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Upcoming Events

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

Thursday, Nov. 4
Aberdeen Novice Online Debate
Volleyball Region 1A Tourney
Bowdle LDE

Friday-Saturday, Nov. 5-6
Golden Eagle Cup Debate & Oral Interp at Aberdeen Central

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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Lawmakers call for inquiry into Cammack COVID grants

Bart Pfankuch
South Dakota News Watch

Commercial activity has resumed at Prairie Mountain Wildlife Studios in Union Center, S.D., shown here in June 2021, since South Dakota News Watch started investigating COVID relief grants issued to the business during the pandemic.

Photo: Bart Pfankuch, South Dakota News Watch

Two South Dakota legislators are calling for further investigation into more than $700,000 in state COVID relief grants given to Chris Cammack, son of Senate Majority Leader Gary Cammack.

The calls for deeper inquiry into the grants follow an Oct. 11 South Dakota News Watch investigation that raised questions about whether Chris Cammack followed the rules of the state COVID relief program.

News Watch showed that Chris Cammack received the grants for a taxidermy business he said is located in Union Center, S.D., but that property records and legislative testimony by Chris Cammack indicate actually operates in Texas. The rules of the South Dakota Coronavirus Relief Fund Program require that businesses receiving grants "must be physically located in South Dakota" in order to qualify.

State Rep. Linda Duba of Sioux Falls, a member of the House Government Operations and Audit Committee (GOAC) and the Joint Appropriations Committee in the Legislature, said the auditing firms the state hired should be investigating the state grants given to Chris Cammack, and that the Legislature should take up its own investigation if the auditing firms do not provide answers.

"I have to believe they [the auditing firms] are looking at it, and if they're not, we need to find out why,"

Linda Duba

"I think we all want to know how a person who has publicly said, 'I run my business out of Texas,' gets a $700,000 grant from the state of South Dakota COVID funds?"
-- Rep. Linda Duba, D-Sioux Falls

Duba said in an interview with News Watch. "I think we all want to know how a person who has publicly said, 'I run my business out of Texas,' gets a $700,000 grant from the state of South Dakota COVID funds."

Chris Cammack did not return calls and emails seeking comment for the Oct. 11 article, and did not return an email and phone call seeking comment for this article. Kurt Schlicker, a partner with the auditing firm Eide Bailly in Nevada, which is under contract to audit the South Dakota COVID relief program, declined to comment on the Cammack grants and referred all questions to the state.

Colin Keeler, director of financial systems at the South Dakota Bureau of Finance and Management, which is running the COVID relief program, said the state cannot comment on individual COVID grants or applicants.

Duba said that after she read the Oct. 11 News Watch article, she called Liza Clark, commissioner of the Bureau of Finance and Management, and inquired directly about the legitimacy of the grants given to Chris Cammack.

Duba said Clark told her she could not legally discuss individual applicants or grants.

"I can look Liza in the eye and say, 'I know you can't comment publicly, but I sure hope this is one you're looking at,'" said Duba, D-Sioux Falls. "If something doesn't come of this, I would think there will be those of us in the Legislature who will start to poke around and ask questions, or ask for a report."

Duba wants to know why Chris Cammack's grant applications were approved, whether he qualified legally for the grants, and why questions about the legitimacy of the grant applications were raised by News Watch and not the two firms the state is paying up to $12 million to manage and audit the COVID relief program.

"My question is, 'How did it get through in the first place?'" Duba said. "And on the other side of the coin, we've had people who had been asked to pay back their grants."

The calls by lawmakers for further investigation follow the first known indictment of a South Dakota resident on charges of defrauding the state COVID relief program. In a multi-count indictment filed in October by U.S. Attorney Dennis R. Holmes, two men with addresses in Pierre, S.D., James and Levi Garrett, were charged with defrauding the government.

Four criminal counts charge that James Garrett filed fraudulent claims with the Federal Crop Insurance Corp., and one count charges Levi Garrett with crop-insurance fraud. Two other counts in the indictment charge that James Garrett executed a scheme "by means of false and fraudulent pretenses, representations or promises" to illegally obtain South Dakota COVID relief grants totaling $1 million. An attorney representing the Garretts released a statement saying they are innocent and will defend themselves against the charges.

Chris Cammack is not known to be under investigation and has not been charged with any crime at this time.

State Sen. Reynold Nesiba, D-Sioux Falls, said the state, the Legislature or the auditing firms hired by the state should investigate whether Chris Cammack followed the rules of the program and received the grants legitimately.

"This seems like something the lawyers and accountants need to take a closer look at," Nesiba said. "It does appear to create a need for a further review and audit of whether these expenditures were ap-

Reynold Nesiba

propriate."

Nesiba, a member of the Senate GOAC and also the Joint Appropriations Committee, said he plans to raise the Cammack grants as a topic of further investigation by the audit committee, which was scheduled for a joint meeting of both the House and Senate GOACs on Oct. 27 and 28.

"When we are meeting, I will bring this up and see if this is an issue we should bring up at a future meeting," Nesiba said.

Nesiba said he was also interested in further review of the COVID relief program overall, which has distributed more than $490 million in payments to 5,833 applicants that included small businesses, nonprofits and health-care providers.

"What I'm also concerned about is, 'Are there any other cases like this?' and I'm concerned that this was able to be found by an enterprising investigative reporter and was not caught by the auditing firms," Nesiba said.

Sen. Kyle Schoenfish, R-Scotland, chair of the Senate GOAC, said nothing related to COVID relief grants has been placed on the committee agenda so far, but Schoenfish said he is generally open to considering matters of concern from any committee member.

State records show Chris Cammack applied for and received $709,792 in state coronavirus relief funds in early 2021 to cover losses he reported during the pandemic at Prairie Mountain Wildlife Studios, which he said is located in Union Center. Cammack also received more than $300,000 in forgivable Paycheck Protection Program loans from the federal government to keep 10 workers at the Union Center location employed.

But a News Watch investigation revealed that a neighbor said there was no recent commercial activity at the Union Center site, and showed that Texas property and tax records show Chris Cammack owns a 7,300-square-foot studio building and he and his wife Felicia own an $880,000 home in Cypress, Texas, near Houston.

Chris Cammack testified before the South Dakota Legislature in March 2020 that his business "outgrew" the Union Center location several years ago, and that he and his wife bought the business in Cypress, Texas, and were running it there. That business, Brush Country Studios, was merged with Prairie Mountain Wildlife Studios and uses the Cypress, Texas, address and phone number on its website.

The questions surrounding the legitimacy of the state grants given to Chris Cammack have only added to the disappointment Sioux Falls dentist Nichole Cauwels has felt with the state COVID relief grant program.

Nichole Cauwels

Cauwels operates Designer Dentistry & Smiles on 41st Street in Sioux Falls, and though she had a strong summer at her practice in 2020, business fell off by at least 40% when the pandemic hit its peak in South Dakota in the fall.

Cauwels applied for the first round of COVID relief and was denied, but after reporting her lost revenue from the fall, she was sent a $23,051 relief check from the state in round two of the program in early 2021.

Cauwels used the money to help pay for a major upgrade of the air filtration at her practice to make the

environment safer for her patients and employees during and after the pandemic.

But in April 2021, Cauwels received an email from Guidehouse, the Virginia firm hired by South Dakota to manage its COVID relief program, notifying her she had to return the grant money. After a follow-up phone call with Guidehouse, in which the employee she spoke with seemed highly unprofessional, Cauwels believed the push to get her to repay the grant money was actually a scam.

Cauwels' accountant eventually confirmed that Cauwels had received the grant money in error, mainly due to a glitch on the Guidehouse website for one day during the application period. She would later learn that the state ruled she had received enough money from the federal Paycheck Protection Program that she did not qualify for state grant money.

Even though Cauwels was told that Guidehouse realized the computer glitch the day it occurred, and fixed it the next day, Cauwels wasn't told about the error until months after receiving and spending the money. She was told about 100 applicants had the same experience caused by the computer problem.

Cauwels was able to pay the money back, but she remains disappointed in how the situation was handled.

"They knew about the glitch the next day, but they let me go three and half months, and then tell me I have to return that money," she said. "The sad thing is that they should have never cut me the check in the first place."

Cauwels said the size of the grants given to Chris Cammack, and the questions about whether his business operates in South Dakota or Texas, made her angry. Cauwels questioned how a taxidermy business, even one that creates large animal trophy rooms, could have lost enough revenue in roughly six months of 2020 to qualify for more than $700,000 in relief payments.

"The money is not paid on a one-to-one basis for losses, so it's hard to see how they justify that level of grant money," she said. "I can't see how they would have enough loss of revenue to qualify even if they were located in South Dakota, which obviously they are not."

Cauwels said she hopes authorities investigate whether Chris Cammack received the state COVID relief money legally.

"They should have to return the money just like I did, but I think there needs to be more accountability than that," she said. "I think there needs to be an investigation, and if there was fraudulent activity, or someone trying to get something they didn't qualify for, I think it should be investigated and it should be prosecuted."

Natalie Stites Means, a Native American community organizer and activist from Rapid City, said she was deeply disturbed to read about the questions surrounding the state COVID grants given to Chris Cammack.

Means said she had heard from several small-business owners in South Dakota, both Native American and non-Native, who were turned down for grants.

"Native Americans are getting cut out of this, and so are other small businesses run by South Dakotans who live and operate in South Dakota, which this business clearly did not," she said of Prairie Mountain Wildlife Studios.

Means said the state should provide a geographic list of where COVID relief money was distributed across the state and release information about the ethnicity of recipients. Means is collaborating with a national group called United Today, Stronger Tomorrow, which is pushing for more transparency and equity in delivery of billions of dollars in federal COVID relief funding.

"We didn't see the positive impacts from this money for tribal people, whether they live on reservations or in towns and cities," she said. "It just angers me that these people are getting money that should be devoted to helping overcome the actual harm many people in South Dakota are feeling."

