is set Friday in Florida for Nikolas Cruz, the man police said has confessed to the 2018 massacre of 17 people at a suburban high school.

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The hearing in Broward County Circuit Court was scheduled abruptly Thursday and does not describe the purpose. But WSVN-TV reported without citing sources by name that Cruz would plead guilty to all 17 murder counts against him. Cruz's attorneys did not respond to calls, texts and emails from The Associated Press.

Cruz also would plead guilty to 17 counts of attempted murder at Marjory Stoneman Douglas High in Parkland, according to the report. The hearing is before Circuit Judge Elizabeth Scherer, court records show. No trial date had been set.

Cruz would still face a jury to determine whether he gets the death penalty or life in prison, the report said. Prosecutors have always insisted that Cruz deserves death for the slayings.

The Sun Sentinel, also without citing sources by name, reported lawyers would be present for a status hearing before the judge on Friday, but Cruz would not be present and pleas would be entered at a later date.

The Broward County state attorney's office issued a statement Thursday night saying Cruz's lawyers would have to comment on any possible guilty plea.

"We have to refer all of your questions to the defense," the state attorney's statement said. "There have been no plea negotiations with the prosecution. If he pleads guilty, there would still be a penalty phase."

Preparations have been ongoing for what would be the biggest murder trial in Broward County history, and one of the most infamous crimes ever in Florida.

Cruz, 23, was arrested about an hour after the attack with an AR-15 semiautomatic rifle on Valentine's Day 2018.

His lawyers have repeatedly offered to plead guilty in return for a guaranteed sentence of life in prison, but prosecutors have refused to drop their pursuit of the death penalty. A guilty plea would both avoid a traumatic, lengthy trial and still allow a jury to decide Cruz's fate.

Much of the penalty phase would likely focus on Cruz's mental condition at the time of the slayings, with prosecutors emphasizing their horrific nature and Cruz's intensive planning beforehand.

Tony Montalto, president of the Stand With Parkland group that represents the families of the victims, said Thursday night that neither he nor any parent he has spoken to has been informed that Cruz would plead guilty, but he is not surprised. Montalto's 14-year-old daughter died in the shooting.

"There is very little doubt he murdered my beautiful daughter, Gina, or the 16 other victims. There is very little doubt he shot the other 17 people and terrorized all the other students at the school. We just hope the system gives him justice," Montalto said.

When asked if he believes Cruz deserves the death penalty, Montalto said, "As a society, we need to disincentivize to the maximum extent possible anyone from attacking our schools, whatever form that takes."

Anderson reported from St. Petersburg, Florida

Bill Clinton in hospital for non-COVID-related infection

By LOU KESTEN Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — Former President Bill Clinton was admitted to a Southern California hospital Tuesday with an infection but he is "on the mend," his spokesman said Thursday.

Clinton, 75, was admitted to the University of California Irvine Medical Center on Tuesday evening for a non-COVID-related infection, Angel Ureña said in a statement.

"He is on the mend, in good spirits and is incredibly thankful to the doctors, nurses, and staff providing him with excellent care," Ureña said.

A second statement from Clinton's spokesman quoted physicians Dr. Alpesh Amin and Dr. Lisa Bardack, who said the former president has been "administered IV antibiotics and fluids."

"After two days of treatment, his white blood cell count is trending down and he is responding to antibiotics well," the doctors said. "The California-based medical team has been in constant communication with the President's New York-based medical team, including his cardiologist. We hope to have him go

home soon.”

In the years since Clinton left the White House in 2001, the former president has faced health scares. In 2004, he underwent quadruple bypass surgery after experiencing prolonged chest pains and shortness of breath. He returned to the hospital for surgery for a partially collapsed lung in 2005, and in 2010 had a pair of stents implanted in a coronary artery.

He responded by embracing a largely vegan diet that saw him lose weight and report improved health.

He repeatedly returned to the stump, campaigning for Democratic candidates, mostly notably his wife, Hillary, during her failed 2008 bid for the presidential nomination. And in 2016, as Hillary Clinton sought the White House as the Democratic nominee, Bill Clinton — by then a grandfather and nearing 70 — returned to the campaign trail.

A spokesman for the Clinton Foundation said the former president was in the Los Angeles area for private events related to his charitable organization. The UCI Medical Center is in Orange County, about 40 miles (64 km) southeast of Los Angeles.

Associated Press writer Robert Jablon in Los Angeles contributed to this report.

US to restore full pension of FBI official fired under Trump

By ERIC TUCKER Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — Former FBI Deputy Director Andrew McCabe has won back his full pension as part of a settlement of his lawsuit arising from his firing during the Trump administration more than three years ago, his lawyers announced Thursday.

McCabe, a frequent target of then-President Donald Trump’s ire, was fired in March 2018 after the Justice Department’s inspector general concluded he had authorized the release of information to a newspaper reporter and then misled internal investigators about his role in the leak. The termination by Jeff Sessions, the attorney general at the time, came hours before McCabe was due to retire, denying the FBI official his pension.

The settlement agreement vacates that decision, expunges from his personnel folder references to having been fired and entitles McCabe, who joined the FBI in 1996, to his full pension.

“Politics should never play a role in the fair administration of justice and civil service personnel decisions,” McCabe said in a statement. He added that he hopes “this result encourages the men and women of the FBI to continue to protect the American people by standing up for the truth and doing their jobs without fear of political retaliation.”

McCabe has denied intentionally deceiving anyone, was never criminally charged and has blasted his firing as politically motivated and part of the Trump administration’s “ongoing war on the FBI.” Trump, who at the time was relentlessly railing against the FBI for its investigation into ties between Russia and his 2016 presidential campaign, called the termination a “great day for Democracy” shortly after it was announced.

McCabe sued in 2019, saying his firing was part of an effort by Trump to purge the FBI of officials he perceived as disloyal. McCabe had become acting director of the FBI in May 2017 after Trump fired James Comey amid the bureau’s Russia investigation, a termination that was examined by special counsel Robert Mueller for potential obstruction of justice.

As part of the settlement, the federal government has agreed to rescind and vacate McCabe’s firing, deem him as having retired in good standing, restore his full retirement pension and record him as having been employed continuously between 1996 until his actual retirement day.

He is also entitled to other benefits afforded to retiring FBI senior executives, including special cufflinks and “official FBI credentials, badge, and time-in-service award keys mounted in the format typically provided to retiring FBI Deputy Directors” and other senior officials, according to the settlement.

“For 140 years, civil servants like Andrew McCabe have been the federal government’s backbone, pledging their loyalty to the Constitution rather than to any politician or political party,” Murad Hussain, a lawyer for McCabe, said in a statement.

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"This settlement and the district court's rulings make clear that attempts to corrupt the federal workforce through partisan intimidation and improper political influence will not go unanswered," he added.

A spokesperson for the Justice Department, which did not admit any wrongdoing as part of the settlement, declined to comment.

Though the settlement restores McCabe's pension, it does not undo the inspector general's finding that McCabe displayed a lack of candor under questioning from investigators.

Follow Eric Tucker on Twitter at <http://www.twitter.com/etuckerAP>

Jan. 6 panel moves against Bannon, sets contempt vote

By MARY CLARE JALONICK, ERIC TUCKER and LISA MASCARO Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — A congressional committee investigating the Jan. 6 Capitol insurrection moved aggressively against close Trump adviser Steve Bannon on Thursday, swiftly scheduling a vote to recommend criminal contempt charges against the former White House aide after he defied a subpoena.

The chairman of the special committee, Rep. Bennie Thompson, D-Miss., said the panel will vote Tuesday to recommend charges against Bannon, an adviser to Donald Trump for years who was in touch with the president ahead of the most serious assault on Congress in two centuries.

"The Select Committee will not tolerate defiance of our subpoenas," Thompson said in a statement. Bannon, he said, is "hiding behind the former president's insufficient, blanket and vague statements regarding privileges he has purported to invoke. We reject his position entirely."

If approved by the Democratic-majority committee, the recommendation of criminal charges would go to the full House. Approval there would send them to the Justice Department, which has final say on prosecution.

The showdown with Bannon is just one facet of a broad and escalating congressional inquiry, with 19 subpoenas issued so far and thousands of pages of documents flowing to the committee and its staff. Challenging Bannon's defiance is a crucial step for the panel, whose members are vowing to restore the force of congressional subpoenas after they were routinely flouted during Trump's time in office.

The committee had scheduled a Thursday deposition with Bannon, but his lawyer said Trump had directed him not to comply, citing information that was potentially protected by executive privileges afforded to a president. Bannon, who was not a White House staffer on Jan. 6, also failed to provide documents to the panel by a deadline last week.

Still, the committee could end up stymied again after years of Trump administration officials refusing to cooperate with Congress. The longtime Trump adviser similarly defied a subpoena during a GOP-led investigation into Trump's Russia ties in 2018, but the House did not move to hold him into contempt.

Even though President Joe Biden has been supportive of the committee's work, it is uncertain whether the Justice Department would choose to prosecute the criminal contempt charges against Bannon or any other witnesses who might defy the panel. Even if it the department does prosecute, the process could take months, if not years. And such contempt cases are notoriously difficult to win.

Members of the committee are pressuring the department to take their side.

House Intelligence Committee Chairman Adam Schiff, who also sits on the Jan. 6 panel, said he expects the Justice Department to prosecute the cases.

"The last four years have given people like Steve Bannon the impression they're above the law," Schiff said during an interview for C-SPAN's Book TV that airs next weekend. "But they're going to find out otherwise."

Schiff said efforts to hold Bannon and others in contempt during the Russia investigation were blocked by Republicans and the Trump administration's Department of Justice.

"But now we have Merrick Garland, we have an independent Justice Department, we have an attorney general who believes in the rule of law -- and so this is why I have confidence that we will get the answers," Schiff said.

While Bannon has outright defied the Jan. 6 committee, other Trump aides who have been subpoenaed

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appear to be negotiating. A deposition by a second witness that had been scheduled for Thursday, former Defense Department official Kashyap Patel, was delayed, but Patel is still engaging with the panel, a committee aide said. The aide requested anonymity to discuss the confidential talks.

Two other men who worked for Trump — former White House chief of staff Mark Meadows and longtime Trump social media director Dan Scavino — were scheduled for depositions Friday, but they have both been pushed back as well. Meadows, like Patel, has been given a “short postponement” as he is also engaging with the panel, the aide said, and Scavino’s deposition has been rescheduled because there were delays in serving his subpoena.

It is unclear to what extent Trump has tried to influence his aides, beyond his lawyers’ attempts to assert executive privilege. In a statement Thursday, the former president said the members of the committee should “hold themselves in criminal contempt” and added “the people are not going to stand for it!”

Other witnesses are cooperating, including some who organized or staffed the Trump rally on the Ellipse behind the White House that preceded the riot. The committee subpoenaed 11 rally organizers and gave them a Wednesday deadline to turn over documents and records. They have also been asked to appear at scheduled depositions.

Among those complying was Lyndon Brentnall, whose firm was hired to provide Ellipse event security that day, and two longtime Trump campaign and White House staffers, Megan Powers and Hannah Salem. It is uncertain whether any of the others subpoenaed have complied.

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.” Dozens of police officers were injured as the Trump supporters overwhelmed them and broke through windows and doors to interrupt the certification of Biden’s victory.

The rioters repeated Trump’s claims of widespread fraud as they marched through the Capitol, even though the results of the election were confirmed by state officials and upheld by courts. Trump’s attorney general, William Barr, had said the Justice Department found no evidence of widespread fraud that could have overturned the results.

The panel has also issued a subpoena to a former Justice Department lawyer who positioned himself as Trump’s ally and aided the Republican president’s efforts to challenge the results of the 2020 election.

The demands for documents and testimony from that lawyer, Jeffrey Clark, announced Wednesday, reflect the committee’s efforts to probe not only the 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 election claims.

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

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

Biden signs debt limit hike, but December standoff looms

By ALEXANDRA JAFFE Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — President Joe Biden on Thursday signed into law a bill raising the nation’s debt limit until early December, delaying the prospect of an unprecedented federal default that would cause economic disaster.

