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Upcoming Events

Thursday, Oct. 28

All State Chorus & Orchestra at Rapid City Civic Center

Friday, Oct. 29

All State Chorus & Orchestra at Rapid City Civic Center

Downtown Trick or Treat, 4 p.m. to 6 p.m.

Methodist Church Trunk or Treat, 5:30 p.m. to 7 p.m.

Saturday, Oct. 30

All State Chorus & Orchestra at Rapid City Civic Center

Pumpkinstakes Oral Interp at Watertown

Tuesday, Nov. 2

Brookings Novice Debate

Volleyball Region 1A Tourney

NCRC Test at GHS, 8:30 a.m. to noon

Thursday, Nov. 4

Aberdeen Novice Online Debate

Volleyball Region 1A Tourney

Bowdle LDE

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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Allstate Chorus & Orchestra

Allstate Chorus is a yearly event where students are selected from schools in South Dakota to come together and learn songs to sing in a state choir. This is a great honor to be selected to participate in this event. Students spend time outside of school rehearsing and on their own to get the musical selections down before the event and then come together for rehearsals with the other schools from the state.

This year Allstate Chorus and Orchestra is being held in Rapid City at the Monument Center. The Groton Students selected to participate this year are: Cadance Tullis, Ashtyn Bahr, Shaylee Peterson, Camryn Kurtz, Elliana Weismantel, Rebecca Poor, Carter Barse, and Axel Warrington.



Inform. Enlighten. Illuminate.

South Dakota outsourced management and auditing of COVID relief grants

Bart Pfankuch

South Dakota News Watch

The state Bureau of Finance and Management is not conducting its own auditing of individual grant applications or grants awarded under the Coronavirus Relief Fund, according to Colin Keeler, director of financial systems in the department.

The state hired an independent firm to manage both the application and award process that distributed millions in federal funds aimed at helping South Dakota businesses and healthcare facilities stay afloat during the worst of the pandemic.

A second firm was hired by the state to conduct monitoring of grants that have been awarded.

The second firm, Eide Bailly, using employees based in Nevada, set up a Fraud Inquiry Center website where anyone can file complaints or raise questions about potential abuse of the program. So far, based on use of the website, 11 complaints are under review about roughly 30 grants, Keeler said.

Keeler said the grant process was outsourced because the state was under a very tight timeline to distribute the federal COVID relief money and was able to use a firm that has experience in managing the programs.

To date, the state Coronavirus Relief Fund program has distributed more than \$490 million in payments to 5,833 applicants that included small businesses, small nonprofits, acute healthcare providers, community providers, safety-net organizations and startups.

The small business portion of the program distributed the largest portion of funds. As of September 2021, the small-business program had distributed more than \$302 million to 4,760 applicants.

The larger contract was for a maximum of \$11 million with Guidehouse consulting of McLean, Va., for overall management of the COVID-19 relief grant programs. As part of its work, Keeler said Guidehouse was responsible for ensuring that paperwork filed by grant applicants was accurate and appropriate.

In a separate contract, the state is paying up to \$980,000 to Eide Bailly to handle complaints of possible fraud or abuse of the program and to perform a random audit of paid grants in all four sections of the relief program.

The three main criteria that made small businesses eligible for state relief funds were that the business be located in South Dakota, be registered with the state or pay sales taxes, and show cash-flow losses of 15% or more due to the pandemic in two separate time periods in 2020, from March to August and September to November. Net losses supported by the state coronavirus grants were calculated after

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other COVID aid, including PPP loans, were factored in as income to prevent double-dipping from grant programs.

Citing privacy laws, Keeler declined to discuss or release paperwork on any specific individual grants or applications.

For the small nonprofit, small business and small start-up portion of the program, the firm will review the "eligibility determination, calculation of awarded funds as to amount, as well as the reasonableness of the recipient's assertion that awards were used in accordance" with the state program guidelines. The firm said it will review all grants over \$500,000, a random selection of 80 grants between \$100,000 and \$499,999 and a random selection of 115 grants under \$100,000. All told, the firm will randomly review about 270 of the grants, or about 4.8% of the 5,621 grants in that section of the larger relief program.

The firm will also respond to any complaints filed through the state's program website that allows anyone to file a report through a website link called "Report Suspected Fraud, Waste and Abuse."

In addition to responses to the fraud website, auditors have found multiple other errors among applicants, Keeler said. As of late September, auditors found 30 grant awards that were underpaid by the state and had identified 143 applications that led to an estimated \$4 million in overpayments.

The state so far has resolved 79 of those cases, with a total grant value of about \$2.2 million, including about \$500,000 that has been paid back to the state, Keeler said.

"Our objective is to try to correct these applications where we can as opposed to having them pay money back," he said. "Most of these are simply mistakes ... we're not calling these fraud because we don't know the intent of the mistake."

So far, no criminal cases have been filed pertaining to the grant application or receipt processes, Keeler said.

Keeler said the reviews of grants and applications did not include site visits to businesses that were awarded grants.

"It was paperwork and phone calls and emails," he said. "There was nobody on the ground running around knocking on doors or anything."

Work by both contractors is expected to be completed by Dec. 31, 2021.

Keeler said that while the grant-distribution program was not perfect, he has a high comfort level that the taxpayer money distributed through the COVID relief programs in South Dakota was done efficiently and with sufficient oversight.

"We really tried to be as careful as we could and do it right, and I think if you look at how other states did this, compared to how we did this, I think you'd find that ours is a lot more careful and intentional," Keeler said. "We think that South Dakotans are inherently quite honest, which is maybe why we haven't seen so far a ton of things we need to look deeper into."

Gov. Noem Protects State Employees from Federal Vaccine Mandates Announces Plans to Protect Private Workers as Well

PIERRE, S.D. – Governor Kristi Noem signed Executive Order 2021-14, protecting state employees from President Biden’s federal vaccine mandates. She also released this video announcing her decision.

“South Dakota is fighting back against President Biden’s illegal vaccine mandates,” said Governor Kristi Noem. “Our state has many contracts with the federal government, and President Biden is attempting to use those contracts to force state employees to be vaccinated against their will. My executive order will protect their rights to medical and religious exemptions under any federal vaccine mandates. I am already talking with legislators about extending these protections to private employees through legislation as well.”

For the medical exemption, employees need a written statement from a physician stating that the COVID-19 vaccination is contraindicated for medical reasons.

For the religious exemption, a form will be made available by the Bureau of Human Resources that shall read in full, “I, [insert person’s full name], dissent and object to receiving a COVID-19 vaccine on religious grounds, which includes moral, ethical, and philosophical beliefs or principles.”

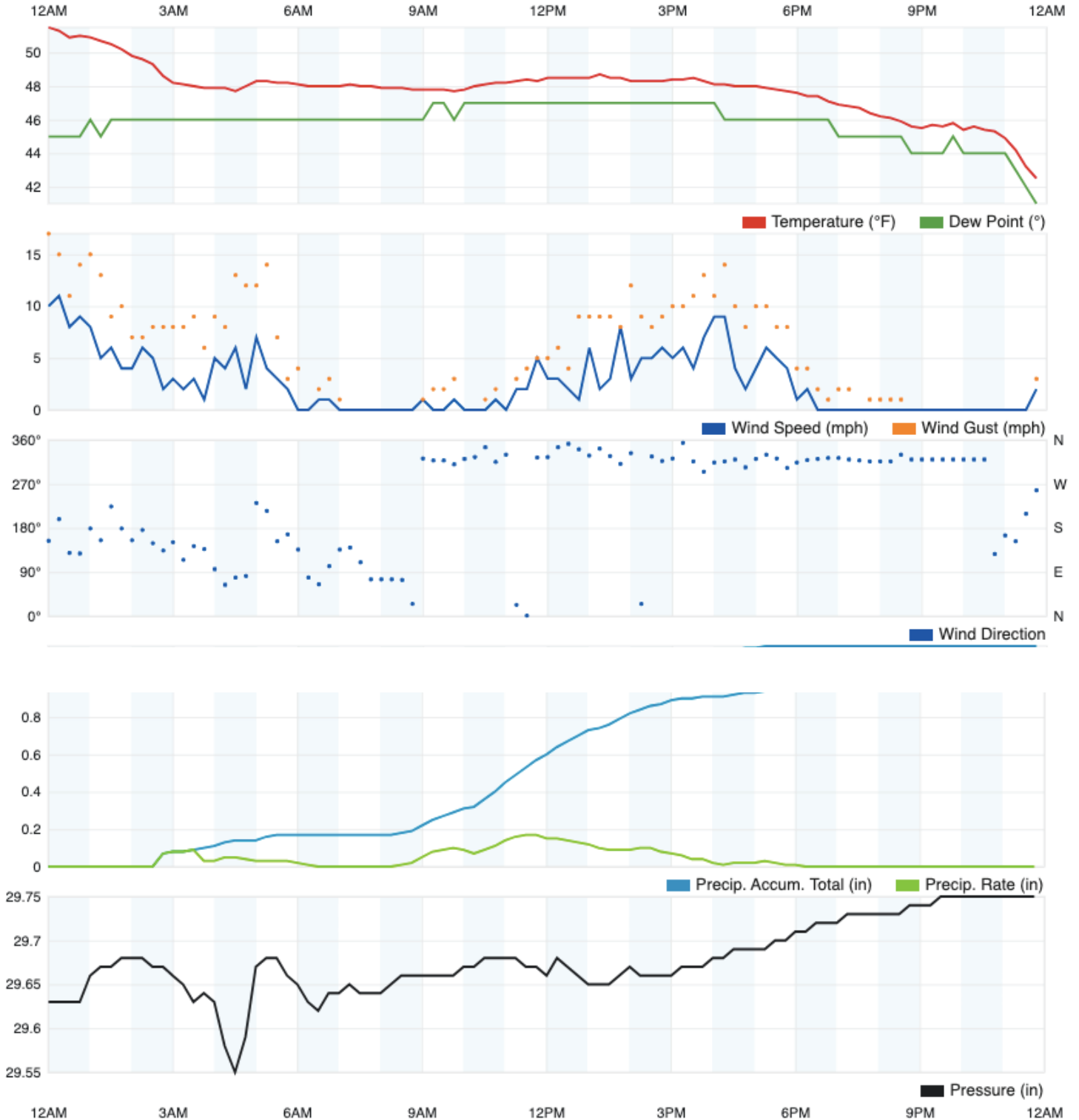
Due to established precedent, this Executive Order does not apply to service members with the South Dakota National Guard who must meet federal readiness responsibilities for deployment.

During the 2022 legislative session, Governor Noem will work with the legislature to make these protections for state employees permanent, and to extend similar health and religious liberty protections to employees of private businesses who adopted mandatory COVID-19 vaccination policies.

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Yesterday's Groton Weather Graphs



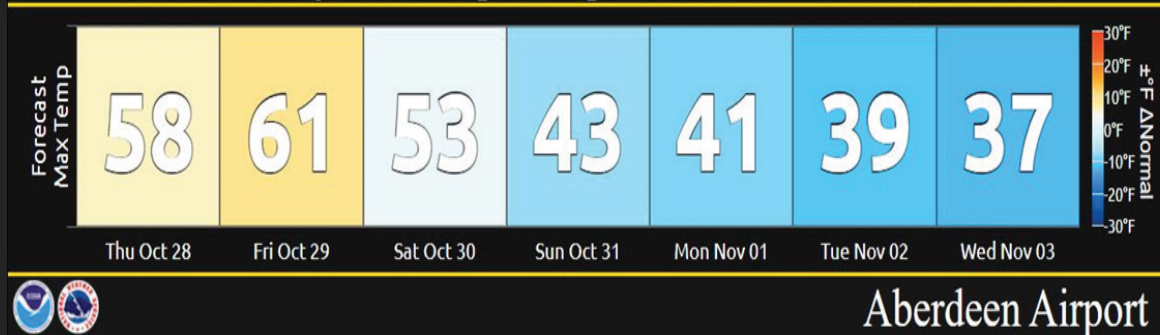
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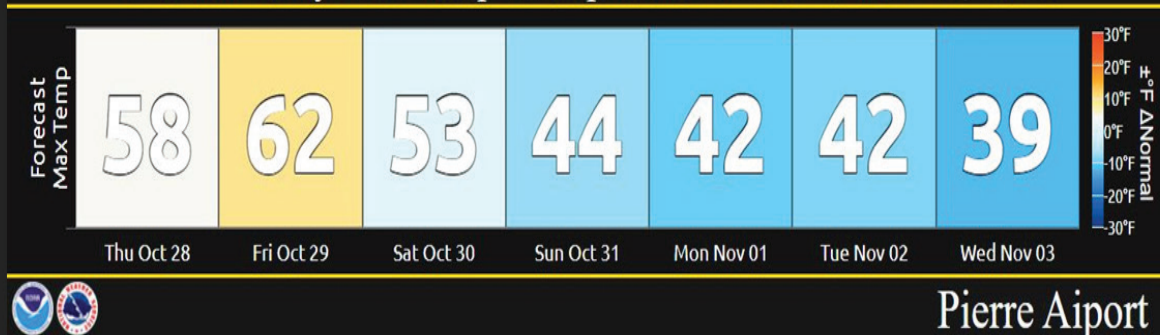
Today	Tonight	Friday	Friday Night	Saturday
				
Sunny then Sunny and Breezy	Mostly Clear	Sunny	Mostly Clear	Sunny then Mostly Sunny and Breezy
High: 56 °F	Low: 30 °F	High: 58 °F	Low: 36 °F	High: 55 °F

Temperatures Taking The Plunge After Saturday

Forecast Daily Max Temp vs Departure for Oct 28-Nov 03, 2021



Forecast Daily Max Temp vs Departure for Oct 28-Nov 03, 2021



Just a couple more days of relatively warm temperatures. Then a strong cold front sweeping through the region by the end of the day Saturday will drop the hammer on temperatures for the second half of the weekend and on through the first half of the upcoming work week. Note the below normal blue color getting darker and darker heading into day 7 of the forecast.

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Today in Weather History

October 28, 1989: The season's first snowfall brought much-needed moisture to the Black Hills and portions of western South Dakota as up to nearly a foot of snow fell in the higher elevations. The storms caused motorists some problems. A build-up of ice and slush in combination with blowing snow prompted the State Highway Patrol to close the portion of Interstate-90 from Rapid City to Wall. Numerous multiple vehicle accidents were reported.

October 28, 1993: Very strong northwest winds gusting to 50 to 60 mph raked South Dakota. A new home under construction southwest of DeSmet collapsed in the winds. Reported peak winds included 56 mph at Huron, 55 mph at Rapid City, and 52 mph at Sioux Falls.

1846: In the spring of 1846, a group of nearly 90 emigrants left Springfield, Illinois, and headed west to California. The Donner party arrived at the Great Salt Lake and still needed to cross the Sierra Nevada Mountains late in the season. On this day, a heavy snowfall blocked the pass, thus trapping the emigrants. Only 45 of the original 89 emigrants reached California the following year.

1999: A Super Typhoon, known as Cyclone 05B reached the equivalent of the Category 5 hurricane on this day. This storm is the strongest tropical cyclone ever record in the North Indian Ocean. Cyclone 05B hit the Indian State of Odisha near the city of Bhubaneswar on October 29. An estimated 10,000 individuals would die from this cyclone, and 1.67 million people were left homeless.

1936 - The temperature at Layton, NJ, dipped to 9 above zero to establish a state record for the month of October. (The Weather Channel)

1971 - A severe early season blizzard raged across the Plateau Region and Rocky Mountain Region. Heavy snow blocked railroads and interstate highways, and record cold accompanied the storm. Lander WY received 27 inches of snow, and the temperature at Big Piney WY plunged to 15 degrees below zero. (David Ludlum)

1987 - Thunderstorms over the San Joaquin Valley of California produced three-quarters of an inch of rain in thirty minutes at Placerville, and caused numerous power outages due to lightning. Rain began to diminish in the northeastern U.S., but some flooding continued in Vermont, eastern New York and northern New Jersey. One inch rains in Vermont clogged culverts and sewers with fallen leaves, resulting in erosion of dirt roads. (Storm Data) (The National Weather Summary)

1988 - Arctic cold invaded the north central U.S. Valentine, NE, dipped to 8 degrees, and Cutbank, MT, reported a morning low of one degree above zero. The temperature at Estes Park CO dipped to 15 degrees, but then soared thirty degrees in less than thirty minutes. (The National Weather Summary)

1989 - A storm crossing the western U.S. produced 10 to 20 inches of snow across northern and central Wyoming, with 22 inches reported at Burgess Junction. Seven cities in the Lower Ohio Valley and the Upper Great Lakes Region reported record high temperatures for the date as readings again warmed into the 70s. Alpena MI reported a record high of 75 degrees. (The National Weather Summary) (Storm Data)

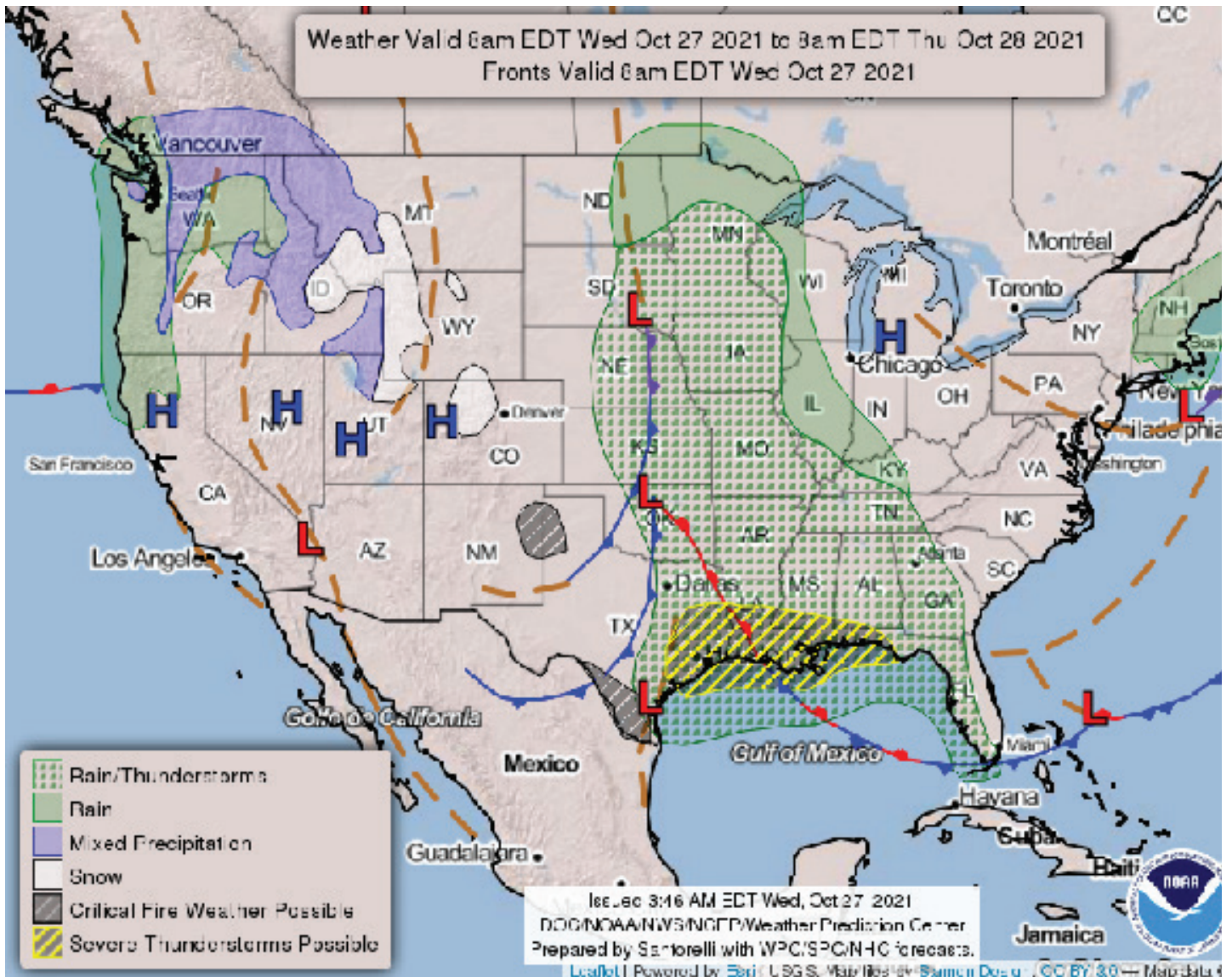
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Yesterday's Groton Weather Today's Info

High Temp: 51.5 °F at Midnight
Low Temp: 42.5 °F at 11:59 PM
Wind: 17 mph at Midnight
Precip: 0.94

Record High: 82° in 1937
Record Low: -6° in 1919
Average High: 52°F
Average Low: 28°F
Average Precip in Oct.: 1.99
Precip to date in Oct.: 4.29
Average Precip to date: 20.32
Precip Year to Date: 19.71
Sunset Tonight: 6:26:52 PM
Sunrise Tomorrow: 8:06:48 AM



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"WINDS AND FLAMES" HIS SERVANTS

Missionary Rachel Smith was carefully telling the Christmas Story to a group of primitive headhunters in the jungles of Peru. With simplicity, she told the story of some men who were in the fields guarding their sheep when an angel suddenly appeared.

"What did he look like?" asked one. "Just like a man," she answered. "Did he have feathers?" he asked. "No," she replied. "Then he could not fly, and the story is not true," he shouted.

"Have you seen the missionary plane?" she asked. "Yes," came his reply. "Have you touched it?" she asked. "I have," he said. "Did it have feathers?" she wanted to know. "No," he admitted. "You see," she explained, "one need not have feathers to fly."

Immediately the questioner and the tribe went into an intense discussion. After several moments they agreed that the Christmas Story could be true. God used an angel that first Christmas evening to be a messenger with the most important announcement ever made to man.

The Bible has much to say about angels and their actions but little about their appearance. In Psalm 104:4 we read that "He makes winds His messengers, flames of fire His servants."

These "messengers" - or angels - are sent by God to help and care for those who receive His salvation. The Lord will always meet the needs of His children through one way or another - even if it takes one of His angels.

Prayer: With grateful hearts, Father, we give You our thanks for Your unending care and constant protection. In Jesus' Name, Amen.

Scripture For Today: He makes winds His messengers, flames of fire His servants. Psalm 104:4

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2021 Community Events

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

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News from the Associated Press

SD Lottery

By The Associated Press undefined

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

Dakota Cash

10-11-19-29-35

(ten, eleven, nineteen, twenty-nine, thirty-five)

Estimated jackpot: \$170,000

Lotto America

01-05-27-36-41, Star Ball: 3, ASB: 4

(one, five, twenty-seven, thirty-six, forty-one; Star Ball: three; ASB: four)

Estimated jackpot: \$3.6 million

Mega Millions

Estimated jackpot: \$22 million

Powerball

03-06-26-35-51, Powerball: 17, Power Play: 4

(three, six, twenty-six, thirty-five, fifty-one; Powerball: seventeen; Power Play: four)

Estimated jackpot: \$102 million

Editorial Roundup: South Dakota

By The Associated Press undefined

Black Hills Pioneer. October 22, 2021.

Editorial: Black Hills State University needs to be heard

Black Hills State University has plenty to boast about.

But it seems university leadership and supporters need to crow a bit louder, and in the direction of South Dakota legislators to ensure that the institution gets its share of state higher education dollars.

The issue of how state universities across the state are performing arose during the 2020 legislative session when Black Hills State University alum and State Sen. Ryan Maher, R-Isabel., introduced SB55.

The legislation charged the South Dakota Board of Regents with forming a task force to evaluate the administration of the various institutes of higher learning under its authority to identify any efficiencies and overlaps.

The 20-member task force held meetings at universities across the state, including BHSU in Spearfish. The task force included university presidents and Board of Regents members, but also included a cross-section of representation because the focus was not so much on the university system studying itself, but more about having other constituencies take a fresh look at how the universities operate to give the state a new perspective.

Fred Romkema, former state representative and former mayor of Spearfish, took the opportunity to address the discrepancy in how much funding BHSU receives from the state versus other universities. He revealed that 18.7% of the budget of Black Hills State University is supported by the state versus a 31% average among all universities.

He told those gathered in Spearfish that there seemed to be an inequality of resources.

Maher told those gathered in Spearfish: "You as a community, if you want a university here, you're going to have to work to help preserve it and save it and move it forward. And that starts by showing up in Pierre."

The South Dakota Board of Regents does have a lobbyist in Pierre during the legislative session, but that person advocates on behalf of all institutions of higher learning.

It is widely known that South Dakota State University and the University of South Dakota have broad

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representation in the South Dakota State Legislature. So, when it comes to voting for projects or new dollars for universities they may lean toward their alma mater.

Those universities also have a large alumni base on which they can draw support.

BHSU, although an underdog in this fight for state dollars, needs to step up its game. Rally the troops and crow for its fair share of state higher education money.

District 31 Rep. Scott Odenbach, R-Spearfish, may have said it best in a recent column in the Black Hills Pioneer: "We are fortunate to have a beautiful university located in Spearfish. It adds to our quality of life, brings in many new young people every year, and is a great benefit to our region."

He went on to say that he looks forward to working closely with community and university leaders in Pierre during the next Legislative session to seek approval for smart priorities that will benefit the unique mission of Black Hills State University in the future.