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COVID GRANTS TO SMALL BUSINESSES -- WHO GOT WHAT IN SOUTH DAKOTA?

Here is a look at how the state COVID-19 relief grants were distributed in the small-business portion of the program in 2020-2021. The number of grants and amount of money are based on grant recipients that self-reported the industries in which they operate. Industries are listed by highest grant totals to lowest grant totals.

INDUSTRY TYPE
Number of grants; average grant; total paid to industry

AGRICULTURE, FORESTRY, FISHING, HUNTING
554 grants; $129,000 average; $71.6 million total

OTHER SERVICES
1,412 grants; $39,000 average; $55.0 million total

ACCOMMODATIONS AND FOOD SERVICE
804 grants; $61,000 average; $49.1 million total

CONSTRUCTION
417 grants; $65,200 average; $27.2 million total

RETAIL TRADE
604 grants; $42,400 average; $25.6 million total

MANUFACTURING
170 grants; $120,000 average; $20.4 million total

ARTS, ENTERTAINMENT, RECREATION
394 grants; $41,900 average; $16.5 million total

PROFESSIONAL, SCIENTIFIC AND TECHNICAL SERVICES
257 grants; $57,100 average; $14.7 million total

REAL ESTATE RENTAL AND LEASING
265 grants; $53,000 average; $14.0 million total

TRANSPORTATION AND WAREHOUSING
169 grants; $62,900 average; $10.6 million total

HEALTH CARE AND SOCIAL ASSISTANCE
237 grants; $42,800 average; $10.1 million total

COMPANY AND ENTERPRISE MANAGEMENT
38 grants; $140,300 average; $5.3 million total

FINANCE AND INSURANCE
81 grants; $62,500 average; $5.1 million total

EDUCATIONAL SERVICES
125 grants; $34,200 average; $4.3 million total

WHOLESALE TRADE
47 grants; $55,000 average; $2.6 million total

UTIITIES
5 grants; $91,900 average; $460,000 total

MINING
6 grants; $47,500 average; $285,000 total

INFORMATION
17 grants; $13,700 average; $233,000 total

ADMINISTRATION AND SUPPORT
9 grants, $19,285 average, $173,600 total

PUBLIC ADMINISTRATION
1 grant; $27,100 average; $27,100 total

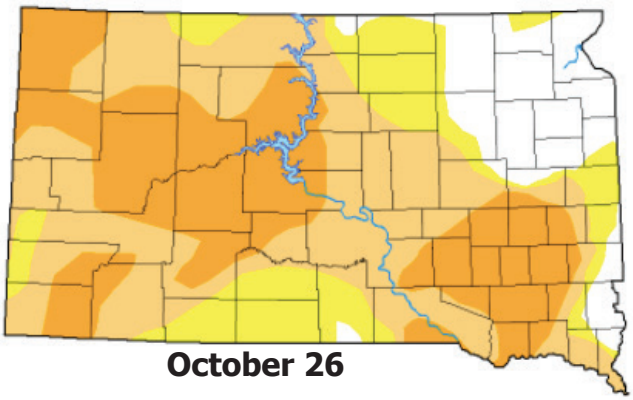
SMALL BUSINESS PROGRAM TOTALS
5,612 grants; $59,400 average; $333.2 million total

Notes: Source is South Dakota Bureau of Finance and Management; industries are self-reported by applicants; current as of April 26, 2021; numbers are rounded.

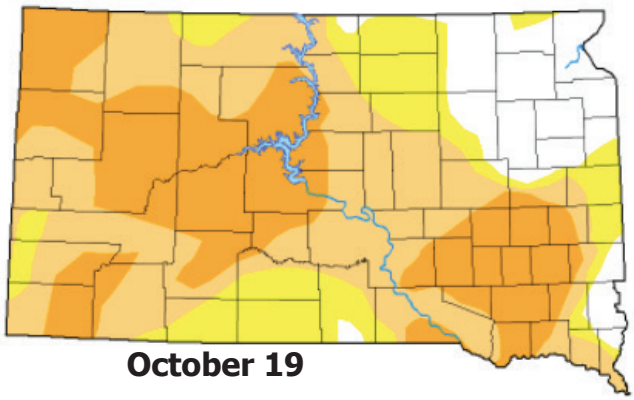
Drought Classification

None
D0 (Abnormally Dry)
D1 (Moderate Drought)
D2 (Severe Drought)
D3 (Extreme Drought)
D4 (Exceptional Drought)
No Data

Drought Monitor



October 26



October 19

High Plains

Half an inch to an inch of rain was widespread across Wyoming and South Dakota to eastern Nebraska, with up to 2 inches falling across southeast Kansas. Otherwise, little to no precipitation occurred elsewhere in the High Plains region. D0 was trimmed in eastern Nebraska and D0-D1 trimmed in southeast Kansas. D1 and D3 (extreme drought) were reduced in Wyoming, and D2 and D3 contracted in western Colorado, but D0-D2 expanded in eastern, central, and southern Colorado. According to USDA statistics, 73% of the pasture and rangeland in North Dakota was in poor to very poor condition, with the statistics 78% in South Dakota, 55% in Wyoming, 49% in Colorado, 31% in Nebraska, and 26% in Kansas.

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Left to right: Vicci Stange - Table Talks, Amanda Sperry - Mother, Sarah Schuster- FCA Leader, Kim Weber - Groton Staff, Mitch Reed - Speaker, Tyhe Gerlach - Community. (Courtesy Photo)

Motivational Speaker Mitch Reed comes to Groton

Recently Groton FCA partnered with Table Talks to bring motivational speaker Mitch Reed (author of Cardboard Confessionals) to the Groton HS Arena. He gave a powerful message to help remind students, parents and community that we all carry more power than we realize. We can greatly impact those around us by doing the little things on a daily basis to show that we care.

Student attendees with speaker Mitch Reed. (Courtesy Photo)

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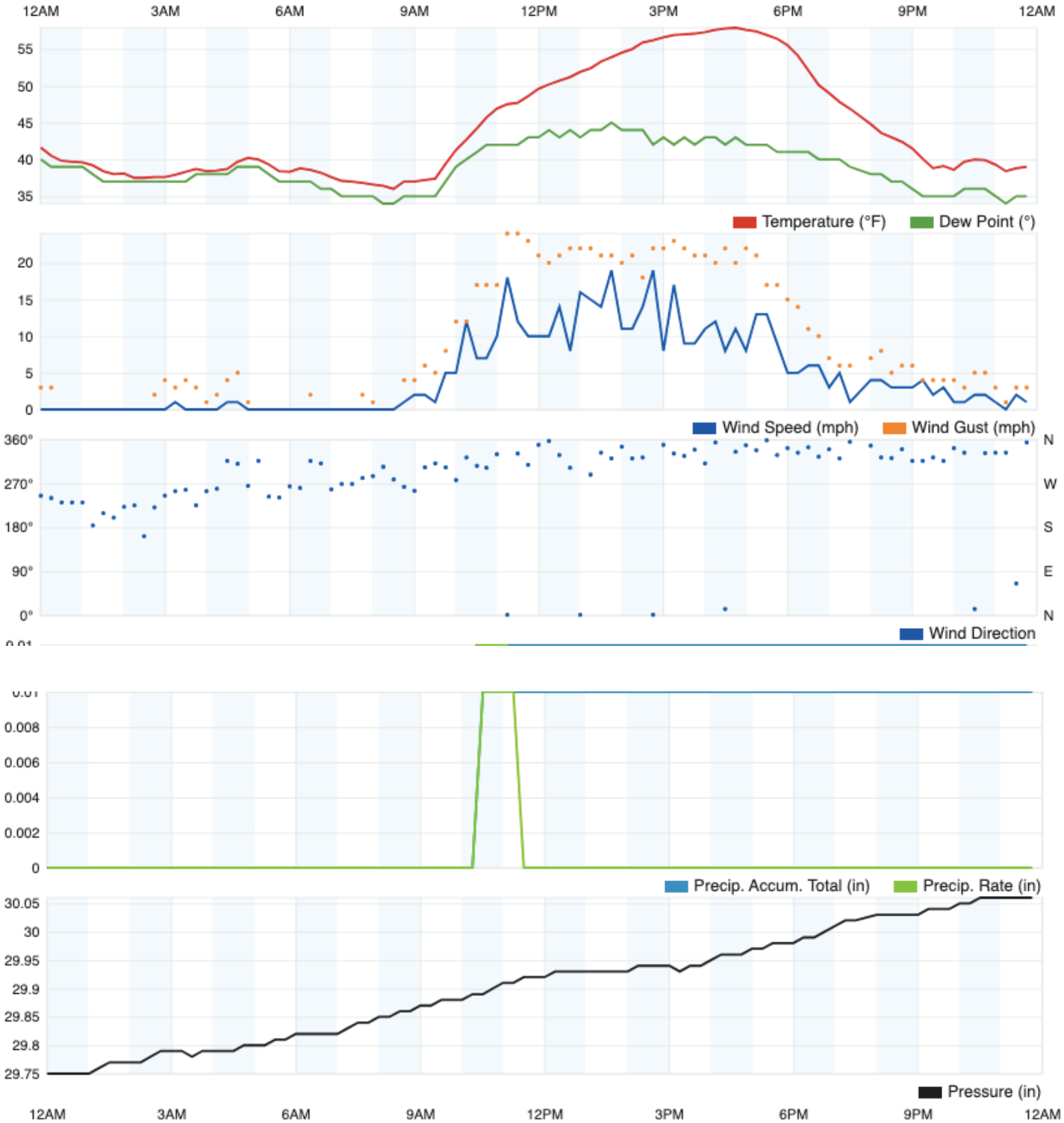
Yesterday's Groton Weather Graphs



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Today	Tonight	Saturday	Saturday Night	Sunday
				
Sunny	Mostly Clear	Sunny then Mostly Sunny and Breezy	Mostly Clear	Sunny
High: 58 °F	Low: 38 °F	High: 57 °F	Low: 27 °F	High: 43 °F

After a sunny and warm day today, temperatures will cool through the weekend in the wake of a cold front sweeping across the region late tonight into Saturday morning. Southerly breezes will shift to the north on Saturday as temperatures fall in the afternoon.