The House passed the \$480 billion increase in the country’s borrowing ceiling on Tuesday, after the Senate approved it on a party-line vote last week. The eventual approval came after a protracted standoff with Senate Republicans, who derailed initial Democratic efforts with filibusters, delays that require 60 votes to halt.

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Ultimately, a handful of Senate Republicans agreed to join Democrats and voted to end GOP delays and move to a final vote on the legislation, but Minority Leader Mitch McConnell has said Republicans will offer no support for another increase in December.

Treasury Secretary Janet Yellen had warned that the U.S. would hit its borrowing limit Monday, an unprecedented situation that she and others cautioned could lead to economic catastrophe for a nation still reeling from a global pandemic. Routine government payments to Social Security beneficiaries, disabled veterans and active-duty military personnel would potentially be delayed, and the economic fallout in the U.S. could ripple through global markets.

The passage of the short-term debt ceiling increase ensures that, for now, the U.S. will continue to meet its obligations. But it sets up another potential cliff at the end of the year — at a time when lawmakers will also be working to pass a federal funding bill to avert a government shutdown.

Republicans have said Democrats should use a budgetary maneuver to pass an increase in the debt limit without Republican support, like the process Democrats are using for Biden's massive climate change and social safety net plan. But Democrats have resisted that option. The clash between the two parties leaves Congress without a clear solution to avert the next default deadline in December, but the White House has emphasized it is still pursuing a bipartisan increase.

Lawmakers from both parties have used the debt ceiling votes as leverage for other priorities. House Speaker Nancy Pelosi threatened to vote against raising the debt ceiling when President Donald Trump was in office, saying she had no intention of supporting lifting the debt ceiling to enable Republicans to give another tax break to the rich. And Republicans in 2011 managed to coerce President Barack Obama into accepting about \$2 trillion in deficit cuts as a condition for increasing the debt limit — though lawmakers later rolled back some of those cuts.

Associated Press writer Kevin Freking contributed to this report.

Seattle police staffing woes prompt emergency dispatch plan

SEATTLE (AP) — Seattle's police department is sending detectives and non-patrol officers to respond to emergency calls because of a shortage of patrol officers.

The department on Wednesday moved to the emergency officer dispatching scenario because of the staffing crunch. The police union leader said he fears things will get worse because of COVID-19 vaccine mandates but the city's mayor urged the small percentage of holdouts to get the shot, noting officers are already required to show proof of other vaccines.

KOMO reports the department has lost more than 300 officers over the past year. Nearly 300 more could face termination if they do not comply with an Oct. 18 deadline to be vaccinated against the coronavirus.

"We can't afford to lose one, that's how desperate we are to hold onto to people," said police union president Mike Solan. "If we lose more officers, the public safety situation will become that much more untenable here."

According to figures from the Seattle mayor's office, 782 officers have submitted proof of COVID-19 vaccination, while 98 officers are seeking exemptions and 186 have not turned in paperwork.

Officials hope more will submit the required paperwork as the deadline approaches.

Mayor Jenny Durkan's office said Seattle Police, first responders, and health care workers across the state are required by Gov. Jay Inslee to get a COVID-19 vaccine.

"The definition of a police officer's job is to maintain public safety and protect the communities they serve — 88% of our Seattle Police Department staff have been vaccinated, so they can continue to do their heroic work to save lives," Durkan's spokesman, Anthony Derrick, said in a statement.

The statement said COVID-19 was the number one cause of death for the first responders during the pandemic.

"Mayor Durkan sincerely hopes that anyone at risk of leaving the City or at departments statewide will make the decision to stay by getting vaccinated," said Derrick, adding city police are already required to

get vaccinated for Hepatitis.

The staffing shortage comes as the Seattle area, like other U.S. metropolitan regions, is experiencing a gun violence surge. Fatal shootings over the first nine months of 2021 in King County, which includes Seattle, already exceed last year's year-end total.

As of the end of September, 73 people had been killed and 283 injured in shootings in King County this year, according to data from the King County Prosecutor's Shots Fired Project.

For all off 2020, there were 69 firearm-related homicides and 268 nonfatal shootings in King County.

Marine who criticized Afghanistan withdrawal pleads guilty

CAMP LEJEUNE, N.C. (AP) — A former Marine battalion commander pleaded guilty Thursday to charges including conduct unbecoming an officer after he complained about the U.S. withdrawal from Afghanistan in online videos that made him well-known in conservative political circles.

During the court-martial at Camp Lejeune in North Carolina, Lt. Col. Stuart Scheller entered the plea to charges that also include failure to obey order or regulation, his attorney Tim Parlatore said in a text message. A sentencing hearing followed the morning proceedings and adjourned late Thursday afternoon. It will resume Friday morning, when a decision is expected.

Speaking on his own behalf, Scheller told a judge he made his comments "because I thought it was in the best long-term interest of the Marine Corps," The Daily News of Jacksonville reported.

Scheller said he went public instead of through "the proper channels" because, otherwise, his complaints would not have been heard by the commandant of the Marine Corps, the U.S. secretary of defense or American public.

"At no time did I advocate for the violent overthrow of the government," he said. "At no time did I ever say I was going to use violence."

In an Aug. 26 video posted on Facebook, Scheller said he was willing to risk his career to call out military leaders regarding the withdrawal from Afghanistan after 13 U.S. troops were killed in Kabul.

"I am willing to throw it all away to say to my senior leaders: I demand accountability," he said in the video while wearing a camouflage uniform.

Scheller followed that comment with a series of social media posts, including an Aug. 29 video in which he resigned his commission and said "follow me and we will bring down the whole ... system." On Thursday, he said that remark was meant "in a constitutional manner."

Scheller continued to speak out, and on Sept. 27, he was placed in pretrial confinement at Camp Lejeune. After his videos attracted numerous views, he became the subject of a fundraising campaign and received the support of a nonprofit legal defense fund for former service members.

In a sign of support, two Republican members of Congress testified Thursday on his behalf — Rep. Marjorie Taylor Greene of Georgia by teleconference and Rep. Louie Gohmert of Texas in person, The Daily News of Jacksonville reported.

"Nobody has owned up. Nobody has taken accountability" for the situation in Afghanistan, Gohmert said, adding that the judge should take into account that Scheller "is an honest guy" when sentencing him.

Gunbattles erupt during protest of Beirut blast probe; 6 die

By ZEINA KARAM and SARAH EL DEEB Associated Press

BEIRUT (AP) — Heavy gunfire broke out Thursday in Beirut during a protest organized by the Hezbollah group against the judge leading the probe into last year's blast in the city's port. At least six people were killed and dozens wounded in the most violent street fighting in the Lebanese capital in years.

The exchanges of fire along a former front line from the 1975-90 civil war involved pistols, automatic rifles and rocket-propelled grenades, and were reminiscent of that conflict. Gunfire echoed for hours, and ambulances rushed to pick up casualties. Snipers shot from buildings. Bullets penetrated apartment windows in the area. Schools were evacuated and residents hid in shelters.

The chaos raised the specter of a return to sectarian violence in a country already embroiled in multiple

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crises, including one of the world's worst economic crises of the past 150 years.

It was not clear who started the shooting, which began shortly after the start of the protest organized by the Iran-backed Hezbollah and its Shiite allies from the Amal Movement against Judge Tarek Bitar, who is leading the investigation into last year's massive port explosion. Hezbollah and its allies accuse the judge of singling out politicians for questioning, most of them allied with Hezbollah.

Tensions over the port blast have contributed to Lebanon's many troubles, including a currency collapse, hyperinflation, soaring poverty and an energy crisis leading to extended electricity blackouts.

Officials from both Shiite parties, including Hezbollah leader Hassan Nasrallah, had attacked Bitar for days, accusing him of politicizing the investigation by charging and summoning some officials and not others. They want him removed.

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

The probe centers on hundreds of tons of ammonium nitrate that were improperly stored at a port warehouse that detonated on Aug. 4, 2020. The blast killed at least 215 people, injured thousands and destroyed parts of nearby neighborhoods. It was one of the largest non-nuclear explosions in history and further devastated the country already beset with political divisions and financial woes.

Bitar is the second judge to lead the complicated investigation. His predecessor was removed following legal challenges.

On Thursday, shortly before the planned protest, an appeals court turned down a request to remove Bitar from his post filed by two lawmakers who are defendants in the case, both of them allies of Hezbollah.

The calls for the judge's removal upset many who considered it blatant interference in the work of the judiciary.

The right-wing Christian Lebanese Forces mobilized supporters Wednesday evening after Hezbollah and Amal called for the protest at the Justice Palace, located on the former front line separating predominantly Muslim and Christian areas of Beirut. Videos circulating on social media Wednesday night showed supporters of the Christian Lebanese Forces marching in the streets, carrying large crosses.

In a statement Thursday, the two Shiite groups said their protesters came under fire from snipers deployed over rooftops. Among the dead — all Shiites — were two Hezbollah members.

The army also said protesters came under fire, but later in the evening said an "altercation and exchange of fire" occurred as the protesters were headed to the Justice Palace.

The violence unfolded while U.S. Undersecretary of State for Political Affairs Victoria Nuland was in town, meeting with Lebanese officials. Her schedule was slightly thrown off by the action on the streets.

Nuland later told an airport news conference that an impartial judiciary is the guarantor of all rights, in apparent criticism of Hezbollah. "The Lebanese people deserve no less, and the victims and the families of those lost in the port blast deserve no less," she said. "Today's unacceptable violence makes clear what the stakes are."

U.N. Secretary-General called on all parties to stop the violence and refrain from any provocative actions or inflammatory rhetoric, U.N. spokesman Stephane Dujarric said.

"The secretary-general reiterates the need for an impartial, thorough and transparent investigation into the explosion at the port of Beirut that took place last year," Dujarric said.

As the clashes erupted, an Associated Press journalist saw a man open fire with a pistol and gunmen shooting in the direction of protesters from a balcony. Several men fell immediately and bled on the street. The army sent patrols to the area following the gunfire between the Muslim and Christian sides of the capital.

The Lebanese Red Cross said at least 30 people were wounded. One of the dead, a mother of five, was shot in the head. Hezbollah said it planned a funeral for the woman, and two of its fighters, for Friday. Amal, which is headed by Parliament Speaker Nabih Berri, planned a separate funeral for two of its members.

Four projectiles fell near a private French school, Freres of Furn el Chebbak, causing panic. In scenes reminiscent of the civil war, students huddled in the central corridors. Smoke covered the neighborhoods that saw relentless gunfire.

The shooting subsided around four hours later, after army troops were deployed.

Youssef Diab, a journalist who specializes in court affairs, said the protest was meant as a show of force

and a message that Hezbollah and Amal control the street. What happened showed them that they are not the only ones who control the street.

"There is another street, and confronting it could blow up the situation in a big way," Diab said.

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

Beirut resident Haneen Chemaly, who heads a local group that provides social services, hid with her 6-month-old baby in her building's shelter and then at her neighbors' home. She accused Lebanon's leaders of steering the country into civil war, saying it's "the last card they have to use."

"They have (driven) us into bankruptcy, devastation and now they are scaring us with the specter of civil war," she said.

Michel Younan, a resident of Ain el-Remeneh neighborhood, inspected his car, which had its windows and doors broken in the fighting. "There were protests and then suddenly gunfire began ... Shooting, RPGs, everything," he said. "Isn't this a shame? They brought us back to the days of the war."

The clashes could derail Mikati's month-old government even before it begins tackling Lebanon's economic meltdown.

A cabinet meeting was canceled Wednesday after Hezbollah demanded urgent government action against the judge. One Hezbollah-allied minister said he and other Shiite cabinet members would stage a walkout if Bitar isn't removed, further complicating Mikati's mission.

Associated Press journalists Hassan Ammar and Fadi Tawil contributed to this report.

FDA panel endorses lower-dose Moderna COVID shot for booster

By LAURAN NEERGAARD and MATTHEW PERRONE Associated Press

U.S. health advisers said Thursday that some Americans who received Moderna's COVID-19 vaccine at least six months ago should get a half-dose booster to rev up protection against the coronavirus.

The panel of outside advisers to the Food and Drug Administration voted unanimously to recommend a booster shot for seniors, as well as younger adults with other health problems, jobs or living situations that put them at increased risk from COVID-19.