If we continue to take the quality and impact of BHSU for granted it could very well go away.

It's time to demand our fair share of funding.

Yankton Press & Dakota. October 25, 2021.

Editorial: Some Movement On The Marijuana Front

South Dakota's marijuana issues have taken some interesting turns the past few weeks, suggesting that several people and groups are not willing to wait around for things to happen, or possibly not happen.

Last week, a proposal surfaced in an interim subcommittee to inject a new, possibly clarifying wrinkle into the state's marijuana status. Under the proposal, anyone age 21 and older would be allowed to possess up to an ounce of cannabis for either recreational or medical use. This would address the legality of recreational marijuana, which voters approved last November but was suspended by a lower court last winter and is still awaiting a final verdict from the state Supreme Court. The legislation would also render moot Initiative 26, the medicinal cannabis law that voters overwhelmingly approved last year. After some early considerations to somehow undercut it, lawmakers finally decided that they cannot overturn the will of the people on this issue.

On one hand, the proposal provides what seems like an overall streamlined solution to marijuana legality in this state by embracing recreational cannabis, which has hung in limbo for months.

However, the proposal would also remove some voter-approved aspects dealing with medical marijuana, notably the portion allowing individuals to grow their own plants. Also, commercial marijuana cultivation in the state could only occur indoors.

Matthew Schweich of South Dakotans for Better Marijuana Laws told KELO, "The positive is that legislators want to enact a bill that is in alignment with the will of the people and that's good to see. Now, is this proposal the policy that we should ultimately adopt? That remains to be seen. We're going to need to take a closer look."

However, he added, "Unfortunately, throughout all over the country, legislators have this fear of home cultivation as though it's going to create big problems. The reality is that somebody growing three or six or nine plants at home is not going to cause any problem."

But Schweich's group isn't waiting around for what happens with this proposal or what the state Supreme Court may decide (or when it may decide it). Two weeks ago, the group announced a new petition drive to get an initiative for legalizing recreational marijuana on the 2022 ballot.

"At this time, we are completely focused on our petition signature drive so that we can maintain the option of going back to the ballot next year, if necessary," Schweich told the website Marijuana Moment. "We remain open to working with legislators to enact laws that align with the will of the people. Ideally, a 2022 ballot initiative is unnecessary. But right now, we need to keep that option open."

Time for this is of the essence, with 16,961 verified signatures needed by Nov. 8, 2021, to get the measure on the 2022 ballot.

Marijuana proponents are leaving nothing to chance with either the Supreme Court or the Legislature.

It's also clear some lawmakers appear to want to hammer out the marijuana issue in this state once and for all.

At this moment, nothing is settled on the state's marijuana front other than there will be some form a legalization, probably of both recreational and medicinal cannabis, in the near future. The details remain fluid and must be clarified in the months to come.

END

Report: At least 59,000 meat workers caught COVID, 269 died

By JOSH FUNK Associated Press

OMAHA, Neb. (AP) — At least 59,000 meatpacking workers caught COVID-19 and 269 workers died when the virus tore through the industry last year, which is significantly more than previously thought, according to a new U.S. House report released Wednesday.

The meatpacking industry was one of the early epicenters of the coronavirus pandemic, with workers standing shoulder-to-shoulder along production lines. The U.S. House Select Subcommittee on the Coronavirus Crisis, which examined internal documents from five of the biggest meatpacking companies, said companies could have done more to protect their workers.

The new estimate of infections in the industry is nearly three times higher than the 22,400 that the United Food and Commercial Workers Union has said were infected or exposed. And the true number could be even higher because the companies' data didn't generally include coronavirus cases confirmed by outside testing or self reported by employees.

At the height of the outbreaks in the spring of 2020, U.S. meatpacking production fell to about 60% of normal as several major plants were forced to temporarily close for deep cleaning and safety upgrades or operated at slower speeds because of worker shortages. The report said companies were slow to take protective steps such as distributing protective equipment and installing barriers between work stations.

"Instead of addressing the clear indications that workers were contracting the coronavirus at alarming rates due to conditions in meatpacking facilities, meatpacking companies prioritized profits and production over worker safety, continuing to employ practices that led to crowded facilities in which the virus spread easily," the report said.

Martin Rosas, who represents a UFCW chapter based in Kansas with over 17,000 members in three states, said the union pressed companies for better protections.

"The harsh reality is that many of the companies were slow to act in the early days of the outbreak, and whatever progress that was achieved was due to the union demanding action," Rosas said.

The report is based on documents from JBS, Tyson Foods, Smithfield Foods, Cargill and National Beef. Together they control over 80% of the beef market and over 60% of the pork market nationwide.

The North American Meat Institute trade group defended the industry's response to the pandemic. And Cargill, Tyson, Smithfield and JBS released statements Wednesday saying they worked aggressively to meet federal health and safety standards and took additional measures to protect their employees, such as conducting widespread testing and urging employees to get vaccinated.

"The health and safety of our team members always comes first and our response since the onset of the pandemic has demonstrated that commitment, with an investment of more than \$760 million to date. We have taken aggressive action to keep the virus out of our facilities and adopted hundreds of safety measures that often outpaced federal guidance and industry standards," JBS spokeswoman Nikki Richardson said.

The companies expressed regret at the toll the virus has taken.

"Even one illness or loss of life to COVID-19 is one too many, which is why we've taken progressive action from the start of the pandemic to protect the health and safety of our workers," Tyson spokesman Gary Mickelson said.

The report said infection rates were especially high at some meatpacking plants between the spring of 2020 and early 2021. At a JBS plant in Hyrum, Utah, 54% of the workforce contracted the virus. Nearly 50% of workers at a Tyson plant in Amarillo, Texas, were infected. And 44% of employees at National Beef's plant in Tama, Iowa, caught COVID-19.

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The report said internal documents show Smithfield aggressively pushed back against government safety recommendations after experts from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention inspected its pork plant in Sioux Falls, South Dakota, after a major outbreak. A few days earlier, Smithfield's CEO told the CEO of National Beef in an email that "Employees are afraid to come to work."

Maryland Rep. Jamie Raskin said the Occupational Safety and Health Administration needs to do more to protect meatpacking workers.

"Some of these companies are treating the workers in the plants not much better than the animals that go through them," Raskin said.

Debbie Berkowitz, with Georgetown University's Kalmanovitz Initiative for Labor and the Working Poor, said the industry was slow to respond and federal regulators didn't force companies to act.

"When the pandemic hit, of course it was going to hit meatpacking plants really hard and really fast," said Berkowitz, a former OSHA official who testified Wednesday. "What was the industry's response — not to protect workers and mitigate the spread of COVID-19, not to separate workers 6 feet apart, which was the earlier guidance that came out in late February — but to just keep on going."

Company moving ramen production to US, Black Hills

BELLE FOURCHE, S.D. (AP) — A California company plans to build one of the largest ramen producing facilities in the country in a small Black Hills community.

Albany Farms CEO Bill Saller says the complex in Belle Fourche will include a flour mill, production factories and packaging areas that would produce more than 100 million packages of ramen each year and eventually employ up to 900 people.

Belle Fourche Rail Park and South Dakota's agriculture economy are part of the plan, South Dakota Public Broadcasting reported. Wheat will be brought to the factory while ramen cups and packets will be shipped by train, Saller said.

Albany Farms recently bought a building in Belle Fourche for its factory and is working on purchasing 11 of the surrounding acres, according to company spokeswoman Stephanie Magoon.

The company manufactures its products overseas but decided it needed to switch gears once the COVID-19 pandemic hit.

"With the onset of COVID, importing food became problematic. Transportation has become a major issue for food companies and certainly for us," Saller said.

Saller said the price for their shipping containers has increased an average of \$18,000 per container, doubling import costs. So, the company decided to move all manufacturing to the United States.

Albany Farms began looking for a site within the Black Hills after its lead engineer happened to be driving through the area, Saller said.

Albany Farms' struggle with the international supply chain is a part of a global trend. Ports are clogged with shipping containers and companies and consumers have reported long wait times to receive products produced overseas.

AP: Myanmar military uses systematic torture across country

By VICTORIA MILKO and KRISTEN GELINEAU Associated Press

JAKARTA, Indonesia (AP) — The soldiers in rural Myanmar twisted the young man's skin with pliers and kicked him in the chest until he couldn't breathe. Then they taunted him about his family until his heart ached, too: "Your mom," they jeered, "cannot save you anymore."

The young man and his friend, randomly arrested as they rode their bikes home, were subjected to hours of agony inside a town hall transformed by the military into a torture center. As the interrogators' blows rained down, their relentless questions tumbled through his mind.

"There was no break — it was constant," he says. "I was thinking only of my mom."

Since its takeover of the government in February, the Myanmar military has been torturing detainees across the country in a methodical and systemic way, The Associated Press has found in interviews with

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28 people imprisoned and released in recent months. Based also on photographic evidence, sketches and letters, along with testimony from three recently defected military officials, AP's investigation provides the most comprehensive look since the takeover into a highly secretive detention system that has held more than 9,000 people. The military, known as the Tatmadaw, and police have killed more than 1,200 people since February.

While most of the torture has occurred inside military compounds, the Tatmadaw also has transformed public facilities such as community halls and a royal palace into interrogation centers, prisoners said. The AP identified a dozen interrogation centers in use across Myanmar, in addition to prisons and police lockups, based on interviews and satellite imagery.

The prisoners came from every corner of the country and from various ethnic groups, and ranged from a 16-year-old girl to monks. Some were detained for protesting against the military, others for no discernible reason. Multiple military units and police were involved in the interrogations, their methods of torture similar across Myanmar.

The AP is withholding the prisoners' names, or using partial names, to protect them from retaliation by the military.

Inside the town hall that night, soldiers forced the young man to kneel on sharp rocks, shoved a gun in his mouth and rolled a baton over his shinbones. They slapped him in the face with his own Nike flip flops. "Tell me! Tell me!" they shouted. "What should I tell you?" he replied helplessly.

He refused to scream. But his friend screamed on his behalf, after realizing it calmed the interrogators. "I'm going to die," he told himself, stars exploding before his eyes. "I love you, mom."

The Myanmar military has a long history of torture, particularly before the country began transitioning toward democracy in 2010. While torture in recent years was most often recorded in ethnic regions, its use has now returned across the country, the AP's investigation found. The vast majority of torture techniques described by prisoners were similar to those of the past, including deprivation of sleep, food and water; electric shocks; being forced to hop like frogs, and relentless beatings with cement-filled bamboo sticks, batons, fists and the prisoners' own shoes.

But this time, the torture carried out inside interrogation centers and prisons is the worst it's ever been in scale and severity, according to the Assistance Association for Political Prisoners, which monitors deaths and arrests. Since February, the group says, security forces have killed 1,218 people, including at least 131 detainees tortured to death.

The torture often begins on the street or in the detainees' homes, and some die even before reaching an interrogation center, says Ko Bo Kyi, AAPP's joint secretary and a former political prisoner.

"The military tortures detainees, first for revenge, then for information," he says. "I think in many ways the military has become even more brutal."

The military has taken steps to hide evidence of its torture. An aide to the highest-ranking army official in western Myanmar's Chin state told the AP that soldiers covered up the deaths of two tortured prisoners, forcing a military doctor to falsify their autopsy reports.

A former army captain who defected from the Tatmadaw in April confirmed to the AP that the military's use of torture against detainees has been rampant since its takeover.

"In our country, after being arrested unfairly, there is torture, violence and sexual assaults happening constantly," says Lin Htet Aung, the former captain. "Even a war captive needs to be treated and taken care of by law. All of that is gone with the coup. ... The world must know."

Lin Htet Aung told the AP that interrogation tactics are part of the military's training, which involves both theory and role playing. He and another former army captain who recently defected say that the general guidelines from superiors are, simply: We don't care how you get the information, so long as you get it.

After receiving detailed requests for comment, military officials responded with a one-line email that said: "We have no plans to answer these nonsense questions."

Last week, in an apparent bid to improve its image, the military announced that more than 1,300

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detainees would be freed from prisons and the charges against 4,320 others pending trial would be suspended. But it's unclear how many have actually been released and how many of those have already been re-arrested.

All but six of the prisoners interviewed by the AP were subjected to abuse, including women and children. Most of those who weren't abused said their fellow detainees were.

In two cases, the torture was used to extract false confessions. Several prisoners were forced to sign statements pledging obedience to the military before they were released. One woman was made to sign a blank piece of paper.

All prisoners were interviewed separately by the AP. Those who had been held at the same centers gave similar accounts of treatment and conditions, from interrogation methods to the layout of their cells to the exact foods provided — if any.

The AP also sent photographs of several torture victims' injuries to a forensic pathologist with Physicians for Human Rights. The pathologist concluded wounds on three victims were consistent with beatings by sticks or rods.

"You look at some of those injuries where they're just black and blue from one end to the other," says forensic pathologist Dr. Lindsey Thomas. "This was not just a swat. This has the appearance of something that was very systematic and forceful."

Beyond the 28 prisoners, the AP interviewed the sister of a prisoner allegedly tortured to death, family and friends of current prisoners, and lawyers representing detainees. The AP also obtained sketches that prisoners drew of the interiors of prisons and interrogation centers, and letters to family and friends describing grim conditions and abuse.

Photographs taken inside several detention and interrogation facilities confirmed prisoners' accounts of overcrowding and filth. Most inmates slept on concrete floors, packed together so tightly they could not even bend their knees.

Some became sick from drinking dirty water only available from a shared toilet. Others had to defecate into plastic bags or a communal bucket. Cockroaches swarmed their bodies at night.

There was little to no medical help. One prisoner described his failed attempt to get treatment for his battered 18-year-old cellmate, whose genitals were repeatedly smashed between a brick and an interrogator's boot.

Not even the young have been spared. One woman was imprisoned alongside a 2-year-old baby. Another woman held in solitary confinement at the notorious Insein prison in Yangon said officials admitted to her that conditions were made as wretched as possible to terrify the public into compliance.

Amid these circumstances, COVID ripped through some facilities, with deadly results.

One woman detained at Insein said the virus killed her cellmate.

"I was infected. The whole dorm was infected. Everyone lost their sense of smell," she says.

The interrogation centers were even worse than the prisons, with nights a cacophony of weeping and wails of agony

"It was terrifying, my room. There were blood stains and scratches on the wall," one man recalls. "I could see smudged, bloody handprints and blood-vomit stains in the corner of the room."

Throughout the interviews, the Tatmadaw's sense of impunity was clear.

"They would torture us until they got the answers they wanted," says one 21-year-old. "They always told us, 'Here at the military interrogation centers, we do not have any laws. We have guns, and we can just kill you and make you disappear if we want to — and no one would know.'"

The tortured prisoners were already dead when soldiers began attaching glucose drip lines to their corpses to make it look like they were still alive, a military defector told the AP. It was one of multiple examples the AP found of how the military tries to hide its abuse.

Torture is rife throughout the detention system, says Sgt. Hin Lian Piang, who served as a clerk to the North-Western Regional Deputy Commander before defecting in October.

"They arrest, beat and torture too many," he says. "They did it to everyone who was arrested."

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In May, Hin Lian Piang witnessed soldiers torture two prisoners to death at a mountaintop interrogation center inside an army base in Chin state. The soldiers beat the two men, hit them with their guns, and kicked them, he says.

After the men were put into jail, one of them died. The major in charge asked the military's medical doctor to examine the man and determine his cause of death. Meanwhile, the other prisoner began trembling and then died, too.

The soldiers attached the drip lines to the prisoners' corpses, then sent them to a military hospital in Kalay.

"They forced the Kalay military doctor to write in the chest biopsy report that they died from their own health problems," Hin Lian Piang says. "Then they cremated the dead bodies straight away."

Hin Lian Piang says the direct order to cover up the cause of the men's deaths came from Tactical Operations Commander Col. Saw Tun and Deputy Commander Brig. Gen. Myo Htut Hlaing, the two highest-ranking army officials stationed in Chin state. The AP sent questions about the case to the Tatmadaw but they were not answered.

Though the Tatmadaw has been open about many of its brutalities since the takeover — killing people in broad daylight, releasing photos on state TV of detainees' bruised faces — it has used modified torture techniques and false statements to hide evidence of other widespread abuse.

Several prisoners say their interrogators brutalized only the parts of their bodies that could be hidden by clothes, which Hin Lian Piang calls a common strategy. One prisoner had his ears repeatedly slapped, leaving no scars but inflicting intense pain. Another, Min, says his interrogators placed a rubber pad over his chest and back before beating him with a rod, minimizing bruising.

"They would just make sure to hit you so that only your insides are damaged, or would severely beat you on your back, chest and thighs, where the bruises aren't visible," says Min.

The use of rubber pads appears to be a classic example of "stealth torture," which leaves no physical marks, says Andrew Jefferson, a Myanmar prisons researcher at DIGNITY, the Danish Institute Against Torture.

"It seems to indicate that the torturers actually sort of care about being found out," Jefferson says. "So few ever get convicted that I don't really understand why they care."

The military may be attempting to pre-empt public accounts of its abuses, says Matthew Smith, co-founder of the human rights group Fortify Rights.

"This is a technique that dictatorships have used for a very long time," he says. "What I believe the authorities are attempting to do is at least inject some level of doubt into the allegations that that survivor or that person or human rights groups or journalists or governments may accuse them of."

One prisoner, Kyaw, said he was tortured for days and freed only after signing a statement that he had never been tortured at all.

Kyaw's hell began when the military surrounded his house and detained him for the second time since February for his pro-democracy activism. As the soldiers beat him and hauled him away with five of his friends, his mother wet her pants and fainted.

His usually stoic father began to cry. Kyaw knew what he was thinking: "There goes my son. He's going to die."

All the way to the interrogation center in Yangon, soldiers ordered them to keep their heads bowed and beat them with their guns. When Kyaw's 16-year-old friend became dizzy and lifted his chin, a soldier bashed his head with a gun until he bled.

At the interrogation center, the soldiers handcuffed them, chained them together and put bags over their heads. His first night was a blur of beatings. "Rest well tonight," one soldier told him.

The next morning, none of the detainees could open their swollen mouths enough to eat their rice. It was the only food Kyaw would receive for four days. He drank from the toilet.

His interrogation began around 11 a.m. and lasted until 2 or 3 a.m. The soldiers poked his thighs with a knife. They zapped him with a taser. They rolled iron rods up and down his legs.

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They learned he could not swim, and kicked him into a lake, blinded by the bag on his head and paralyzed by handcuffs that bound his hands behind him. He thrashed and flailed, sinking ever deeper. They eventually yanked him out.

Their questions were monotonous. "Who are you and what are you up to?" they demanded. "I really didn't do anything," he replied. "I know nothing."

Another 100 detainees arrived at the center while he was there, some of their faces so disfigured from beatings they no longer looked human. A few could not walk. One detainee told Kyaw that soldiers had raped his daughter and her sister-in-law in front of him.

On the fourth day, Kyaw's family called on a friend with military connections to intervene, and the torture stopped. But he was still held for three weeks until the tell-tale swelling in his face went down.

Kyaw was finally released after he paid military officials around a thousand dollars. The officials then made him sign a statement saying that the military had never asked for money or tortured anyone. The statement also warned that if he protested again, he could be imprisoned for up to 40 years.

Kyaw does not know if his friends are still alive. But against his mother's pleas, he has vowed to continue his activism.

"I told my mother that democracy is something we have to fight for," he says. "It won't come to our doorsteps just by itself."

The soldiers forced the 16-year-old girl to her knees, then ordered her to remove the mask meant to protect her from COVID.

"You are not afraid of death – that's why you are here," one soldier sneered. "Don't pretend like you are scared of the virus."

Of the prisoners interviewed by the AP, a dozen were women and children, most of whom were abused. While the men faced more severe physical torture, the women were more often psychologically tortured, especially with the threat of rape.

Sixteen-year-old Su remembers kneeling with her hands in the air as a soldier warned, "Get ready for your turn." She remembers walking between two rows of soldiers while they taunted, "Keep your strength for tomorrow."

Su pleaded in vain for soldiers to help one of her fellow inmates, a girl even younger than she, whose leg was broken during her arrest. The soldiers refused to let the girl call her family.

Another girl, around 13, cried constantly and fainted at least six times the day they were arrested. Rather than call a doctor, officers sprayed the child with water.

Prison officials warned Su never to speak of what happened inside to people on the outside. "They said, 'We really are nice to you. Tell the people the good things about us,'" Su says. "What good things?"

Su had never stayed apart from her parents before. Now she was barred from even calling them, and had no idea that both her grandfathers had died.

"As soon as I was released, I had to take sleeping pills for nearly three months," Su says. "I cried every day."

Inside Shwe Pyi Thar interrogation center in Yangon, the women grew to dread the night, when the soldiers got drunk and came to their cell.

"You all know where you are, right?" the soldiers told them. "We can rape and kill you here."

The women had good reason to be frightened. The military has long used rape as a weapon of war, particularly in the ethnic regions. During its violent crackdown on the country's Rohingya Muslim population in 2017, the military methodically raped scores of women and girls.

"Even if they did not rape us physically, I felt like all of us were verbally raped almost every day because we had to listen to their threats every night," says Cho, an activist detained along with her husband.

Another young woman recalls her four months in a southwest Myanmar prison, and the constant fear of torture and rape.

"I was locked in the cell and they could call me out at any time," she says.

A teacher, held for eight days at an interrogation center, learned to fear the sound of the cell door.

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"Our thoughts ran wild, like: 'Are they coming to take me? Or are they coming to take her?'" the teacher says. "When we saw them blindfolding someone, we were extremely anxious because that could be me."

Not every woman was spared from violence. Cho's cellmate was beaten so severely with a bamboo stick that she could not sit or sleep on her back for five days. And though Cho was not subjected to physical assaults at Shwe Pyi Thar, officers at Insein prison struck her on the back of her neck and forced her into a stress position.

When she objected, they beat her back and shoulders, then banished her to solitary confinement for two weeks.

For another woman, Myat, the beatings began the moment the soldiers burst into her home, smashing the butts of their guns into her chest and shoving a rifle into her mouth. As they arrested her and her friends, she heard one of them say: "Shoot them if they try to run." She cries while recounting her ordeal.

One 17-year-old boy endured days of beatings, the skin on his head splitting open from the force of the blows. As one interrogator punched him, another stitched his head wound with a sewing needle. They gave him no pain medication, telling him the brutal treatment was all that he was worth. His body was drenched in blood.

After three days, he says, they took him to the jungle and dumped him in a hole in the ground, burying him up to his neck. Then they threatened to kill him with a shovel.

"If they ever tried to arrest me again, I wouldn't let them," he says. "I would commit suicide."

Back inside the rural town hall, the young man ached for his mother as his night passed in a haze of pain. The next morning, he and his friend were sent to prison.

His small cell was home to 33 people. Every inch of floor was claimed, so he lay next to the lone squat toilet.

An inmate gently cleaned the blood from the young man's eyes. When he looked at his friend's battered face, he began to cry.

After two days, his family paid to get him out of prison. He and his friend were forced to sign statements saying they had participated in a demonstration and would now obey the military's rules.

At home, his mother took one look at him and wept. For a month afterward, his legs and hands shook constantly. Even today, his right shoulder — stomped on by a soldier — won't move properly.

He is constantly on edge. Two months after his release, he realized he was being followed by soldiers. When the sun goes down, he stays inside.

"After they caught us, I know their hearts and their minds were not like the people's, not like us," he says. "They are monsters."

Gelineau reported from Sydney. Associated Press journalist Sam McNeil in Beijing contributed to this report.

Oil chiefs set to testify at landmark congressional hearing

By MATTHEW DALY Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — Top executives at ExxonMobil and other oil giants are set to testify at a landmark House hearing Thursday as congressional Democrats investigate what they describe as a decades-long, industry-wide campaign to spread disinformation about the role of fossil fuels in causing global warming.

Top officials at four major oil companies are testifying before the House Oversight Committee, along with leaders of the industry's top lobbying group and the U.S. Chamber of Commerce. Company officials were expected to renew their commitment to fighting climate change.

The much-anticipated hearing comes after months of public efforts by Democrats to obtain documents and other information on the oil industry's role in stopping climate action over multiple decades. The appearance of the four oil executives — from ExxonMobil, Chevron, BP America and Shell — has drawn

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comparisons to a high-profile hearing in the 1990s with tobacco executives who famously testified that they didn't believe nicotine was addictive.

"The fossil fuel industry has had scientific evidence about the dangers of climate change since at least 1977. Yet for decades, the industry spread denial and doubt about the harm of its products — undermining the science and preventing meaningful action on climate change even as the global climate crisis became increasingly dire," said Reps. Carolyn Maloney, D-N.Y., and Ro Khanna, D-Calif.

Maloney chairs the Oversight panel, while Khanna leads a subcommittee on the environment.

More recently, Exxon, Chevron and other companies have taken public stances in support of climate actions while privately working to block reforms, Maloney and Khanna charged. Oil companies frequently boast about their efforts to produce clean energy in advertisements and social media posts accompanied by sleek videos or pictures of wind turbines.

The industry "spends billions to promote climate disinformation through branding and lobbying" that is increasingly outsourced to trade groups, "obscuring their own roles in disinformation efforts," the lawmakers said.