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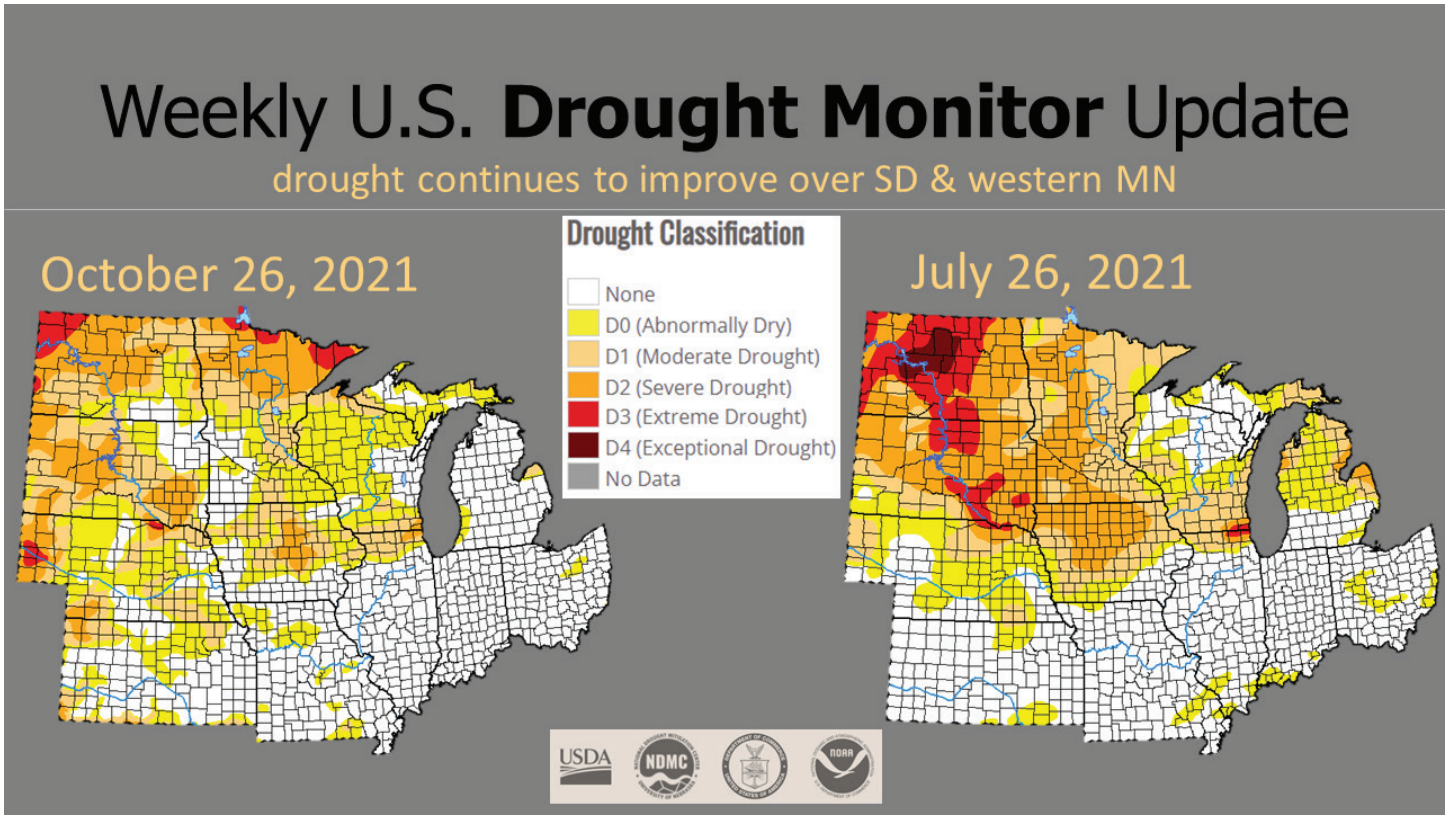

The weekly U.S. Drought Monitor update is out, and continues to show improvements for central to eastern South Dakota, and west central Minnesota. Shown here is a comparison between the outlook posted this week, and when we were generally at our driest conditions that were valid on the July 26th. Areas of extreme drought have lessened to abnormally dry to severe drought across portions of central South Dakota.

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Today in Weather History

October 29, 1925: Record cold occurred across the area on this date in 1925. The record lows were 9 at Wheaton, Minnesota, 2 degrees below zero at Watertown, 5 degrees below zero at Aberdeen, 7 degrees below zero southeast of McInstosh, and a frigid late October 19 degrees below zero at Kennebec.

1693: From the Royal Society of London: "There happened a most violent storm in Virginia which stopped the course of ancient channels and made some where there never were any." Known as the Accomack Storm, this event likely caused changes to the Delmarva shoreline, and coastal inlets.

1948: An historic smog event occurred in the town of Donora, Pennsylvania. The smog killed 20 people and sickened 7,000 more.

1917 - The temperature at Denver, CO, dipped to zero, and at Soda Butte, WY, the mercury plunged to 33 degrees below zero, a U.S. record for the month of October. (David Ludlum)

1942 - A tornado struck the town of Berryville in northwest Arkansas killing 20 persons and causing half a million dollars damage. (David Ludlum)

1956 - A violent tornado, or series of tornadoes, moved along a path more than 100 miles in length from south of North Platte NE into Rock County NE. It was an unusually late occurence so far north and west in the U.S. for such a storm. (The Weather Channel)

1987 - Severe thunderstorms in Arizona produced wind gusts to 86 mph at the Glendale Airport near Phoenix, baseball size hail and 70 mph winds at Wickenburg, and up to an inch of rain in fifteen minutes in Yavapai County and northwest Maricopa County. Arizona Public Service alone reported 2.5 million dollars damage from the storms. (The National Weather Summary) (Storm Data)

1988 - Wintry weather prevailed in the Upper Midwest. South Bend, IN, equalled their record for October with a morning low of 23 degrees. International Falls MN reported a record low of 11 degrees in the morning, then dipped down to 8 degrees above zero late in the evening. (The National Weather Summary)

1989 - Thunderstorms developing along a cold front produced severe weather in Oklahoma and north central Texas during the late afternoon and evening hours. Thunderstorms in Oklahoma produced weak tornadoes near Snyder and Davidson, and produced hail two inches in diameter at Altus. Large hail damaged 60 to 80 percent of the cotton crop in Tillman County OK. Nine cities in the northeastern U.S. reported record high temperatures for the date as readings warmed into the 70s. For Marquette MI it marked their fifth straight day of record warmth. Arctic cold invaded the western U.S. Lows of 7 degrees at Alamosa CO and 9 degrees at Elko NV were records for the date. (The National Weather Summary)

2011 - New York City received one inch of snow, the earliest they had received that much snow since records began. It was also only the fourth times since the Civil War snow had fallen in New York City in October. The storm also left over three million people without power including 62% of the customers of Connecticut Light and Power.

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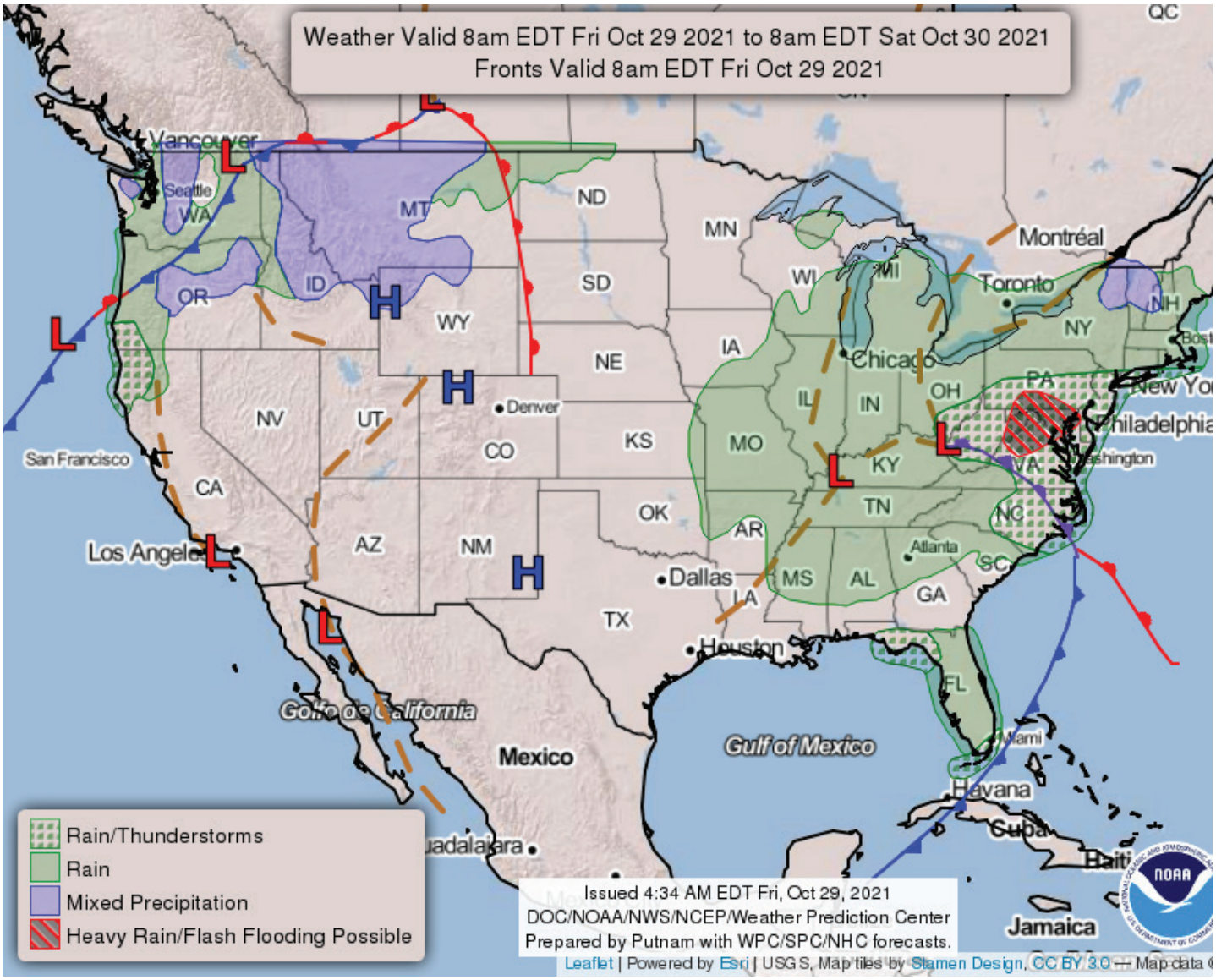
Yesterday's Groton Weather