The recommendation is non-binding but it's a key step toward expanding the U.S. booster campaign to millions more Americans. Many people who got their initial Pfizer shots at least six months ago are already getting a booster after the FDA authorized their use last month — and those are the same high-risk groups that FDA's advisers said should get a Moderna booster.

But there's no evidence that it's time to open booster doses of either the Moderna or Pfizer vaccine to everybody, the panel stressed — despite initial Biden administration plans to eventually do that.

The coronavirus still is mostly a threat to unvaccinated people — while the vaccinated have strong protection against severe illness or death from COVID-19.

"I don't really see a need for a 'let it rip' campaign for everyone," said Dr. Michael Kurilla of the National Institutes of Health.

As for the dose, initial Moderna vaccination consists of two 100-microgram shots. But Moderna says a single 50-microgram shot should be enough for a booster.

The agency convened its experts to weigh in on who should get boosters and when for those who received the Moderna and Johnson & Johnson shots earlier this year. The panel will discuss J&J on Friday.

The FDA will use its advisers' recommendations in making final decisions for boosters from both companies. Assuming a positive decision, there's still another hurdle: Next week, a panel convened by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention will offer more specifics on who should get one.

Many U.S. scientists remain divided about exactly who needs boosters and their purpose — whether they're needed mostly for people at risk of severe disease or whether they should be used to try to reduce milder infections, too.

The FDA panel wrestled with whether Moderna presented enough evidence backing its low-dose booster.

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As the delta variant surged in July and August, a Moderna study found people who were more recently vaccinated had a 36% lower rate of “breakthrough” infections compared with those vaccinated longer ago.

Another study of 344 people found a six-month booster shot restored virus-fighting antibodies to levels thought to be protective — and that included large jumps in antibodies able to target the delta variant. But that was a small study, and only about half of those people got the exact series of doses that would be offered under a Moderna booster campaign.

“The data itself is not strong but it is certainly going in the direction that is supportive of this vote,” said Dr. Patrick Moore of the University of Pittsburgh.

And several advisers worried that boosting with a lower dose might cost people some of the potential benefit of a full-strength third shot.

“That may actually have a tremendous impact on the durability,” Kurilla said.

Moderna said it chose the lower-dose booster because it triggered fewer uncomfortable shot reactions such as fever and achiness but also leaves more vaccine available for the global supply.

One very rare side effect of both the Moderna and Pfizer vaccines is heart inflammation, particularly among young men soon after the second dose — and one lingering question is whether another dose could spark more cases. Moderna’s booster study wasn’t large enough to spot such a rare risk.

But Israel began offering Pfizer boosters sooner than the U.S. and to more of its population. Thursday, Dr. Sharon Alroy-Preis of Israel’s health ministry told the FDA panel that after 3.7 million booster doses administered, there’s no sign the extra shot is any riskier.

Because the Moderna vaccine is similar, the FDA’s advisers found that data reassuring.

While Pfizer’s boosters are only for certain high-risk groups of Americans, Israeli officials credit wider booster use in their country to stemming the delta surge.

“There is no question in my mind that the break of the curve was due to the booster dose,” Alroy-Preis said in response to FDA advisers who noted that other countries have seen a lowering of delta cases without widespread booster use.

But FDA’s advisers also highlighted one confusing issue: People with severely weakened immune systems already can get a third full dose of the Moderna vaccine soon after the initial vaccinations — so a lingering question is whether they should be eligible for a booster, too, which would be their fourth dose.

The Associated Press Health and Science Department receives support from the Howard Hughes Medical Institute’s Department of Science Education. The AP is solely responsible for all content.

Q&A: La Nina’s back and it’s not good for parts of dry West

By SETH BORENSTEIN AP Science Writer

For the second straight year, the world heads into a new La Nina weather event. This would tend to dry out parts of an already parched and fiery American West and boost an already busy Atlantic hurricane season.

Just five months after the end of a La Nina that started in September 2020, the U.S. National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration announced a new cooling of the Pacific is underway.

La Nina’s natural cooling of parts of the Pacific is the flip side of a warmer El Nino pattern and sets in motion changes to the world’s weather for months and sometimes years. But the changes vary from place to place and aren’t certainties, just tendencies.

La Ninas tend to cause more agricultural and drought damage to the United States than El Ninos and neutral conditions, according to a 1999 study. That study found La Ninas in general cause \$2.2 billion to \$6.5 billion in damage to the U.S. agriculture.

HOW STRONG AND HOW LONG WILL IT LAST?

There’s a 57% chance this will be a moderate La Nina and only 15% that it will be strong, said Mike Halpert, deputy director of NOAA’s Climate Prediction Center. He said it is unlikely to be as strong as last year’s because the second year of back-to-back La Ninas usually doesn’t quite measure up to the first.

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This La Nina is expected to stretch through spring, Halpert said.

WHAT DOES THIS MEAN FOR THE WEST?

For the entire southern one-third of the country and especially the Southwest, a La Nina often means drier and warmer weather. The West has been experiencing a two decade-plus megadrought that's worsened the last couple of years.

But for the Northwest — Washington, Oregon, maybe parts of Idaho and Montana — La Nina means a good chance rain and drought relief, Halpert said.

"Good for them, probably not so good for central, southern California," Halpert said.

The Ohio Valley and Northern Plains could be wetter and cooler. La Nina winters also tend to shift snow storms more northerly in winter while places like the mid-Atlantic often don't get blockbuster snowstorms.

WHAT ABOUT ATLANTIC HURRICANE SEASON?

During last year's La Nina, the Atlantic set a record with 30 named storms. This year, without La Nina, the season has still been busier than normal with 20 named storms and only one name left unused on the primary storm name list: Wanda.

The last couple weeks have been quiet but "I expect it to pick up again," Halpert said. "Just because it's quiet now, it doesn't mean we won't still see more storms as we get later into October and even into November."

La Ninas tend to make Atlantic seasons more active because one key ingredient in formation of storms is winds near the top of them. An El Nino triggers more crosswinds that decapitate storms, while a La Nina has fewer crosswinds, allowing storms to develop and grow.

WHAT ABOUT THE REST OF THE WORLD?

Much of both southeast Asia and northern Australia are wetter in La Nina — and that's already apparent in Indonesia, Halpert said. Central Africa and southeast China tend to be drier.

Expect it to be cooler in western Canada, southern Alaska, Japan, the Korean peninsula, western Africa and southeastern Brazil.

Follow Seth Borenstein on Twitter: @borenbears.

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Missouri gov slams paper for uncovering data security flaw

By SUMMER BALLENTINE and JIM SALTER Associated Press

JEFFERSON CITY, Mo. (AP) — Republican Gov. Mike Parson on Thursday condemned one of Missouri's largest newspapers for exposing a flaw in a state database that allowed public access to thousands of teachers' Social Security numbers, even though the paper held off from reporting about the flaw until after the state could fix it.

Parson told reporters outside his Capitol office that the Missouri State Highway Patrol's digital forensic unit will be conducting an investigation "of all of those involved" and that his administration had spoken to the prosecutor in Cole County, which includes the state capital, Jefferson City. He didn't elaborate as to what he meant by "involved" or whether investigators would be looking into whether the St. Louis Post-Dispatch broke the law during the course of its reporting on the data vulnerability.

The Post-Dispatch broke the news about the security flaw on Wednesday. The newspaper said it discovered the vulnerability in a web application that allowed the public to search teacher certifications and credentials.

The Department of Elementary and Secondary Education removed the pages from its website on Tuesday after being told about the issue by the Post-Dispatch, which said it gave the state time to fix the problem before it published its story.

The Post-Dispatch estimated that more than 100,000 Social Security numbers were vulnerable, based on

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pay records and other data. It found that the school workers' Social Security numbers were in the HTML source code of the pages involved.

"The state is unaware of any misuse of individual information or even whether information was accessed inappropriately outside of this isolated incident," the DESE said in a news release.

Though the Post-Dispatch alerted the agency to the problem and held off on the story, the agency's news release called the person who discovered the vulnerability a "hacker" — an apparent reference to the reporter — who "took the records of at least three educators." The agency didn't elaborate as to what it meant by "took the records" and it declined to discuss the issue further than what it said in its news release when reached by The Associated Press.

Source codes are accessible by right-clicking on public webpages.

The newspaper's president and publisher, Ian Caso, said in a statement that the Post-Dispatch stands by the story and the reporter, who he said "did everything right."

"It's regrettable the governor has chosen to deflect blame onto the journalists who uncovered the website's problem and brought it to the Department of Elementary and Secondary Education's attention," Caso said.

Parson also suggested that the reporter somehow broke the law.

"This individual is not a victim," Parson told reporters. "They were acting against a state agency to compromise teachers' personal information in an attempt to embarrass the state and sell headlines for their news outlet. We will not let this crime against Missouri teachers go unpunished."

Peter Swire, a cyber law expert and professor at the Georgia Institute of Technology's School of Cybersecurity and Privacy, said flagging security vulnerabilities on publicly accessible websites is a "public service" and is "clearly not criminal under federal law."

"Right clicking does not count as criminal hacking," Swire said.

Joseph Martineau, an attorney for the Post-Dispatch, said in a statement that the reporter "did the responsible thing by reporting his findings to DESE so that the state could act to prevent disclosure and misuse. A hacker is someone who subverts computer security with malicious or criminal intent. Here, there was no breach of any firewall or security and certainly no malicious intent."

"For DESE to deflect its failures by referring to this as 'hacking' is unfounded," Martineau said.

Jean Maneke, an attorney for the Missouri Press Association, said she doubted any judge "would allow this to proceed very far."

"Clearly the Post-Dispatch warned the state of this issue," Maneke said. "There's no evidence of any criminal or malicious intent in the act. There's no attempt to steal information. There's no basis for him (Parson) to say there's any kind of illegal act from the Post-Dispatch."

Byron Clemens, a spokesman for AFT St. Louis, Local 420, said the teachers union isn't aware of any educators' information being misused.

"But we are concerned over the attempt to deflect responsibility and politicize what is very obviously a security breach by the state," Clemens said in a statement.

Meanwhile, Parson said the state will address security issues raised by the newspaper's reporting.

"We are working to strengthen our security to prevent this incident from happening again," Parson said. "The state is owning its part, and we are addressing areas in which we need to do better than we have done before."

Salter reported from O'Fallon, Missouri.

Efforts to track diversity in journalism are lagging

By DAVID BAUDER AP Media Writer

NEW YORK (AP) — More than a year after George Floyd's killing focused attention on efforts to diversify newsrooms, the ability to measure real progress is proving elusive.

The News Leaders Association, a journalism trade group, extended the deadline for responses to its survey about employment practices at news organizations for two months, after expressing disappointment

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about how few are willing to reveal the diversity of their staffs.

The group hopes for as much participation from an estimated 5,900 newsrooms across the country as possible but has had fewer than 250 responses, said Meredith Clark, a Northeastern University professor who is running the survey.

"As a researcher and a journalist, I am deeply discouraged that the journalism industry isn't as transparent about its workforce in the way that it expects other industries to be transparent about theirs," Clark said.

There have been tangible signs of progress for the industry, most notably in diverse hires for some major journalism jobs: Kevin Merida, the second Black executive editor of The Los Angeles Times after Dean Baquet; Kim Godwin and Rashida Jones, both Black women, as presidents of ABC News and MS-NBC; Katrice Hardy and Monica Richardson, the first Black executive editors at the Dallas Morning News and Miami Herald; and Daisy Veerasingham, the first woman and first person of color appointed as The Associated Press' president and CEO.

Newsrooms throughout the Gannett chain, The New York Times, The Washington Post and NBC News have publicly revealed statistics on diversity hiring. There have been large-scale reckonings about past bias in reporting in newspapers like the Kansas City Star and Los Angeles Times.

Despite these steps, the overall diversity picture remains blurred.

First through a precursor, the American Society of News Editors, a newsroom diversity survey has been conducted since the mid-1970s, following a Kerner Commission report that described the absence of Black journalists as "shockingly backward." News organizations were given a goal of having staffs that reflected their communities by 2000.