Democrats have focused particular ire on Exxon, after a senior lobbyist for the company was caught in a secret video bragging that Exxon had fought climate science through "shadow groups" and had targeted influential senators in an effort to weaken President Joe Biden's climate agenda, including a bipartisan infrastructure bill and a sweeping climate and social policy bill currently moving through Congress.

Keith McCoy, a former Washington-based lobbyist for Exxon, dismissed the company's public expressions of support for a proposed carbon tax on fossil fuel emissions as a "talking point."

McCoy's comments were made public in June by the environmental group Greenpeace UK, which secretly recorded him and another lobbyist in Zoom interviews. McCoy no longer works for the company, an Exxon spokesperson said last month.

Darren Woods, Exxon's chairman and chief executive, has condemned McCoy's statements and said the company stands by its commitment to work on finding solutions to climate change.

Woods is among the chief executives set to testify Thursday, along with BP America CEO David Lawler, Chevron CEO Michael Wirth and Shell president Gretchen Watkins.

Casey Norton, an ExxonMobil spokesperson, said the company has cooperated with the Oversight panel, adding: "ExxonMobil has long acknowledged that climate change is real and poses serious risks."

In addition to substantial investments in "next-generation technologies," the company also advocates for responsible climate-related policies, Norton said.

"Our public statements about climate change are, and have been, truthful, fact-based, transparent and consistent with the views of the broader, mainstream scientific community at the time," he said.

Maloney and Khanna compared tactics used by the oil industry to those long deployed by the tobacco industry to resist regulation "while selling products that kill hundreds of thousands of Americans."

The oil industry's "strategies of obfuscation and distraction span decades and still continue today," Khanna and Maloney said in calling the hearing last month. The five largest publicly traded oil and gas companies reportedly spent at least \$1 billion from 2015 to 2018 "to promote climate disinformation through 'branding' and lobbying," the lawmakers said.

Bethany Aronhalt, a spokeswoman for API, said the group's president, Mike Sommers, welcomes the opportunity to testify and "advance our priorities of pricing carbon, regulating methane and reliably producing American energy."

Paid family leave falls out of Biden's bill as tempers rise

By LISA MASCARO, AAMER MADHANI and ALAN FRAM Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — Top Democrats signaled a deal is within reach on President Joe Biden's big domestic bill, but momentum fizzled and tempers flared as a paid family leave proposal fell out and a billionaires' tax appeared scrapped, mostly to satisfy a pivotal member of the 50-50 Senate.

With his signature domestic initiative at stake, Biden will head to Capitol Hill on Thursday morning to

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urge Democratic lawmakers to bring talks on the social services and climate change bill "over the finish line" before he departs for global summits overseas.

Still in the mix: expanded health care programs, free pre-kindergarten and some \$500 billion to tackle climate change remain in what's now at least a \$1.75 trillion package.

And Democrats are eyeing a new surcharge on the wealthy — 5% on incomes above \$10 million and an additional 3% on those beyond \$25 million — to help pay for it, according to a person who insisted on anonymity to discuss the private talks.

"They're all within our reach. Let's bring these bills over the finish line." Biden tweeted late Wednesday.

To help push lawmakers toward that goal, Biden will speak Thursday morning to the House Democratic Caucus, a person familiar with the plan told The Associated Press on the condition of anonymity. Besides pressing for important party priorities, the president was hoping to show foreign leaders the U.S. was getting things done under his administration.

The administration was assessing the situation "hour by hour," White House press secretary Jen Psaki said.

It was a fast-moving day on Capitol Hill that started upbeat as House Speaker Nancy Pelosi declared that Democrats were in "pretty good shape." But hopes quickly faded as Biden's big proposal ran into stubborn new setbacks, chief among them how to pay for it all.

A just-proposed tax on billionaires could be scrapped after Democratic Sen. Joe Manchin of West Virginia objected, according to a senior party aide, who insisted on anonymity to discuss the private talks.

The billionaires' tax proposal had been designed to win over another Democratic holdout, Sen. Kyrsten Sinema of Arizona, but Manchin panned it as unfairly targeting the wealthy, leaving Democrats at odds.

"People in the stratosphere, rather than trying to penalize, we ought to be pleased that this country is able to produce the wealth," Manchin told reporters.

Manchin said he prefers a minimum 15% flat "patriotic tax" to ensure the wealthiest Americans don't skip out on paying any taxes. Nevertheless, he said: "We need to move forward."

Next to fall was a proposed paid family leave program that was already being chiseled back from 12 to four weeks to satisfy Manchin. But with his objections, it was unlikely to be included in the bill, the person said.

Sen. Kirsten Gillibrand, D-N.Y., had devised several new options for Manchin's review and told reporters late in the evening, "It's not over until it's over."

Together, Manchin's and Sinema's objections packed a one-two punch, throwing Biden's overall plan into flux, halving what had been a \$3.5 trillion package, and infuriating colleagues along the way.

In the evenly divided Senate, Biden needs all Democrats' support with no votes to spare.

White House officials met at the Capitol with Manchin and Sinema, two senators who now hold enormous power, essentially deciding whether or not Biden will be able to deliver on the Democrats' major campaign promises.

"Making progress," Sinema said as she dashed into an elevator.

A Sunday deadline loomed for approving a smaller, bipartisan roads-and-bridges infrastructure bill or risk allowing funds for routine transportation programs to expire. But that \$1 trillion bill has been held up by progressive lawmakers who are refusing to give their support without the bigger Biden deal.

Despite a series of deadlines, Democrats have been unable to close the deal among themselves, and Republicans overwhelmingly oppose the package. At best, Democrats could potentially reach a framework Thursday that could send Biden overseas with a deal in hand and unlock the process while the final details were sewn up.

Applying pressure, Pelosi announced a Thursday committee hearing to spur the Biden package along toward a full House vote, though timing remained uncertain.

Democrats had hoped the unveiling of the billionaires tax Wednesday could help resolve the revenue side of the equation after Sinema rejected the party's earlier idea of reversing Trump-era tax breaks on corporations and the wealthy, those earning more than \$400,000.

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The new billionaires' proposal would tax the gains of those with more than \$1 billion in assets or incomes of more than \$100 million over three consecutive years — fewer than 800 people — requiring them pay taxes on the gains of stocks and other tradeable assets, rather than waiting until holdings are sold.

The billionaires' tax rate would align with the capital gains rate, now 23.8%. Democrats have said it could raise \$200 billion in revenue that could help fund Biden's package over 10 years.

Republicans have derided the billionaires' tax as "harebrained," and some have suggested it would face a legal challenge.

But Democratic Sen. Ron Wyden of Oregon, chairman of the Senate Finance Committee, insisted the billionaires tax remains on the table.

"I've not heard a single United States senator — not one — get up and say, 'Gee, I think it's just fun that billionaires pay little or nothing for years on end,'" Wyden said.

More likely in the mix was the companion proposal, a new 15% corporate minimum tax, as well as the new surtax being proposed on higher incomes above \$10 million.

Together they are designed to fulfill Biden's desire for the wealthy and big business to pay their "fair share." They also fit his promise that no new taxes hit those earning less than \$400,000 a year, or \$450,000 for couples. Biden wants his package fully paid for without piling on debt.

Resolving the revenue side has been crucial, as lawmakers figure out how much money will be available to spend on the new health, child care and climate change programs in Biden's big plan.

Among Democrats, Rep. Richard Neal of Massachusetts, the chairman of the Ways and Means Committee, said he told Wyden the billionaires' tax may be difficult to implement. Despite Sinema's opposition, he expects Democrats to stick with the approach his panel took in simply raising rates on corporations and the wealthy, undoing the 2017 tax cuts.

"There's a lot of there's a lot of angst in there over the billionaires' tax," Neal said.

Under the House bill approved by Neal's panel, the top individual income tax rate would rise from 37% to 39.6%, on those earning more than \$400,000 a year, or \$450,000 for couples. The corporate rate would increase from 21% to 26.5%.

The House bill also proposes a 3% surtax on the wealthiest Americans with adjusted income beyond \$5 million a year, and Neal suggested that could be raised to \$10 million to win over the holdouts.

Opposition from the two senators is forcing difficult reductions, if not the outright elimination, of policy priorities — from child care assistance to dental, vision and hearing aid benefits for seniors.

The once hefty climate change strategies are less punitive on polluters, as coal-state Manchin objected, focusing instead on rewarding clean energy incentives.

Said Sen. Bernie Sanders, the Vermont Independent: "You got 48 out of 50 people supporting an agenda that works for the American people."

Associated Press writers Farnoush Amiri and Kevin Freking contributed to this report.

Biden bound for global summits as domestic agenda in limbo

By JOSH BOAK and ZEKE MILLER Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — President Joe Biden promised to show the world that democracies can work to meet the challenges of the 21st century. As he prepares to push that message at a pair of global summits, his case could hinge on what's happening in Washington, where he is rushing to finalize a major domestic legislative package.

Headed first to Rome and then to Glasgow, Scotland, Biden will be pressed to deliver concrete ideas for stopping a global pandemic, boosting economic growth and halting the acceleration of climate change. Those stakes might seem a bit high for a pair of two-day gatherings attended by the global elite and their entourages. But it's written right into the slogan for the Group of 20 meeting in Rome: "People, Planet, Prosperity."

Biden, who planned to deliver East Room remarks before leaving Washington on Thursday, has prom-

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ised to align U.S. diplomacy with the interests of the middle class. This has tied any success abroad to his efforts to get Congress to advance his environmental, tax, infrastructure and social policies. It could be harder to get the world to commit to his stated goals if Americans refuse to fully embrace them, one of the risks of Biden's choice to knit together his domestic and foreign policies.

Biden's trip abroad comes as he faces an increasingly pessimistic nation at home, and souring views of his handling of the nation's economy. According to a new poll from The Associated Press-NORC Center for Public Affairs Research, just 41% of Americans now approve of Biden's economic stewardship, down from 49% in August and a sharp reversal since March, when 60% approved.

Americans are split on Biden overall, with 48% approving and 51% disapproving of his handling of his job as president. Only about a third of Americans say the country is headed in the right direction, also a significant decline since earlier this year when about half said so.

One consequence of Biden's decision to so closely link up his domestic and foreign policies is that both are now at the mercy of West Virginia Sen. Joe Manchin and Arizona Sen. Kyrsten Sinema, whose votes are essential in a Senate evenly split between Democrats and Republicans. Biden aides have hoped for, among other things, a more than \$500 billion investment to combat climate change in the United States, which would help efforts to persuade China and other nations to make investments of their own in renewable energy.

"It'd be very, very positive to get it done before the trip," Biden said Monday.

But as talks slogged on, administration officials began to play down the significance of Biden's spending plan still hovering in limbo rather than being locked down. White House press secretary Jen Psaki stressed that the president can still work the phones from Rome, the city that gave birth to the word "Senate." She suggested on Wednesday that foreign leaders can see beyond ongoing back-room talks with U.S. lawmakers in order to judge Biden's commitment.

"They don't look at it through the prism of whether there is a vote in one body of the legislative body before he gets on an airplane," Psaki said.

Reaching for a deal that has had a perilous journey thus far, the president is beginning his trip abroad with an expert in the power of prayer. Biden, the nation's second Catholic president, will meet Friday with Pope Francis at the Vatican in a visit that is part personal for the intensely religious commander in chief and part policy, particularly around matters of climate and confronting autocracies.

Biden will also pay a visit to the Italian hosts of the G-20 summit before he sits down with French President Emmanuel Macron. Biden is trying to close a rift with France created when the U.S. and U.K. agreed to provide nuclear-powered submarines to Australia, supplanting a French contract in the process.

Biden is also expected to meet with Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, who backed down just days ago from threats to expel Western diplomats and whose purchase of Russian surface-to-air missiles has upended his country's participation in the F-35 fighter program.

In those and other meetings, Biden is expected to address the Iranian nuclear threat, and Iran's announcement that it could return to talks next month in Vienna.

He is also set to continue to press wealthier U.S. allies to step up their commitments to share COVID-19 vaccines with lower- and middle-income countries. Some nations have been slow to deliver on ambitious pledges and others have largely stayed on the sidelines. Biden will argue that the pandemic can't be ended until vaccines are available widely, and that democracies can't let Chinese and Russian vaccine diplomacy — which often comes with strings attached — take root globally.

Biden will have little interaction with those two most significant of American rivals, as China's Xi Jinping and Russia's Vladimir Putin participate in the summits only virtually because of the pandemic threat. Those two leaders are critical for broader climate issues at a time of rising energy prices. China has committed to increase coal mining ahead of winter, while Russia's natural gas reserves give it a degree of political power over parts of Europe.

Beyond the policies and personalities that will be prominent in Biden's trip, the president will be trying to make the case for democracy itself, arguing that essential aspects — fair elections and representative

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government — are superior to autocracies in good times and bad.

Heading to Scotland on Sunday night for the climate summit, Biden will lead a large U.S. delegation that he hopes will showcase America's plans to address the threat of climate change. It's a sharp reversal from former President Donald Trump, who withdrew the U.S. from the Paris climate accord.

Biden is set to deliver a significant address on climate change and attempt to reclaim the mantle of American leadership. One of the key objections to shifting away from oil and other fossil fuels has been the costs, but the president has been making the claim that nature is already exacting a price with extreme weather from climate change.

The president noted in a Monday speech in New Jersey that storms, floods, fires and other disasters exacerbated by climate change have already cost the U.S. \$100 billion this year.

"We're going to address the root cause of ever-increasing extreme weather and destruction: the climate crisis — we have a climate crisis," Biden said.

Miller reported from Rome. AP Director of Public Opinion Research Emily Swanson contributed to this report.

Biden, Dems get low marks on spending talks: AP-NORC poll

By KEVIN FREKING and HANNAH FINGERHUT Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — As President Joe Biden and Democrats try to get a roughly \$2 trillion package over the finish line, a new poll shows that fewer than half of Americans approve of how they have handled the spending bill. And many say they know little to nothing about it.

It's a troubling sign for a party that hopes to make the social spending investments the hallmark of their midterm election campaigns next year.

The new poll from the Associated Press-NORC Center for Public Affairs Research finds that 36% of Americans say they approve of Biden's handling of the negotiations over the bill, while 41% disapprove and 23% say they neither approve nor disapprove. Fewer than half say they know a lot or some about the proposals.

"I don't place all the blame on him, but I think that, as a president, as a commander-in-chief, I think he could be doing a lot more to get people on board with his plan," said Gary Hines, 65, a Democratic voter from Philadelphia who emphasized he supports the various elements of Biden's plan, from expanding the number of people with health insurance, to making child care more affordable, to doing more to curb climate change.

The findings come at a pivotal moment for Biden and his party. Compared with his spending bill efforts, Americans are more positive about his job performance overall, with 48% approving. Still, 51% disapprove. That split is similar to last month but a notable slump from earlier this year.

The new poll also gives Biden his first underwater approval rating for his handling of the economy and shows increasing pessimism about the direction of the country.

Still, the poll shows ratings of Republicans' role in the situation are even worse. Just 18% percent approve of how Republicans in Congress are handling negotiations over the spending package, while 49% disapprove. Republicans, who have been shut out from the talks over the bill, are expected to overwhelmingly, if not unanimously, oppose the Democratic package.

Democrats have pared back Biden's plans at the insistence of Democratic Sens. Joe Manchin of West Virginia and Kyrsten Sinema of Arizona. Still, they are struggling to reach agreement on a smaller framework of priorities and a means to pay for them.

Kristopher Bennefield, 39, of San Augustine, Texas, voiced frustration with Democrats "being so indecisive among themselves." And he said Biden bears responsibility, because "if he can't get his own party to do anything, how can he really do anything else?"

"He has great ideas, but he's having poor follow-through," said Bennefield, who described himself as an independent.

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Meanwhile, some Americans skeptical of the effort remain so.

"I don't think we can afford it," said Greg Holman, 59, of Grants Pass, Ore., who is hoping for what he described as a "red wave" in next year's mid-term elections.

"It's ridiculous to turn the country into a socialist nation where the government is doing everything for the people," said James Solar, 78, of Houston. "The point is, these programs are not free."

Despite concerns about the progress being made on the spending package, or the lack thereof, most Americans support several of the broad priorities of the plan. The poll shows majorities say funding for health care and education programs should be high priorities, and close to half say the same about programs that address climate change.

Fewer say funding for child care (40%) or paid family leave (27%) should be high priorities, but majorities say they should at least be moderate priorities.

Biden has originally called for up to 12 weeks of paid family and medical leave, allowing workers to get their wages partially replaced in the event of a new child or to care for a seriously ill loved one. But the paid leave program is at risk of being dropped from the bill amid pressure from Manchin and others to reduce the bill's overall price tag.

Ryan Guyer, 40, of Flagstaff, Ariz., views health care, child care and climate change as high priorities. He said he's not against paid family leave and believes it can provide important dividends. Still, he called it a moderate priority because most people have gotten by for a long time without it and he wonders if it "can be kicked down the road again."

As negotiations drag on, Biden's standing with the public has declined, but other factors may also play a role, from the military's difficult withdrawal from Afghanistan to rising prices for groceries, gas and other basics.

For the first time in AP-NORC polling, Biden also earns negative marks for his handling of the economy, with 58% disapproving and 41% approving. That's even more negative than last month, when Americans were closely divided. In March, 60% approved of Biden on the economy.

Only about a third of Americans say the nation is headed in the right direction, similar to last month, but a decline from earlier this year. When Biden took office and in the early months of his presidency, roughly half said the nation was on the right track.

And just 26% think the way things are going in the country will improve in the next year, down from 43% in February. Now, 48% say things will worsen in the year ahead.

Guyer, a Democrat, believes the country is on the right track.

"The thing I'm most concerned about is the polarization of our country, but I think a lot of the pandemic issues over the last year, including the supply chains, including people getting back to work, I think those are going in the right direction," Guyer said.

The AP-NORC poll of 1,083 adults was conducted Oct. 21-25 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 percentage points.

Is it OK to go trick-or-treating during the pandemic?

By EMMA H. TOBIN Associated Press

NEW YORK (AP) — Is it OK to go trick-or-treating during the pandemic?

It depends on the situation and your comfort level, but there are ways to minimize the risk of infection this Halloween.

Whether you feel comfortable with your children trick-or-treating could depend on factors including how high the COVID-19 transmission rate is in your area and if the people your kids will be exposed to are vaccinated.

But trick-or-treating is an outdoor activity that makes it easy to maintain a physical distance, notes Emily Sickbert-Bennett, an infectious disease expert at the University of North Carolina. To prevent kids

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crowding in front of doors, she suggests neighbors coordinating to spread out trick-or-treating.

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention says outdoor activities are safer for the holidays, and to avoid crowded, poorly ventilated spaces. If you attend a party inside, the agency says people who aren't vaccinated — including children who aren't yet eligible for the shots — should wear a well-fitting mask, not just a Halloween costume mask. In areas with high COVID-19 transmission rates, even the fully vaccinated should wear masks inside.

It's generally safe for children to ring doorbells and collect candy, since the coronavirus spreads mainly through respiratory droplets and the risk of infection from surfaces is considered low. But it's still a good idea to bring along hand sanitizer that kids can use before eating treats.

For adults, having a mask on hand when you open the door to pass out candy is important.

"You probably won't necessarily know until you open the door how many people will be out there, whether they'll be wearing masks, what age they'll be, and how great they'll be at keeping distance from you," Sickbert-Bennett says.

Another option if you want to be extra cautious: Set up candy bowls away from front doors.

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

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

Can I get the flu and COVID-19 vaccines at the same time?

Can new variants of the coronavirus keep emerging?

Sudan military leader fires 6 diplomats who criticized coup

By SAMY MAGDY Associated Press

CAIRO (AP) — Sudan's strongman fired at least six ambassadors, including the envoys to the U.S., the European Union and France, after they condemned the military's takeover of the country, a military official said Thursday.

The diplomats pledged their support for the now-deposed government of Prime Minister Abddalla Hamdok.

Also fired by Gen Abdel-Fattah Buran late Wednesday were the Sudanese ambassadors to Qatar, China and the U.N. mission in Geneva, according to the official, who spoke on condition of anonymity because he was not authorized to brief media.

The state-run Sudan TV also reported the dismissals.

The ambassadors were fired two days after Burhan dissolved the transitional government and detained the prime minister, many government officials and political leaders in a coup condemned by the U.S. and the West. The military allowed Hamdok to return home Tuesday after international pressure for his release.

Burhan said the military forces were compelled to take over because of quarrels between political parties that he claimed could lead to civil war. However, the coup also comes just weeks before Burhan would have had to hand over the leadership of the Sovereign Council, the ultimate decision-maker in Sudan, to a civilian, in a step that would reduce the military's hold on the country. The council has military and civilian members. Hamdok's government ran Sudan's daily affairs.

The coup threatens to halt Sudan's fitful transition to democracy, which began after the 2019 ouster of long-time ruler Omar al-Bashir and his Islamist government in a popular uprising.

The takeover came after weeks of mounting tensions between military and civilian leaders over the course and pace of that process.

Ali bin Yahia, Sudan's envoy in Geneva, was defiant after his dismissal.

"I will spare no efforts to reverse the situation, explain facts and resist the blackout imposed by coup officials on what is happened my beloved country," he said in video comments posted online.

Nureldin Satti, the Sudanese envoy to the U.S., said Tuesday he was working with Sudanese diplomats in Brussels, Paris, Geneva and New York to "resist the military coup in support of the heroic struggle of the Sudanese people" to achieve the aims of the uprising against al-Bashir.

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Activists have been circulating videos on social media showing mostly empty streets in the capital, with most stores except for groceries and bakeries closed on Thursday. Earlier, protesters called for a national strike to pressure the military to relinquish power.

Earlier this week, a group of over 30 Sudanese diplomats in and outside Sudan condemned the military's takeover in a joint statement, saying that the ambassadors in Belgium, Switzerland and France had pledged their continued allegiance to the Hamdok government.

The Ministry of Culture and Information, still loyal to Hamdok, said in a Facebook post that the ambassador to South Africa is also part of this group.

In another development, Burhan fired Adlan Ibrahim, head of the country's Civil Aviation Authority, according to the official. Adlan's dismissal came after the resumption of flights in and out of Khartoum's international airport resumed Wednesday.

It was not immediately clear if Ibrahim's dismissal was linked to the reopening of the airport or whether the decision was made before then. The airport remained open Thursday morning.

The country's Civil Aviation Authority initially said flights would be suspended until Saturday, the day of a planned mass protest against the coup, but then reopened the airport Wednesday.

Protesters, meanwhile, took to the streets of Khartoum and its twin city of Omdurman late Wednesday in continued demonstrations against the coup amid heavy security across the capital. By Thursday morning, security forces had cleared several makeshift stone barricades that protesters had set up in a few residential neighborhoods.

No casualties were reported, but a young man died in a Khartoum hospital late Wednesday of wounds sustained in Monday's protests, according to activist Nazim Siraj.

This raised to seven the number of protesters killed since Monday. More than 140 people have been wounded since the military's takeover, according the activist.

Also on Thursday, the Friends of Sudan Group, which consists of several EU states as well as the US and the UN, issued a statement condemning the coup and called for the immediate release of Sudanese officials who were unlawfully detained.

"The actions of the security forces deeply jeopardize Sudan's hard-won political, economic and legal gains made over the past two years and put Sudan's security, stability and reintegration into the international community at risk," read the statement issued by the alliance formed after Bashir's ouster in 2019.

The statement urged the country's armed forces to restore all transitional arrangements that were based on military-civilian partnership.

Vaccine reluctance in Eastern Europe brings high COVID cost

By YURAS KARMANAU Associated Press

KYIV, Ukraine (AP) — Truck driver Andriy Melnik never took the coronavirus seriously. With a friend, he bought a fake vaccination certificate so his travel documents would appear in order when he hauled cargo to other parts of Europe.

His view changed after the friend caught COVID-19 and ended up in an intensive care unit on a ventilator.

"It's not a tall tale. I see that this disease kills, and strong immunity wouldn't be enough -- only a vaccine can offer protection," said Melnik, 42, as he waited in Kyiv to get his shot. "I'm really scared and I'm pleading with doctors to help me correct my mistake."

He added: "Death from coronavirus appears much closer than I imagined."

Ukraine is suffering through a surge in coronavirus infections, along with other parts of Eastern Europe and Russia. While vaccines are plentiful, there is a widespread reluctance to get them in many countries — though notable exceptions include the Baltic nations, Poland, the Czech Republic, Slovenia and Hungary.

The slow pace of vaccinations in Eastern Europe is rooted in several factors, including public distrust and past experience with other vaccines, said Catherine Smallwood, WHO Europe COVID-19 incident manager.

"At the end of the day, we're seeing low vaccine uptake in a whole swath of countries across that part of the region," she told The Associated Press. "Historical issues around vaccines come into play. In some

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countries, the whole vaccine issue is politicized, in any case.”

Russia on Thursday recorded 1,159 deaths in 24 hours — its largest daily toll since the pandemic began — with only about a third of the country’s nearly 146 million people fully vaccinated. The Kremlin ordered a national nonworking period starting this week and lasting until Nov. 7.

In Ukraine, only 16% of the adult population is fully vaccinated — the second-lowest share in Europe after Armenia’s rate of slightly over 7%.