High Temp: 57.9 °F at 4;45 PM
Low Temp: 36.0 °F at 8:30 AM
Wind: 24 mph at 11:15 AM
Precip: 0.01

Today's Info

Record High: 79° in 1937
Record Low: -5° in 1925
Average High: 52°F
Average Low: 27°F
Average Precip in Oct.: 2.05
Precip to date in Oct.: 4.30
Average Precip to date: 20.38
Precip Year to Date: 19.72
Sunset Tonight: 6:23:52 PM
Sunrise Tomorrow: 8:08:11 AM



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ESTABLISHED FOREVER!

If God said "it" we can believe it. And if He did "it" we know it is right. And when He created this planet, we have His assurance that it will never be moved from its orbit. It is safe, stable, and secure until His "plan for the ages" is complete. The Psalmist was convinced of this when He wrote in Psalm 104:5, "He set the earth on its foundations; it can never be moved."

There is nothing as important as the foundation of a building if it is to withstand the blasts of tornadoes and tremors of earthquakes. Foundations are essential and are designed and built to withstand the violent acts of "nature." Many building codes have been revised after buildings have been destroyed and people killed. However, no guarantee is given that they are beyond some damage. Not God's creation, however. He guarantees His work!

God gave us a guarantee that the foundation of this earth is secure. Isaiah wrote of another foundation: "This is what the Sovereign Lord says: I will lay a stone in Zion, a tested stone, a precious cornerstone for a sure foundation; the one who trusts (in this Foundation) will never be dismayed."

This Foundation is the Messiah, the one in whom we have our salvation and on whom we build our lives for eternity. Even as the foundation of this earth has God's guarantee that it cannot be "moved," so does our salvation in Him have His guarantee that this same power is ours for this life and the one to come.

Prayer: What a blessed assurance is ours, Lord, to know that nothing is as secure as Your Eternal Word. In Jesus' Name, Amen.

Scripture For Today: He set the earth on its foundations; it can never be moved. Psalm 104:5

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2021 Community Events

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

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News from the Associated Press

Thursday's Scores

The Associated Press undefined
PREP VOLLEYBALL=
Belle Fourche def. Lead-Deadwood, 25-8, 25-8, 25-15
Rapid City Stevens def. Douglas, 25-23, 25-17, 25-10

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

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

Thursday's Scores

The Associated Press undefined
PREP FOOTBALL=
Sioux Falls Lincoln 45, Sioux Falls Washington 24
Class 9A State=
Quarterfinal=
DeSmet 32, Warner 16
Herreid/Selby Area 48, Castlewood 32
Howard 46, Wolsey-Wessington 6
Wall 34, Gregory 20
Class 9AA State=
Quarterfinal=
Canistota 14, Ipswich 0
Parkston 34, Garretson 7
Platte-Geddes 26, Hanson 24
Timber Lake 24, Lyman 18
Class 9B State=
Quarterfinal=
Avon 30, Alcester-Hudson 14
Dell Rapids St. Mary 42, Gayville-Volin 22
Faulkton 48, Harding County 22
Potter County 48, Hitchcock-Tulare 8
Class 11A State=
Quarterfinal=
Dell Rapids 19, West Central 15
Madison 35, Sioux Falls Christian 14
Milbank 6, Canton 0
Vermillion 21, Tri-Valley 7
Class 11AA State=
Quarterfinal=
Aberdeen Central 42, Brookings 34
Pierre 38, Watertown 9
Tea Area 57, Sturgis Brown 10
Yankton 42, Mitchell 21
Class 11AAA State=
Quarterfinal=

Belle Fourche 45, Sioux Falls Washington 24
Brandon Valley 23, Sioux Falls Jefferson 9
Harrisburg 50, Rapid City Stevens 9
Sioux Falls O'Gorman 42, Sioux Falls Roosevelt 28
Class 11B State=
Quarterfinal=
Beresford 7, Aberdeen Roncalli 6, OT
Bridgewater-Emery 21, Sioux Valley 8
Elk Point-Jefferson 48, Wagner 6
Winner 66, McCook Central/Montrose 28

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

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

Official: Meeting didn't impact Noem daughter's application

By STEPHEN GROVES Associated Press

South Dakota's labor secretary told lawmakers Thursday that officials had decided to give Gov. Kristi Noem's daughter another chance to win her state real estate appraiser license even before a meeting in the governor's mansion that has spurred conflict of interest questions.

The Associated Press reported last month that on July 27, just days after a state agency moved to deny Kassidy Peters' license, her mother, Noem, convened a meeting that included Secretary of Labor and Regulation Marcia Hultman, the then-director of the appraiser certification program, and Peters herself.

Testifying before the Legislature's Government Operations and Audit Committee, which is looking into the agency at the center of the controversy, Hultman acknowledged it was unusual to have an applicant like the governor's daughter in a meeting that she said mostly covered potential changes to the application process but included a discussion of Peters' application. However, Hultman defended her department's handling of Peters' licensure as keeping with the normal course of business.

Hultman told lawmakers that before the meeting in the governor's mansion, state regulators had worked out an agreement with Peters to seek further education and resubmit work samples to be reviewed for compliance with federal standards. Hultman did not give specifics on how or when that decision was made but said it was not unusual for applicants to enter into such an agreement.

"We should not say 'never' to an applicant who wants to take extra steps to learn the trade," Hultman said.

When asked by lawmakers why Peters was at the meeting, Hultman said, "Someone who is going through the process, regardless of who they are, has insight."

But Kathleen Clark, a law professor who specializes in government ethics at Washington University in St. Louis, told the AP the fact that Peters' application was discussed at the meeting was "evidence" the governor had used her power to aid her daughter because it brought pressure on the government employees.

"There's every reason to think this applicant was being treated differently to other applicants," she said.

The governor's spokesman, Jordan Overturf, insisted the committee testimony showed just the opposite, saying it "confirms that Kassidy Peters never received special treatment."

After several hours of questioning, Republican lawmakers acknowledged the episode did not look good for the governor but said there was no evidence of direct pressure from the governor. Democrats, who hold just two seats on the 10-member committee, pressed for a deeper inquiry. As the committee concluded its meeting Thursday, it moved to submit a request for the training agreements between Peters and the Department of Labor and Regulation.

Part of the committee's investigation has dealt with another official who was in the meeting, Sherry Bren, the former director of the state's real estate certification program. About a week after Peters received her license in November 2020, Bren was pressured to retire by Hultman. She eventually did so this year

but not before receiving a $200,000 payment from the state to withdraw an age discrimination complaint.

Republican Sen. David Wheeler said it looked, at the onset, like the governor created a conflict of interest by including her daughter in the meeting. But he was convinced by Hultman's explanation that the agreement was reached before the meeting. He also pointed out that Bren herself did not review Peters' work samples.

"At no point, was there pressure placed on Sherry Bren to approve the license," he said.

Lawmakers also requested that Bren appear before the committee, but she declined. She and Hultman are both barred from disparaging each other as part of Bren's settlement.

In a statement to the AP, Bren said, "I am at this time working with my attorney to achieve an opportunity to provide relevant facts to members of the Government Operations and Audit Committee and to correct any factual inaccuracies that were provided to them by Secretary Hultman in her testimony today."

Lawmakers learned Thursday the state had to pay an additional $19,000 in outside legal fees to negotiate the settlement agreement.

Noem, who has positioned herself as a prospect for the GOP presidential ticket in 2024, has defended her conduct by saying she was working to "cut red tape" to solve a shortage of appraisers. But the organization that represents appraisers in South Dakota told lawmakers they were worried about changes to the agency since Bren's departure.

Sandra Gresh, the president of the Professional Appraisers Association of South Dakota, told lawmakers there has been a breakdown in communication with state regulators since shortly before Bren left her position. She also reported that delays to license renewals had disrupted business for some appraisers and took issue with recent rule changes proposed by the agency.

Hultman said the agency would work to smooth the relationship with the appraiser's association.

The committee chair, Republican Sen. Kyle Schoenfish, said the committee could potentially take further action next month. A separate government ethics board is also expected to review the issue next week.

"It still seems like there are a lot of questions that remain unanswered," said Democratic Sen. Reynold Nesiba. "And I'll just leave it at that."

S.D. high court: Warrants in Sanford probe will be unsealed

By AMY FORLITI Associated Press

MINNEAPOLIS (AP) — Search warrants will be unsealed in an investigation into billionaire banker-turned philanthropist T. Denny Sanford for possible possession of child pornography, the South Dakota Supreme Court ruled.