"The more diversity you have in your newsroom, the better you are able to capture what is going on in your community," said Myriam Marquez, executive director of the news leaders group, which includes executives at newspapers, websites and media groups.

A lack of diversity can reveal itself in many news decisions: To many critics, the attention paid to the story of Gabby Petito, a young woman found dead after a cross-country trip with her fiance, reflected a long-time concern about journalists paying more attention to missing white women than minorities in similar situations.

Despite some improvements, the 2000 goal wasn't reached, and concerns about diversity faded with the industry's financial collapse over the past two decades. Participation in the annual survey also became spotty, to the point where it was suspended in 2019 after only 293 responses were received.

Clark was hired to create a more thorough and modern questionnaire, and to seek ways to get more participation, since internal peer pressure is proving insufficient.

This year's effort got off to a slow start because much of the group's contact list was initially out-of-date. The survey asked for more information than in past years, and that proved time-consuming. Some organizations expressed concern about violations of privacy for staff members, but organizers insist that shouldn't be an issue.

"It might be in some cases that people, frankly, know if they fill it out that the current state of their news organization doesn't look like what they'd hope it would look like," said Hardy, newly-named Dallas editor and head of the NLA's diversity committee. "I always think that's a factor in any year, but especially after a year of social unrest."

Since organizations are being asked to volunteer information — as opposed to a random sample being taken — it also stands to reason that organizations making progress toward meeting diversity goals would be most likely to participate, lending doubt about whether the survey will truly reflect what is going on.

Nearly 90 of the returned surveys are from Gannett newspapers, which has been particularly aggressive in boosting diversity and last month had editors at all of its newspapers report to their readers on progress reaching goals. Gannett as a company set 2025 as a goal for their outlets to reach racial and gender parity with their communities.

As an example, the Arizona Republic said that in July, 38% of their journalists were people of color, up from 20% five years earlier. The goal is 44%. Executive Editor Greg Burton told readers how reporting and editing duties had changed to cover equity issues.

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Hardy said she isn't concerned the news leaders' report will present false progress.

"I don't think any of us are happy with where we are," she said.

It may be a more long-term solution, but the group is considering asking foundations and others who provide funding for news organizations to require participation in the survey before getting a grant. Same thing with journalism prizes: If you want to enter the competition for a Pulitzer, show you've filled out a survey.

Clark said her goal was to have 1,500 responses to produce a statistically solid report. It seems doubtful they'll get there by the end of October, the new deadline. But George Stanley, NLA president, said there's a baseline of participants including Gannett, McClatchy newspapers, ProPublica, BuzzFeed and The Associated Press — the latter for the first time — that the information will be worth releasing.

"I think these participating organizations, by proving their commitment, will gain a recruiting advantage and that will encourage others," said Stanley, editor of the Milwaukee Journal Sentinel.

The New York Times said earlier this year that the percentage of non-white staff members had increased from 27% in 2015 to 34% last year. At the Times, Washington Post and USA Today, a majority of the newsroom staff are women.

The AP reported that 76% of its full-time news employees in the United States are white, 8% are Latino, 7% are Black and 6% are Asian. News management is 81% white.

When he began as head of news at NBC Universal last year, Cesar Conde publicly set a goal of a staff that is 50% minority and 50% women, although he gave no deadline. Since then, monthly hires have averaged 48% people of color and 63% women, the network said. The division's percentage of minorities has increased from 27% to 30%.

Hiring minorities is important, but so is keeping them, said Doris Truong, director of training and diversity at the Poynter Institute, a journalism think tank. The news industry is seeing a generational shift among young staff members less willing to wait for attitudes to change, she said.

"There is no pipeline problem," said Robert Hernandez, a professor at the University of Southern California's Annenberg School for Communication and Journalism. "We are producing diverse students. The reality is they're not being hired, they're not being retained, they're not being promoted."

Hardy said retention is a real issue, and impatience about advancement isn't something unique to a younger generation.

She hopes the prominent leadership hires of the past year help usher in real change.

"It is a passion we have," she said. "It is something we have lived and breathed and discussed and wanted to have a hand in helping over the years. The buck stops with us, frankly."

This story corrects that Kevin Merida is the second Black executive editor of the Los Angeles Times, quote by Robert Hernandez and changes reference to diversity goal in graph 11 to 2000, not 2020.

Murdaugh charged with taking insurance money in maid's death

By JEFFREY COLLINS Associated Press

COLUMBIA, S.C. (AP) — A prominent South Carolina lawyer has been charged with stealing insurance settlements meant for the sons of his late housekeeper that a lawsuit said total more than \$4 million, state police said Thursday.

Alex Murdaugh was arrested at a drug rehab facility in Orlando, Florida, where his attorneys said he has spent the past six weeks since claiming he was shot in the head on the side of a lonely road near his home, authorities said.

The arrest is the latest development in six state police investigations into Murdaugh, including the deaths of his wife and son, millions of dollars missing from the huge law firm founded a century ago by his great-grandfather and trying to arrange his own death so his surviving son could collect on a \$10 million life insurance policy.

Thursday's arrest on two felony counts of obtaining property by false pretenses involves Murdaugh's

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housekeeper for decades, Gloria Satterfield, the State Law Enforcement Division said in a statement.

Murdaugh told Satterfield's sons at her February 2018 funeral that he would get insurance settlements for her death and take care of them, according to a lawsuit filed by the sons. Murdaugh managed to secure more than \$4 million from his insurers, but he only told the sons about a \$500,000 settlement and then never sent them a dime, the lawsuit said.

Murdaugh took the settlement money by creating a fraudulent bank account with a name similar to a legal consulting firm that handles settlements, the lawsuit said.

Satterfield's family called it a bittersweet day in a statement released by their attorneys.

"Avarice and betrayal of trust are at the heart of this matter," lawyers Eric Bland and Ronald Richter said in their statement.

The Murdaugh family told the sons their mother tripped over the family dog and died weeks later from her lingering injuries. The death was never reported to the Hampton County coroner, who asked state police to investigate why she was not called to review what she would consider an accidental death.

The sons also took Murdaugh's advice to hire attorney Cory Fleming to be executor of their mother's estate without telling them Fleming was a longtime friend, old college roommate and godfather to at least one of Murdaugh's sons.

The law licenses of both Fleming and Murdaugh have been suspended as the investigations continue.

Murdaugh is being held at the Orange County jail in Florida to await extradition, investigators said. His lawyers promised at a bond hearing on different charges last month that Murdaugh would return to South Carolina without a fight if charged with additional crimes.

Murdaugh's lawyers said in a statement that he "intends to fully cooperate with this investigation, as he has with the investigation into the murder of his wife and son. He deeply regrets that his actions have distracted from the efforts to solve their murders."

The deaths of Murdaugh's son and wife at their Colleton County home in June remain unsolved. Murdaugh said he found Maggie Murdaugh, 52, and their son Paul, 22, shot to death after he returned home from visiting his father in the hospital, according to authorities.

In September, Murdaugh was charged with insurance fraud and other counts after reporting that his head was grazed by a bullet when someone attempted to shoot him.

Curtis "Eddie" Smith is charged with firing at Murdaugh. He told The Associated Press last month that Murdaugh asked for his help on Sept. 4 but didn't tell him he wanted Smith to shoot him until he was on the side of the road.

Smith said the gun went off as he tried to prevent Murdaugh from shooting himself. He bristled at suggestions from Murdaugh's lawyers that he was a drug dealer, saying he was good friends with Murdaugh after the attorney helped him in a worker's compensation case.

"With a friend like that, who needs enemies?" Smith told an AP reporter as he limped around his property.

Smith said last month that he wasn't sure if the bullet hit Murdaugh or not, saying he grabbed the gun, immediately drove away and ditched the weapon.

In an interview with The Today Show aired Thursday, Smith said he was 1,000% certain Murdaugh was not shot.

"There was no blood on me; there was no blood on him," Smith said.

Murdaugh's lawyers have said they saw medical records showing Murdaugh was covered in blood when taken by helicopter to a hospital but have not shown them to the public.

The Thursday arrest is just another step in the long process for justice in all of the investigations, State Law Enforcement Division Chief Mark Keel said in a statement.

"As I have said previously, we are committed to following the facts wherever they may lead us and we will not stop until justice is served," Keel said.

Follow Jeffrey Collins on Twitter at <https://twitter.com/JSCollinsAP>.

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Bow-and-arrow killings in Norway seen as an 'act of terror'

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

KONGSBERG, Norway (AP) — The bow-and-arrow rampage by a man who killed five people in a small town near Norway's capital appeared to be a terrorist act, authorities said Thursday, a bizarre and shocking attack in a Scandinavian country where violent crime is rare.

Police identified the attacker as Espen Andersen Braathen, a 37-year-old Danish citizen, who was arrested on the street Wednesday night about a half-hour after authorities were alerted.

They said he used the bow and arrow and possibly other weapons to randomly target people at a supermarket and other locations in Kongsberg, a town of about 26,000 where he lived.

Witnesses said their quiet neighborhood of wooden houses and birch trees was turned into a scene of terrifying cries and turmoil.

"The screaming was so intense and horrifying there was never any doubt something very serious was going on," said Kurt Einar Voldseth, who had returned home from an errand when he heard the commotion. "I can only describe it as a 'death scream,' and it burned into my mind."

Four women and a man between the ages of 50 and 70 were killed, and three other people were wounded, police said.

Andersen Braathen is being held on preliminary charges and will face a custody hearing Friday. Police said they believe he acted alone.

"The whole act appears to be an act of terror," said Hans Sverre Sjoevold, head of Norway's domestic intelligence service, known as the PST.

"We do not know what the motivation of the perpetrator is," Sjoevold said in English. "We have to wait for the outcome of the investigation."

He said the suspect was known to the PST, but he declined to elaborate. The agency said the terror threat level for Norway remained unchanged at "moderate."

Regional Police Chief Ole B. Saeverud described the man as a Muslim convert and said there "earlier had been worries of the man having been radicalized," but he did not elaborate or say why he was previously flagged or what authorities did in response.

Norwegian media reported the suspect had a conviction for burglary and drug possession, and last year a court granted a restraining order for him to stay away from his parents for six months after threatening to kill one of them.

Svane Mathiassen told broadcaster NRK the suspect will be examined by forensic psychiatric experts, which is "not unusual in such serious cases."

Police were alerted to a man shooting arrows about 6:15 p.m. Regional prosecutor Ann Iren Svane Mathiassen, told The Associated Press that after his arrest, the attacker "clearly described what he had done. He admitted killing the five people."

She said the bow and arrows were just part of his arsenal. Police have not said what else he used, but Voldseth told the AP that when he ran toward the sound of screams, he saw a woman being stabbed by a man with some kind of weapon.

Voldseth said he recognized the attacker, saying he lived nearby and "usually walks with his head down and headphones on."

"I have only spoken to him a few times, but I have had the impression he might be a person with problems," he said.

Mass killings are rare in low-crime Norway, and the attack recalled the country's worst peacetime slaughter a decade ago, when a right-wing domestic extremist killed 77 people with a bomb, a rifle and a pistol. Memorials were held in July on the 10th anniversary of those slayings.

People have "experienced that their safe local environment suddenly became a dangerous place," King Harald V said. "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."

New Prime Minister Jonas Gahr Stoere called the attack "horrific."

Dozens of people saw the killings. Erik Benum, who lives on the same road as the supermarket that was

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attacked, told AP he saw shop workers taking shelter 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," Benum said.

Police, along with reinforcements from elsewhere, flooded into Kongsberg and blocked several roads. The blue lights of emergency vehicles and spotlights from a helicopter illuminated the scene.

On Thursday morning, the whole town was eerily quiet, Benum said.

"People are sad and shocked," he said.

Flags were lowered to half-staff, and residents placed flowers, candles and stuffed animals around a makeshift memorial in a central square.

Mayor Kari Anne Sand described the last 24 hours as a "nightmare."

"The town was attacked last night and five people died. I think most of the inhabitants are in quite a shock that such a thing could happen here. This is a quiet town, a quiet municipality," she said, adding that health and social services officials are working to care for those who need assistance.

The main church in Kongsberg also was open for those needing comfort.