Authorities in Ukraine are requiring teachers, government employees and other workers to get fully vaccinated by Nov. 8 or face a suspension of their pay. In addition, proof of vaccination or a negative test is now needed to board planes, trains and long-distance buses.

This has created a booming black market in counterfeit documents. Fake vaccination certificates sell for the equivalent of \$100-\$300. There’s even a phony version of the government’s digital app, with bogus certificates already installed, said Mykhailo Fedorov, minister for digital transformation.

Last week, President Volodymyr Zelenskyy chaired a meeting on how to combat the counterfeits. Police said they suspect workers at 15 hospitals of being involved in issuing false vaccination documents.

Police have opened 800 criminal cases into such fakes and deployed 100 mobile units to track down their holders, said Interior Minister Denys Monastyrsky. They even caught a former lawmaker who had produced a fake vaccination document upon returning to Ukraine last week.

The low vaccination rate has led to the rapid spread of COVID-19, putting new stress on the country’s already overworked health care system.

The surgical ward of a hospital in the town of Biliaivka, near the Black Sea port of Odesa, is now treating only coronavirus patients, with 50 of its 52 beds filled. Drugs and oxygen are in short supply, and some hospital personnel are leaving their jobs.

“We are on the verge of catastrophe, pushed by aggressive opponents of vaccination and the lack of funds,” said Dr. Serhiy Shvets, the head of the ward. “Regrettably, five workers of my ward have quit over the past week.”

The situation looks similar at a 120-bed hospital in the western city of Chernivtsi, where Dr. Olha Kobevko says she has 126 patients in grave condition.

“I’m weeping in despair when I see that 99% of patients in serious condition with COVID-19 are unvaccinated, and those people could have protected themselves,” the infectious disease specialist told AP. “We are left struggling to save them without sufficient amount of drugs and resources.”

The current surge seems especially lethal, Kobevko said, with 10-23 patients dying daily at her hospital, compared with fewer than six per day last spring. The share of patients in their 30s and 40s has grown considerably, she added.

She blames widespread vaccine skepticism, influenced by social media and religious beliefs.

“Fake stories have spread widely, making people believe in microchips and genetic mutations,” Kobevko said. “Some Orthodox priests have openly and aggressively urged people not to get vaccinated, and social networks have been filled with the most absurd rumors. Ukrainians have learned to distrust any authorities’ initiatives, and vaccination isn’t an exclusion.”

Lidia Buiko, 72, chose to get the Chinese Sinovac shot, citing a falsehood that the Western vaccines contained microchips to control the population.

“Priests have urged us to think twice about getting immunized — it would be impossible to get rid of the chip,” she said as she waited in Kyiv.

Vaccine hesitancy exists even among medical workers. Shvets said 30% of the employees at his hospital in Biliaivka have refused the shots, and Health Minister Viktor Lyashko admitted that about half of Ukrainian medical workers are still reluctant to get them.

Murat Sahin, UNICEF representative in Ukraine, said false and misleading information about COVID-19 poses a growing threat.

“The risks of misinformation to vaccination have never been higher — nor have the stakes,” he said.

Similar skepticism has been seen elsewhere in Eastern Europe, fueled by online misinformation, religious beliefs, distrust of government officials, and reliance on nontraditional treatments.

In Romania, where about 35% of adults are fully immunized, tighter restrictions took effect this week requiring vaccination certificates for many daily activities, such as going to the gym, the movies or shopping malls. There's a 10 p.m. curfew, shops close at 9 p.m., bars and clubs will close for 30 days, and masks are mandatory in public.

So many are "afraid of the vaccines because of the immense (amount of) fake information that has flooded social media and TV," said Dr. Dragos Zaharia of Bucharest's Marius Nasta Institute of Pneumology. "Every day, we see people arriving with shortness of breath and most of them are feeling sorry for not being vaccinated," he told AP. "Every day we see people dying in our ward. We see scared people."

Bulgaria, with only a quarter of the adult population fully vaccinated, also reported record infections and deaths this week. According to official data, Bulgaria has had the highest COVID-19 mortality rate in the 27-nation European Union in the past two weeks, and 94% of those deaths were of unvaccinated people.

Only 33% of Georgia's population has been fully vaccinated, and authorities launched a lottery with cash prizes for those getting shots. Still, Dr. Bidzina Kulumbegov bemoaned the slow pace of vaccinations.

The government's information campaign "was not designed according to the peculiarities of our country. The emphasis should have been done, for instance, on the Georgian Orthodox Church, because we have many instances when priests are saying that vaccination is a sin," Kulumbegov said in televised remarks.

For Melnik, the Ukrainian truck driver, the fear of getting COVID-19 outweighed all his other concerns. "You can't cheat this illness," he said. "You can buy a counterfeit certificate, but you can't buy antibodies. Ukrainians are slowly starting to realize that there is no alternative to vaccination."

Oleksandr Stashevskiy in Odesa, Ukraine, Jamey Keaten in Geneva, Stephen McGrath in Bucharest, Romania, Veselin Toshkov in Sofia, Bulgaria, Sophiko Megrelidze in Tbilisi, Georgia, and Vladimir Isachenkov in Moscow contributed.

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Turkey's Lake Tuz dries up due to climate change, farming

By SUZAN FRASER and MEHMET GUZEL Associated Press

KONYA, Turkey (AP) — For centuries, Lake Tuz in central Turkey has hosted huge colonies of flamingos that migrate and breed there when the weather is warm, feeding on algae in the lake's shallow waters.

This summer, however, a heart-wrenching scene replaced the usual splendid sunset images of the birds captured by wildlife photographer Fahri Tunc. Carcasses of flamingo hatchlings and adults scattered across the cracked, dried-up lake bed.

The 1,665 square kilometer (643 square mile) lake — Turkey's second-largest lake and home to several bird species — has entirely receded this year. Experts say Lake Tuz (Salt Lake in Turkish) is a victim of climate change-induced drought, which has hit the region hard, and decades of harmful agricultural policies that exhausted the underground water supply.

"There were about 5,000 young flamingos. They all perished because there was no water," said Tunc, who also heads the regional branch of the Turkish environmental group Doga Dernegi. "It was an incredibly bad scene. It's not something I can erase from my life. I hope I do not come across such a scene again."

Several other lakes across Turkey have similarly dried up or have receded to alarming levels, affected by low precipitation and unsustainable irrigation practices. Climate experts warn that the entire Mediterranean basin, which includes Turkey, is particularly at risk of severe drought and desertification.

In Lake Van, Turkey's largest lake, located in the country's east, fishing boats no longer could approach a dock last week after the water fell to unusual levels, HaberTurk television reported.

"(We have) rising temperatures and decreasing rain, and on the other side, the water needs for irrigation in agriculture," said Levent Kurnaz, a scientist at Bogazici University's Center for Climate Change and Policy Studies. "It's a bad situation all over Turkey at the moment."

A study based on satellite imagery conducted by Turkey's Ege University shows that water levels at

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Lake Tuz started to drop beginning in 2000, according to Turkey's state-run Anadolu Agency. The lake completely receded this year due to rising temperatures, intensified evaporation and insufficient rain, according to the study.

The study also noted a sharp decline in underground water levels around Lake Tuz, a hypersaline lake that straddles the Turkish provinces of Ankara, Konya and Aksaray.

The Konya basin in central Anatolia, which includes Lake Tuz, was once known as Turkey's breadbasket. Farms in the region have turned to growing profitable but water-intensive crops such as corn, sugar-beet and alfalfa, which have drained groundwater supplies, photographer Tunc said. Farmers have dug thousands of unlicensed wells while streams feeding the lake have dried up or been diverted, he said.

Environmental groups say poor government agricultural policies play a significant role in the deterioration of Turkey's lakes.

"If you don't pay them enough money, the farmers, they will plant whatever is water intensive and will make money for them. And if you just tell them it's not allowed, then they won't vote for you in the next election," Kurnaz said.

The overuse of groundwater is also making the region more susceptible to the formation of sinkholes. Dozens of such depressions have been discovered around Konya's Karapinar district, including one that Associated Press journalists saw next to a newly harvested alfalfa field.

Tunc, 46, a native of Aksaray, is saddened by the thought that he won't be able to enjoy the flamingos with his 7-month-old son like he did with his 21-year-old son. He remains hopeful, however, that Lake Tuz may replenish itself, if the government stops the water-intensive agriculture.

Kurnaz, the climate scientist, is less optimistic.

"They keep telling people that they shouldn't use groundwater for this agriculture and people are not listening. There are about 120,000 unlicensed wells in the region, and everybody is pumping out water as if that water will last forever," Kurnaz said.

"But if you are on a flat place, it can rain as much as you want and it won't replenish the groundwater in a short time. It takes maybe thousands of years in central Anatolia to replenish the underground water table," he added.

The drought and flamingo deaths at Lake Tuz were just one of a series of ecological disasters to strike Turkey this summer, believed to be partly due to climate change.

In July, wildfires devastated swaths of forests along Turkey's southern coast, killing eight people and forcing thousands to flee. Parts of the country's northern Black Sea coast were struck by floods that killed 82 people. Earlier, a layer of sea mucilage, blamed on soaring temperatures and poor waste management, covered the Sea of Marmara, threatening marine life.

Although Turkey was among the first countries to sign the 2015 Paris climate agreement, the country held off ratifying it until this month as it sought to be reclassified as a developing country instead of a developed one to avoid harsher emission reduction targets. Turkish lawmakers issued a declaration rejecting the status of developed country at the same time they ratified the climate agreement.

In the town of Eskil, near the shores of Lake Tuz, farmer Cengiz Erkol, 54, checked the irrigation system on his field growing animal feed.

"The waters aren't running as strong and abundant as they used to," he said. "I have four children. The future doesn't look good. Each year is worse than the previous year."

Ayse Wieting and Robert Badendieck in Istanbul contributed.

Follow all AP stories on climate change at <https://apnews.com/hub/climate-change>.

A monk, a student, an artist: Tortured by Myanmar military

By VICTORIA MILKO and KRISTEN GELINEAU Associated Press

JAKARTA, Indonesia (AP) — A monk was made to hop like a frog, in a humiliation tactic. An accountant

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was shocked with electric probes. An artist was beaten in the head with a baton until he passed out.

Since the military took over Myanmar's government in February, it has tortured detainees held across the country in a methodical and systemic way, an Associated Press investigation has found. The military has also abducted thousands, including young men and boys; used the bodies of the dead and wounded as tools of terror and deliberately attacked medics during a pandemic. Since February, security forces have killed more than 1,200 people, including an estimated 131 or more tortured to death.

Here are a few more stories of prisoners abused by the military.

THE MONK: "LIKE HELL"

A 31-year-old monk was grazed with a bullet while running from the military, handcuffed and beaten with batons and rifles. Security forces kicked him in the head, chest and back. They also photographed the monk and other protesters with gasoline bottles to manufacture evidence of criminal intent.

The soldiers forced the monk to change into civilian clothing and sent him to a torture center set up in Mandalay Palace.

"The interrogation camp in the palace was really like hell," he says.

They ordered him to hop like a frog. Then they took him to a cell with no toilet. Prisoners urinated in a corner of the cell and defecated into plastic bags.

After six days, he was sent to a police station and then a nearby prison, where he was jammed into a cell with 50 other prisoners.

At night, they had to lay down on the floor. If they lifted their heads, the prison guards shot them with a slingshot.

"Sometimes, especially when they were drunk, they tended to torture the prisoners," he says. "If they were drunk, they also tended to come to us and ask why we were saying our prayers at a certain time. ... Then they shot us with the slingshot."

THE ACCOUNTANT: "I COULD DIE HERE"

A 21-year-old accountant's interrogation started at a police station, where soldiers kicked him in the arms, thighs and ribs, and hit him in the head and back. He felt like he was going to faint. He was blindfolded and driven to 9-Mile Interrogation Center in Yangon.

A soldier demanded to know if he had anything to do with a series of bombings, and told him there was a morgue and crematorium in the compound. When the accountant denied any link, the soldier dragged him to the ground by the nape of his neck and forced him to kneel. Later, other soldiers tied him to the wall and beat him.

The soldiers kicked him in the chest and hit his back with a PVC pipe until it broke. They hit him only in places that could be hidden by clothing. He blacked out.

They woke him by dumping ice water on his head. While he was drenched, they shocked him with electric probes.

"I was shaking so much it felt like I was going to die," he says. "Then they zapped me the second time, and then I passed out again."

He was released from 9-Mile only after his family paid money to officials. But soldiers immediately transported him to another interrogation center, Shwe Pyi Thar.

There, soldiers beat him with a rubber baton and kept him in a pitch dark room for so long that he lost track of where he was.

They drafted a confession statement he was forced to sign. After his father paid more money, he was released.

"I told myself that I could die here....I kept thinking, how could they be inflicting this kind of excruciating pain towards other human beings?" he says.

THE ARTIST: "I TRIED NOT TO HAVE ANY HOPE"

A 21-year-old artist was arrested by security forces during a protest and beaten in the head with a baton until he passed out.

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When he awoke, he heard a soldier say, "Hey, just kill these guys already." Another soldier warned him that there were CCTV cameras nearby, and they began dismantling the cameras.

"They were about to kill us," the artist recalls. "This is it for me, you know?"

But the local police soon arrived, and told the soldiers they couldn't kill the young men. The artist was taken to the police station, and then to Shwe Pyi Thar interrogation center in Yangon, where he was held for four days.

"Once I got to the interrogation center, I tried not to have any hope," he says.

A police officer told him to sit down, so he did. A soldier then asked him why he was sitting and beat him.

The room reeked of blood. At night, he could hear banging noises and the sounds of people being beaten.

"Whenever we heard a door opening with the squeaking metal sound, late at night from the back, the whole cell would be startled, wondering who had been taken out for interrogation," he says. "Some of the people, they never came back."

After four days, he was transferred to Insein prison, where he was held for three months before finally being released.

THE STUDENT: "IT'S VERY SYSTEMATIC"

The 23-year-old student from Yangon was arrested on March 3 alongside others protesting the military's takeover.

They were transported to an indoor football stadium, where officials collected their names, addresses and phone numbers. Then they were taken to Insein prison. More than 50 people were inside each vehicle, and a few women fainted.

At Insein, up to 180 people were jammed into each cell.

"It's really, really bad," the student says. "Especially for this COVID time."

On his second night, the military questioned him about his work with the student union.

The next morning, at 7 a.m., he and three other prisoners were taken outside. The officers ordered them to kneel, handcuffed their hands behind their backs, blindfolded their eyes and placed a hood over their heads. They tied a rope around the young man's neck and his body and held onto it like a leash.

The students were forced inside a vehicle, where the soldiers beat and kicked them. They drove for an hour to the interrogation center.

He was kept at the interrogation center for three days. The first night, around 2 a.m., around five officers beat him and told him that if he lied, they would take him to the barracks where the dogs lived. He was blindfolded and handcuffed, hauled out of the room and beaten outside.

He was taken back to Insein, where he saw officers scratching knives through other prisoners' tattoos.

"It's very systematic," he says of the torture. "There is a pattern."

He spent four months at Insein. He spoke with an old man who had been beaten so badly that he was blinded in one eye.

After he was released on June 30, he spent two days with his family, then fled to a new location to hide.

THE SISTER: "THEY JUST TOOK HIM AWAY"

Around midnight, the 22-year-old man was in the shower when four members of the military arrived on motorbikes.

The man's mother begged the soldiers not to take her son, saying he was young and innocent. But the soldiers said they would shoot the family if he didn't go with them.

"They just took him away, and they told my mother that they would detain him for a while," the man's sister says.

The family spent the next day trying to find him. He had been taken to a military base. They sent food and clothing into the base, and soldiers told them he would be released in a few days — if the family gave them money.

The family worked to gather up funds. But the day before the young man was scheduled to be released, the military told the family that he had gotten a stomach ache and died in the hospital.

Soldiers brought the man's parents to the cemetery, and showed them the smoke from the alleged cremation of his body. They never showed his parents his dead body.

"They just told our parents, 'Look, we cremated him already.' My parents only could see smoke from cremation and came back home," the man's sister says.

The family asked the military for a piece of one of the young man's bones. They are convinced he was tortured to death by the military.

How live ammo got on set still a mystery in Baldwin shooting

By MORGAN LEE, SUSAN MONTOYA BRYAN and GENE JOHNSON Associated Press

SANTA FE, N.M. (AP) — Light from a high afternoon sun slanted through the tall windows of the weathered wooden church, catching on the plank floorboards and illuminating the stained glass. Outside, the arid ground of the northern New Mexico foothills stretched for miles — a picturesque setting for an Old West gun battle.

The actor Alec Baldwin, haggard in a white beard and period garb as he played a wounded character named Harlan Rust, sat in a pew, working out how he would draw a long-barreled Colt .45 revolver across his body and aim it toward the movie camera.

A crew readied the shot after adjusting the camera angle to account for the shadows. The camera wasn't rolling yet, but director Joel Souza peered over the shoulder of cinematographer Halyna Hutchins to see what it saw.

Souza heard what sounded like a whip followed by a loud pop, he would later tell investigators.

Suddenly Hutchins was complaining about her stomach, grabbing her midsection and stumbling backward, saying she couldn't feel her legs. Souza saw that she was bloodied, and that he was bleeding too: The lead from Baldwin's gun had pierced Hutchins and embedded in his shoulder.

A medic began trying to save Hutchins as people streamed out of the building and called 911. Lighting specialist Serge Svetnoy said he held her as she was dying, her blood on his hands. Responders flew Hutchins in a helicopter to a hospital, to no avail.

A week after the Oct. 21 shooting on the set of the movie "Rust," accounts and images released in court documents, interviews and social media postings have portrayed much of what happened during the tragedy, but they have yet to answer the key question: how live ammunition wound up in a real gun being used as a movie prop, despite precautions that should have prevented it.

During a news conference Wednesday, Santa Fe County Sheriff Adan Mendoza said there was "some complacency" in how weapons were handled on the set. Investigators found 500 rounds of ammunition — a mix of blanks, dummy rounds and what appeared to be live rounds, even though the set's firearms specialist, armorer Hannah Gutierrez Reed, said there should never have been real ammo present.

"Obviously I think the industry has had a record recently of being safe," Mendoza said. "I think there was some complacency on this set, and I think there are some safety issues that need to be addressed by the industry and possibly by the state of New Mexico."

Mike Tristano, a veteran movie weapons specialist, called it "appalling" that live rounds were mixed in with blanks and dummy rounds.

"In over 600 films and TV shows that I've done, we've never had a live round on set," Tristano said.

The shooting occurred on Bonanza Creek Ranch, a sprawling property that bills itself as "where the Old West comes alive." More than 130 movies have been filmed there, dating back to Jimmy Stewart's "The Man from Laramie" in 1955. Other features have included "3:10 to Yuma," "Cowboys and Aliens" and the miniseries "Lonesome Dove." The Tom Hanks Western "News of the World" and "The Comeback Trail" starring Robert De Niro, Tommy Lee Jones and Morgan Freeman were filmed there in recent years.

Workplace disputes beset the production of "Rust" from its start in early October. In the hours before the shooting, several camera crew members walked off the set amid discord over working conditions, including safety procedures. A new crew was hired that morning, but filming was slow because they were down to one camera, Souza told detectives.

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At 24, Gutierrez Reed had little experience working as an armorer. She told detectives that on the morning of the shooting, she checked the dummy bullets — bullets that appear real, save for a small hole in the side of the casing that identifies them as inoperable — to ensure none were “hot,” according to a search warrant affidavit made public Wednesday.

When the crew broke for lunch, the guns used for filming were locked in a safe inside a large white truck where props were kept, Gutierrez Reed said. The ammunition, however, was left unsecured on a cart. There was additional ammo inside the prop truck.

After lunch, the film’s prop master, Sarah Zachry, removed the guns from the safe and handed them to Gutierrez Reed, Gutierrez Reed told investigators.

According to a search warrant affidavit released last Friday, Gutierrez Reed set three guns on a cart outside the church, and assistant director Dave Halls took one from the cart and handed it to Baldwin. The document released Wednesday said the armorer sometimes handed the gun to Baldwin, and sometimes to Halls.

Gutierrez Reed declined to comment when contacted by The Associated Press on Wednesday. She wrote in a text message Monday that she was trying to find a lawyer.

However Halls obtained the weapon before giving it to Baldwin, he failed to fully check it. Normally, he told detectives, he would examine the barrel for obstructions and have Gutierrez Reed open the hatch and spin the drum where the bullets go, confirming none of the rounds is live.

This time, he reported, he could only remember seeing three of the rounds, and he didn’t remember if the armorer had spun the drum.

Nevertheless, he yelled out “cold gun” to indicate it was safe to use.

“He advised he should have checked all of them, but didn’t,” a Santa Fe County sheriff’s detective wrote in the affidavit released Wednesday.

It’s unclear whether Baldwin deliberately pulled the trigger or if the gun went off inadvertently.

In the commotion after the shooting, Halls found the weapon — a black revolver manufactured by an Italian company that specializes in 19th century reproductions — on a church pew.

He brought it to Gutierrez Reed and told her to open it so he could see what was inside. There were at least four dummy bullet casings, with the small hole in the side, he told detectives.

There was one empty casing. It had no hole.

Montaya Bryan reported from Albuquerque, New Mexico, and Johnson reported from Seattle. Associated Press writer Cedar Attanasio in Santa Fe, New Mexico, contributed.

EXPLAINER: Why Congress is looking closely at Jan. 6 rally

By MARY CLARE JALONICK and MICHELLE R. SMITH Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — The House panel investigating the Jan. 6 Capitol insurrection has focused some of its early work on the planning of the rally at which President Donald Trump told his supporters to “fight like hell.” The rally, held that morning and planned by former White House and campaign aides, became a staging ground for hundreds of supporters who marched to the Capitol, pushed past police and broke inside.

What the committee still doesn’t know — or at least hasn’t revealed publicly — is whether Trump and the organizers of the rally, along with Republican members of Congress, were in touch with protesters who later breached the Capitol or aware of plans for violence. Around 800 people eventually busted through windows and doors and interrupted the certification of President Joe Biden’s victory, repeating Trump’s false claims that he had won the election.

But there were strong signals of what was to take place, starting with Trump’s December tweet promising that the Jan. 6 event would be “wild” and encouraging supporters to come. In the weeks and days beforehand, some people — including those from far-right militant groups — planned for violence openly online. And when they arrived, some wore tactical gear as if prepared for battle.

“Why would you bring bear spray, Kevlar vests, and other items to a peaceful rally?” asked Mississippi

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Rep. Bennie Thompson, the committee's chairman, in an interview with The Associated Press on Tuesday. Thompson says there were people who came to Washington just for the rally, and others who came "to do just what happened here at the Capitol."

As part of the probe, the committee is looking at what members of Congress knew about the event. Some lawmakers spoke at the rally, while others helped plan it. Thompson said that "we're not there yet" in terms of reaching any conclusions, but added that there is "a school of thought that there were some people who misinformed as to what was happening on Jan. 6" as they encouraged Trump supporters to attend.

A look at what we know, and what we don't, about the rally's planning as the committee investigates:

WHAT WE KNOW

The committee has subpoenaed 13 people associated with the rally on the National Mall that morning and a smaller one that had been planned next to the Capitol. Almost all of the people subpoenaed were listed on the permit for the Mall event, where Trump told his supporters that "if you don't fight like hell, you're not going to have a country anymore."

Republican members of Congress, including Alabama Rep. Mo Brooks and North Carolina Rep. Madison Cawthorn, also spoke at the rally. Brooks told the crowd to "stop at the Capitol" before they went home and that "today is the day that American patriots start taking down names and kicking ass."

Most of the rally's organizers had worked on Trump's presidential campaign or in his administration, and the White House coordinated with them starting in mid-December, according to two people familiar with the planning who requested anonymity to discuss it. The permit for the rally was issued to Women for America First, a pro-Trump group with roots in the tea party movement.

As the event was underway and as Trump was speaking, a large group of people made its way to the Capitol, among them members of far-right extremist groups like the Proud Boys and Oath Keepers who forcibly entered. Some dressed in tactical vests and helmets and marched toward the door in a military-style formation.

One of the organizers who was subpoenaed, Ali Alexander, said after the riot that the intention was to direct attendees of the larger rally to march to the Capitol. In his subpoena, the panel cited media reports that Alexander had made reference "to the possible use of violence to achieve the organization's goals" and had been in communication with the White House and members of Congress.

In the months since, many Republicans who denounced the violence have started playing it down and even defended the rioters. Arizona Rep. Paul Gosar, for example, has repeatedly said that a woman who was shot and killed by police as she was trying to break into the House chamber was "executed." The committee has asked the National Archives for records of communications between Gosar's chief of staff and the Trump administration.

WHAT WE DON'T KNOW

There are still many unknowns about how the rally was planned. Were the organizers planning an insurrection? Who paid for the rally and what was their goal? How much did Trump know? And were any members of Congress communicating with the protesters who broke in?

In the days after the attack, some Democrats questioned whether their Republican colleagues had helped the rioters. House Speaker Nancy Pelosi said that if any members "aided and abetted the crimes" they may have to be prosecuted.

There has been no direct evidence that any members of Congress helped the rioters. But the committee says it is investigating every aspect of the attack, including whether lawmakers assisted the attackers and how involved they were in planning the rally and others beforehand.