The unanimous ruling, dated Wednesday and announced Thursday, upheld a lower court ruling that said state law prohibits courts from sealing search warrants and the corresponding lists of what investigators found. The affidavits supporting the search warrants will remain sealed until the investigation is concluded or criminal charges are filed, as allowed under state law.

"Notwithstanding the skilled advocacy on behalf of the parties, the question we confront here is not a close one," Justice Mark Salter wrote, adding that state law and court rules are clear. "With the exception of the affidavits in support of the five search warrants, our current order sealing the Supreme Court clerk's appellate file will be dissolved following the expiration of the time for petitioning for rehearing or the resolution of a petition seeking rehearing, provided we do not grant the petition."

Under state law, Sanford's attorneys have 20 days to ask the court to reconsider.

The investigation into Sanford was reported last year by ProPublica and the Sioux Falls Argus Leader. Court documents in the case are sealed and refer only to "an implicated individual" — both news outlets went to court for access.

Sanford has not been charged with a crime. His attorney, former South Dakota Attorney General Marty Jackley, did not mention Sanford by name but released a statement saying: "The ultimate fact remains that the investigating authorities have not filed any criminal charges."

Jon Arneson, an attorney for the Argus Leader, said the opinion's conclusion "is a very lucid explanation

of why we prevailed." The state attorney general's office had no comment on the ruling.

Sanford, 85, is the state's richest man and is worth an estimated $2.8 billion. He has vowed to "die broke," and his name adorns dozens of buildings and institutions in South Dakota and beyond.

Even after the investigation was reported last year, Sanford donated hundreds of millions of dollars to the South Dakota government and the state's largest employer, Sanford Health. Some organizations, universities and governments stopped accepting Sanford's donations. But in South Dakota, some of the state's top lawmakers, including Republican Gov. Kristi Noem, have not distanced themselves from him.

ProPublica first reported that South Dakota investigators had obtained a search warrant, citing four unidentified sources. Two people briefed on the matter by law enforcement have previously confirmed the existence of the investigation to The Associated Press. They spoke on the condition of anonymity because they were not authorized to discuss it.

Sanford's electronic devices came to the attention of investigators from the state attorney general's office after a technology firm reported that child pornography had either been sent, received or downloaded on his device, according to one of the people who spoke to the AP.

Sanford told the AP in 2016 that he wanted his fortune to have a positive impact on children after his hardscrabble childhood in St. Paul, Minnesota. His mother died of breast cancer when he was 4, and by the time he was 8, Sanford was working in his father's clothing distribution company.

"You can only have so many cars and all of that kind of stuff so put it into something in which you can change people's lives," he said in 2016.

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Associated Press reporter Stephen Groves contributed to this story from Sioux Falls, S.D.

Sioux Falls officer fatally shoots man suspected in stabbing

SIOUX FALLS, S.D. (AP) — Police say a Sioux Falls officer shot and killed a man they say stabbed three people Thursday morning.

According to police spokesman Sam Clemens, the incident began about 7:30 a.m. when three people showed up at a hospital with stab wounds. Clemens says the two adults and one juvenile were known to the suspect.

Police responded to a residence where the alleged stabber was located about 15 minutes later. Clemens says the man refused to surrender and police negotiators were called to the scene.

Officers tried to negotiate with the man for about an hour before the suspect confronted officers and was shot, the Argus Leader reported. Clemens says the man died at the scene.

The state Department of Criminal Investigation has been called in to investigate. The man's name, age or further circumstances have not yet been released. The conditions of those who were stabbed is unknown.

Supreme Court rules in non-disclosure of session supporters

PIERRE, S.D. (AP) — The South Dakota Supreme Court is siding with a legislative leader who has refused to disclose the names of lawmakers who signed a petition calling for a special session on impeachment of the state's attorney general.

The high court ruled Wednesday in a lawsuit brought by the South Dakota Newspaper Association and the Argus Leader against House Speaker Spencer Gosch. The Glenham Republican won't disclose the names of legislators who signed the petition after earlier announcing that at least two-thirds of the House members had signed it.

A special session on the impeachment of Attorney General Jason Ravnsborg will be held Nov. 9. Gosch has indicated he intends to appoint a panel to recommend whether the conduct of Ravnsborg, who struck and killed a pedestrian in 2020, merits his removal from office.

Gosch has argued the names of the lawmakers are irrelevant, but the plaintiffs say the petition signatures amount to legislative votes that triggered government action and should be released like any other votes cast by legislators.

Chief Justice Steven Jensen wrote the non-disclosure of the names doesn't in and of itself implicate a question of whether Gosch convened a special session "in excess of the powers of authority conferred by law upon him."

"As unfortunate as Speaker Gosch's shielding this information from the public is, for the state's highest court to allow and encourage opaque government is dumbfounding," said Argus Leader news director Cory Myers.

Interior preps guidelines for Native youth service corps

FLAGSTAFF, Ariz. (AP) — The Interior Department issued draft guidelines Thursday for a new conservation corps that will allow Native youth to work on projects that benefit their own communities.

The department scheduled a series of consultations in late November and early December to get feedback on the guidelines from Native American tribes, Alaska Native corporations and Native Hawaiians.

The Indian Youth Service Corps was created through a bill that expanded the Public Lands Corps Act in 2019. The Interior Department was tasked with coming up with the guidelines on how it will be implemented.

Tribes and Alaska Native corporations will be able to work with the Interior, Agriculture and Commerce departments to carry out conservation projects on public land, tribal land and Hawaiian homelands. Projects can include restoring trails, removing invasive species, gardening, sampling water or soil, and preserving historic structures.

Apprentices in vocational programs could work on construction, electrical or plumbing projects.

Anyone between the ages of 16 and 30, or veterans who are 35 and younger are eligible to apply for the temporary positions.

"The Indian Youth Service Corps program has the potential to transform the lives of Indigenous youth all across our country," Interior Secretary Deb Haaland said in a news release. "Young people are the future stewards of our lands, waters, and resources."

Congress did not appropriate funding for the program. The Interior Department said federal agencies are encouraged to redirect existing funding to support the service corps.

Noem order aimed at easing exemptions for vaccine mandate

PIERRE, S.D. (AP) — South Dakota Gov. Kristi Noem issued an executive order Wednesday aimed at ensuring that state employees can easily obtain medical and religious exemptions from federal vaccine mandates.

Noem said the move was necessary to ensure that employees aren't forced to get COVID-19 vaccinations under President Joe Biden's initiative, which covers not only people directly paid by federal contracts but also anyone who works to support them.

State lawmakers have said South Dakotans are being denied medical and religious exemptions from feds and have called for a special session to stop it. Noem spokesman Jordan Overturf said Noem's exemptions are "explicit and offer a clear path" for state workers to opt out of the shots.

For medical exemptions, state employees need a note from a doctor stating that the vaccination is too risky because of health reasons. For religious exemptions, workers need to fill out and sign a form stating they object to the COVID-19 vaccine based "on religious grounds, which includes moral, ethical, and philosophical beliefs or principles." Once either forms are submitted, the exemptions are automatic, Overturf said.

Noem said she is talking to lawmakers about extending those protections to private employees.

Noem earlier criticized proposals by Republican lawmakers to ban vaccine mandates as "not conservative" because they're telling businesses what to do and how to treat their employees. This order, Overturf said, is about upholding rights already included in the Constitution and it's "not growing government" to clarify the protection of those rights.

"She has repeatedly said private businesses should offer medical and religious exemptions for COVID

vaccine mandates," Overturf said.

In Virginia, McAuliffe brings big names, Youngkin goes solo

By JILL COLVIN Associated Press

NEW YORK (AP) — Democrat Terry McAuliffe has brought in the biggest names in Democratic politics to come to his aid in Virginia's hotly contested gubernatorial race: Obama, Harris, Abrams, Biden (both Joe and Jill).

Republican Glenn Youngkin, meanwhile, is campaigning with ... Glenn Youngkin.

The GOP candidate, a newcomer who has surprised his party with his strong bid in blue Virginia, has eschewed virtually all public campaign visits from well-known party allies, who typically flock to hot races to lend a hand. It's not that Youngkin won't take the help — the candidate has welcomed numerous high-profile Republicans to the state for closed-door fundraisers. But the Youngkin campaign's unofficial policy is that they can't campaign alongside him.

That decision to go solo is a deliberate strategy by his team to keep voters' focus on state, rather than national, issues. But it's also an acknowledgment that a parade of GOP visitors would only undermine Youngkin's attempt to keep his party — and its leader, former President Donald Trump — at arm's length.

"Glenn is an outsider, he's a businessman. And so when we're doing events, we want events to convey that message," said Youngkin spokesman Devin O'Malley of the approach.

Trump, who lost Virginia by 10 percentage points in 2020, hasn't been easy to keep away. On Wednesday, he issued a cryptically worded statement suggesting he might make a last-minute, first appearance in the state.

On Thursday, a person familiar with his plans said he will instead be holding a last-minute tele-rally Monday, the day before the election.

Trump's announcement came the day his former vice president, Mike Pence, a far less polarizing figure than Trump, visited a small Christian college in the northern Virginia suburbs for a speech on education. But Youngkin did not join him and Pence never mentioned the candidate's name, even as he echoed the same message on parental rights in schools that Youngkin has made in the closing days of the campaign

"The Youngkin strategy, I think, is a smart one in that he is focused intensely on state and local issues and taking it directly to voters in the suburbs and exurbs where the election will be decided," said Mark J. Rozell, founding Dean of the Schar School of Policy and Government at George Mason University in Fairfax.

"Now, in fairness, Youngkin doesn't have a major national figure in the Republican party who can help him," he added. "Youngkin doesn't want Trump to come here. He can't say that openly because he doesn't want to alienate the loyal Trump voters who right now are all in with Youngkin."