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

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

From condiments to condoms: new California laws bring change

By ADAM BEAM Associated Press

SACRAMENTO, Calif. (AP) — California Gov. Gavin Newsom spent the summer campaigning to keep his job and, with a landslide victory in hand, he's continued pushing progressive California further left.

In the four weeks after beating back a recall attempt, the Democrat signed laws that require gender-neutral displays of children's toys and toothbrushes in large department stores, made it illegal to remove a condom without consent during intercourse and cleared the way for a nation's first ban on the sale of new gas-powered leaf blowers and lawn mowers.

He also made it illegal to film someone near an abortion clinic for the purpose of intimidation, banned secret employment settlements involving harassment or discrimination and limited the use of rubber bullets by police during protests. He even prohibited restaurants from handing out ketchup packets and other disposable condiments unless customers ask for them.

California is among the deepest blue states in the country — Democrats control all statewide offices and have super majorities in the Legislature, which nowadays often acts as a laboratory for liberal policies that would not get to a vote in many other states. The governor wields immense power over what becomes law because California lawmakers rarely override vetoes.

If this had been a normal non-election year, Newsom might have been more cautious heading into his 2022 re-election campaign. But in early September, just three days into the 30-day period the governor has to review legislation, Newsom convincingly beat back the Republican-led effort to oust him.

Just three days after that election, Newsom signed two laws aimed at limiting single-family zoning in California, a stark change for a state with many communities that define suburban sprawl but now faces an affordable housing shortage.

In all, Newsom signed 92% of the bills lawmakers put on his desk — the highest percentage during his three years in office, according to an analysis by veteran lobbyist Chris Micheli, who has tracked gubernatorial vetoes for years.

The result was "oodles of progressive legislation and oodles of virtual signaling," said Bill Whalen, a policy fellow at the Hoover Institution, a conservative think tank at Stanford University.

"Traditionally, we have governors who have been more centrist than Newsom," he said. "With the recall now gone, this is a governor who is really not threatened in any way."

But what counts as progressive in most of the country can be seen as moderate in California.

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Newsom angered many among the state's left wing with his vetoes, including blocking a bill that would have required state contractors to confirm their supply chains don't contribute to tropical deforestation.

He also axed a bill that would have made jaywalking legal, a move advocates have said is needed because police disproportionately stop and ticket Black people for the offense.

And he halted a bill that would have let farm workers vote by mail in union elections, a decision that made some workers so angry they marched in protest to the French Laundry, the fancy restaurant in the San Francisco Bay Area where Newsom was famously photographed dining without a mask during the pandemic. The scene of Newsom out with lobbyist friends while telling others to stay home helped drive the recall effort.

In the weeks leading up to the recall, lawmakers said that the Newsom administration was unusually involved in the legislative process, prompting a flurry of amendments to tailor bills to his liking. He signed a law making California the first state to prohibit mega-retailers like Amazon from firing workers for missing quotas that interfere with bathroom and rest breaks.

But he insisted on lawmakers removing language ordering regulators to impose a statewide standard on reasonable work speeds, according to Assemblywoman Lorena Gonzalez, the author of the bill.

"From somebody who considers themselves probably to the left of this governor, ... I don't think he went all that far," said Gonzales, a Democrat from San Diego and chair of the powerful Assembly Appropriations Committee. "If you look at some of the bills, as they started, and then where they ended up because of input by the administration, then ... you kind of see what's happening."

Lawmakers did not send Newsom as many bills as they normally would. The pandemic limited where and how often lawmakers could hold committee hearings, prompting legislative leaders to limit lawmakers to authoring 12 bills each. And this was the first year of a two-year legislative session, so many of the most controversial proposals were delayed for consideration until next year.

One bill would have eliminated the crime of loitering with the intent to commit prostitution, a law advocates have said targets Black women and transgender people. The bill passed the Legislature, but the author decided not to send it to Newsom yet.

Gonzalez believes lawmakers "had a lot of self-regulation" during the session, cognizant that forcing polarizing issues on Newsom could hurt him in the recall election.

But Sen. Sydney Kamlager, a Democrat from Los Angeles, said few lawmakers would have delayed bills because they were worried about how it would impact Newsom's political future, saying "legislators also have egos." She said the governor is "always involved" with legislation.

"You would want a governor or an administration to be involved, you know, because policy that doesn't fit or can't be implemented just ends up becoming a dream," she said.

Next year, lawmakers could send Newsom legislation to regulate health care prices and impose COVID vaccine or testing mandates for employers, decisions the governor must make amid his re-election campaign. But those decisions could be easier for Newsom now that the recall has affirmed his political strength, despite protests from Republicans. Newsom defeated the recall attempt by more than 60% of the vote.

"Life has become harder and more expensive for families, yet Democrats focus on things like banning to-go ketchup packets and gas-powered lawn mowers," said Senate Republican Leader Scott Wilk said. "I hope that 2022 brings some common-sense to Sacramento."

Lucy in the sky: Spacecraft will visit record 8 asteroids

By MARCIA DUNN AP Aerospace Writer

CAPE CANAVERAL, Fla. (AP) — Attention asteroid aficionados: NASA is set to launch a series of spacecraft to visit and even bash some of the solar system's most enticing space rocks.

The robotic trailblazer named Lucy is up first, blasting off this weekend on a 12-year cruise to swarms of asteroids out near Jupiter — unexplored time capsules from the dawn of the solar system. And yes, there will be diamonds in the sky with Lucy, on one of its science instruments, as well as lyrics from other Beatles' songs.

NASA is targeting the predawn hours of Saturday for liftoff.

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Barely a month later, an impactor spacecraft named Dart will give chase to a double-asteroid closer to home. The mission will end with Dart ramming the main asteroid's moonlet to change its orbit, a test that could one day save Earth from an incoming rock.

Next summer, a spacecraft will launch to a rare metal world — an nickel and iron asteroid that might be the exposed core of a once-upon-a-time planet. A pair of smaller companion craft — the size of suitcases — will peel away to another set of double asteroids.

And in 2023, a space capsule will parachute into the Utah desert with NASA's first samples of an asteroid, collected last year by the excavating robot Osiris-Rex. The samples are from Bennu, a rubble and boulder-strewn rock that could endanger Earth a couple centuries from now.

"Each one of those asteroids we're visiting tells our story ... the story of us, the story of the solar system," said NASA's chief of science missions, Thomas Zurbuchen.

There's nothing better for understanding how our solar system formed 4.6 billion years ago, said Lucy's principal scientist, Hal Levison of Southwest Research Institute in Boulder, Colorado. "They're the fossils of planet formation."

China and Russia are teaming up for an asteroid mission later this decade. The United Arab Emirates is also planning an asteroid stop in the coming years.

Advances in tech and design are behind this flurry of asteroid missions, as well as the growing interest in asteroids and the danger they pose to Earth. All it takes is looking at the moon and the impact craters created by asteroids and meteorites to realize the threat, Zurbuchen said.

The asteroid-smacking Dart spacecraft — set to launch Nov. 24 — promises to be a dramatic exercise in planetary defense. If all goes well, the high-speed smashup will occur next fall just 7 million miles (11 million kilometers) away, within full view of ground telescopes.

The much longer \$981 million Lucy mission — the first to Jupiter's so-called Trojan entourage — is targeting an unprecedented eight asteroids.

Lucy aims to sweep past seven of the countless Trojan asteroids that precede and trail Jupiter in the giant gas planet's path around the sun. Thousands of these dark reddish or gray rocks have been detected, with many thousands more likely lurking in the two clusters. Trapped in place by the gravitational forces of Jupiter and the sun, the Trojans are believed to be the cosmic leftovers from when the outer planets were forming.

"That's what makes the Trojans special. If these ideas of ours are right, they formed throughout the outer solar system and are now at one location where we can go and study them," Levison said.

Before encountering the Trojans, Lucy will zip past a smaller, more ordinary object in the main asteroid belt between Mars and Jupiter. Scientists consider this 2025 flyby a dress rehearsal.

Three flybys of Earth will be needed as gravity slingshots in order for Lucy to reach both of Jupiter's Trojan swarms by the time the mission is set to end in 2033.

The spacecraft will be so far from the sun — as much as 530 million miles (850 million kilometers) distant — that massive solar panels are needed to provide enough power. Each of Lucy's twin circular wings stretches 24 feet (7 meters) across, dwarfing the spacecraft tucked in the middle like the body of a moth.

Lucy intends to pass within 600 miles (965 kilometers) of each targeted asteroid.

"Every one of those flybys needs to be near-perfection," Zurbuchen said.

The seven Trojans range in size from a 40-mile (64-kilometer) asteroid and its half-mile (1-kilometer) moonlet to a hefty specimen exceeding 62 miles (100 kilometers). That's the beauty of studying these rocks named after heroes of Greek mythology's Trojan War and, more recently, modern Olympic athletes. Any differences among them will have occurred during their formation, Levison said, offering clues about their origins.

Unlike so many NASA missions, including the upcoming Dart, short for Double Asteroid Redirection Test, Lucy is not an acronym. The spacecraft is named after the fossilized remains of an early human ancestor discovered in Ethiopia in 1974; the 3.2 million-year-old female got her name from the 1967 Beatles song "Lucy in the Sky with Diamonds."

"The Lucy fossil really transformed our understanding of human evolution, and that's what we want to

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do is transform our understanding of solar system evolution by looking at all these different objects," said Southwest Research Institute's Cathy Olkin, the deputy principal scientist who proposed the spacecraft's name.

One of its science instruments actually has a disc of lab-grown diamond totaling 6.7 carats.

And there's another connection to the Fab Four, a plaque attached to the spacecraft includes lines from songs they wrote, along with quotes from other luminaries. From a John Lennon single: We all shine on . . . like the moon and the stars and the sun.

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At least 46 killed in Taiwanese apartment building inferno

By HUIZHONG WU Associated Press

KAOHSIUNG, Taiwan (AP) — At least 46 people were killed and another 41 injured after a fire broke out early Thursday in a run-down mixed commercial and residential building in the Taiwanese port city of Kaohsiung, officials said.

Neighborhood residents said the 13-story building was home to many poor, elderly and disabled people and it wasn't clear how many of the 120 units were occupied.

Witnesses said they heard something that sounded like an explosion at about 3 a.m. when the blaze erupted in the building's lower floors, which housed a closed movie theater, abandoned restaurants and karaoke clubs.

Tsai Hsiu-Chin, 70, had lived in the building for 15 years. At 3 a.m., she heard someone screaming "fire." She said she took the elevator down, escaping with just the clothing on her back.

"I didn't bring anything. I just cared about saving my life," she said, sitting opposite the charred building on Thursday night, trying to process her experience over a beer with a friend.

Across the street, Lin Chie-ying said she was awoken in her home by the sound of ambulances and fire trucks. "I thought our home would burn up too," she said.

It took firefighters until after 7 a.m. to extinguish the blaze. Many of the upper floors appeared not to have been damaged directly. However, the smoke was thick enough to have killed and injured the several dozens living above the fire.

Throughout Thursday, first responders pored through the wreckage and recovered dozens of bodies. Another 14 of 55 taken initially to the hospital were confirmed dead on arrival or shortly after.

The building's age and piles of debris blocking access to many areas complicated search and rescue efforts, officials said, according to Taiwan's Central News Agency.

Later in the day, the smell of smoke still lingered and the sound of shattering glass rang throughout the area. Construction workers were raised on a crane to break out the remaining glass from window frames with a crowbar, and waited to put up scaffolding to prevent the building from being a further hazard.

Scattered crowds of people gathered across the street. Curious onlookers drove by on their scooters and paused to look at the damage.

The decades-old apartment building is one of many in the Yancheng district, an older part of Kaohsiung, a city of some 2.8 million people in southwestern Taiwan.

"For the families and Yancheng, I feel incomparable pain and I blame myself deeply," Mayor Chen Chi Mai said at a news conference, bowing in apology. "Here I want to express my deepest sorrow to all the wounded and those who died, as well as their families and all the residents."

It appears the fire broke out on the ground floor but it was not immediately clear exactly where and the cause was still under investigation.

The United Daily News said that investigators were focusing on a first-floor tea shop where the fire had started, and police were looking into a resident who reportedly fought with his girlfriend earlier on Wednesday. They had not ruled out arson, the newspaper said.