Thompson says that if any members appear to be implicated in the attack, "I don't think there's any reluctance" to call them in for testimony.

WHAT THE COMMITTEE IS INVESTIGATING

The committee is interviewing some of the rally organizers it subpoenaed behind closed doors and negotiating with others. So far, all of the 13 have at least communicated with the panel about testifying. The committee is also seeking a broad swath of presidential documents from the National Archives about

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communications between officials in the run-up to the rally and the insurrection.

In August, the committee asked social media and telecommunications companies to preserve phone or computer records for hundreds of people who were potentially involved with efforts to “challenge, delay or interfere” with the certification or otherwise try to overturn the results of the 2020 election.

Among the hundreds of names they sent the companies were several of Trump’s most ardent Republican allies in Congress, including Brooks, Cawthorn and GOP Reps. Jim Jordan of Ohio, Andy Biggs of Arizona, Paul Gosar of Arizona, Matt Gaetz of Florida, Jody Hice of Georgia, Marjorie Taylor Greene of Georgia, Louie Gohmert of Texas, Scott Perry of Pennsylvania and Lauren Boebert of Colorado.

Maryland Rep. Jamie Raskin, a Democrat on the Jan. 6 panel, said the committee is probing how the origins of the rally, or its planning, may be linked to the violence.

“We want to know what the connection is,” Raskin said, and whether the insurrection was part of the original design, or a “detour” for the people who were there.

“We’ve been given the charge to investigate the events of Jan. 6, the causes of Jan. 6, and what America needs to do to prevent further political insurrections and coups directed against the government,” Raskin said. “So we want to talk to everybody who’s got information related to all of those things. And so that includes elected officials, that includes anyone who has information to give us.”

Smith reported from Providence, Rhode Island.

World Siri: Rookie propels Astros past Braves to tie Series

By KRISTIE RIEKEN AP Sports Writer

HOUSTON (AP) — Jose Siri launched himself headfirst into home plate, popped up with arms flexed and screamed with all his might.

Welcome to the World Series, rook.

The career minor leaguer sparked a team whose biggest stars took a while to shine, sending the Houston Astros to a 7-2 victory over the Atlanta Braves on Wednesday night that evened the Fall Classic at one game apiece.

“It’s a long ways from waiver wire and Triple-A to the World Series,” Houston manager Dusty Baker said. “And he’s handled it pretty well.”

Jose Altuve doubled early, homered late and scored twice to break out at the plate. Siri’s speed and aggressive play created havoc on the bases, leading to a four-run second inning that helped the Astros snap a five-game skid at home in the World Series.

It’s the first time they’ve won a Series game in Houston since a 13-12 victory over the Dodgers in 10 innings in Game 5 on Oct. 29, 2017.

Altuve hit a leadoff double and scored in the first inning before adding a solo homer in the seventh as the October-tested Astros rolled past the suddenly sloppy Braves. It was the 22nd career postseason homer for Altuve, tying Bernie Williams for second-most behind Manny Ramirez (29).

“You can be 0 for 20,” Altuve said. “But what about if you get the big hit? So that’s what playoffs is about.”

Siri and Altuve ignited an offense still waiting on a big swing from Carlos Correa, Alex Bregman and ALCS MVP Yordan Alvarez in this Series.

José Urquidy gave the Astros five solid innings for his second career World Series win and Houston’s bullpen — already so important this postseason — did the rest. Cristian Javier, Phil Maton, Ryan Pressly and Kendall Graveman combined for one-hit ball over four scoreless innings.

“I was very focused,” said Urquidy, a rookie when he beat Washington in the 2019 Fall Classic. “I love it. I love the feeling.”

The best-of-seven series shifts to Atlanta for the first of three games Friday night, with Ian Anderson scheduled to pitch for the Braves against rookie Luis Garcia.

The Astros jumped on Atlanta starter Max Fried for seven hits and six runs in five-plus innings.

The game was tied at 1 when Kyle Tucker got things going in the second with a one-out single before

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advancing to third on a single by Yuli Gurriel. The speedy Siri, who made his major league debut Sept. 3, then beat out an infield single to score Tucker and put the Astros on top.

That made Siri the first player to debut in September or later and drive in a run in that year's World Series. Hey Siri: How does that feel?

Martín Maldonado grounded a single to left fielder Eddie Rosario that scored Gurriel.

The usually fundamentally sound Braves then misplayed things all around. Rosario threw to an unoccupied third base and the ball rolled into foul territory, allowing Siri to dash home on the error.

"There's so many baseball plays that don't go like you want," Atlanta manager Brian Snitker said. "We just kind of got caught in between a little bit."

Siri stood at the plate reveling in the spotlight.

"Vamos," Spanish for 'let's go,' he hollered again and again.

Stuck in the minors since 2013, the excitable 26-year-old outfielder is now a World Siri. Before Wednesday he was most known for almost knocking over the 72-year-old Baker en route to celebrating a teammate's postseason exploits.

This moment was all his.

"I've never had fear," Siri said through a translator. "I'm not scared."

The crowd, so quiet a night before, roared as Siri bounded toward the dugout. A fan in the lower deck displayed a sign that read: "Don't Poke The Bear" as the Astros rediscovered their potent offense after Tuesday night's dud of a 6-2 loss.

The Braves had a visit at the mound to try and regroup after that fiasco of a play but Fried threw a wild pitch soon afterward to send Maldonado to third. There were two outs when Michael Brantley singled, pumping his fist as he left the batter's box to send another run home that made it 5-1.

Urquidy permitted six hits and two runs while striking out seven and walking none to rebound from a clunker in Game 3 of the AL Championship Series when he allowed five runs while getting just five outs against Boston.

Altuve's leadoff double got the Astros going a night after the star second baseman went 0 for 5 in the first three-strikeout game of his postseason career. He advanced to third on a fly ball by Brantley before scoring on Bregman's sacrifice fly to make it 1-0.

Urquidy got off to a much better start than teammate Framber Valdez did in Game 1. It was a low bar, though, after Valdez was rocked for a leadoff homer by Jorge Soler on Tuesday night.

Urquidy struck out his first two batters before allowing consecutive singles to Ozzie Albies and Austin Riley. Soler then came to the plate, and the right-hander avoided the first-inning trouble Valdez got into when he fanned the big designated hitter to escape the jam.

Travis d'Arnaud homered for Atlanta in the second to tie it 1-1. Dansby Swanson singled, but Gurriel grabbed Rosario's liner to first base for the third out.

An RBI single by Freddie Freeman cut the lead to 5-2 in the fifth.

"Obviously, you want to win two. But if you get out of here with a split, then that's a good thing going home," Snitker said.

UP NEXT

García pitched no-hit ball into the sixth inning during his last start in Game 6 of the ALCS to lead the Astros to the win.

Anderson allowed one run in four innings of a start in Game 6 of the NLCS.

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

'Animalism': Blackhawks scandal raises culture questions

By JAY COHEN AP Sports Writer

CHICAGO (AP) — For three weeks in 2010, they did nothing. That's how long it took for the leadership of the Chicago Blackhawks to act on allegations that an assistant coach sexually assaulted a player.

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Three weeks. Three weeks that — more than a decade later — rocked a once-proud franchise and raised more questions about the culture of sports.

In the span of 107 pages, featuring interviews with 139 witnesses, more than 100 gigabytes of electronic records and 49 boxes of hard-copy records, a report by an outside law firm detailed how senior leaders of the Blackhawks seemingly ignored the sexual assault accusations raised with the franchise days before the team won its first Stanley Cup title since 1961.

The ramifications of the independent review, commissioned by the team in response to two lawsuits, stretched into several corners of the NHL, which fined the Blackhawks \$2 million for “the organization’s inadequate internal procedures and insufficient and untimely response.”

Florida coach Joel Quenneville is slated to meet with NHL Commissioner Gary Bettman on Thursday, and Winnipeg general manager Kevin Cheveldayoff is planning to talk to the commissioner on Monday. Both were with the Blackhawks when the accusations by Kyle Beach were first reported to team leadership.

According to the report, Donald Fehr, the leader of the NHL players’ association, was contacted twice about allegations connected to the assistant coach, including by a Beach confidant. Fehr told investigators he couldn’t recall either conversation, but did not deny that they had occurred.

“Kyle Beach has been through a horrific experience and has shown true courage in telling his story,” Fehr said in a statement Wednesday night. “There is no doubt that the system failed to support him in his time of need, and we are part of that system.”

“In his media interview, Mr. Beach stated that several months after the incident he told someone at the NHLPA the details of what happened to him. He is referring to one of the program doctors with the NHL/NHLPA player assistance program. While this program is confidential between players and the doctors, the grave nature of this incident should have resulted in further action on our part. The fact that it did not was a serious failure. I am truly sorry, and I am committed to making changes to ensure it does not happen again.”

Beach, a 2008 first-round draft pick playing professionally in Germany, told TSN on Wednesday he felt “alone and dark” in the days following the alleged assault. He said he is only now beginning the healing process.

Beach, 31, had been referred to as John Doe in his lawsuit against the team and the Blackhawks’ report. The AP does not typically identify people who say they are victims of sexual assault unless they come forward publicly.

In a statement attributed to the team, the Blackhawks commended Beach for his courage in coming forward, and reiterated the organization’s “deepest apologies” for what he has gone through and its failure to promptly respond in 2010.

Blackhawks CEO Danny Wirtz, the son of team chairman Rocky Wirtz, met with current players Wednesday, a day after the graphic report was released, leading to the departures of President of Hockey Operations Stan Bowman and Al MacIsaac, another top executive.

“I think the overriding message was that we, as in the organization, we’re here for you,” coach Jeremy Colliton said. “The family is behind us. The organization’s behind us, and we’re going to do everything we can to move forward here.”

Rocky Wirtz said Tuesday that he and Danny were first made aware of the accusations ahead of a May filing of a lawsuit by Beach alleging sexual assault by then-assistant coach Brad Aldrich in 2010. The team also is facing a second lawsuit by a former student whom Aldrich was convicted of assaulting in Michigan.

The Blackhawks said their lawyers contacted Susan Loggans, an attorney who represents John Doe and the former student in the second lawsuit, on Tuesday about possible settlements. A call was set up for early next week.

According to the report, the encounter between Beach, then a 20-year-old minor leaguer called up in case the Blackhawks needed help in the playoffs, and Aldrich, then 27, occurred on May 8 or 9 in 2010.

Beach told investigators that Aldrich threatened him with a souvenir baseball bat before forcibly performing oral sex on him and masturbating on the player’s back, allegations that he also detailed in his lawsuit.

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Aldrich told investigators the encounter was consensual. Asked Wednesday about the law firm's report, Aldrich responded: "I have nothing to say."

About two weeks later, on May 23, 2010, right after Chicago advanced to the Stanley Cup Final, Bowman, MacIsaac, team president John McDonough, executive vice president Jay Blunk and assistant general manager Cheveldayoff met with Quenneville and mental skills coach Jim Gary to discuss the allegations.

Former federal prosecutor Reid Schar, who led the investigation, said accounts of the meeting "vary significantly." But there was no evidence that anything was done about the accusations before McDonough contacted the team's director of human resources on June 14 — a delay that violated the team's sexual harassment policy, according to Schar.

During those three weeks, Aldrich continued to work for and travel with the team. Schar said Aldrich also "made an unwanted sexual advance" toward a 22-year-old Blackhawks intern.

Beach told TSN seeing Aldrich around the team made him feel sick.

"I reported this and I was made aware that it made it all the way up the chain of command by (Jim Gary) and nothing happened," Beach said. "It was like his life was the same as the day before. Same every day.

"And then when they won, to see him paraded around lifting the Cup, at the parade, at the team pictures, at celebrations, it made me feel like nothing."

McDonough, Blunk and Gary are no longer employed in the NHL. Now Bowman and MacIsaac are out as well.

But the report makes clear that 11 years ago, winning the Cup took priority over taking immediate action on the Aldrich allegations: Bowman recalled that during the May 23 meeting, McDonough and Quenneville talked about the challenge of reaching the Stanley Cup Final and "a desire to focus on the team and the playoffs."

Bowman's description of what happened was reminiscent of scandals at Baylor, where assault claims against football players were mishandled by school officials, or at USA Gymnastics, still reeling from its mishandling of convicted serial sex abuser and team doctor Larry Nassar.

Loggans said she hopes what happened with Chicago leads to changes across sports.

"There has to be a change from a mentality of complete animalism, like let's just completely ramp up the masculinity factor of these players and whatever it takes to win a game, we'll do that," she said. "There has to be some context, no different than being concerned about concussions in football games.

"It's not winning at all costs. These are human beings. They're not gladiators whose lives are going to be sacrificed in the game."

AP Hockey Writer Stephen Whyno contributed to this report.

More AP sports: <https://apnews.com/hub/apf-sports> and https://twitter.com/AP_Sports

Brazil probe of Bolsonaro offers COVID-19 families solace

By DAVID BILLER and DÉBORA ÁLVARES Associated Press

RIO DE JANEIRO (AP) — The morning after a Brazilian Senate committee recommended criminal indictments for President Jair Bolsonaro over his handling of the COVID-19 pandemic, Bruna Chaves, who lost her mother to the disease, was venting her pain in an emotional grief support group session.

"It wasn't my mom's time to go," she told the others Wednesday inside an ecumenical chapel in Rio de Janeiro. "Somebody needs to be blamed."

A government body laying blame at the president's feet in the form of a nearly 1,300-page report is already helping bring solace and validation to the mournful nation with the world's second highest death toll from the virus and eighth highest per capita.

Chaves, a 25-year-old chemistry student, has been watching in recent weeks the nationally televised sessions on the committee's six-month probe, which culminated Tuesday with the recommendation that President Jair Bolsonaro face charges along with dozens of other officials and allies.

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The social worker coordinating Chaves' session, Márcia Torres, said that publicly laying out the facts during the Senate inquiry can help people move forward in their grieving process. Seeing officials face the consequences of their actions would bring further comfort.

"Condemnation would be justice," Torres said. "For people, it would be of great value to see that, see the government arrested — literally arrested. For them, it would be a relief."

Many including Chaves fear, however, that prospects are slim for concrete punishment of officials accused of responsibility for many of Brazil's 607,000 COVID-19 deaths. It's far from certain that the prosecutor-general, a Bolsonaro appointee, will pursue charges or that impeachment proceedings will advance in Congress.

The president has repeatedly denied wrongdoing and called the Senate committee's probe a politically motivated sham seeking to undermine his administration.

But Dr. Helian Nunes, a psychiatrist at the Federal University of Minas Gerais who coordinates a program providing mental health support to front-line workers, said the probe has mattered to his patients. Of the nearly 100 people he personally counseled, almost all of whom lost loved ones or acquaintances, most have followed news from the Senate inquiry closely and brought it up in sessions, he told the AP.

"It isn't possible to replace the losses, but when you give voice to these people, and hold the people involved responsible, it's possible to lessen the damage," Nunes said.

"Society needs to give importance to what happened so it doesn't happen again," he added.

Bolsonaro has often deflected blame for the pandemic's toll, excoriating governors and mayors for imposing restrictions on activity to contain the virus' spread, attacking the Supreme Court for upholding local leaders' jurisdictions and casting himself as righteously refusing politically correct recommendations by keeping the economy running, ostensibly to shield the poor.

A constant in his pandemic approach has been dismissive, belittling rhetoric — COVID-19 was just "a little flu," Bolsonaro has said, and he also joked that Brazilians should be studied because they can swim in sewage without falling ill.

That has long rankled people like Márcio Antônio Silva, who lost his 25-year-old son to the coronavirus and recently told the Senate committee it pained him to have his grief downplayed as mere bellyaching by a president offering sarcasm rather than succor.

"That's why this investigation was so important to me, because someone appeared who didn't say, 'So what?'" Silva said in testimony, his voice quavering. "Someone came and said, 'I'm going to do something for you.'"

Throughout the pandemic, Bolsonaro gathered crowds of maskless people to demonstrate that individuals have a right to come and go as they please, but not once did he pay respects at a COVID-19 memorial or burial. He has followed tepid statements of regret over COVID-19 deaths with pivots to fatalism by saying death is part of life.

An outspoken vaccine skeptic, he insistently touted the anti-malaria pill hydroxychloroquine long after broad testing showed it wasn't effective against COVID-19. The Senate committee's report says hydroxychloroquine was "practically the only government policy to fight the pandemic," and as a result Bolsonaro is "the main person responsible for the errors committed by the federal government."

Amid the drumbeat of allegations arising from the investigation, the president's approval ratings have steadily declined to reach their lowest level since he took office in 2019. Early polls for next year's election, meanwhile, show him trailing his main rival.

The Senate committee has proposed creating a monument for COVID-19 victims, but for now, relatives of the dead must take solace in temporary memorials like the white flags planted earlier this month outside Congress in Brasilia, the capital.

Fernanda Natasha Bravo Cruz was there that day mourning her father, whom she recalled as a lawyer who often provided pro bono legal services to those in need. After initially heeding stay-at-home recommendations, he started letting his guard down, got infected and died before getting the chance to hold his newborn granddaughter. Ahead of that much-anticipated encounter, he sent her a copy of Antoine de

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Saint-Exupéry's "The Little Prince."

Now, whenever Cruz's daughter glimpses the book, she points excitedly as if she knows someone wanted her to grow up reading it.

On Wednesday, Cruz said the Senate committee's decision brought some measure of justice.

"It's important that there be institutions on the side of the people who are suffering and were made very fragile by this process," Cruz said. "It's not just personal grief. It's collective grief."

Billler reported from Rio de Janeiro, and Álvares reported from Brasilia.

Minneapolis mayor faces voters with policing on their minds

By STEVE KARNOWSKI Associated Press

MINNEAPOLIS (AP) — Minneapolis Mayor Jacob Frey was the face of the city through some of its darkest days — the death of George Floyd under an officer's knee last year and rioting that marred the ensuing protests, including the burning of a police precinct after Frey ordered officers to abandon it.

Frey, a Democrat, is now in a tough fight to keep his job as the city tries to rebuild since Floyd's death in May 2020 sparked the most damaging unrest in the U.S. since the Rodney King riots. Tuesday's election will likely turn on how voters view Frey's efforts to find a middle road in a city sharply divided by questions on racism, policing and crime.

Frey has positioned himself as a defender of police and the city's popular Black chief — and against the most liberal and vocal progressives seeking a symbolic victory in Floyd's city.

"There's not a mayor in the country that is content with the pace of change, and count me in on that vote," Frey, 40, said in an interview. "But we have passed a litany of reforms and changes, more than any mayor in the history of this city."

During the worst of the unrest following the death of Floyd, a Black man, under white Officer Derek Chauvin's knee, conservatives accused Frey of failing to stem the riots or crack down on soaring crime and gun violence.

But he has also been pilloried by many on the left for not doing enough to overhaul Minneapolis police. Most of his serious challengers in a 17-candidate field are more liberal than Frey in a city that last elected a Republican mayor 64 years ago. Some have made a mantra of the slogan "Don't Rank Frey" — a plea for voters to leave him off their ballot in the city's ranked-choice voting system, thus increasing the chances someone else will win.

Frey's fate may well be tied to a ballot question that asks voters whether they want to replace the police department with a new Department of Public Safety. The ballot question would drop a requirement that the city have a police department and a minimum number of officers. Opponents have said that could mean too few officers; supporters have dismissed that as fear-mongering.

The mayor opposes the ballot question. He notes it doesn't include a clear plan for whatever would replace it, and that it would shift sole oversight of police from the mayor's office to a system that gives the 13-member City Council more input.

Two top challengers, Sheila Nezhad and Kate Knuth, both support replacing the current department. Nezhad was a leader of the campaign behind the ballot question. Knuth is a former state representative and environmental justice activist.

Progressive groups have united around the two women and the "Don't Rank Frey" strategy, including U.S. Rep. Ilhan Omar, who represents the Minneapolis area in Congress. In an appearance with both candidates in mid-October, Omar blasted "four years of failed leadership" in the city, and Nezhad and Knuth sounded similar notes.

"Our path forward does not require us to choose among safety, justice and police accountability," Knuth said.

Frey, a lawyer by training and a Virginia transplant, first won a City Council seat in 2013. He ascended to the mayor's office in 2017 by ousting incumbent Betsy Hodges in a race also roiled by police account-

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ability issues, including the 2015 shooting of Jamar Clark, a Black man, in a struggle with white officers and the 2017 shooting of Justine Ruszczyk Damond, a white woman, by a Black officer.

The divisions in the campaign in the wake of Floyd's death don't break down cleanly along racial lines. Frey said his strongest support comes from the Black and Somali communities, which have been hit hard by crime and where support for defunding police is not universal. He said there's a "massive disjoint" between what he's hearing from those communities compared to what white progressive activists are saying.

Frey said he has made substantial progress in overhauling policing. As examples, the mayor said police compliance with rules on using body cameras was just 55% when he took office. Penalties that he and Medaria Arradondo, the city's first Black police chief, imposed after Floyd's death brought it to 95%. The department banned "warrior-style" training. They overhauled use-of-force rules including a ban on choke holds. They banned pretext stops for low-level offenses such as air fresheners hanging from mirrors and expired license plate tabs.

Frey said Minnesota law requires changes to do more to hold bad cops accountable. He said the department has terminated or disciplined more officers in 2020 and 2021 than the previous four years combined: final disciplinary decisions in 73 cases last year and this year, compared to 63 between 2015 and 2019. But Frey said it's hard to make those decisions stick.

"Right now when Chief Arradondo or I fire or discipline an officer, 55% of the time that decision is overturned by mandatory arbitration, which is required under state law," he said. "Fifty percent of the time they're returned and they go back to violate trust with the community."

Frey said he wants to continue working on public safety and police accountability in a second term, and on a "strong and inclusive recovery" from both the pandemic and last year's destruction. He'd also like to revisit affordable housing, an issue where he had some early successes.

"For all these issues, public safety, police accountability, affordable housing, economic inclusion and recovery, there are no magic wand fixes," he said. "There are no hashtags that lead to utopia. You gotta do the work."

Steve Cramer, president and CEO of the Minneapolis Downtown Council and a former City Council member, said Frey has staked out a strong position of wanting to work with Arradondo to reform the police department as it is.

"I think that stance is popular with a big chunk of voters in the city, including many in the African American community, but there's also a cohort of young people who don't see it that way," Cramer said.

Paid family leave falls out of Biden bill as tempers rise

By LISA MASCARO, AAMER MADHANI and ALAN FRAM Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — Top Democrats signaled a deal is within reach on President Joe Biden's big domestic bill but momentum fizzled and tempers flared late Wednesday as a paid family leave proposal fell out and a billionaires' tax appeared scrapped, mostly to satisfy a pivotal member of the 50-50 Senate.

With his signature domestic initiative at stake, Biden will head to Capitol Hill on Thursday morning to urge Democratic lawmakers to bring talks on the social services and climate change bill "over the finish line" before he departs for global summits overseas.

Still in the mix: expanded health care programs, free pre-kindergarten and some \$500 billion to tackle climate change remain in what's now at least a \$1.75 trillion package.

And Democrats are eyeing a new surcharge on the wealthy — 5% on incomes above \$10 million and an additional 3% on those beyond \$25 million — to help pay for it, according to a person who requested anonymity to discuss the private talks.

"They're all within our reach. Let's bring these bills over the finish line." Biden tweeted late Wednesday.

To help push lawmakers toward that goal, Biden will speak Thursday morning to the House Democratic Caucus, a person familiar with the plan told The Associated Press on condition of anonymity. Besides pressing for important party priorities, the president was hoping to show foreign leaders the U.S. was getting things done under his administration.

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The administration was assessing the situation "hour by hour," White House press secretary Jen Psaki said.

It was a fast-moving day on Capitol Hill that started upbeat as House Speaker Nancy Pelosi declared that Democrats were in "pretty good shape." But hopes quickly faded as Biden's big proposal ran into stubborn new setbacks, chief among them how to pay for it all.

A just-proposed tax on billionaires could be scrapped after Democratic Sen. Joe Manchin of West Virginia objected, according to a senior party aide, who requested anonymity to discuss the private talks.

The billionaires' tax proposal had been designed to win over another Democratic holdout, Sen. Kyrsten Sinema of Arizona, but Manchin panned it as unfairly targeting the wealthy, leaving Democrats at odds.

"People in the stratosphere, rather than trying to penalize, we ought to be pleased that this country is able to produce the wealth," Manchin told reporters.

Manchin said he prefers a minimum 15% flat "patriotic tax" to ensure the wealthiest Americans don't skip out on paying any taxes. Nevertheless, he said: "We need to move forward."

Next to fall was a proposed paid family leave program that was already being chiseled back from 12 to four weeks to satisfy Manchin. But with his objections, it was unlikely to be included in the bill, the person said.

Sen. Kirsten Gillibrand, D-N.Y., had devised several new options for Manchin's review and told reporters late in the evening, "It's not over until it's over."

Together, Manchin's and Sinema's objections packed a one-two punch, throwing Biden's overall plan into flux, halving what had been a \$3.5 trillion package, and infuriating colleagues along the way.

In the evenly divided Senate, Biden needs all Democrats' support with no votes to spare.

White House officials met at the Capitol with Manchin and Sinema, two senators who now hold enormous power, essentially deciding whether or not Biden will be able to deliver on the Democrats' major campaign promises.