Indeed, last time Trump waded into the race — calling into a rally organized by conservative allies — McAuliffe's campaign seized on the appearance, quickly cutting ads featuring Trump's praise of the Republican, even though Youngkin hadn't even attended the event. The Democrats has repeatedly highlighted Youngkin's ties to Trump in a bid to turn off more moderate voters, particularly those in the suburbs surrounding Washington, D.C., and Richmond, who revolted against Trump in his final years in office and helped deliver Biden's victory.

Throughout the campaign, Youngkin has done a delicate dance, trying to win over Trump's loyal base, which he needs to turn out to win the election, while striking a far softer, less confrontational tone.

The "no surrogates at political events" policy has had the added benefit of providing an excuse to keep Trump out without antagonizing the grudge-bearing former president, who takes slights deeply personally.

The strategy is one Youngkin advisers say they settled on months ago and doubled down on when they announced a bus tour for the final days of the campaign with a press release that knocked McAuliffe for his reliance on big names.

The tour would "highlight the contrast between the grassroots enthusiasm for Glenn Youngkin's candidacy" and Terry McAuliffe's dependence on Democrats like Stacey Abrams, Joe Biden, Kamala Harris, and Barack Obama to draw a crowd.

McAuliffe's campaign responded by saying Youngkin had little choice.

"They are in a position where in Virginia they really can't welcome very many members of the Republican Party because it's a party led by Donald Trump," said McAuliffe campaign spokeswoman Christina Freundlich. "Their party has become too divisive."

With little interest from outside figures in the early days of the race, campaign officials said they realized that Youngkin could draw his own crowds without having to feature surrogates who might rub people the wrong way. And without other politicians, they could highlight his status as a businessman and political newcomer, and focus on issues like education and local taxes they believed would resonate with state voters.

But the campaign has not rebuffed the outreach entirely. Instead, it has funneled that support to closed-door fundraisers that have featured a slew of potential 2024 candidates from across the ideological spectrum including Pence, former Secretary of State Mike Pompeo, former U.N. Ambassador Nikki Haley, former New Jersey Gov. Chris Christie, Maryland Gov, Larry Hogan and Sens. Cruz and Tom Cotton, along with former attorney general Bill Barr and ex-House Speaker Paul Ryan.

And it appears to be paying off.

Sandy Corbitt, 61, who works in education and attended Pence's Thursday speech in Loudoun County — an area that has become a hotbed for parental activist groups — said that promoting parental freedom can be a winner for Youngkin without help from national Republicans. Corbitt said she'd not heard "a ton" about Youngkin but likes "what I'm hearing."

"I think he hasn't been asking for others to help, where it looks like the other guy's had to call in everybody under the sun," she said, mentioning Obama and other top Democrats campaigning with McAuliffe. "So, he can't make it on his own."

Still, if Youngkin pulls off a win, Trump is expected by allies to head to the state to try to claim credit.

"I think he's going to be excited to come to Virginia. It's a state that he loves and he's always believed that we can do better here than we have in the past. So I'm sure he'll be here celebrating," said conservative talk show host John Fredericks, Trump's former campaign chair in the state.

___ Associated Press writer Will Weissert contributed to this report from Purcellville, Virginia.

Biden at Vatican to talk climate, poverty with Pope Francis

By JOSH BOAK, ZEKE MILLER and NICOLE WINFIELD Associated Press

VATICAN CITY (AP) — Declaring it's "good to be back," President Joe Biden on Friday opened a five-day European trip at the Vatican, where he and Pope Francis — the world's two most prominent Roman Catholics — planned to discuss the COVID-19 pandemic, climate change and poverty.

A dozen Swiss Guards in their blue and gold striped uniforms and red-plumed halberds stood at attention in the San Damaso courtyard for the arrival of Biden and his wife, Jill. They were received by Monsignor Leonardo Sapienza, who runs the papal household, and then greeted one by one the papal ushers, or papal gentlemen, who lined up in the courtyard.

"It's good to be back," Biden said as he shook the hand of one of them. "I'm Jill's husband," he said to another before he was ushered into the frescoed Apostolic Palace and taken upstairs to the pope's private library.

The president takes pride in his Catholic faith, using it as moral guidepost to shape many of his social and economic policies. Biden wears a rosary and frequently attends Mass, yet his support for abortion rights and same-sex marriage has put him at odds with many U.S. bishops, some of whom have suggested he should be denied Communion.

Biden arrived at the Vatican from the U.S. Ambassador's residence in Rome in an unusually long motorcade of more than 80 vehicles, owing in part to Italian COVID-19 restrictions on the number of people sharing a car.

No live pictures or video of the meeting was expected, due to last-minute Vatican restrictions on press access.

White House press secretary Jen Psaki, in previewing the visit, said she expected a "warm and construc-

tive dialogue" between the two leaders.

"There's a great deal of agreement and overlap with the president and Pope Francis on a range of issues: poverty, combating the climate crisis, ending the COVID-19 pandemic," Psaki said. "These are all hugely important, impactful issues that will be the centerpiece of what their discussion is when they meet."

U.S. national security adviser Jake Sullivan said the president and pontiff would meet privately before talks with expanded delegations. Biden is visiting Rome and then Glasgow, Scotland, for back-to-back summits, first a gathering for leaders of Group of 20 leading and developing nations and then a global climate conference.

As only the second Catholic president after John F. Kennedy, Biden has made his audience with the pope a clear priority. It was his first scheduled meeting of the trip. Biden and Francis have previously met three times but Friday's encounter was their first since Biden became president.

Following the papal meeting, Biden will meet separately Friday with Group of 20 summit hosts Italian President Sergio Mattarella and Italian Prime Minister Mario Draghi. He will end the day by meeting with French President Emmanuel Macron, part of an effort to mend relations with France after the U.S. and U.K. decided to provide nuclear-powered submarines to Australia, scotching an existing French contract.

Biden's meeting with Pope Francis generated some controversy in advance as the Vatican on Thursday abruptly canceled plans to broadcast the meeting with Biden live and denied press access. Vatican spokesman Matteo Bruni said the revised television plan reflected the virus protocol for all heads of state audiences, though he didn't say why more robust live TV coverage had been initially scheduled and then canceled.

There will be no live broadcast or independent photographs of Biden greeting Francis in the palace Throne Room, nor live footage of the leaders beginning their conversation in Francis' library.

The Vatican said it would provide edited footage of the encounter to accredited media.

A live broadcast was particularly important because the Vatican has barred independent photographers and journalists from papal audiences with leaders since early 2020 due to the coronavirus, even though external news media are allowed into other papal events.

That decision comes as U.S. bishops are scheduled to meet in roughly three weeks in Baltimore for their annual fall convention. Among the agenda items for that convention is an effort by conservatives to disqualify Biden from receiving Communion. Any document emerging from the event is unlikely to single out the president by name, but he still could face some form of rebuke.

Francis has stressed that he will not reject political leaders who support abortion rights, though Catholic policy allows individual bishops to choose whether to prevent people from taking Communion.

On the eve of Biden's visit, a leading U.S. conservative cardinal and Francis critic, Cardinal Raymond Burke, penned an impassioned plea for U.S. bishops to deny Catholic politicians Communion if they support abortion rights legislation.

Burke didn't cite Biden by name, but said such Catholic politicians were causing grave scandal to the faithful since church law says someone who is "obstinately persevering in manifest grave sin" should not be admitted to Communion.

Catholic politicians who support abortion rights "have, in fact, contributed in a significant way to the consolidation of a culture of death in the United States, in which procured abortion is simply a fact of daily life," Burke wrote.

Biden has long cast his faith as a cornerstone of his identity, writing in his 2007 memoir "Promises to Keep" that Catholicism gave him a sense "of self, of family, of community, of the wider world." He admits to becoming angry with God after the death of his first wife and baby daughter in a 1972 traffic accident, but Biden said he never doubted God's existence.

He told The Christian Science Monitor in 2007 that he believes his faith is universal enough to accept those with differing viewpoints.

"My views are totally consistent with Catholic social doctrine," Biden said. "There are elements within the church who say that if you are at odds with any of the teachings of the church, you are at odds with the church. I think the church is bigger than that."

Groton Daily Independent
Friday, Oct. 29, 2021 ~ Vol. 30 - No. 114 ~ 24 of 91

G20 leaders to tackle energy prices, other economic woes

By DAVID McHUGH and JOSH BOAK Associated Press

ROME (AP) — Leaders of the Group of 20 countries gathering for their first in-person summit since the pandemic took hold will confront a global recovery hampered by a series of stumbling blocks: an energy crunch spurring higher fuel and utility prices, new COVID-19 outbreaks and logjams in the supply chains that keep the economy humming and goods headed to consumers.

The summit will allow leaders representing 80% of the global economy to talk — and apply peer pressure — on all those issues. Analysts question how much progress they can make to ease the burden right away on people facing rising prices on everything from food and furniture to higher heating bills heading into winter.

Health and financial officials are sitting down in Rome on Friday before presidents and prime ministers gather for the G-20 Saturday and Sunday, but the leaders of major economic players China and Russia won't be there in person. That may not bode well for cooperation, especially on energy issues as climate change takes center stage just before the U.N. Climate Change Conference begins Sunday in Glasgow, Scotland.

Here's a look at some of the economic issues facing G-20 leaders:

THE PANDEMIC RECOVERY

The International Monetary Fund says the top priority for the economic recovery is simple: speed up the vaccination of the world population. Yet big headlines on vaccine cooperation may not be forthcoming at the Rome summit.

The G-20 countries have supported vaccine-sharing through the U.N.-backed COVAX program, which has failed to alleviate dire shortages in poor countries. Donated doses are coming in at a fraction of what is needed, and developed countries are focused on booster shots for their own populations.

Negotiations before the summit have not focused on a large number of vaccines that could be made available, though countries talked about strengthening health systems.