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Fire extinguishers had been installed last month, but only three per floor because the residents could not afford to pay more, the United Daily News, a major newspaper, reported.

A 1995 fire at a nightclub in Taichung, Taiwan's third-largest city, killed 64 people in the country's deadliest such disaster in recent times.

'As seen on TikTok' is the new 'As seen on TV'

By JOSEPH PISANI AP Retail Writer

NEW YORK (AP) — Near the Twizzlers and Sour Patch Kids at a New York candy store are fruit-shaped soft jelly candies that earned a spot on the shelves because they went viral on TikTok.

A flood of videos last year showed people biting into the fruit gummies' plastic casing, squirting artificially-colored jelly from their mouths. Store staffers at the candy store chain It'Sugar urged it to stock up, and the gummies did so well that TikTok became part of the company's sales strategy. The chain now has signs with the app's logo in stores, and goods from TikTok make up 5% to 10% of weekly sales.

"That's an insane number," said Chris Lindstedt, the assistant vice president of merchandising at It'Sugar, which has about 100 locations.

TikTok, an app best known for dancing videos with 1 billion users worldwide, has also become a shopping phenomenon. National chains, hoping to get TikTok's mostly young users into its stores, are setting up TikTok sections, reminiscent of "As Seen On TV" stores that sold products hawked on infomercials.

At Barnes & Noble, tables display signs with #BookTok, a book recommendation hashtag on TikTok that has pushed paperbacks up the bestseller list. Amazon has a section of its site it calls "Internet Famous," with lists of products that anyone who has spent time on TikTok would recognize.

The hashtag #TikTokMadeMeBuyIt has gotten more than 5 billion views on TikTok, and the app has made a grab-bag of products a surprise hit: leggings, purses, cleaners, even feta cheese. Videos of a baked feta pasta recipe sent the salty white cheese flying out of supermarket refrigerators earlier this year.

It's hard to crack the code of what becomes the next TikTok sensation. How TikTok decides who gets to see what remains largely a mystery. Companies are often caught off guard and tend to swoop in after their product has taken off, showering creators with free stuff, hiring them to appear in commercials or buying up ads on TikTok.

"It was a little bit of a head scratcher at first," said Jenny Campbell, the chief marketing officer of Kate Spade, remembering when searches for "heart" spiked on Kate Spade's website earlier this year.

The culprit turned out to be a 60-second clip on TikTok posted by 22-year-old Nathalie Covarrubias. She recorded herself in a parked car gushing about a pink heart-shaped purse she'd just bought. Others copied her video, posting TikToks of themselves buying the bag or trying it on with different outfits. The \$300 heart-shaped purse sold out.

"I couldn't believe it because I wasn't trying to advertise the bag," said Covarrubias, a makeup artist from Salinas, California, who wasn't paid to post the video. "I really was so excited and happy about the purse and how unique it was."

Kate Spade sent Covarrubias free items in exchange for posting another TikTok when the bag was back in stores. (That video was marked as an ad.) It turned what was supposed to be a limited Valentine's Day purse into one sold year round in different colors and fabrics, such as faux fur.

TikTok is a powerful purchasing push for Gen Z because the creators seem authentic, as opposed to Instagram, where the goal is to post the most perfect looking selfie, said Hana Ben-Shabat, the founder of Gen Z Planet. Her advisory firm focuses on the generation born between the late 1990s and 2016, a cohort that practically lives on TikTok.

Users trust the recommendations, she said: "This is a real person, telling me a real story."

Instagram, YouTube and other platforms connected people with friends or random funny videos before marketers realized their selling potential. For TikTok, losing the veneer of authenticity as more ads and ways to shop flood the app could be a risk. If ads are "blatant or awkward, it's more of a problem," said Colin Campbell, an assistant professor of marketing at the University of San Diego.

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Influencers who get paid to shill for brands are getting better at pitching goods to their followers, telling them that even though they get paid, they're recommending a product they actually like. "They feel like they are our friend, even though they aren't," he said.

Channah Myers, a 21-year-old barista from Goodyear, Arizona, bought a pair of \$50 Aerie leggings after seeing several TikTok videos of women saying the cross-banding on the waist gave them a more hour-glass-like figure. "It's funny, I shop religiously at Aerie and I had no idea they existed until I saw them on TikTok," Myers said.

After those Aerie leggings went viral on TikTok in 2020, the teen retailer expanded the same design to biker shorts, tennis skirts and bikini bottoms, all of which can be found by searching "TikTok" on Aerie's website. It wouldn't say how many of the leggings sold.

TikTok, along with other tech companies like Snapchat, is gearing up to challenge Facebook as a social-shopping powerhouse. Shopping on social media sites, known as social commerce, is a \$37 billion market in the U.S., according to eMarketer, mostly coming from Instagram and its parent company Facebook. By the end of 2025, that number is expected to more than double, to \$80 billion.

Last month, TikTok began testing a way for brands to set up shop within the app and send users to checkout on their sites. But TikTok has hinted that more is coming. It may eventually look more like Douyin, TikTok's sister app in China, where products can be bought and sold without leaving the app — just like you can on Facebook and Instagram.

"Over the past year, we've witnessed a new kind of shopping experience come to life that's been driven by the TikTok community," said TikTok General Manager Sandie Hawkins, who works with brands to get them to buy ads on the app and help them boost sales. "We're excited to continue listening to our community and building solutions that help them discover, engage and purchase the products they love."

That includes The Pink Stuff, a British cleaning product that wasn't available in the U.S. last year. That all changed when videos of people using it to scrub rusty pots and greasy countertops went viral on TikTok, pushing the brand to cross the Atlantic. It launched in the U.S. in January on Amazon, with 1.3 million tubs sold monthly, and is getting calls from major stores wanting to stock it, according to Sal Pesce, president and chief operating officer of the The Pink Stuff U.S.

"I've never seen anything like this," he said.

Follow Joseph Pisani on Twitter @ josephpisani

Nursing schools see applications rise, despite COVID burnout

By PAT EATON-ROBB Associated Press

STORRS, Conn. (AP) — Nurses around the U.S. are getting burned out by the COVID-19 crisis and quitting, yet applications to nursing schools are rising, driven by what educators say are young people who see the global emergency as an opportunity and a challenge.

Among them is University of Connecticut sophomore Brianna Monte, a 19-year-old from Mahopac, New York, who had been considering majoring in education but decided on nursing after watching nurses care for her 84-year-grandmother, who was diagnosed last year with COVID-19 and also had cancer.

"They were switching out their protective gear in between every patient, running like crazy trying to make sure all of their patients were attended to," she said. "I had that moment of clarity that made me want to jump right in to health care and join the workers on the front line."

Nationally, enrollment in bachelor's, master's and doctoral nursing programs increased 5.6% in 2020 from the year before to just over 250,000 students, according to the American Association of Colleges of Nursing.

Figures for the current 2021-22 school year won't be available until January, but administrators say they have continued to see a spike in interest.

The University of Michigan nursing school reported getting about 1,800 applications for 150 freshman slots this fall, compared with about 1,200 in 2019.

Marie Nolan, executive vice dean of the Johns Hopkins University School of Nursing in Baltimore, said it

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has seen its biggest number of applicants ever, many of them applying even before a vaccine was available, despite her worries that COVID-19 would scare off students.

Students at those and other schools have been able to gain valuable hands-on experience during the pandemic, doing COVID-19 testing and contact tracing and working at community vaccination clinics.

"We've said to the students, 'This is a career opportunity that you'll never see again,'" Nolan said.

Emma Champlin, a first-year nursing student at Fresno State, said that like many of her classmates, she saw the pandemic as a chance to learn critical-care skills and then apply them. And she is young and her immune system is fine, she said, "so the idea of getting the virus didn't scare me."

"It's just time for us to step in and give it our all and figure out how we can help, because there has to be a new generation and that's got to be us," the 21-year-old said.

The higher enrollment could help ease a nursing shortage that existed even before COVID-19. But it has brought its own problems: The increase, combined with the departure of too many experienced nurses whose job is to help train students, has left many nursing programs without the ability to expand.

The rise is happening even as hospital leaders around the U.S. report that thousands of nurses have quit or retired during the outbreak, many of them exhausted and demoralized because of the pressure of caring for the dying, hostility from patients and families, and the frustration in knowing that many deaths were preventable by way of masks and vaccinations.

Eric Kumor saw many of his nursing colleagues from a COVID-19 unit in Lansing, Michigan, transfer or take other jobs this past spring when the pandemic's third wave began to hit. He followed them out the door in July.

"It was like this mass exodus. Everybody chose their own health and wellness over dealing with another wave," he said.

He said he plans on returning to health care someday, but for now is working at a barbecue joint, where the worst thing that can happen is "burning a brisket."

"I'm not done with nursing yet," he said.

Betty Jo Rocchio, chief nursing officer for Mercy Health, which runs hospitals and clinics in Missouri, Arkansas, Kansas and Oklahoma, said her system has about 8,500 nurses but is losing about 160 each month.

The departures are also taking their toll on nursing education, which relies on clinical instructors and preceptors, the experienced, hands-on nurses who mentor students on the job.

Nursing faculty is expected to shrink by 25% by 2025 across the country as nurses retire or leave because of burnout or other reasons, said Patricia Hurn, the nursing school dean at Michigan.

Mindy Schiebler, a cardiac nurse from Vancouver, Washington, taught nursing students for three years before quitting in 2016. She said she would love to still be teaching but that it's not workable financially. She said she knows nursing professors who work multiple jobs or dip into their retirement savings.

"How long can you subsidize your own job?" she asked. "Nurses will make double what you make in just a few years out of the gate."

Administrators said they would like to see more financial incentives such as tax breaks for instructors and preceptors. Rocchio said it would also help to have national licensing instead of state-by-state requirements, giving health systems more flexibility in training and hiring.

Champlin, the Fresno State student now doing clinical studies in a COVID-19 ward, said the stress, even on students, is sometimes overwhelming. It's physically and mentally tiring to don cumbersome protective equipment every time you enter someone's room and then watch as a tube is inserted down the frightened patient's throat and the person is hooked up to a ventilator.

"I don't even know when it will stop," she said. "Is this the new normal? I think the scariness of it has worn off at this point, and now we're just all exhausted." She confessed: "That has had me reconsider, at times, my career choice."

Hurn said the pandemic has led to a new focus at her school on the mental health of students, leading to the creation of programs such as "Yoga on the Lawn."

"For nursing, you have to develop the skills to be resilient, to adapt to high-strain conditions," she said.

Monte, whose grandmother survived, said she believes the pandemic is waning and hopes to have a long career no matter the challenges.

"They do have this nursing shortage right now, which selfishly is good for me, because I won't have trouble finding a job, wherever I decide to go," she said. "I feel like I won't get burned out, even if we have another national emergency. I feel I'll still be committed to nursing."

Associated Press writer John Seewer in Toledo, Ohio, contributed to this story.

Stewart enters NHRA with fiancée Leah Pruett, Matt Hagan

By JENNA FRYER AP Auto Racing Writer

CONCORD, N.C. (AP) — First came the woman, then the fastest cars in racing.

Tony Stewart, who fell in love with NHRA while tagging along with fiancée Leah Pruett at her races the past two seasons, will be an official part of the sport in 2022. The NASCAR Hall of Fame driver will add two full-time NHRA entries to Tony Stewart Racing next season — a Top Fuel entry for Pruett and a Funny Car for Matt Hagan.

"It's a very unique opportunity to control my own destiny with my almost-husband in a sport I'm absolutely passionate about," Pruett told The Associated Press. "That's an experience and opportunity that nobody would pass up, and I feel like I've been prepping my whole life for something like this — to apply all of my talents to something grand in partnership and alongside somebody sharing the same goals."

Pruett and Hagan currently compete for Don Schumacher Racing, which on Wednesday announced that eight-time Top Fuel champion Tony Schumacher will return to the team next year in a full-time entry and be paired with Pruett's current crew chief.