"Making progress," Sinema said as she dashed into an elevator.

A Sunday deadline loomed for approving a smaller, bipartisan roads-and-bridges infrastructure bill or risk allowing funds for routine transportation programs to expire. But that \$1 trillion bill has been held up by progressive lawmakers who are refusing to give their support without the bigger Biden deal.

Despite a series of deadlines, Democrats have been unable to close the deal among themselves, and Republicans overwhelmingly oppose the package. At best, Democrats could potentially reach a framework Thursday that could send Biden overseas with a deal in hand and unlock the process while the final details were sewn up.

Applying pressure, Pelosi announced a Thursday committee hearing to spur the Biden package along toward a full House vote, though timing remained uncertain.

Democrats had hoped the unveiling of the billionaires tax Wednesday could help resolve the revenue side of the equation after Sinema rejected the party's earlier idea of reversing Trump-era tax breaks on corporations and the wealthy, those earning more than \$400,000.

The new billionaires' proposal would tax the gains of those with more than \$1 billion in assets or incomes of more than \$100 million over three consecutive years — fewer than 800 people — requiring them pay taxes on the gains of stocks and other tradeable assets, rather than waiting until holdings are sold.

The billionaires' tax rate would align with the capital gains rate, now 23.8%. Democrats have said it could raise \$200 billion in revenue that could help fund Biden's package over 10 years.

Republicans have derided the billionaires' tax as "harebrained," and some have suggested it would face a legal challenge.

But Democratic Sen. Ron Wyden of Oregon, chairman of the Senate Finance Committee, insisted the billionaires tax remains on the table.

"I've not heard a single United States senator — not one — get up and say, 'Gee, I think it's just fun that billionaires pay little or nothing for years on end,'" Wyden said.

More likely in the mix was the companion proposal, a new 15% corporate minimum tax, as well as the

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new surtax being proposed on higher incomes above \$10 million.

Together they are designed to fulfill Biden's desire for the wealthy and big business to pay their "fair share." They also fit his promise that no new taxes hit those earning less than \$400,000 a year, or \$450,000 for couples. Biden wants his package fully paid for without piling on debt.

Resolving the revenue side has been crucial, as lawmakers figure out how much money will be available to spend on the new health, child care and climate change programs in Biden's big plan.

Among Democrats, Rep. Richard Neal of Massachusetts, the chairman of the Ways and Means Committee, said he told Wyden the billionaires' tax may be difficult to implement. Despite Sinema's opposition, he expects Democrats to stick with the approach his panel took in simply raising rates on corporations and the wealthy, undoing the 2017 tax cuts.

"There's a lot of there's a lot of angst in there over the billionaires' tax," Neal said.

Under the House bill approved by Neal's panel, the top individual income tax rate would rise from 37% to 39.6%, on those earning more than \$400,000 a year, or \$450,000 for couples. The corporate rate would increase from 21% to 26.5%.

The House bill also proposes a 3% surtax on the wealthiest Americans with adjusted income beyond \$5 million a year, and Neal suggested that could be raised to \$10 million to win over the holdouts.

Opposition from the two senators is forcing difficult reductions, if not the outright elimination, of policy priorities — from child care assistance to dental, vision and hearing aid benefits for seniors.

The once hefty climate change strategies are less punitive on polluters, as coal-state Manchin objected, focusing instead on rewarding clean energy incentives.

Said Sen. Bernie Sanders, the Vermont Independent: "You got 48 out of 50 people supporting an agenda that works for the American people."

Associated Press writers Farnoush Amiri and Kevin Freking contributed to this report.

Thai police: Woman cut rope holding painters 26 floors high

By CHALIDA EKVITTHAYAVECHNUKUL Associated Press

BANGKOK (AP) — A resident of a high-rise condominium in Thailand cut the support rope for two painters, apparently angry she wasn't told they would be doing work, and left them hanging above the 26th floor until a couple rescued them, police said Wednesday.

The woman is facing attempted murder and property destruction charges, Pol. Col. Pongjak Preecharunpong, chief of the Pak Kret police station north of the Thai capital, told The Associated Press.

Pongjak did not say what prompted the suspect to cut the rope, but Thai media reported that she was apparently frustrated when the workers appeared outside her room and hadn't seen an announcement by the condo that they would be doing work on Oct. 12.

A video clip on social media showed two painters asking the residents on the 26th floor to open the window and let them in. One of the painters, a Myanmar national named Song, told the Thai media that he and his two friends had lowered themselves from the 32nd floor to repair a crack on the building.

When he reached the 30th floor, he felt that the rope was heavier and when he looked down, he saw someone on the 21st floor open a window and cut his rope. He tried asking for help from other units, but nobody was in. The third colleague continued to support them from the top floor, said Praphaiwan Setsing, the resident who saved them.

Praphaiwan said her British husband noticed one painter signaling for help and called her to talk to them. "This incident is shocking and should not happen at all," she said.

The management of the condo accompanied the painters to report the incident to the police. The 34-year-old woman at first denied she responsible, but police sent the severed rope for a fingerprint and DNA analysis, media reported.

On Wednesday, the woman and her lawyer appeared at the police station. After the police showed her the CCTV footage and the forensic evidence, she confessed but denied any intention to kill the workers.

Pongjak said the suspect was temporarily released. Police will file an indictment at the provincial court within 15 days, he said. She could face a prison term up to 20 years if found guilty on a charge of attempted murder.

United States issues its 1st passport with 'X' gender marker

By COLLEEN SLEVIN Associated Press

DENVER (AP) — The United States has issued its first passport with an "X" gender designation, marking a milestone in the recognition of the rights of people who do not identify as male or female, and expects to be able to offer the option more broadly next year, the State Department said Wednesday.

The department did not identify the passport recipient, but Dana Zzyym, an intersex activist from Fort Collins, Colorado, told The Associated Press in a telephone interview that they received it. Since 2015, Zzyym, who prefers a gender-neutral pronoun, has been in a legal battle with the State Department to obtain a passport that did not require Zzyym to lie about gender by picking either male or female.

Zzyym (pronounced Zimm) picked up the UPS package with the passport after getting an early morning text and phone call from their lawyer, Paul Castillo of Lambda Legal, that it had arrived. Zzyym had stayed up late celebrating Intersex Awareness Day with two visiting activists.

While Zzyym, 63, said it was thrilling to finally get the passport, the goal was to help the next generation of intersex people win recognition as full citizens with rights, rather than travel the globe, Zzyym said.

"I'm not a problem. I'm a human being. That's the point," said Zzyym, who has an arm tattoo that reads, "Never give up," a reminder of goals to accomplish in life.

Zzyym was born with ambiguous physical sexual characteristics but was raised as a boy and had several surgeries that failed to make Zzyym appear fully male, according to court filings. Zzyym served in the Navy as a male but later came to identify as intersex while working and studying at Colorado State University. The State Department's denial of Zzyym's passport prevented Zzyym from being able to go to two Organization Intersex International meetings.

Zzyym would like a chance to travel to another advocacy conference once they resume after the pandemic or perhaps go sea fishing in Costa Rica but, being on a fixed income, says a road trip to Canada for fishing might be more feasible.

Advocates, who praised the work of Zzyym, said the United States' decision to join over a dozen countries that allow a third-gender option would allow people to travel as their authentic selves and possibly keep them safer doing it.

"Intersex, nonbinary, and transgender people need identity documents that accurately reflect who we are, and having mismatched documents can create problems with safety and visibility," said Mary Emily O'Hara of GLAAD, the world's largest lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and queer (LGBTQ) media advocacy organization,

The U.S. special diplomatic envoy for LGBTQ rights, Jessica Stern, said the decision brings the government documents in line with the "lived reality" that there is a wider spectrum of human sex characteristics than is reflected in the previous two designations.

"When a person obtains identity documents that reflect their true identity, they live with greater dignity and respect," Stern said.

The State Department said in June that it was moving toward adding a third gender marker for nonbinary, intersex and gender-nonconforming people but that would take time because of required updates to its computer systems. In addition, a department official said the passport application and system update with the "X" designation option still awaited approval from the Office of Management and Budget, which signs off on all government forms.

The department now also allows applicants to self-select their gender as male or female, no longer requiring them to provide medical certification if their gender did not match that listed on their other identification documents.

Stern said her office planned to talk about the U.S. experience with the change in its interactions around

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the world and hopes that might help inspire other governments to offer the option.

"We see this as a way of affirming and uplifting the human rights of trans and intersex and gender-nonconforming and nonbinary people everywhere," she said.

AP Diplomatic Writer Matthew Lee in Washington contributed to this report.

AP Sources: Letitia James will run for New York governor

By MICHAEL BALSAMO, MICHAEL R. SISAK and MICHELLE L. PRICE Associated Press

NEW YORK (AP) — New York Attorney General Letitia James plans to run for governor, according to three people directly familiar with her plans who spoke to The Associated Press on Wednesday.

James will enter the race as a formidable candidate for the Democratic nomination just months after issuing a damning report that drove Andrew Cuomo from office in a sexual harassment scandal.

The three people familiar with her plans were not authorized to speak publicly. James is expected to make an announcement later this week, according to one of the people.

Kimberly Peeler-Allen, a James campaign adviser said in a statement: "Attorney General Letitia James has made a decision regarding the governor's race. She will be announcing it in the coming days."

James, 63, is the first woman elected as New York's attorney general and the first Black person to serve in the role. With a power base in New York City, she is poised to be a top threat to Gov. Kathy Hochul, who had been Cuomo's lieutenant governor.

Hochul, who is from the Buffalo area, entered office with a reputation as a political centrist but has been striving to win over New York City progressives, making numerous appearances in the city during her first months in office.

James, who was born and raised in Brooklyn and made her first run for City Council as a candidate of the liberal Working Families Party, would have the reverse task of winning over upstate Democrats who might be more conservative.

Before this year, James was best known nationally for her frequent legal tussles with former President Donald Trump.

Since she became attorney general in 2019, her office has investigated Trump's business affairs and sued the Republican's administration dozens of times over federal policies on immigration, the environment and other matters.

James also filed a lawsuit accusing the National Rifle Association's leaders of financial mismanagement, the latest in a string of regulatory actions that have delighted liberals but drawn complaints from Republicans that she has unfairly used her office to target political opponents.

Under public pressure, Cuomo last year authorized James to investigate allegations he had sexually harassed several women. The independent investigators she hired to conduct the inquiry released a report in August concluding that there were credible allegations from 11 women, including one aide who said the governor had groped her breast.

Cuomo and his political advisers assailed the report as an unfair and inaccurate hit job, designed to drive him out of a job James coveted. But he resigned from office in August, saying the state couldn't afford the distraction of an impeachment fight.

James dismissed the charge that her investigation was politically motivated, saying Cuomo should take responsibility for his own conduct.

James' announcement will set the stage for a competitive race featuring Hochul fighting to retain the job she got when Cuomo quit, and a host of other potential candidates who could sap some of the attorney general's potential downstate strength.

New York City Public Advocate Jumaane Williams and New York City Mayor Bill de Blasio have both said they are considering a run. Two other potential Democratic candidates come from Long Island: Suffolk County executive Steve Bellone and U.S. Rep. Thomas Suozzi, who lives in Nassau County.

Cuomo might also be a factor in the race. After leaving office, he has dug into his campaign funds to

pay the salaries of spokespeople and lawyers who have spent months blasting James' integrity on television and on social media.

Republican candidates include U.S. Rep. Lee Zeldin, a Trump-aligned congressman from Long Island; Andrew Giuliani, the son of former New York City Mayor Rudy Giuliani; and former Westchester County Executive Rob Astorino, who lost to Cuomo in 2014.

The primary election is in June and the general election is in November 2022.

Before becoming attorney general, James was New York City's public advocate, an elected job where she acted as a sort of city ombudsman. Previously, she was a member of the City Council. She worked as a public defender and an assistant state attorney general. She graduated from Lehman College in the Bronx and earned her law degree from Howard University in Washington.

Balsamo reported from Washington. Associated Press writer Marina Villeneuve in Albany, New York, contributed to this report.

Sheriff: Movie set showed 'some complacency' with weapons

By MORGAN LEE, SUSAN MONTOYA BRYAN and CEDAR ATTANASIO Associated Press

SANTA FE, N.M. (AP) — Investigators said Wednesday that there was "some complacency" in how weapons were handled on the movie set where Alec Baldwin accidentally shot and killed a cinematographer and wounded another person, but it's too soon to determine whether charges will be filed.

Santa Fe County Sheriff Adan Mendoza noted that 500 rounds of ammunition — a mix of blanks, dummy rounds and suspected live rounds — were found while searching the set of the Western "Rust."

"Obviously I think the industry has had a record recently of being safe. I think there was some complacency on this set, and I think there are some safety issues that need to be addressed by the industry and possibly by the state of New Mexico," Mendoza told a news conference nearly a week after the shooting.

Authorities also confirmed there was no footage of the shooting, which happened during a rehearsal.

Investigators believe Baldwin's gun fired a single live round that killed cinematographer Halyna Hutchins and wounded director Joel Souza.

Detectives have recovered a lead projectile they believe the actor fired last week. Testing is being done to confirm whether the projectile taken from Souza's shoulder was fired from the same long Colt revolver used by Baldwin. The FBI will help with ballistics analysis.

Two other guns were seized, including a single-action revolver that may have been modified and a plastic gun that was described as a revolver, officials said.

Souza, who was standing behind Hutchins, told investigators there should never be live rounds present near the scene.

"We suspect that there were other live rounds, but that's up to the testing. But right now, we're going to determine how those got there, why they were there because they shouldn't have been," Mendoza said.

District Attorney Mary Carmack-Altwies said investigators cannot say yet whether it was negligence or by whom. She called it a complex case that will require more research and analysis.

"It will take many more facts, corroborated facts, before we can get to that criminal negligence standard," she said.

Investigators said they planned to follow up on reports of other incidents involving misfires with guns on the set.

Mike Tristano, a veteran armorer, or movie weapons specialist, was alarmed to hear that live rounds were mixed in with blanks and dummy rounds.

"I find that appalling," Tristano said. "In over 600 films and TV shows that I've done, we've never had a live round on set."

The shooting has baffled Hollywood professionals and prompted calls to better regulate firearms on sets or even ban them in the age of seamless computer-generated imagery. Court records say that an assistant director grabbed the gun from a cart and indicated the weapon was safe by yelling "cold gun."

The armorer on the Baldwin film, Hannah Gutierrez Reed, said she checked dummy bullets on the day

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of the shooting to ensure that none were "hot" rounds. She also told a detective that while the guns used for filming were locked up during a crew lunch break, ammunition was left on a cart unsecured, according to a search warrant released Wednesday ahead of the news conference.

Gutierrez Reed told a detective that no live ammo was ever kept on the set.

When reached Wednesday by The Associated Press, she declined to comment. She said Monday by text message that she was looking for a lawyer.

Assistant director David Halls, who handed the gun to Baldwin before the shooting, said Gutierrez Reed typically opened the hatch of the gun and spun the drum, though he couldn't recall if she did that before the shooting. He said he only remembered seeing three rounds in the gun, according to the warrant.

After the shooting, Halls took the gun to Gutierrez and said he saw five rounds in the gun, at least four of them were dummy rounds indicated by a hole on the side and a cap on the round. Halls said there was also a casing in the gun that did not have the cap and did not have the hole indicating it was a dummy, the warrant said.

Halls "advised the incident was not a deliberate act," according to the warrant, which was issued Wednesday in order to search a truck that was used on the set.

Baldwin, 63, who is known for his roles in "30 Rock," "The Departed" and "The Hunt for Red October," along with his impression of then-President Donald Trump on "Saturday Night Live," has described the killing as a "tragic accident."

The gun Baldwin used was one of three that the armorer had placed on a cart outside the building where a scene was being rehearsed, according to court records.

The production of "Rust" was beset by workplace disputes from the start in early October. Hours before the shooting, several camera crew members walked off the set amid discord over working conditions, including safety procedures.

Baldwin in his role as actor appeared unlikely to be held criminally or civilly liable for the tragedy. As a producer, however, he is among a long list of associates on the film who could face some sort of liability.

Concerns have been raised about Halls' safety record by colleagues on two previous productions. Halls has not returned phone calls and email messages seeking comment.

Rust Movie Productions, the production company, says it is cooperating with authorities and conducting its own internal review of procedures with the production shut down.

Cheap antidepressant shows promise treating early COVID-19

By CARLA K. JOHNSON AP Medical Writer

A cheap antidepressant reduced the need for hospitalization among high-risk adults with COVID-19 in a study hunting for existing drugs that could be repurposed to treat coronavirus.

Researchers tested the pill used for depression and obsessive-compulsive disorder because it was known to reduce inflammation and looked promising in smaller studies.

They've shared the results with the U.S. National Institutes of Health, which publishes treatment guidelines, and they hope for a World Health Organization recommendation.

"If WHO recommends this, you will see it widely taken up," said study co-author Dr. Edward Mills of McMaster University in Hamilton, Ontario, adding that many poor nations have the drug readily available. "We hope it will lead to a lot of lives saved."

The pill, called fluvoxamine, would cost \$4 for a course of COVID-19 treatment. By comparison, antibody IV treatments cost about \$2,000 and Merck's experimental antiviral pill for COVID-19 is about \$700 per course. Some experts predict various treatments eventually will be used in combination to fight the coronavirus.

Researchers tested the antidepressant in nearly 1,500 Brazilians recently infected with coronavirus who were at risk of severe illness because of other health problems, such as diabetes. About half took the antidepressant at home for 10 days, the rest got dummy pills. They were tracked for four weeks to see who landed in the hospital or spent extended time in an emergency room when hospitals were full.

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In the group that took the drug, 11% needed hospitalization or an extended ER stay, compared to 16% of those on dummy pills.

The results, published Wednesday in the journal *Lancet Global Health*, were so strong that independent experts monitoring the study recommended stopping it early because the results were clear.

Questions remain about the best dosing, whether lower risk patients might also benefit and whether the pill should be combined with other treatments.

The larger project looked at eight existing drugs to see if they could work against the pandemic virus. The project is still testing a hepatitis drug, but all the others — including metformin, hydroxychloroquine and ivermectin — haven't panned out.

The cheap generic and Merck's COVID-19 pill work in different ways and "may be complementary," said Dr. Paul Sax of Brigham and Women's Hospital and Harvard Medical School, who was not involved in the study. Earlier this month, Merck asked regulators in the U.S. and Europe to authorize its antiviral pill.

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.

Biden easily won Virginia. Why is McAuliffe struggling?

By STEVE PEOPLES Associated Press

ROANOKE, Va. (AP) — As Terry McAuliffe made his case for the Democratic nomination for governor of Virginia this summer, he argued the state wanted "seasoned" leadership. The former governor, like the new President Joe Biden, had broad appeal that would keep up Virginians' enthusiasm for voting against Republicans, his campaign argued.

Less than a week before Election Day, even McAuliffe's allies are wondering if he was wrong.

Publicly, McAuliffe is confident in his campaign against Republican businessman Glenn Youngkin, but the finger-pointing and handwringing has begun among Democrats who are openly contemplating the possibility of a worst-case scenario on Nov. 2. Internally, there is fear that they may have overestimated voters' desire for an experienced politician. And some allies worry that McAuliffe's hyper-focus on former President Donald Trump may not energize voters in the same way it did when he was in office.

The Democrat is locked in a dead heat against a political neophyte who is threatening to become the first Republican to win statewide office here in more than a decade. This, in a state Biden won by 10 percentage points last year.

"Everybody is nervous," said Abbi Easter, who lives in the Richmond suburbs and sits on the state Democratic Party's steering committee.

A McAuliffe loss on Tuesday would reverberate across the national political landscape, likely triggering all-out panic among Democrats. For Republicans, it would be a burst of confidence and a roadmap for finding their way through post-Trump divisions ahead of 2022 midterm elections, which will decide control of Congress and dozens of state capitals.

McAuliffe's team privately points to the drag of Biden's weakened standing among Virginia voters, a shift that began in August after the U.S. withdrawal from Afghanistan. That exacerbated traditional headwinds for candidates whose party occupies the White House. In 2013, McAuliffe himself became the first Virginia candidate in 40 years to win the governor's office while his party was in power.

And within the campaign, there is concern that McAuliffe's experience, thought to be an asset when he got into the race, may actually work against him in a political environment that continues to favor outsiders. Even before becoming governor, McAuliffe had been active in national politics for decades. He served as a former Democratic National Committee chairman and a chief fundraiser for Bill and Hillary Clinton.

In the 2021 election's closing days, one McAuliffe aide conceded Republicans are more excited about scoring a dramatic upset that would send a message to the country than Democrats are about preserving the status quo — especially as many polls suggest that voters believe the country is on the wrong track.

McAuliffe's first event on Wednesday in the southern edge of the state drew fewer than 40 people.

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State delegate Chris Hurst, a McAuliffe supporter, acknowledged the so-called enthusiasm gap at a get-out-the-vote rally this week in the state's rural southwest corner.

"You don't have to be enthusiastic to go to the doctor or the dentist to still do it every single year," Hurst said. "It's time for us to go out and do our jobs."

Trump may be about to give Democrats an unexpected burst of energy, however.

The former president issued a cryptic statement Wednesday afternoon indicating he may visit Virginia "soon." Trump spokesman Taylor Budowich followed up with a statement reminding voters that Trump has endorsed Youngkin, adding, "President Trump looks forward to being back in Virginia! Details will be released when appropriate."

Privately, however, the Youngkin campaign indicated that Trump would not be campaigning in Virginia before Election Day.

Meanwhile, some of McAuliffe's challenges are of his own making.

In the final debate against Youngkin late last month, McAuliffe's answered a question about parents' efforts to ban some books from school libraries.

"I don't think parents should be telling schools what they should teach," McAuliffe quipped.

The comment played into Youngkin's push to win over a crucial bloc of suburban voters, who shifted sharply away from the GOP during Donald Trump's presidency. Youngkin's team immediately began running attack ads highlighting the comment as part of a "Parents Matter" campaign.

The education debate turned to an overt play to energize Youngkin's far-right base, however, when he released a new television ad featuring a mother who sought to have the book "Beloved" banned from classrooms in suburban Washington. The acclaimed 1987 novel by Nobel laureate Toni Morrison is about an escaped slave who kills her infant daughter rather than allowing the girl to be returned to the plantation.

McAuliffe's campaign and fellow Democrats accused Youngkin of trying to "silence" Black authors.

The intensifying messages have been amplified by the massive sums of money each of the candidates has raised and spent — most of it on television ads.

Each candidate has raised more than \$58 million in the election so far, according to the most recent campaign finance reports. The combined \$117 million raised nearly doubled the previous record for a Virginia governor's election. Youngkin, a wealthy former private equity executive, has lent his campaign \$20 million from his personal fortune, according to the Virginia Public Access Project.

McAuliffe's team decided long ago to devote the bulk of his fundraising haul to a message focused on national issues — specifically, Trump — instead of his accomplishments while governor, which included a strong state economy and a surge in funding for education. McAuliffe often mentions such governing accomplishments at his events on the campaign trail, but his television commercials, which is how most voters interact with the campaign, have most recently been aimed at tying Youngkin to Trump and the GOP's push to curtail abortion rights.

Easter said it remains to be seen whether Democrats can still win by embracing an anti-Trump message now that he is no longer in office.

"I'll know Nov. 3," she said.

Some issues in the race have been out of McAuliffe's control.

The surge of the delta variant over the summer boosted support for McAuliffe's strict approach on vaccines and other public health measures, including mask mandates. The Democrat used the issue to link Youngkin to Trump and other GOP leaders who have resisted the federal Center for Disease Control's recommendations.

Youngkin's team privately acknowledged in the early fall that the pandemic focus was hurting his campaign. But as COVID cases declined in the weeks leading up to the election, voters' focus shifted elsewhere — including toward Washington.

Few Democrats on the ground here believe that the Democratic-controlled Congress' inability so far to enact Biden's sweeping agenda is a defining issue in the Virginia contest, but it is certainly not helping as McAuliffe struggles to give Democratic voters something to get excited about.

State Democratic Party Chair Susan Swecker acknowledged her personal anxiety while on a bus tour

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this week designed to energize Democratic voters.

"You know how we get. I do this, too," she said. "We wring our hands a little bit. Look, we always knew this was going to be a tough race, right? We got a lot on the line here."

Associated Press writer Sarah Rankin in Richmond contributed to this report.

In Haiti, the difficult relationship of gangs and business

By ALBERTO ARCE and RODRIGO ABD Associated Press

PORT-AU-PRINCE, Haiti (AP) — Youri Mevs knew that the call was coming, and she was terrified.

Mevs is a member of one of the richest families in Haiti; she owns Shodecosa, Haiti's largest industrial park, which warehouses 93 percent of the nation's imported food. Like everyone else, she has watched with despair as her country descended into chaos since the assassination of President Jovenel Moise.

Her office got the call one early morning in August. It was from Jimmy Cherizier -- aka Barbecue, a former policeman who leads the G9 gang coalition which controls the coastal strip of Port-au-Prince. Most of Haiti's food and gasoline flows through his domain, and he can stop it with a single word.

Barbecue's demand: \$500,000 a month, a "war chest" he claimed would be used to buy food for the hungry and fight for democracy.