Meanwhile, rising consumer prices and government stimulus programs to help economies bounce back from the pandemic may be discussed, but central banks tend to deal with higher prices and stimulus spending is decided at the national level.

GLOBAL TAXES

One major economic deal is already done: The G-20 will likely be a celebration of an agreement on a global minimum corporate tax, aimed at preventing multinational companies from stashing profits in countries where they pay little or no taxes.

All G-20 governments signed on to the deal negotiated among more than 130 countries, and it now faces an ambitious timeline to get approved and enacted through 2023.

U.S. President Joe Biden has tied his domestic agenda to it — creating a global minimum tax can allow the United States to charge higher taxes without the risk of companies shifting their profits to tax havens. U.S. adoption is key because so many multinational companies are headquartered there.

The agreement also helps remove trade tensions between the U.S. and Europe. It allows nations including France, Italy and Spain to back off digital services taxes that targeted U.S. tech companies Google, Facebook and Amazon.

Biden goes to the G-20 with his tax and economic agenda still subject to congressional negotiations. That means he will be unable to show that the U.S. is leading on global corporate taxes, though his national security adviser, Jake Sullivan, said G-20 leaders understand the nature of congressional talks.

"They'll say, 'Is President Biden on track to deliver on what he said he's going to deliver?' And we believe one way or the other, he will be on track to do that," Sullivan said.

HIGH ENERGY PRICES

The summit offers an opportunity for dialogue on high oil and gas prices because it includes delegations from major energy producers Saudi Arabia and Russia, major consumers in Europe and China, and the

U.S., which is both.

Chinese President Xi Jinping and Russian President Vladimir Putin plan to participate remotely.

"Perhaps the most important thing the G20 could do is to tell those among them that are major energy suppliers that they should think about their future," said Holger Schmieding, chief economist at Berenberg Bank.

If energy prices are too high in the developed world, it will only speed up the move away from fossil fuels, "which is ultimately, in the long run, bad for the suppliers," he said.

The White House says Biden intends to engage with other key leaders about energy prices, with oil recently hitting a seven-year high in the U.S. at over $84 per barrel and the international Brent crude benchmark reaching a three-year peak at over $86.

"We are definitely in an energy crisis, there is no other way to put it," said Claudio Galimberti, senior vice president of analysis at Rystad Energy and an expert in oil market demand.

But he said it's unlikely the G-20 "can take any decision that has immediate impact."

So far, Saudi-led OPEC and allies including Russia, dubbed OPEC+, have ignored Biden's pleas to increase production faster than its pace of 400,000 barrels per day each month into next year.

In one bright spot, Russian President Vladimir Putin told state-controlled company Gazprom to pump more gas into storage facilities in Europe, where prices have quintupled this year and fears have spread about winter shortages.

But producing nations "are in a powerful position," Galimberti said. "There is no one who can put pressure on OPEC+."

SUPPLY CHAINS

Biden will press for countries to share more information about troubles with supply chains that have slowed growth in the developed world. Port and factory closures, shortages of shipping containers and rising demand have contributed to backlogs at ports and delays for deliveries of everything from bicycles to computer chips used in smartphones and cars.

Sullivan, Biden's national security adviser, said the president would push for more transparency about identifying logjams with other governments: "How do we know, at every level, where there may be bottlenecks or breaks in the supply chain so that we can quickly respond to them?"

Trade expert Chad P. Bown, senior fellow at the Peterson Institute for International Economics, agreed that sharing information can be helpful but said "there's very little anyone can do" now about the backups over a lack of shipping containers.

Longer term, leaders can discuss efforts to diversify supply of key goods such as masks, other medical protective equipment and semiconductors.

"There is a call to diversify some production of semiconductors geographically" away from Asia, Bown said.

The U.S. and the European Union are talking about finding ways to incentivize chip production at home without starting a subsidy war — for instance, by agreeing on which sectors of the semiconductor industry each side would seek to attract.

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Boak reported from Washington.

Biden announces 'historic' deal — but there's no action yet

By LISA MASCARO, AAMER MADHANI and FARNOUSH AMIRI Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — President Joe Biden said he and Democrats in Congress have reached a "historic" framework for his sweeping domestic policy package. But he still needs to lock down votes from key colleagues for what's now a dramatically scaled-back bill.

Eager to have a deal in hand before his departure late Thursday for global summits, Biden made his case privately on Capitol Hill to House Democrats and publicly in a speech at the White House. He's now pressing for a still-robust package — $1.75 trillion of social services and climate change programs — that the White House believes can pass the 50-50 Senate.

The fast-moving developments put Democrats closer to a hard-fought deal, but battles remain as they press to finish the final draft in the days and weeks ahead.

"Let's get this done," Biden exhorted.

"It will fundamentally change the lives of millions of people for the better," he said about the package, which he badly wanted before the summits to show the world American democracy still works.

Together with a nearly $1 trillion bipartisan infrastructure bill, Biden claimed the infusion of federal investments would be a domestic achievement modeled on those of Franklin Roosevelt and Lyndon Johnson.

"I need your votes," Biden told the lawmakers at the Capitol, according to a person who requested anonymity to discuss the private remarks.

But final votes will not be called for some time. The revised package has lost some top priorities, frustrating many lawmakers as the president's ambitions make way for the political realities of the narrowly divided Congress.

Paid family leave and efforts to lower prescription drug pricing are now gone entirely from the package, drawing outrage from some lawmakers and advocates.

Still in the mix, a long list of other priorities: free prekindergarten for all youngsters, expanded health care programs — including the launch of a new $35 billion hearing aid benefit for people with Medicare — and $555 billion to tackle climate change.

There's also a one-year extension of a child care tax credit that was put in place during the COVID-19 rescue and new child care subsidies. An additional $100 billion to bolster the immigration and border processing system could boost the overall package to $1.85 trillion if it clears Senate rules.

One pivotal Democratic holdout, Sen. Kyrsten Sinema of Arizona, said, "I look forward to getting this done."

However, another, Joe Manchin of West Virginia, was less committal: "This is all in the hands of the House right now."

The two Democrats have almost single-handedly reduced the size and scope of their party's big vision and are crucial to sealing the deal.

Republicans remain overwhelmingly opposed, forcing Biden to rely on the Democrats' narrow majority in Congress with no votes to spare in the Senate and few in the House.

Taking form after months of negotiations, Biden's emerging bill would still be among the most sweeping of its kind in a generation, modeled on New Deal and Great Society programs. The White House calls it the largest-ever investment in climate change and the biggest improvement to the nation's healthcare system in more than a decade.

In his meeting with lawmakers at the Capitol, Biden made clear how important it was to show progress as he headed to the summits.

"We are at an inflection point," he said. "The rest of the world wonders whether we can function."

With U.S. elections on the horizon, he said it's not "hyperbole to say that the House and Senate majorities and my presidency will be determined by what happens in the next week."

Biden "asked for a spirited, enthusiastic vote on his plan," said Rep. Richard Neal, D-Mass.

Twice over the course of the hour-long meeting Democratic lawmakers rose to their feet and started yelling: "Vote, vote, vote," said Rep. Gerald Connolly of Virginia.

Biden's proposal would be paid for by imposing a new 5% surtax on income over $10 million a year, and instituting a new 15% corporate minimum tax, keeping with his plans to have no new taxes on those earning less than $400,000 a year, officials said. A special billionaires' tax was not included.

Revenue to help pay for the package would also come from rolling back some of the Trump administration's 2017 tax cuts, along with stepped-up enforcement of tax-dodgers by the IRS. Biden has vowed to cover the entire cost of the plan, ensuring it does not pile onto the debt load.

With the framework being converted to a 1,600-page legislative text for review, lawmakers and aides cautioned it had not yet been agreed to.

Rep. Pramila Jayapal, D-Wash., the progressive leader, said her caucus endorsed the framework, even as progressive lawmakers worked to delay further action. "We want to see the actual text because we

don't want any confusion and misunderstandings," she said.

House Speaker Nancy Pelosi said Biden asked the House to vote on the related $1 trillion infrastructure bill, which already cleared the Senate but became tangled in deliberations over the broader bill. But Jayapal said she did not hear an urgent request from him, which emboldened progressives to halt the hoped-for Thursday vote.

"When the president gets off that plane we want him to have a vote of confidence from this Congress," Pelosi told lawmakers, the person at the private meeting said.

But no votes were scheduled. Progressives have been withholding their support for the roads-and-bridges bill as leverage until they have a commitment that Manchin, Sinema and the other senators are ready to vote on Biden's bigger package.

"Hell no," said Rep. Rashida Tlaib, D-Mich., about allowing the smaller infrastructure bill to pass.

Rep. Cori Bush, D-Mo., shared her own story of making "pennies" at low-wage work, struggling to afford child care and wanting to ensure constituents have better.

"We need both bills to ride together. And we don't have that right now," Bush said. "I feel a bit bamboozled because this was not what I thought was coming today."

Instead, Congress approved an extension to Dec. 3 of Sunday's deadline for routine transportation funds that were at risk of expiring without the infrastructure bill.

The two holdout Democratic senators now hold enormous power, essentially deciding whether Biden will be able to deliver on the Democrats' major campaign promises.

Sinema has been instrumental in pushing her party off a promise to undo the Republicans' 2017 tax cuts. And Manchin's resistance forced serious cutbacks to a clean energy plan, the elimination of paid family leave and the imposition of work requirements for parents receiving the new child care subsidies.

At the same time, progressives achieved one key priority — Vermont Independent Bernie Sanders' proposal to provide hearing aid benefits for people on Medicare. However, his ideas to also include dental and vision care were left out.

Other expanded health care programs build on the Affordable Care Act by funding subsidies to help people buy insurance policies and coverage in states that declined the Obamacare program.

Overall, the new package also sets up political battles in future years. The enhanced child care tax credit expires alongside next year's midterm elections, while much of the health care funding will expire in 2025, ensuring a campaign issue ahead of the next presidential election.