Stewart followed with his announcement Thursday and said the new NHRA team will operate alongside his sprint car teams in TSR's existing 25,000-square-foot facility in Brownsburg, Indiana. Stewart, co-owner of the NASCAR team Stewart-Haas Racing, has won 27 owner championships in sprint car racing.

"It wasn't until I met Leah and started going to races regularly, where I saw the strategy and the preparation firsthand, that I truly understood it," Stewart told the AP. "I've annoyed everyone in the paddock by asking so many questions, Don Schumacher included, and the more I learned about drag racing, I knew I didn't want to be a spectator. I wanted to have a role and be all in."

Pruett is in her 25th NHRA season, getting into drag racing as an 8-year-old in the junior league. She won the 2010 NHRA Hot Rod Heritage Racing Series championship in the Nostalgia Funny Car class and has spent the last eight years advancing through Top Fuel.

The 33-year-old has done double duty for several years, also competing in the NHRA Factory Stock Showdown. She won the 2018 title for Schumacher.

Hagan, who has driven for Schumacher since 2009, is the three-time and reigning Funny Car champion. He currently leads the Funny Car standings with three races remaining in the season. He has 39 event victories.

"Don Schumacher has been a huge chapter in my racing career and we've won a whole lot of trophies and multiple championships together," Hagan said. "This next chapter with Tony Stewart is one I'm excited for. I'm ready to go racing. I'm jumping into this new program with two feet and I'm confident in the package we're bringing into the 2022 season with TSR."

Because TSR will be a Schumacher customer, Stewart is expected to be a Dodge team in NHRA but he did not make a manufacturer announcement Thursday. Stewart-Haas Racing is a Ford team in NASCAR and Ford also competes in NHRA and has helped Stewart learn to drive a dragster since he became infatuated with the racing series.

Stewart and Pruett are set to be married next month and the three-time NASCAR champion said they'd forego a honeymoon to be ready for the NHRA season opener Feb. 17-20 at Auto Club Raceway in Pomona, California.

Neither expects any tensions to form in this new chapter of their relationship, which Pruett clearly de-

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ined: "I am Tony Stewart Racing's Top Fuel driver."

"I think it will be fine, I mean, it's not going to be flatline, there are going to be pulses in it because we have hearts and they beat," Pruett said. "But we know this will work. Seeing things that have happened within other series and teams and tracks, I've been able to understand his thought process of solving problems and coming up with solutions.

"It made me be like, 'That's somebody I would love to work with, knowing where his head and heart are.' Moving forward and working together, this isn't jumping into something unknown, I've seen how he works firsthand."

Stewart said he and Pruett have barely discussed how to manage their new working relationship.

"I have an understanding of what has to happen from the professional side, and the racing side is the racing side," Stewart said. "You don't bring the professional stuff to the personal side, and vice versa. Leah is a smart woman, she's a smart businesswoman, and she understands that there has to be a difference between owner and driver, and I don't think it creates an unhealthy environment for me to be the car owner and her the driver.

"I don't feel like this is going to put us relationship-wise in any type of bind or predicament. We have no reason not to get along."

More AP auto racing: <https://apnews.com/hub/auto-racing> and https://twitter.com/AP_Sports

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 lava has partially or completely destroyed more than 1,600 buildings, about half of them houses, officials said, though prompt evacuations have so far prevented any deaths. Around 7,000 people have had to abandon their homes, 300 of them Thursday.

"This is definitely the most serious eruption in Europe of the past 100 years," Canary Islands President Ángel Víctor Torres said.

"The only good news is that...so far, nobody has been hurt," he said.

The flow from three rivers of molten rock broadened to almost 1.8 kilometers (just over a mile), the La Palma government said, but their advance has slowed to a crawl.

Hard, black lava now covers 674 hectares (1,665 acres) on the western side of the island, authorities said, though most of la Palma is unaffected.

Authorities advised locals against traveling by car because volcanic ash was ankle-deep in some places. The volcano's plume was 2,600 meters (about 8,500 feet) high as of Thursday.

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.

The AP Interview: Kerry says world short of climate goal

By ELLEN KNICKMEYER Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — Crucial U.N. climate talks next month are likely to fall 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 Saudi Arabia as he pushes for more last-minute pledges before settling in Glasgow for two weeks of talks. "We have a lot of things to still come across the transom. And that will decide where we are overall," Kerry said.

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.

While Kerry lauded Western countries for their emission cutting efforts and plans, the U.N. official said that it's not enough and that developed countries will need to do more.

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

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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.

AP Science Writer Seth Borenstein contributed from Washington.

This story has deleted an incorrect reference to the world warming nearly 2 degrees Fahrenheit since the 2015 Paris accord. The warming has occurred since the mid-19th century.

US wholesale prices rose record 8.6% over 12 months

By MARTIN CRUTSINGER AP Economics Writer

WASHINGTON (AP) — Inflation at the wholesale level rose 8.6% in September compared to a year ago, the largest advance since the 12-month change was first calculated in 2010.

The Labor Department reported Thursday that the monthly increase in its producer price index, which measures inflationary pressures before they reach consumers, was 0.5% for September compared to a 0.7% gain in August.

The 8.6% rise for the 12 months ending in September compared to an 8.3% increase for the 12 months ending in August, which had been the previous record 12-month gain.

On Wednesday, the government reported that inflation at the retail level rose 0.4% in September with its consumer price index up 5.4% over the past 12 months, matching the fastest pace since 2008.

The jump in inflation this year reflects higher prices for food and energy and a number of other items from furniture to autos as the pandemic has snarled supply chains and demand has outstripped supply.

The report on wholesale prices showed that core inflation at the wholesale level, excluding volatile energy and food, was up 0.2% in September from August and was 6.8% higher over the past 12 months.

Almost 80% of the overall increase in wholesale prices last month was attributed to a 1.3% rise in the price of goods, the largest increase since May. In September, 40% of the jump in goods prices reflected rising energy prices. Price increases for services rose a smaller 0.2%

Food costs at the wholesale level rose 2% in September while energy prices were up 2.8%, the biggest jump since a 5% surge in March.

On Wednesday, President Joe Biden took actions in an effort to address the supply chain problems including announcing that the Port of Los Angeles would begin operating 24 hours a day, seven days a week to clear bottlenecks at one of America's largest ports.

Economists said that the jump in wholesale and retail prices reflected impacts of the pandemic as strong demand is running up against supply chain problems.

"The demand impact will fade further over coming months," said Rubeela Farooqi, chief U.S. economist at High Frequency Economics. "But there is a risk of more persistent headwinds from broken supply chains that could keep goods prices and inflation high for longer than expected."

Minutes released Wednesday of the Federal Reserve's September meeting provided further indications that the central bank is preparing to start pulling back on its \$120 billion in monthly bond purchases, possibly at its next meeting in November, as the first step in unwinding the extraordinary support the central bank has been providing the economy.

Prince William: Before travelling to space, save the planet

By KHADIJA KOTHIA Associated Press

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LONDON (AP) — Britain's Prince William has criticized some of the world's richest men for using their wealth to fund a new space race and space tourism rather than trying to fix the problems on Earth instead.

William voiced his disapproval in an interview with the BBC aired Thursday, a day after the former "Star Trek" actor William Shatner became the oldest man to fly to space, in a rocket funded by Amazon founder Jeff Bezos.

"We need some of the world's greatest brains and minds fixed on trying to repair this planet, not trying to find the next place to go and live," said William, who is second-in-line to the British throne.

On Wednesday, the 90-year-old Shatner, who is best known for playing Captain James T. Kirk in the 1960s television series "Star Trek," briefly flew into space with Bezos' space travel company, Blue Origin. Billionaires Elon Musk and Richard Branson are also pumping resources into their own space ambitions.

Asked whether he would like to become a space tourist, William said "I have absolutely no interest in going that high."

"I've been up to 65,000 feet once in a plane, that was truly terrifying," said William, who served in the Royal Air Force as a helicopter pilot. "That's high enough."

William, who is formally known as the Duke of Cambridge, was speaking about climate change ahead of his inaugural Earthshot environmental prize awards ceremony on Sunday and two weeks before a U.N. climate summit starts in the Scottish city of Glasgow at the end of the month.

During the star-studded ceremony at Alexandra Palace in London, which will see five sustainability projects win 1 million pounds (\$1.35 million) each, William will be joined by his wife Kate, Duchess of Cambridge. The awards take their inspiration from the Moonshot challenge that President John F. Kennedy set for the U.S. in 1961 to land humans on the moon by the end of the decade — a challenge that was met eight years later.

The winners will be chosen by a committee including veteran broadcaster David Attenborough, actor Cate Blanchett and World Trade Organization director Ngozi Okonjo-Iweala.

William, who has been immersed in environmental issues all his life through the strong interest of his father, Prince Charles, and his late grandfather, Prince Philip, voiced his worries about the world his own children will inherit.

He said it would be an "absolute disaster" if his 8-year-old eldest son Prince George, who he said is "acutely aware" of how resources impact the planet, was having to raise the same issues in 30 years' time.

"Young people now are growing up where their futures are basically threatened the whole time," William said. "It's very unnerving and it's very you know, anxiety-making."

Echoing comments from his father, William urged world leaders to put words into action at the U.K. climate summit in Glasgow, known as COP26.

"I think for COP to communicate very clearly and very honestly what the problems are and what the solutions are going to be, is critical," William said.

The summit is scheduled to take place Oct. 31-Nov. 12. It is being billed by many environmentalists as the world's last chance to turn the tide in the battle against climate change.

Follow all of AP's climate coverage at <https://apnews.com/hub/climate-change>

A more comfortable goodbye? Vets bring pet euthanasia home

By LEANNE ITALIE Associated Press

NEW YORK (AP) — Clarence the giant schnauzer came into Penny Wagner's life as a puppy nearly eight years ago, at a traumatic time for her family.

She and her husband, Steve, had recently lost their 21-year-old daughter in a car accident. Soon after, their other child went off to college and Steve returned to work, leaving Penny home alone with her grief. That's when they brought Clarence into the family.

Earlier this year, the beloved pet became critically ill with advanced kidney disease. Their veterinarian wouldn't allow them to stay with him until the end at the clinic due to COVID protocols, so they decided

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to have him put down at home in Albuquerque, New Mexico, in a favorite laundry room spot.

A vet working with a company called Pet Loss at Home arrived and greeted Clarence and the Wagners. She gave the couple all the time they needed before administering two injections, one to relax the 90-pound dog and the other to let him go. The couple cuddled him as they cried, and their other dog, Cooper, was able to say goodbye as well.

"He'll always have a special place in my heart," said a tearful Wagner. "I think he was very comforted by the fact that he was home and that he was with loved ones up to the moment we said goodbye."

Private services that offer home euthanasia for pets have been busier than ever since the pandemic led to restrictions on humans inside veterinary practices and animal hospitals. But home euthanasia isn't for everybody. It tends to cost more, and some pet owners believe it is unduly upsetting to small children and other pets in their households.

The vast majority of pet euthanasia is still done in a clinical setting, though some vets have begun to offer end-of-life care at home as part of their practices.

For Wagner, the human touch was a gift. The same is true of Diane Brisson, 72, in Pinellas Park, Florida. Brisson used Lap of Love when it came time to bid farewell to Champagne, her 12-year-old Yorkie, last December. Champagne was the only dog her mother, since passed, enjoyed. Champagne fell critically ill with pancreatitis and other organ failure, and Brisson couldn't bring herself to leave him at the vet alone at the end.

"I couldn't have asked for anything more peaceful," she said.

Lap of Love allowed her to have a neighbor with her for support. The neighbor took photos as Champagne sat in Brisson's lap in a favorite chair, the only piece of furniture she brought from her hometown in Massachusetts when she moved to Florida. The vet waited patiently until Brisson was ready to let go. The doctor placed Champagne in a small wicker basket with a white satin pillow and a lavender satin blanket after he passed to take him away for cremation.

"I stayed with him for about 20, 25 minutes and said, 'OK, you're going to be with nanny now. You're going to watch over me with her and you're going to take care of her up there, and she's going to take care of you,'" Brisson tearfully recalled.

Lap of Love returned Champagne's ashes to Brisson. She plans to have them scattered at sea back in Massachusetts, along with her own ashes when the time comes.