Pay the price, no problems. Refuse, and Shodecosa would be ransacked, and the gangs also would block the roads around the port terminal owned by the Mevs family.

This story is part of a series, "Haiti: Business, Politics and Gangs," produced with support from the Pulitzer Center on Crisis Reporting.

Mevs knew the threat was credible. Three neighboring warehouses were looted in June. It came down to math: "How much do we make? Can we afford it?" The answer was no.

Should she fight back? Again, no. "We are not going to shoot a gun to defend a bag of rice."

There was nowhere to turn for help. In Haiti, there is no functioning government. For decades, the country was ruled by political strongmen supported by armed gangs; with Moise's killing, the state collapsed and the gangs were unbound.

Having lost their meal ticket — the government — the gangs have become independent predators. While some turned to kidnapping, like those who captured 17 missionaries and their relatives, Barbecue's men took control of the port district, gaining a stranglehold on the country's economy.

Mevs is far from poor. She is not starving, not struggling for survival -- in so many ways, she is unlike the migrants who are fleeing Haiti's misery. Like others of her caste, she traces her roots to ancestors who came to Haiti generations ago from Europe and the Middle East and built fortunes.

But like those emigrants, she and others among Haiti's wealthy elite have few illusions about life in Haiti. She wants her daughters to join those families moving abroad while the future of the country is settled. If life does not improve, she may have to sell what she owns and join them.

In the meantime, she vows to stand up and fight the political battle to rebuild the government and country. She accepts that the gangs are part of the Haitian eco-system, something to be dealt with constantly as she struggles to keep her business going.

But Barbecue and his gang are immensely powerful. Her money, her contacts with rival gangs, her political connections -- all may be to no avail.

On a hot October morning, Barbecue -- the name comes from his mother's occupation, selling food at a street stall -- receives reporters in his stronghold of Bellecour-Cité Soleil, a wretched neighborhood of tin shacks without water, electricity or any basic services.

Barbecue unboxes two new, American-made AK rifles with ammunition. Then surrounded by a dozen young, hooded men armed and dressed in brightly colored T-shirts and sneakers, he walks to the perim-

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eter wall that encloses Terminal Varreux, the port owned by the Mevs family.

No, he insists. He did not ask for money from the Mevs in exchange for not looting their properties. "If I did that, they would have killed me by now," he says.

Barbecue fancies himself a man of the people and an enemy of the elite. He speaks blithely of a possible civil war of the poor against the rich and powerful "foreign" families who own Haiti. He has blocked fuel shipments from the port, causing shortages -- not to extort money for himself, he insists, but to pressure political and business leaders.

This, he says, is what he believes: "Water, housing, school, university, security for all and not only for the 5% who have lighter skin" -- the rich families like the Mevs.

"I have hatred for those people, every time we look at them we can say that there are two Haitis. We have to put an end to the system of dispossession."

He mingles with the people of Bellecour-Cité Soleil, trying to present himself as not a gangster but as a revolutionary leader fighting for social change. He is not very successful.

Carrying a gun, he enters shacks without permission and does not say hello to the people living there before launching into diatribes about their living conditions. Generally, the occupants look down in silence, extras in a movie they played no part in producing.

Barbecue gestures to a teenager who walks behind him. The youth pulls a wad of bills from his back pocket and gives some to Barbecue; he, in turn, hands the money to the woman of the house.

"Their position is that of mental slaves, they have not always understood the struggle," he says.

He says he can do little more for slum dwellers. And despite all appearances, he says he is not positioning himself for a political career. He claims not to have any political affiliation or party and says he does not see himself "as a candidate in a system that I see as corrupt."

Mevs and others dismiss nearly everything Barbecue says as posturing -- especially his claims that he is not corrupt but an enemy of corruption.

He has been accused -- by the United Nations and other international organizations -- of participation in three massacres between 2018 and 2020.

The bloodbaths, said to have been sponsored by high-ranking officials in the Moise administration, left more than 200 people dead. Women were gang-raped, and entire neighborhoods were burned, displacing thousands.

Barbecue's extortion is brazen. And sometimes, a payoff is not enough to guarantee protection.

For 20 years, Giovanni Saleh, 44, rented a warehouse from the Mevs. It was located halfway between Cité Soleil and Shodecosa, the Mevs' industrial park.

Saleh can offer no explanation for what happened starting on the morning of June 6. He had complied with the rules. He had, he says, a "stable and correct" relationship with the gang.

"The last day I went to the warehouse I was preparing the food I used to leave for the gang every two weeks" -- cans of tomatoes, cartons of spaghetti, oil, beans, 20 sacks of rice. "I collaborated with them with food and some money on a regular basis."

Saleh says he received a call from Merci Dieu, a member of Barbecue's gang coalition: "We are going to block the area for a couple of days to ask for money from the government and trucks leaving the port, so come now and take whatever you need and then stay away for some days."

Two days later, a friend called Saleh to tell him that there were rumors of an attack against his warehouse. He called security, no answer. He checked the cameras online and they were off. He called police, called everyone he knew. Nobody would do anything.

Saleh lost \$3.5 million in goods over three days, as thousands of people directed by Barbecue and a colleague disassembled his warehouse box by box, bag by bag, shelf by shelf. Drone footage he took shows a constant and orderly flow of looters entering the warehouse from two directions.

Guards told him later that armed men fronting a mob had come to the door and knocked.

"Who would shoot? No one would shoot," Saleh said. "They opened the doors and left."

Saleh has sent his wife and two kids to Santo Domingo, and wants to join them. But for now he is rebuilding his business. He has taken out loans to reopen in the Mevs' industrial park.

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Youri Mevs "may be making the same mistake I made. I thought that by dealing with them, they would protect me, but they didn't," he said. "They charge you, one way or the other, for protection, but instead of protecting you against other gangs or even the police, they turn against you."

Magalie Dresse lives in an elegant home in the heart of Port-au-Prince, with a well-tended garden where she does yoga in the morning. "I need the strength to go out there and handle what I'm going to find, which is not going to be positive."

Since 2004, her car has been attacked; she has survived two kidnapping attempts; the government expropriated some of her properties; and her factory was damaged by arson in riots, costing her \$400,000 in a single day.

And then there are the gangs. "At one point," she says, "we've had cash at home during the weekends in case a friend needed it for a ransom and banks were closed."

Dresse's business sends about 50 containers of art to the United States each year. But before they arrive at the port, they must pass through gang-controlled areas.

"They can open them, check if there is something they want or even set them on fire," she says. So "we pay the police, then sometimes we have to pay a gang because they can barricade the route."

Later, she acknowledges that "some businesses" -- not hers -- "decide to have their own gangs on payroll. And that choice is the story of many companies in Haiti."

At the end of the day, she holds a cocktail party for friends and associates, and they swap stories about the impossibility of business life in a gangster nation.

"If you have \$5 million worth of merchandise to unload and deliver, \$50,000 (in bribes) is something you can deal with," says Geoffrey Handal, entrepreneur in the shipping industry and former president of the Franco-Haitian Chamber of Commerce.

But the uncertainty -- the possibility that Barbecue might close the port for three days, or block trucks -- is impossible to live with.

Politics and violent groups have a long history in Haiti. In the 1960s, Francois Duvalier created the Tonton Macoute, a militia that spread terror in the population for decades. When deposed president Jean-Bertrand Aristide ruled early in this century, he was supported by armed groups known as "chimères."

Moise and his predecessor, Michel Martelly, used gangs for hire to control the coastal areas where a large number of votes were concentrated.

When Moise was assassinated, the gangs decided there was no need to serve as middlemen for politicians anymore. "Why would they accept being used if they could manage the business?" Handal asks.

Barbecue's revolutionary rhetoric is empty, he says. "If someone offers Barbecue 5% more than what he is making right now, he will change allegiances immediately."

For Handal, the issue is simple: How low must businesspeople stoop to succeed in a gangster nation? "Do you want to become one of them? Are you willing to have blood on your hands?"

Instead, Dresse says the solution is citizenship.

"We need people like us involved in politics with a long-term approach," she says. "We need to create a new political party."

Youri Mevs does not pay the \$500,000 extortion. She orders one of her managers to supply some of Barbecue's rivals: "Get them corn flakes, milk, pasta, tomato and soap." How much? "\$5,000."

She describes it as "looking for ways of compensating for the non-aggression." She does not believe in cash donations because "they will use them to buy ammunition," so she donates goods that cannot be used "to hunt me or people like me."

She has staked her future on the political system, one with overtones of the failed past.

When Moise's government began to fall apart, she decided she could no longer talk about "they" and "them" when she referred to her own country: "Because I belong to the caste, I know what the caste has done to this country and what the country is doing to my caste."

In 2016 she met Youri Latortue, a veteran politician who was then president of the Senate. Latortue

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asked her to help with a report about a corruption scheme during Martelly's administration.

In 2018 she became secretary general of Latortue's party, AAA, which has led the opposition against Martelly and Moise since the 2016 elections. Now Latortue is "waiting for the party nomination" and Mevs is running his campaign.

Latortue has been accused of a lot in the past, from corruption to running gangs. He denies it all, and has never been formally accused. He says he wants to break with the Haitian tradition of strongmen and militias; that can only happen, he says, "with a strong state, a strong public force, and institutions that guarantee the functioning of the state."

Latortue and Mevs have proposed a special police unit, trained by international experts, to fight the gangs. And they want to put Barbecue behind bars.

But in the meantime, Mevs has to deal with him.

At the AAA headquarters, a truck awaits to be loaded with the food she ordered that morning. This is how she rationalizes the payoff: "It is a donation from the political party to a neighborhood. ... It is populism, but people are hungry. There is nothing wrong in giving them food."

Even if so, Latortue cannot be tied publicly to the shipment. "Some people could accuse me of giving them weapons because the place is at war," he explains.

The two delivery men are tied to their phones, discussing the route. There are reports of gunfights, it is going to be a long route of discussions and shouts and detours along the way to the "backdoor entrance" of a barricaded front line.

The truck stops three times, on three parallel streets. Every corner is guarded by a dozen young men. They unload the truck into a house, a school, a party office.

Behind them, on empty streets, gunshots ring out and armed young men stand guard at a barricade. They call themselves a self-defense group. They are simply one of Port-Au-Prince's gangs.

Garland defends school board memo amid Republican criticism

By MICHAEL BALSAMO Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — Attorney General Merrick Garland on Wednesday defended a memo aimed at combating threats against school officials nationwide while Republicans insisted he rescind the directive. He signaled he had no plans to do so despite their criticism.

The memo took center stage as Garland appeared before the Senate Judiciary Committee — his second congressional appearance in a week — and said it was meant to respond to violence and threats of violence directed against local school board officials.

The memo came out Oct. 4, less than a week after the National School Board Association wrote the Biden administration about the threats to school officials and asked for help. Some school board meetings have devolved into shouting contests over issues such as how racial issues are taught, masks in schools, and COVID-19 vaccines and testing requirements.

Republicans say Garland went too far in instructing Justice Department divisions to coordinate with local law enforcement. In his memo Garland said there had been "a disturbing spike in harassment, intimidation, and threats of violence against school administrators, board members, teachers, and staff who participate in the vital work of running our nation's public schools."

An accompanying news release mentioned the FBI, the department's criminal division, national security division, civil rights division and other parts.

"The obligation of the Justice Department is to protect the American people against violence and threats of violence and that particularly includes public officials," Garland said.

Republicans on the Senate committee also seized on a memo from Leif Johnson, the acting U.S. attorney in Montana, to the state attorney general, county attorneys, sheriffs and school officials in the state. The memo spells out federal crimes that could be used in prosecutions for violence, harassment or intimidation of school board officials.

The Montana memo, obtained by The Associated Press, cites about a dozen federal statutes from con-

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spiracy to deprive someone of civil rights to stalking and "anonymous telephone harassment." It instructs the recipients to contact the FBI "if you believe that a person has violated one of these statutes."

Garland told senators he was never sent the U.S. attorney's memo and did not know specifics about it. A spokesperson for the U.S. attorney's office in Montana did not immediately respond to questions about whether Johnson had consulted senior Justice Department officials before issuing the memo.

"I've never seen that memo," Garland said. "No one has sent me that memo, so I haven't seen it."

The National School Board Association has since said "we regret and apologize" for its letter, which asked for federal assistance to combat harassment and violence against school officials and said some of the acts could be "domestic terrorism."

The original letter asked for the federal government to investigate cases where threats or violence could be handled as violations of federal laws protecting civil rights. The association asked for the Justice Department, FBI, Homeland Security and Secret Service to help monitor threat levels and assess risks to students, educators, board members and school buildings.

The letter documented more than 20 instances of threats, harassment, disruption, and acts of intimidation in California, Florida, Georgia, New Jersey, Ohio and other states. It cited the September arrest of an Illinois man for aggravated battery and disorderly conduct for allegedly striking a school official at a meeting. In Michigan, a meeting was disrupted when a man performed a Nazi salute to protest masking.

Garland has said parents have the right to express their concerns to school boards but his primary concern is if that devolves into violence or when threats emerge. During questioning Wednesday, Garland said that making a Nazi salute would be protected under the First Amendment. He also acknowledged that he did not have an accounting of the number of incidents.

At least two Republican senators – Sens. Tom Cotton of Arkansas and Josh Hawley of Missouri – called for Garland to resign over his handling of the memo.

"This is shameful," Cotton exclaimed. "You should resign in disgrace."

Gen. Milley calls Chinese weapon test 'very concerning'

By ROBERT BURNS AP National Security Writer

WASHINGTON (AP) — China recently conducted a "very concerning" test of a hypersonic weapon system as part of its aggressive advance in space and military technologies, the top U.S. military officer says.

Gen. Mark Milley, chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, was the first Pentagon official to confirm on the record the nature of a test this year by the Chinese military that the Financial Times had reported was a nuclear-capable hypersonic weapon that was launched into space and orbited the Earth before re-entering the atmosphere and gliding toward its target in China.

Milley said he could not discuss details because aspects involved classified intelligence. He said the United States also is working on hypersonic weapons, whose key features include flight trajectory, speed and maneuverability that make them capable of evading early warning systems that are part of U.S. missile defenses. The U.S. has not conducted a hypersonic weapon test of the sort Milley said China had achieved.

"What we saw was a very significant event of a test of a hypersonic weapon system, and it is very concerning," Milley said on "The David Rubenstein Show: Peer-to-Peer Conversations" on Bloomberg Television.

"I think I saw in some of the newspapers, they used the term Sputnik moment," he added. "I don't know if it's quite a Sputnik moment, but I think it's very close to that. So it's a very significant technological event that occurred, or test that occurred, by the Chinese. And it has all of our attention."

The launch of a Sputnik satellite by the Soviet Union in 1957 stunned the world and fed U.S. fears that it was falling behind technologically in an accelerating arms race in the early stages of the nuclear age.

China has disputed Western news reports about its test, saying it was working on technology for a re-useable space vehicle for peaceful purposes.

Asked about Milley's remarks, White House press secretary Jen Psaki said he was conveying concern about China's military modernization.

"They continue to pursue capabilities that increase tensions in the region," she said. "And we continue to have concerns about that. And I think that was reflected in his comments."

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Pentagon press secretary John Kirby declined to comment on the test or on Milley's remarks beyond saying that China's work on advanced hypersonic weaponry is among a "suite of issues" that cause the Biden administration to be concerned by "the trajectory of where things are going in the Indo-Pacific."

Asked about progress on U.S. hypersonic weapon technologies, Kirby said it "is real, it's tangible, and we are absolutely working toward being able to develop that capability." He declined to provide specifics.

Some U.S. defense experts say the worry about China's work on a hypersonic weapon that could deliver a nuclear weapon from space are overblown.

James Acton of the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace wrote in an essay last week that the United States has long been vulnerable to a Chinese nuclear attack.

"While the prospect of a nuclear attack against the United States is terrifying, this is no Sputnik moment — partly because it's not entirely clear what was tested, but mostly because the threat of a Chinese nuclear attack on the United States isn't remotely new," Acton wrote.

In addition to its advances in hypersonic weapons, China has been expanding its network of underground silos that could be used to launch intercontinental-range nuclear missiles, and it has rebuffed U.S. calls to join nuclear arms control talks. The U.S. also has raised concerns about what it calls Chinese efforts to intimidate Taiwan, the self-ruled island that China claims as part of its territory, and to claim disputed islands and other land features in the South China Sea.

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Associated Press writers Lolita C. Baldor and Alexandra Jaffe contributed to this report.

Raiders owner: Team wasn't targeted in email investigation

By BARRY WILNER AP Pro Football Writer

NEW YORK (AP) — Las Vegas Raiders owner Mark Davis says he doesn't believe the team was targeted in the leaking of emails that led to the resignation of coach Jon Gruden.

Speaking after the NFL owners meetings ended Wednesday, Davis also acknowledged the team has reached a settlement with Gruden, who received a 10-year, \$100 million contract to return to coach the team in 2018. He did not reveal terms of the settlement.

Asked about any recent conversations with Gruden, whose racist, homophobic and misogynistic comments were uncovered during an investigating of workplace misconduct at the Washington Football Team, Davis said: "He's hurt, he's really hurt. I understand that. But he understands the ramifications of what he said."

"We all have our demons in life," Davis added, "and we have to understand that."

Davis wondered about the timing of the leaking of the emails, and said he was not given a reason for delays in his team being told about them. The NFL has not and will not be releasing documents from the independent investigation of the Washington Football Team, saying the league is protecting the identities of those who testified. Gruden's emails were to Bruce Allen, the former president of the Washington franchise.

Davis would like the league to release a written report of the investigation.

"I would like to see some of the things that were charged," he said.

He also gave a lukewarm endorsement of Raiders general manager Mike Mayock, who was hired by Gruden.

"Mike Mayock is the GM of the Raiders," the owner said. "I will not speak for the future, right now he's the GM of the Raiders."

And, echoing the sentiments of his late father, Al Davis, the Pro Football Hall of Fame owner, Davis noted about the way his team was drawn deeply into the Washington investigation, "We're Raiders. We're used to this."

Al Davis often took on the league and other teams on a variety of issues, including suing the NFL to allow him to move the franchise.

There were no matters up for voting on the owners' agenda for these meetings — the first in person

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since December 2019. There was a tweak to the Rooney Rule that requires interviews of minority candidates for coaching and executive jobs.

At least one in-person interview with a minority candidate for head coach and general manager positions who is not working for the interviewing team will be required. Many interviews during the COVID-19 pandemic have been done virtually.

The idea is to ensure that searches for such hires are diverse and thorough.

Through seven weeks of the schedule, the number of coaches' challenges has dropped significantly from 62 in 2020 and 104 the previous season to 46. Troy Vincent, the NFL's pro football operations chief, believes help from the replay officiating booth and league office in New York has led to the decrease.

Vincent also said the uptick in penalties overall stems from an increase in offensive holding calls.

Defending the process for replay reviews, Vincent said there were five or so reviews that required lengthier than normal stoppages.

"But there is an appreciation of getting it right," he said. "It is not about the time, the goal is to get it right. We're always about efficiency, but we have the technology to get it right."

AP Pro Football Writer Josh Dubow contributed.

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

Nor'easter cuts power to over half-million homes, businesses

BOSTON (AP) — A nor'easter that battered the Atlantic coast with hurricane-force wind gusts left more than a half-million homes and businesses without power in New England and forced the closure of bridges, ferries and schools in the region Wednesday.

Utility workers labored to restore power as the storm's winds and rain, which were felt as far north as Nova Scotia, diminished throughout the day. Restoring power in the hardest-hit areas in southeastern Massachusetts will take days, the utility Eversource told the Cape Cod Times.

The Massachusetts Emergency Management Agency reported about 425,000 power outages after powerful winds blew tree branches laden with wet, heavy leaves onto power lines. Utilities reported about 90,000 customers without power in Rhode Island, 17,000 in Maine, 15,000 in Connecticut and 6,000 in New Hampshire.

Officials advised against travel in southeastern Massachusetts because of wind, toppled trees and downed power lines. At the airport in New Bedford, the wind flipped a small plane over a fence.

The highest gust of the storm was recorded at 94 mph (151 mph) at a ferry dock on the island of Martha's Vineyard, officials said.

Dozens of schools canceled classes. In Connecticut, power lines came down on a school bus headed to Middletown High School. No injuries were reported. Six students were on the bus, which continued its route after emergency responders removed the power lines.

In Rhode Island, authorities closed the Newport Pell and Jamestown Verrazzano Bridges amid wind gusts as high as 70 mph early Wednesday, then reopened them shortly afterward to most vehicles. School buses were not permitted to cross until Wednesday afternoon.

Ferry service to Martha's Vineyard and Nantucket islands was suspended Wednesday.

One driver was killed and another injured when a tree limb fell on two passing vehicles in Morris Township in northern New Jersey, authorities said.

The body of a kayaker who disappeared off New York's Long Island was recovered near the Bronx after being spotted in the water by a helicopter search crew, Coast Guard officials said Tuesday. Laurence Broderick, 45, had been reported missing early Tuesday.

US-China tensions evident as Biden heads to twin summits

By ZEKE MILLER and JOSH BOAK Associated Press

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WASHINGTON (AP) — For nine months under President Joe Biden, the U.S. has pursued a diplomatic strategy that could be characterized as about China, without China.

On security, trade, climate and COVID-19, the Biden White House has tried to reorient the focus of the U.S. and its allies toward the strategic challenges posed by a rising China — all while there has been little direct engagement between the two rivals.

The president is now preparing for a pair of global summits where he again won't be meeting with China's Xi Jinping but the tensions and aggravations between the world's two largest economies will nonetheless be on ready display.

Biden heads first to the Group of 20 summit in Rome this weekend after months of still-unresolved negotiations over his proposals to invest billions more in U.S. workers and key industries. He's promoted those policies by offering them as the solution to a generational threat posed by China and by exhorting the rest of the world to join his cause.

But Xi has chosen to skip the G-20 — and a next-up summit on climate in Scotland — because of COVID-19, an absence that might be the most consequential aspect of the gatherings, as the world waits to see what China's commitments will be to cutting greenhouse gas emissions. Instead, the Chinese leader will participate virtually in some events, missing the informal pull-asides and conversations that often yield the most progress at international summits.

Since he took office in January, Biden has spoken to Xi just twice, though they have agreed to meet virtually at some point by the end of the year. The U.S. leader aimed to prioritize shoring up America's domestic and international positioning before seeking a direct one-on-one with Xi, but now there appears to be a tinge of regret that a meeting won't take place sooner.

"In an era of intense competition between the U.S. and China, intense diplomacy at the highest levels, leader-level diplomacy is vital to effectively managing this relationship," White House national security adviser Jake Sullivan said Tuesday as he previewed the trip.

Yet China is never far from Biden's mind. And the president wants it at the forefront of voters' thoughts too.

He hints at the ascendant power in nearly every speech he delivers. He invokes the need to counter and cajole China in major policy pronouncements on everything from the U.S. withdrawal from Afghanistan to his ongoing push for trillions in domestic infrastructure and social spending.

"In the race for the 21st century between democracies and autocracies, we need to prove that democracies can deliver," Biden said this summer as he pledged American COVID-19 vaccines for the world. He heralded the same "great debate" over the effectiveness of democracies earlier this month as he made the case for Congress to swiftly raise the nation's debt limit.

"Our infrastructure used to be the best in the world," Biden said this month, as he pitched his spending bills, arguing that passing his priorities was about more than mere symbolism. "Twelve other nations have superior infrastructure to us, and China has trains that go 230 miles an hour for long distances."

Yet the painful months-long slog of negotiations over his spending package, which includes hundreds of billions to help the U.S. shift away from fossil fuels, may hamper Biden's ability to pressure China to make its own environmental commitments. China has ramped up coal production amid recent electricity outages.

Biden has tried to refocus the apparatus of the federal government and of global alliances like NATO toward standing up to Beijing, even as European diplomats often express polite bewilderment at the growing U.S. focus on its rivalry with China. Many European nations have taken Chinese infrastructure investment through its "Belt and Road Initiative," and successive U.S. administrations have struggled to prevent China's Huawei from controlling the backbone of emerging 5G infrastructure.

At the G-20, Biden will again try to sell the world on his "Build Back Better World" agenda, an effort by advanced democracies to offer developing nations an alternative to the Chinese infrastructure initiative, which the U.S. argues often comes with onerous and even coercive strings attached. He'll also press American allies to meet their global vaccine donation commitments more swiftly, as the U.S. has warily watched China deploy a COVID-19 "vaccine diplomacy" strategy.

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The U.S. has made a priority of engaging with its "Quad" partners — India, Japan and Australia — as Biden tries to get allies to speak with a more unified voice on China. And cleaning up a geopolitical row with France over a plan by the U.S. and U.K. to supply Australia with nuclear-powered submarines to better respond to the China threat is at the top of Biden's diplomatic agenda this coming week.

At Biden's direction, the U.S. intelligence community has launched a series of investigations focusing on Beijing. Officials have in the last several months publicly accused China of abetting cyber intrusions, considering efforts to interfere in American elections, and withholding critical information about the COVID-19 pandemic. Those allegations have elicited angry denunciations from Beijing, which has responded at times by pointing to previous U.S. intelligence failures.