Dani McVety, a hospice veterinarian in Tampa, Florida, founded Lap of Love in 2009. She considered her ability to help people manage grief to be rare among vets.

"A lot of times doctors aren't necessarily comfortable with that because they haven't been trained to do it," she said.

She and her senior medical director, vet Mary Gardner, teach a course on end-of-life care at the University of Florida College of Veterinary Medicine.

"When I first started Lap of Love, I figured it would be a part-time job. I don't think any of us knew that it could actually be a full-time thing where there would be enough people in any given area that would want this help," said McVety.

Her company operates in 35 states with more than 230 vets.

In general veterinary practices, McVety said, euthanasia costs vary widely, depending on the services sought. It can be as inexpensive as under \$100. At an emergency hospital, it may be more. Like Pet Loss at Home, Lap of Love's fees vary based on location. In Tampa, for instance, Lap of Love charges about \$300. Each client receives a clay paw print.

Most clients pay for the vet to take their pets for cremation. Others drive there themselves or elect to bury their pets at home.

After Clarence was gone, the vet who assisted the Wagners sent a condolence card with marigold seeds inside, suggesting they plant them in the dog's honor. They did, and sent her a photo when the flowers were in bloom.

Pet Loss at Home has served more than 35,000 families since 2003. It operates with about 75 doctors in 50 metropolitan areas, including Seattle, San Francisco, Denver, Houston and Minneapolis. The pandemic

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has caused a dramatic increase in business, said Rob Twyning, who founded the company with his wife, Karen, a veterinarian.

"Right now the phone is ringing off the hook," said Twyning, in Lake Geneva, Wisconsin. "We have so many calls that we just can't help everybody."

Pet Loss at Home charges anywhere from \$300 to \$600 or more, depending on the city and the drive time.

"It's about comfort," he said. "At home, your pet is familiar with the smells and sounds. A vet clinic is filled with other pets' smells. It's filled with other noises, like barking dogs. It's typically a shiny table where the pet will be elevated. A lot of the time, it's not a veterinarian. It's a technician. At home, you can take your own time."

Twyning's vets serve mostly dogs and cats but have handled other species too, from snakes to parrots.

In Marietta, Georgia, 73-year-old Linda Sheffield went in a different direction last year when her rescue poodle, Timmy, fell ill with a collapsed larynx. She consulted animal communicator Nancy Mello, though she didn't let on that Timmy had been diagnosed and was on strong medication. With Timmy showing no outward symptoms during four or five video sessions, Sheffield made the decision to put him down.

"She told me Timmy didn't have long to live," Sheffield said. "I'm very skeptical but she claimed that he told her, 'I can't breathe, I can't breathe,' over and over again. I thought the medicine was really working."

Sheffield, a veteran dog rescuer who takes in senior pets, offered Timmy one last car ride. She drove him to her vet, who met them outside and administered the euthanasia drugs in the car as she held him on her lap. She then placed him in his bed on the seat beside her and drove him to the crematorium herself.

"This is the vet that he knew, who cared for him," Sheffield said. "He loved to go for car rides and he got to be with me."

Follow Leanne Italie on Twitter at <http://twitter.com/litalie>

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 interacting with certain groups, such as those who are deaf or have hearing difficulties, there are also clear masks or cloth masks with clear plastic panels. 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?

US unemployment claims fall to lowest level since pandemic

By CHRISTOPHER RUGABER AP Economics Writer

WASHINGTON (AP) — The number of Americans applying for unemployment benefits fell to its lowest level since the pandemic began, a sign the job market is still improving even as hiring has slowed in the past two months.

Unemployment claims dropped 36,000 to 293,000 last week, the second straight drop, the Labor Department said Thursday. That's the smallest number of people to apply for benefits since the week of March 14, 2020, when the pandemic intensified, and the first time claims have dipped below 300,000. Applications for jobless aid, which generally track the pace of layoffs, have fallen steadily since last spring as many businesses, struggling to fill jobs, have held onto their workers.

The decline in layoffs comes amid an otherwise unusual job market. Hiring has slowed in the past two months, even as companies and other employers have posted a near-record number of open jobs. Businesses are struggling to find workers as about three million people who lost jobs and stopped looking for work since the pandemic have yet to resume their job searches. Economists hoped more people would find work in September as schools reopened, easing child care constraints, and enhanced unemployment aid ended nationwide.

But the pickup didn't happen, with employers adding just 194,000 jobs last month. In a bright spot, the unemployment rate fell to 4.8% from 5.2%, though some of that decline occurred because many of those out of work stopped searching for jobs, and were no longer counted as unemployed. The proportion of women working or looking for work fell in September, likely because of difficulties finding child care or because of schools disrupted by COVID-19 outbreaks.

At the same time, Americans are quitting their jobs in record numbers, with about 3% of workers doing so in August. Workers have been particularly likely to leave their jobs at restaurants, bars, and hotels, possibly spurred by fear of the delta variant of COVID-19, which was still spreading rapidly in August.

Other workers likely quit to take advantage of higher wages offered by businesses with open positions. Average hourly pay rose at a healthy 4.6% in September from a year earlier, and for restaurant workers wage gains in the past year have topped 10%.

The number of people continuing to receive unemployment aid has also fallen sharply, mostly as two emergency jobless aid programs have ended. In the week ending Sept. 25, the latest data available, 3.6 million people received some sort of jobless aid, down sharply from 4.2 million in the previous week. A year ago, nearly 25 million people were receiving benefits.

The emergency programs provided unemployment payments for the first time to the self-employed and gig workers, and those who were out of work for more than six months. More than 7 million Americans lost weekly financial support when those two programs expired Sept. 6. An extra \$300 in federal jobless aid also expired that week.

Many business executives and Republican politicians said the extra \$300 was discouraging those out of work from taking jobs. Yet in about half the states, the additional checks were cutoff as early as mid-June, and those states have not seen faster job growth than states that kept the benefits.

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 that will be the country's first of the pandemic.

At stake in the Oct. 31 polls will be how Japan faces a potential coronavirus resurgence and revives its battered economy, and whether Kishida's government can emerge from the shadow of the nearly nine years that his conservative party have already held power — which some describe as dominating to the point of muzzling diverse views.

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Speaking Thursday with reporters, Kishida sought to depict his governing party as the only one capable of protecting Japan from the security threats in the region.

"Opposition parties cannot even reach consensus on the Japan-U.S. security alliance and the Self-Defense Force, and we cannot let them run this country," he said. "The upcoming election is about choosing the future of Japan."

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

"I would like the people to choose who can show the future vision of a post-corona society," he added.

Kishida 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.

Japan's new leader, tasked with rallying support for the incumbent party, has promised to pursue a politics of "trust and empathy."

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.

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 the government of Shinzo Abe — the premier preceding Suga from the same ruling party.

After Tadamori Oshima, the speaker of the house, announced the legislature's 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 Liberal Democratic Party further to the right while becoming 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 government after the brief rule of the now-defunct Democratic Party of Japan in 2009-2012. But weaker support for Suga, under whom the ruling party lost three parliamentary by-elections and a local vote this year, might create an opening for opposition contenders.

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

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

He said his party will propose economic policies that seek higher pay for workers.

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

Today in History

By The Associated Press undefined

Today in History

Today is Friday, Oct. 15, the 288th day of 2021. There are 77 days left in the year.

Today's Highlight in History:

On Oct. 15, 1991, despite sexual harassment allegations by Anita Hill, the Senate narrowly confirmed the nomination of Clarence Thomas to the U.S. Supreme Court, 52-48.

On this date:

In 1783, the first manned balloon flight took place in Paris as Jean-Francois Pilatre de Rozier ascended in a basket attached to a tethered Montgolfier hot-air balloon, rising to about 75 feet.

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In 1928, the German dirigible Graf Zeppelin landed in Lakehurst, N.J., completing its first commercial flight across the Atlantic.

In 1945, the former premier of Vichy France, Pierre Laval, was executed for treason.

In 1946, Nazi war criminal Hermann Goering (GEH'-reeng) fatally poisoned himself hours before he was to have been executed.

In 1954, Hurricane Hazel made landfall on the Carolina coast as a Category 4 storm; Hazel was blamed for some 1,000 deaths in the Caribbean, 95 in the U.S. and 81 in Canada.

In 1966, President Lyndon B. Johnson signed a bill creating the U.S. Department of Transportation. The revolutionary Black Panther Party was founded by Huey Newton and Bobby Seale in Oakland, California.

In 1976, in the first debate of its kind between vice-presidential nominees, Democrat Walter F. Mondale and Republican Bob Dole faced off in Houston.

In 2001, Bethlehem Steel Corp. filed for Chapter 11 bankruptcy.

In 2003, eleven people were killed when a Staten Island ferry slammed into a maintenance pier. (The ferry's pilot, who'd blacked out at the controls, later pleaded guilty to eleven counts of manslaughter.)

In 2009, a report of a 6-year-old Colorado boy trapped inside a runaway helium balloon engrossed the nation before the boy, Falcon Heene (HEE'-nee), was found safe at home in what turned out to be a hoax. (Falcon's parents served up to a month in jail.)

In 2015, President Barack Obama abandoned his pledge to end America's longest war, announcing plans to keep at least 5,500 U.S. troops in Afghanistan at the end of his term in 2017 and hand the conflict off to his successor.

In 2017, actress and activist Alyssa Milano tweeted that women who had been sexually harassed or assaulted should write "Me too" as a status; within hours, tens of thousands had taken up the #MeToo hashtag (using a phrase that had been introduced 10 years earlier by social activist Tarana Burke.)

Ten years ago: Iran's Foreign Ministry dismissed U.S. accusations that Tehran was involved in a plot to assassinate the Saudi ambassador in Washington, saying the claims had no "legal logic." The Texas Rangers finished off the Detroit Tigers to become the American League's first repeat champion in a decade with a 15-5 win in Game 6 of the ALCS.

Five years ago: Republican Donald Trump sought to undermine the legitimacy of the U.S. presidential election, pressing unsubstantiated claims that the contest was "rigged" against him. Secretary of State John Kerry announced that Yemen's Houthi (HOO'-thee) rebels had released two U.S. citizens as part of a complicated diplomatic arrangement.

One year ago: With their debate in Miami canceled following the president's coronavirus infection, President Donald Trump and Democrat Joe Biden squared off in dueling televised town halls. Biden hedged on whether he would require all Americans to be vaccinated against COVID-19. Responding to a New York Times report citing tax returns showing he had business debts exceeding \$400 million, Trump said, "\$400 million is a peanut," and insisted that he didn't owe money to Russia or to any "sinister people." YouTube said it was taking more steps to limit QAnon and other baseless conspiracy theories that could lead to violence. The sobering musical "Jagged Little Pill," which plumbed Alanis Morissette's 1995 album to tell a story of an American family spiraling out of control, earned 15 Tony Award nominations as Broadway took the first steps to celebrate a pandemic-shortened season.

Today's Birthdays: Singer Barry McGuire is 86. Actor Linda Lavin is 84. Rock musician Don Stevenson (Moby Grape) is 79. Baseball Hall of Famer Jim Palmer is 76. Singer-musician Richard Carpenter is 75. Actor Victor Banerjee is 75. Former tennis player Roscoe Tanner is 70. Singer Tito Jackson is 68. Actor-comedian Larry Miller is 68. Actor Jere Burns is 67. Movie director Mira Nair is 64. Britain's Duchess of York, Sarah Ferguson, is 62. Chef Emeril Lagasse (EM'-ur-ul leh-GAH'-see) is 62. Rock musician Mark Reznicek (REHZ'-nih-chehk) is 59. Singer Eric Benet (beh-NAY') is 55. Actor Vanessa Marcil is 53. Singer-actor-TV host Paige Davis is 52. Country singer Kimberly Schlapman (Little Big Town) is 52. Actor Dominic West is 52. R&B singer Ginuwine (JIHN'-yoo-wyn) is 51. Actor Devon Gummersall is 43. Actor Chris Olivero is 42. Christian singer-actor Jaci (JAK'-ee) Velasquez is 42. Actor Brandon Jay McLaren is 41. R&B singer Keyshia Cole is 40. Actor Vincent Martella is 29. Actor Bailee Madison is 22.