Speaking to students at Stanford University last week, CIA Director William Burns labeled China the "single biggest geopolitical challenge" the U.S. faces.

"Competition with China for the United States spreads across virtually every domain there is," he said.

On the military front, the newest source of U.S. concern is a recent hypersonic weapon test by China that Gen. Mark Milley, chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, said was close to a "Sputnik moment," referring to the 1957 launch by the Soviet Union of the world's first satellite in space, which caught the world by surprise and fed fears that the United States had fallen behind technologically.

The Chinese government has disputed Western news reports about the test, saying it was working on a re-useable spacecraft, not a missile.

While some see the emergence of a new Cold War, it's in many ways more complicated than the decades-long Soviet showdown.

The U.S. and China have arrived at this moment as both rivals and co-dependents. The U.S. needs cooperation with China to combat climate change and curtail Iran's nuclear ambitions, and the two economies are closely entwined despite the Trump-era tariffs that Biden has kept in place.

Beijing, for its part, seeks not just a rollback of the protectionist measures, but for the U.S. to accept China's rise as a geopolitical equal with its own sphere of influence. They've found some striking continuity between Biden and his predecessor, Donald Trump, who, in different ways, intensely sought to push back on Chinese aims.

The U.S. relationship with China "may be the question of our generation," said Matthew Goodman, senior vice president for economics at the Center for Strategic and International Studies. Biden needs to preserve a durable relationship with China to deal with existential issues such as climate change, even as the status of Taiwan, cyber attacks and efforts to bring back factory jobs that moved abroad suggest the two nations are also pulling apart.

The two countries will need to find a path forward for the global community after the coronavirus pandemic.

Members of the G-20 spent a combined \$15 trillion to slog through the economic shutdowns caused by the disease, creating high levels of debt that could become problematic should the Federal Reserve tighten its monetary policy and interest rates climb from their relative lows.

Census figures show that Americans are on track this year to import \$470 billion worth of Chinese goods, the highest total since 2018, when Trump began to impose the new tariffs. Trade has kept the two countries linked, reliant on each other for growth despite the mutual tensions.

Where Trump largely went it alone on China, Biden sees the twin summits of the next week as a chance to bolster what he hopes will be a Western coalition against China.

Sullivan says China needs to understand that "the United States has an affirmative economic agenda for macroeconomic stability in the world, that there are certain steps we're going to take to protect our workers and our businesses."

From there, he says, the administration is waiting to see "what the Chinese government is prepared to step up and do."

AP writers Nomaan Merchant, Bob Burns and Ellen Knickmeyer contributed.

America 'on fire': Facebook watched as Trump ignited hate

By AMANDA SEITZ Associated Press

COLUMBUS, Ohio (AP) — The reports of hateful and violent posts on Facebook started pouring in on the night of May 28 last year, soon after then-President Donald Trump sent a warning on social media that looters in Minneapolis would be shot.

It had been three days since Minneapolis police officer Derek Chauvin knelt on the neck of George Floyd for more than eight minutes until the 46-year-old Black man lost consciousness, showing no signs of life. A video taken by a bystander had been viewed millions of times online. Protests had taken over Minnesota's largest city and would soon spread throughout cities across America.

But it wasn't until after Trump posted about Floyd's death that the reports of violence and hate speech increased "rapidly" on Facebook across the country, an internal company analysis of the ex-president's social media post reveals.

"These THUGS are dishonoring the memory of George Floyd and I won't let that happen," Trump wrote at 9:53 a.m. on May 28 from his Twitter and Facebook accounts. "Any difficulty and we will assume control but, when the looting starts the shooting starts!"

The former president has since been suspended from both Twitter and Facebook.

Leaked Facebook documents provide a first-hand look at how Trump's social media posts ignited more anger in an already deeply divided country that was eventually lit "on fire" with reports of hate speech and violence across the platform. Facebook's own internal, automated controls, meant to catch posts that violate rules, predicted with almost 90% certainty that Trump's message broke the tech company's rules against inciting violence.

Yet, the tech giant didn't take any action on Trump's message.

Offline, the next day, protests — some of which turned violent — engulfed nearly every U.S. city, big and small.

"When people look back at the role Facebook played, they won't say Facebook caused it, but Facebook was certainly the megaphone," said Lanier Holt, a communications professor at Ohio State University. "I don't think there's any way they can get out of saying that they exacerbated the situation."

Social media rival Twitter, meanwhile, responded quickly at the time by covering Trump's tweet with a warning and prohibiting users from sharing it any further.

Facebook's internal discussions were revealed in disclosures made to the Securities and Exchange Commission and provided to Congress in redacted form by former Facebook employee-turned-whistleblower Frances Haugen's legal counsel. The redacted versions received by Congress were obtained by a consortium of news organizations, including The Associated Press.

The Wall Street Journal previously reported that Trump was one of many high-profile users, including politicians and celebrities, exempted from some or all of the company's normal enforcement policies.

Hate speech and violence reports had been mostly limited to the Minneapolis region after Floyd's death, the documents reveal.

"However, after Trump's post on May 28, situations really escalated across the country," according to the memo, published on June 5 of last year.

The internal analysis shows a five-fold increase in violence reports on Facebook, while complaints of hate speech tripled in the days following Trump's post. Reports of false news on the platform doubled. Reshares of Trump's message generated a "substantial amount of hateful and violent comments," many of which Facebook worked to remove. Some of those comments included calls to "start shooting these thugs" and "f--- the white."

By June 2, "we can see clearly that the entire country was basically 'on fire,'" a Facebook employee wrote of the increase in hate speech and violence reports in the June 5 memo.

Facebook says it's impossible to separate how many of the hate speech reports were driven by Trump's post itself or the controversy over Floyd's death.

"This spike in user reports resulted from a critical moment in history for the racial justice movement — not from a single Donald Trump post about it," a Facebook spokesperson said in a statement. "Facebook

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often reflects what's happening in society and the only way to prevent spikes in user reports during these moments is to not allow them to be discussed on our platform at all, which is something we would never do."

But the internal findings also raise questions about public statements Facebook CEO Mark Zuckerberg made last year as he defended his decision to leave Trump's post untouched.

On May 29, for example, Zuckerberg said the company looked closely to see if Trump's words broke any of its policies and concluded that they did not. Zuckerberg also said he left the post up because it warned people of Trump's plan to deploy troops.

"I know many people are upset that we've left the President's posts up, but our position is that we should enable as much expression as possible unless it will cause imminent risk of specific harms or dangers spelled out in clear policies," Zuckerberg wrote on his Facebook account the night of May 29, as protests erupted around the country.

Yet, Facebook's own automated enforcement controls determined the post likely did break the rules.

"Our violence and incitement classifier was almost 90% certain that this (Trump) post violated Facebook's ... policy," the June 5 analysis reads.

That contradicts conversations Zuckerberg had with civil rights leaders last year to quell concerns that Trump's post was a specific threat to Black people protesting Floyd's death, said Rashad Robinson, the president of Color of Change, a civil rights advocacy group. The group also spearheaded a boycott of Facebook in the weeks following Trump's post.

"To be clear, I had a direct argument with Zuckerberg days after that post where he gaslit me and he specifically pushed back on any notion that this violated their rules," Robinson said in an interview with the AP last week.

A Facebook spokesperson said that its internal controls do not always correctly predict when a post has violated rules and that human review, which was done in the case of Trump's post, is more accurate.

To curb the ex-president's ability to stoke hateful reactions on its platform, Facebook employees suggested last year that the company limit reshares on similar posts that may violate Facebook's rules in the future.

But Trump continued to use his Facebook account, which more than 32 million follow, to fire up his supporters throughout much of the remainder of his presidency. In the days leading up to a deadly siege in Washington on Jan. 6, Trump regularly promoted false claims that widespread voter fraud caused him to lose the White House, spurring hundreds of his fans to storm the U.S. Capitol and demand the results of a fair election be overturned.

It wasn't until after the Capitol riot, and as Trump was on his way out of the White House, that Facebook pulled him off the platform in January, announcing his account would be suspended until at least 2023.

There's a reason Facebook waited so long to take any action, said Jennifer Mercieca, a professor at Texas A&M University who closely studied the former president's rhetoric.

"Facebook really benefited from Trump and Trump's ability to draw attention and engagement through outrage," Mercieca said. "They wanted Trump to keep going on."

This story has been updated to correct the spelling of the first name of the Ohio State University professor to Lanier.

See full coverage of the "The Facebook Papers" here: <https://apnews.com/hub/the-facebook-papers>

Exacerbated by pandemic, child care crisis hampers economy

By SALLY HO and JOSH BOAK Associated Press

SEATTLE (AP) — After Bryan Kang's son was born in July, the occupational therapist and his wife, a teacher, started looking for child care in the Los Angeles area. The couple called eight day care centers: Some didn't have spots for months; others stopped taking their calls and some never answered at all.

So with no viable options, Kang scrambled to find a new job that would allow him to work remotely.

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"I told my manager, 'Hey, by the end of the month, I have to transition out,'" Kang said. "They were very supportive and very understanding because they're all mothers. But now there's one less body to see patients."

Kang said he's fortunate he found a job teaching online classes, but the unexpected career pivot forced him to take an 11% pay cut.

The truth is, even if he could find a day care spot for his now 3-month-old son, the \$2,500 monthly cost of infant care is so high that taking a lower-paying job so he can work from home and care for the baby is the most financially sensible thing to do.

The child care business has for years operated in a broken, paradoxical market: low wages for workers and high costs for consumers. Yet the critical service somehow managed to limp along.

Now, the pandemic has made clear what many experts had long warned: The absence of reliable and affordable child care limits which jobs people can accept, makes it harder to climb the corporate ladder and ultimately restricts the ability of the broader economy to grow.

"Early learning is no longer seen as just a women's issue or a children's issue. It's really seen as an economic issue. It's about workforce participation," said Mario Cardona, policy chief for Child Care Aware of America. "It's about employers who don't have to worry about whether they'll be able to rely upon employees."

Child Care Aware estimates 9% of licensed child care programs have permanently closed since the pandemic began, based on its tally of nearly 16,000 shuttered centers and in-home day cares in 37 states between December 2019 and March 2021.

Now, each teacher resignation, coronavirus exposure and day care closure reveals an industry on the brink, with wide-reaching implications for an entire economy's workforce.

The national crisis has forced many people — mostly women — to leave their jobs, reshaping the child care crisis as not just a problem for parents of young children, but also anyone who depends on them. It has contributed to a labor shortage, which in turn has hurt businesses and made it more difficult for customers to access goods and services.

"The decisions we make about the availability of child care today will shape the U.S. macroeconomy for decades to come by influencing who returns to work, what types of jobs parents take and the career path they are able to follow," said Betsey Stevenson, an economist at the University of Michigan.

President Joe Biden has pledged an unprecedented burst of federal spending in hopes of fixing the child care market. At a recent town hall in Baltimore, he assured parents they would "not have to pay more than 7% of your income for child care." Federal money would go directly to care centers to cover costs in excess of the 7% cap. This means the median U.S. family earning \$86,372 would pay \$6,046 annually for child care.

Biden's plan also includes universal pre-kindergarten, which could further reduce child care expenses for families. The expanded monthly payments from the child tax credit approved in Biden's \$1.9 trillion coronavirus relief package would be extended for another year. The president also proposed increasing the size of a tax credit for the cost of child care, all of which should help improve access for families.

The Congressional Budget Office has yet to score the costs as the measures are still being negotiated ahead of Biden's departure Thursday for the G-20 conference in Rome. But Donald Schneider, a former chief economist for the House Ways and Means Committee who now works for the consultancy Cornerstone Macro, estimates the child care and pre-kindergarten support would cost \$465 billion over 10 years. The one-year price-tag of the expanded child tax credit would be around \$120 billion. The credit would cost an additional \$940 billion if renewed for nine more years.

It remains to be seen what survives in the brutal negotiations in Congress for Biden's broad family services agenda, but the pandemic is proving to be a make-or-break catalyst for the future of the child care industry.

At Forever Young Daycare in the Seattle suburb of Mountlake Terrace, Amy McCoy is burning out fast. She's spent half of this year trying to hire a new assistant for her in-home child care, but until then,

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the former public school teacher works 50 hours a week caring for children herself, and more doing the cooking, cleaning and administrative work needed to run her business.

"At what point is my day care more important than my own family?" McCoy asked.

One of McCoy's assistants, who worked there for five years, quit the \$19-an-hour job in April for a \$35-an-hour job nannying. McCoy has posted the opening for an entry-level assistant on Indeed and Facebook, offering \$16 per hour — nearly 20% more than the state minimum wage. She's gotten few responses and all turned her down over pay, making hiring impossible without a tuition increase.

"Nobody wants to work for what I can afford to pay right now," McCoy said. "I absolutely believe these are \$20-an-hour employees, but I hate that, most likely, I will have to raise tuition."

The U.S. Treasury Department noted in a September report that child care workers earn on average \$24,230. More than 15% of the industry's workers live below the poverty line in 41 states and half need public assistance. The sector has high levels of turnover, with 26% to 40% leaving their job each year. Nor is there much room to give among child care centers that tend to operate on profits of 1% or less.

In nearby Edmonds, Briana McFadden shuttered her business, Cocoon Child Care Center, last month due to the stress of the pandemic, though McFadden thinks she would have stayed open if there were government subsidies to stabilize the industry.

In 12 years in business, McFadden said she never raised tuition and was the rare day care in the affluent northern Seattle suburbs to accept low-income families on a state subsidy. In pre-pandemic times, Cocoon employed seven people to care for 37 children. Now McFadden plans to open a convenience store.

"It really wasn't worth it to continue," McFadden said, her voice quivering with emotion. "Day care is a hard business."

Tatum Russell's livelihood depended as much on McFadden's day care as the restaurant that employs her to hand-bread seafood.

During a COVID-19-related day care closure in August, the single mom could only stitch together help from relatives for some of the time. Russell ultimately had to miss four days of work.

"It's been a nightmare, and it's not over," Russell said.

Boak reported from Washington, D.C.

EU court tells Poland to pay \$1.2M a day in judicial dispute

By RAF CASERT Associated Press

BRUSSELS (AP) — The European Union raised the stakes Wednesday in a standoff with Poland over judicial independence and the primacy of EU law, with the bloc's top court fining Poland \$1.2 million a day to prevent what it called "serious and irreparable harm" to the EU's legal order and values.

The European Court of Justice imposed the penalty after a weeklong war of words in which Poland told the EU to stay out of its judicial affairs while other EU nations insisted that Warsaw could not continue to get huge EU subsidies while disregarding the bloc's democratic principles at will.

"You cannot pocket all the money but refuse the values," Belgian Prime Minister Alexander De Croo said Wednesday, warning Poland not to treat the EU like "a cash machine."

The Court of Justice decided to syphon off some of that money, saying the daily fine was "necessary in order to avoid serious and irreparable harm to the legal order of the European Union and to the values on which that Union is founded, in particular that of the rule of law."

The EU's executive commission had requested the penalty until the Polish government acts to improve the functioning of the Polish Supreme Court and suspends new laws deemed to undermine judicial independence.

Poland's deputy justice minister, Michal Wojcik, hinted that Poland may not respect the European court's decision once again, arguing that it's not a proper ruling and has "no legal basis" because the court allegedly acted outside its jurisdiction.

Radoslaw Fogiel, a spokesman for Poland's nationalist ruling party, brushed the penalties off, saying

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Poland's contribution into the EU coffers is much larger than that.

Overall, however, EU figures show that Poland is a net recipient of 12 billion euros (\$14 billion) a year from the bloc.

The point of contention is the Disciplinary Chamber of the Supreme Court, a body that the ruling party empowered to discipline judges. Many Polish judges view the chamber as a tool to pressure judges to rule in favor of the governing authorities.

In July, the European Court of Justice ordered the suspension of the disciplinary chamber, but it is still operating.

Polish Prime Minister Mateusz Morawiecki told the European Parliament last week that the chamber will be abolished, but he gave no precise time for when that would take place. Wojcik said the proper legislation will come in "due time."

De Croo on Wednesday targeted Morawiecki, who accused the EU of threatening "World War III" for insisting that Poland should respect the independence of the judiciary and the primacy of EU law. The Belgian prime minister said his Polish counterpart was "playing with fire when waging war with your European colleagues for internal political reasons."

The comments follow years of disputes over changes that Poland's right-wing government has made to the country's courts. The EU believes the changes erode democratic checks and balances, and the European Commission is holding up billions of euros earmarked for Poland in a pandemic recovery plan.

Wednesday's decision also comes on the heels of an EU summit, where Polish arguments that its fundamental judicial changes would not undermine the EU failed to convince key bloc leaders.

Among them was French President Emmanuel Macron, who met with Polish President Andrzej Duda in Paris on Wednesday.

Morawiecki's recalcitrance crystalized in an interview with the Financial Times over the weekend. When asked if Poland could retaliate by using its EU veto power to block legislation on climate issues, for instance, Morawiecki said: "If they start the third World War, we are going to defend our rights with any weapons which are at our disposal."

The interview did not go down well with Morawiecki's EU colleagues.

"You are playing a dangerous game," De Croo said. "This is about the overwhelming majority of member states — from the Baltics to Portugal — who agree our Union is a union of values, not a cash machine."

Poland's nationalist ruling party, Law and Justice, has been in conflict with Brussels since winning power in 2015 over a number of matters, including migration and LGBT rights. The longest running dispute, however, has centered on the Polish government's attempts to take political control of the judiciary.

The matter came to a head earlier this month when Poland's constitutional court ruled that some key parts of EU law are not compatible with the nation's Constitution. The court stacked with ruling party loyalists gave its opinion after Morawiecki asked it to decide on whether EU or national law has primacy.

The fine imposed on Wednesday comes on top of a 500,000 euro daily fine that the Court of Justice ordered Poland last month to pay for having ignored its injunction to close the Turow brown coal mine. The ruling came in a dispute between Poland and the Czech Republic.

Poland argues it cannot do without the 7% of its energy that the Turow power plant is generating. Morawiecki has indicated Poland is prepared to pay, and can afford it.

Due to the disputes, there is a possibility that Poland will not be getting 36 billion euros (\$42 billion) in EU funds earmarked for recovery from the pandemic as long as it does not change its ways.

Monika Scislowska contributed from Warsaw.

Sudan strongman is seen as an insider with powerful allies

By SAMY MAGDY and ISABEL DEBRE Associated Press

CAIRO (AP) — The general leading Sudan's coup has vowed to usher the country to an elected government. But Abdel-Fattah Burhan has powerful allies, including Gulf nations and a feared Sudanese para-

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military commander, and he appears intent on keeping the military firmly in control.

Burhan first gained prominence in 2019, when he and other top generals toppled Omar al-Bashir, under pressure from mass demonstrations against the autocrat's 30-year rule.

He remained in charge for several months, until international pressure forced the military to reach a power-sharing deal with the protesters. That established a joint civilian-military Sovereign Council headed by Burhan that was supposed to rule Sudan until elections, set for 2023.

Burhan's record was relatively clean and he was not indicted by The International Criminal Court like al-Bashir and others for crimes against humanity during the Darfur conflict of the early 2000s. He was a rare non-Islamist among the top generals during al-Bashir's military-Islamist regime. That helped Sudan emerge from the international pariah status it had under al-Bashir.

On Monday, Burhan swept away the vestiges of civilian government. He dissolved the Sovereign Council and the transitional government, detained Prime Minister Abdalla Hamdok and other officials, and declared a state of emergency. Hamdok was released Tuesday, but others remain in custody.

The takeover came just weeks before Burhan, 61, was scheduled to be replaced by a civilian as head of the council. He has promised that the military will hand over power once a government is elected in July 2023.

Civilian control would not only undermine the military's political power, but also threaten its extensive financial resources and could lead to prosecutions for rights violations in the past 30 years.

Burhan has been backed in recent years by Egypt, led by a general-turned-president, and Gulf countries, particularly the United Arab Emirates. He trained in Egypt's military college and has made multiple visits since 2019 to the Emirates' de-facto ruler, Abu Dhabi crown prince Sheikh Mohammed bin Zayed Al Nahyan.

In a sign of the decisive behind-the-scenes role of Gulf countries, U.S. Secretary of State Antony Blinken spoke with the foreign minister of regional heavyweight Saudi Arabia about Sudan on Tuesday. A State Department statement said both men condemned the military takeover.

On Monday, Egypt and some of the Gulf countries had avoided criticizing the coup, calling instead for calm and dialogue.

"There's a general preference for a strong military leader who is very transactional. That fits Gulf interests more than a democratic government," said Cameron Hudson, a former U.S. State Department official and Sudan expert at the Atlantic Council's Africa Center.

"They're fearful of what an Arab Spring success story looks like," he said, referring to the uprisings in 2011 that helped inspire the Sudanese protests.

Also standing behind Burhan is another general, one who is more feared: Mohammed Hamdan Dagalo, commander of the Rapid Support Forces — a paramilitary unit that grew out of the al-Bashir-backed Janjaweed militias notorious for atrocities and rapes during the Darfur conflict.

RSF fighters were prominent in Monday's coup, taking part in arresting Hamdok and other senior officials and clamping down in the streets. The force is virtually a "de facto parallel army of tens of thousands of battle-tested fighters," said Suliman Baldo, senior adviser at The Sentry, an investigative and policy group focusing on war crimes in Africa.

Burhan has a long connection with Dagalo, who is also known as Hemedti. Burhan was a commander in Darfur, where the military and RSF waged a brutal campaign to crush an insurgency, Baldo said. As many as 300,000 people were killed and 2.7 million were displaced in a campaign of mass rape and abuse.

He distanced himself from the atrocities, once telling the BBC, "I am not responsible for any bad actions in Darfur... As far as I'm concerned, I was fighting an enemy just as all regular forces do."

In 2015, Burhan and Dagalo coordinated the deployment of Sudanese troops and RSF fighters to Yemen to fight with the Saudi-led coalition against Iranian-aligned Houthi rebels. Their forces received hefty payments from the Saudis and Emiratis, building those countries' connections to the two commanders.

In the uprising against al-Bashir, Burhan and Dagalo refused orders to violently disperse the protesters and even met with them at their sit-in camp. Behind the scenes, Egypt, Saudi Arabia and the Emirates encouraged them to push out al-Bashir.

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But protests continued after al-Bashir's fall, with demands for the military to give up. On June 2, 2019, security forces and RSF fighters attacked the protesters. More than 100 people were killed, and soldiers raped dozens of women. Prosecutors blamed paramilitary forces, but the bloodshed stained Burhan and Dagalo in the eyes of protesters.

"Burhan was responsible because he was the leader, it's that simple," said Osman Mirgany, a Khartoum-based columnist and editor of the daily al-Tayar. "He promised not to touch the sit-in and then a massacre occurred. From that point on, people realized he would never keep his promises."

For the military's opponents, that skepticism hangs over Burhan's promises of civilian rule. Baldo, of the Sentry group, said the general and Dagalo are both intent on remaining free from civilian oversight.

Moreover, he said, they are "concerned about being held accountable for atrocity crimes committed under their command" — in Darfur and in the 2019 sit-in killings and rapes.

Associated Press writer Jon Gambrell in Dubai contributed.

Today in History

By The Associated Press undefined

Today in History

Today is Thursday, Oct. 28, the 301st day of 2021. There are 64 days left in the year.

Today's Highlight in History:

On Oct. 28, 1886, the Statue of Liberty, a gift from the people of France, was dedicated in New York Harbor by President Grover Cleveland.

On this date:

In 1636, the General Court of Massachusetts passed a legislative act establishing Harvard College.

In 1858, Rowland Hussey Macy opened his first New York store at Sixth Avenue and 14th Street in Manhattan.

In 1914, medical researcher Jonas Salk, who developed the first successful polio vaccine, was born in New York.

In 1922, fascism came to Italy as Benito Mussolini took control of the government.

In 1962, Soviet leader Nikita Khrushchev informed the United States that he had ordered the dismantling of missile bases in Cuba; in return, the U.S. secretly agreed to remove nuclear missiles from U.S. installations in Turkey.

In 1980, President Jimmy Carter and Republican presidential nominee Ronald Reagan faced off in a nationally broadcast, 90-minute debate in Cleveland.

In 1991, what became known as "The Perfect Storm" began forming hundreds of miles east of Nova Scotia; lost at sea during the storm were the six crew members of the Andrea Gail, a swordfishing boat from Gloucester, Massachusetts.

In 1996, Richard Jewell, cleared of committing the Olympic park bombing, held a news conference in Atlanta in which he thanked his mother for standing by him and lashed out at reporters and investigators who'd depicted him as the bomber, who turned out to be Eric Rudolph.

In 2001, the families of people killed in the September 11 terrorist attack gathered in New York for a memorial service filled with prayer and song.

In 2002, American diplomat Laurence Foley was assassinated in front of his house in Amman, Jordan, in the first such attack on a U.S. diplomat in decades. A student flunking out of the University of Arizona nursing school shot three of his professors to death, then killed himself.

In 2012, airlines canceled more than 7,000 flights in advance of Hurricane Sandy, transit systems in New York, Philadelphia and Washington were shut down, and forecasters warned the New York area could see an 11-foot wall of water.

In 2013, Penn State said it would pay \$59.7 million to 26 young men over claims of child sexual abuse at the hands of former assistant football coach Jerry Sandusky.