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Associated Press writers Zeke Miller in Rome and Colleen Long, Kevin Freking, Alan Fram and Padmanand Rama in Washington contributed to this report.

EXPLAINER: What's so big about the G20 besides economies?

By FRANCES D'EMILIO Associated Press

ROME (AP) — The Group of 20 has morphed from its creation in the late 1990s as an international body to grapple with financial crises into a forum for addressing urgent problems like worldwide vaccine access and climate change. Whether the G-20's structure suits helping to respond to the evolving needs of our times will be put to a test when the leaders of the world's largest economies hold their first face-to-face summit of the COVID-19 in Rome this weekend.

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WHO'S IN THE FOLD?

The Group of Seven industrialized nations - which was the Group of Eight for a few years before Russia's suspension over its annexation of Ukraine's Crimea Peninsula — is likely the better known "G" grouping. The Group of 20 folds in all seven: Britain, Canada, France, Germany, Italy, Japan and the United States. Other members include a dozen other countries, established powerhouses as well ones with fast-growing economies: Argentina, Australia, Brazil, China, India, Indonesia, South Korea, Mexico, Saudi Arabia, South Africa and Turkey. The European Union is the 20th member, and since the EU consists of 27 nations – in-

cluding three in the G-7 -- the G-20 actually represents the interests of considerably more than countries.

HOW MUCH DOES IT COUNT?

In terms of population and economic weight, the G-20 is impressive. The member nations account for 60% of the planet's people and 80% of the world's gross domestic product. There's a lot of back-and-forth among members, too – the G-20 nations account for 75% of foreign trade.

HOW DID IT GET GOING?

The Group of 20 is regarded as the premier international forum for economic and financial cooperation. In wake of a 1997 Asian economic crisis and its repercussions, G-7 finance ministers created the larger grouping in 1999 so other countries could have a say. After the 2008 global financial crisis spawned by the subprime mortgage debacle in the United States, Washington pushed for the G-20 to be raised to the level of heads of state and government. The leaders, at their 2009 summit in Pittsburgh, declared they intended "to turn the page on an era of irresponsibility and to adopt a set of policies, regulations and reforms to meet the needs of the 21st century global economy."

IS THE G-20 STILL RELEVANT?

Some suggest a membership update could be useful, especially in view of the urgency to address climate change. After the global crisis sparked by American subprime lending, the G-20's "emergence as a forum for international policy coordination seemed like the only silver lining of that mess," says Rosario Forlenza, a professor of contemporary history and anthropology at Rome's LUISS university. But he and others note that South Africa still is the only African G-20 country. When it comes to climate issues, "Africa is crucial," Forlenza says. The absence of Nigeria, which has Africa's biggest economy and largest population, thus appears as a glaring gap.

THE HEAVY LIFTING

Before presidents and prime ministers arrive in Rome for the summit, "Sherpas" have been long at work to hammer out an agreement for the G-20's final declaration. Referring in this context to diplomats or other government officials, the term "Sherpa" is used in recognition of the Himalayan people famed for their mountaineering expertise and who lead the way uphill to the summit.

As in a multi-act play, in the months leading up to a G-20 summit, ministerial-level meetings are held, ranging from the likes of foreign affairs, commerce, finance, education, health and environment. These thematic huddles yield pledges. In Venice this summer, example, G-20 finance ministers lent their support to a sweeping revision of international taxation that would include a 15% minimum corporate levy in a bid to deter mega-companies from finding refuge in low-rate tax havens. The Rome summit is an occasion to seal the deal before the curtain comes down.

THE ROAD TO ROME

Each year, the presidency of the G-20 rotates, and with it, the country that hosts the group's annual summit. Italy took the helm in December 2020. Going back year by year, previous summits were held in Saudi Arabia (in November 2020, a gathering that took place remotely due to pandemic precautions), Japan, Argentina, Germany, China, Turkey, Australia, Russia, Mexico, France, South Korea, Canada, the United States, Britain and the United States.

AT THE HEART OF THE MATTER

The G-20 summit gives host countries a chance to push for progress on issues they care about. Italian Premier Mario Draghi is keen on empowering women economically. An economist who formerly served as president of the European Central Bank, Draghi often stresses how the sidelining of women from the workforce – often due to child or elder care needs at home — drags down economic growth. The 2014 G-20 summit in Australia set a goal of slashing the gender employment lag by 25% by 2025.

OUTSIDE THE BUBBLE

Italian security forces will be casting a wide and tight security perimeter around the summit site in EUR, a Rome neighborhood outside the city center notable for its Fascist-era architecture. Protesters are planning events near postcard backdrops in the historic heart of the Italian capital to draw attention to their causes despite being kilometers (miles) out of earshot of the G-20 leaders. Among them are Tibetan

activists who have called a rally at the Colosseum for Friday afternoon, when most of the leaders arrive in Rome. The activists protesting human rights violations want a boycott of 2022 Winter Olympics in Beijing.

Biden vs Macron: First meeting since submarine dispute

By SYLVIE CORBET and ZEKE MILLER Associated Press

ROME (AP) — One of President Joe Biden's toughest meetings at the G-20 summit may be with the leader of America's oldest ally: France.

Biden and French President Emmanuel Macron will huddle Friday in Rome while Paris is still seething over a secret U.S.-British submarine deal with Australia, which left France in the lurch and rattled Europe's faith in American loyalty.

The two men have talked twice since then and their first face-to-face meeting since the scandal broke in September marks the latest American effort to try to smooth things over.

Macron is expecting Biden to make a new "commitment" to supporting French anti-terrorist operations in the Sahel region of Africa, according to a top French official. France has been seeking greater intelligence and military cooperation from the U.S. in the Sahel.

Biden and Macron are set to discuss new ways to cooperate in the Indo-Pacific, a move meant to soothe French tempers over being excised from the U.S.-U.K.-Australia partnership that accompanied the submarine deal. Other topics on the agenda include China, Afghanistan, and Iran, particularly in light of the latter nation agreeing to return to the nuclear negotiating table next month.

The U.S.-led submarine contract supplanted a prior French deal to supply Australia with its own submarines. The U.S. argued that the move, which will arm the Pacific ally with higher-quality nuclear-powered boats, will better enable Australia to contain Chinese encroachment in the region.

But the French, who lost out on more than $60 billion from the deal, have argued that the Biden administration at the highest levels misled them about the talks with Australia and even levied criticism that Biden was adopting the tactics of his bombastic predecessor, Donald Trump. France is especially angry over being kept in the dark about a major geopolitical shift, and having its interests in the Indo-Pacific — where France has territories with 2 million people and 7,000 troops — ignored.

The row challenged Biden's carefully honed image of working to stabilize and strengthen the trans-Atlantic alliance after Trump's presidency, as France for the first time in some 250 years of diplomatic relations pulled its ambassador to the U.S. in protest.

U.S. officials, from Biden on down, have worked for weeks to try to soothe tensions, though not so much for Biden to visit France himself to try to reset relations with Paris. Instead, he's dispatched Vice President Kamala Harris for a visit in early Novembe r.

In a concession by the White House, the Biden-Macron meeting in Rome is being organized and hosted by France, which Macron's office called "politically important." Meanwhile, first lady Jill Biden was to host Brigitte Macron for a "bilateral engagement' Friday afternoon.

White House officials said Biden has not formally apologized to the French leader, instead, according to press secretary Jen Psaki, "He acknowledged that there could have been greater consultation" ahead of the deal announcement.

U.S. national security adviser Jake Sullivan said the two leaders would "literally cover the waterfront of issues facing the U.S.-France alliance," including counterterrorism in the Middle East, China and trade and economic issues.

"We feel very good about the intensive engagement that we've had with France over the course of the past few weeks," he added. He said he expected Biden and Macron to issue a joint statement outlining areas of mutual cooperation, including the Indo-Pacific and economic and technological cooperation.

While the U.S. focuses on Asia, Macron is seeking to bolster Europe's own defense capabilities, such as via more military equipment and military operations abroad.

France is also determined to put "muscle" into Europe's geopolitical strategy toward an increasingly assertive China, France's ambassador to Australia, Jean-Pierre Thebault, told The Associated Press earlier

this month.

France wants Western allies to "divide up roles" instead of competing against each other, and for the Americans to be "allies as loyal and as available for their European partners as always," according to the top French official.

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Corbet reported from Paris.

Tunisia's #MeToo: Lawmaker faces sexual harassment hearing

By FRANCESCA EBEL Associated Press

NABEUL, Tunisia (AP) — A landmark case that helped galvanize Tunisia's #MeToo movement reached court this week, involving a legislator charged with sexual harassment and public indecency.

Feminist activists held a small protest outside the courthouse, shouting chants and waving placards that read "My body is not a public space." The activists sported T-shirts and badges bearing the hashtag of their movement #EnaZeda, #MeToo in Tunisian dialect.

In 2019, a schoolgirl posted photos on social media of parliament member Zouhair Makhlouf, of the Qalb Tounes party, allegedly performing a sexual act in his car outside her high school.

Makhlouf's case was one of the flashpoints in 2019 that prompted thousands of Tunisians to to share their personal experiences of sexual assault and harassment online. The #EnaZeda Facebook page currently has over 90,000 likes, and is updated daily.

But no high-profile figures have faced prosecution for alleged sexual wrongdoing — until now.

Makhlouf avoided prosecution at the time due to his parliamentary immunity. In July, President Kais Saied froze the Tunisian parliament and lifted political immunity for MPs, as well as taking on sweeping executive and legislative powers.

With his immunity revoked, Makhlouf was summoned to face his first hearing on Thursday at the courthouse in Nabeul, south of the capital Tunis.

Makhlouf, who denies all charges, did not appear at the hearing. In an interview with The Associated Press at a local hospital, Makhlouf said that his mother had been taken ill and he could not attend because he was the only one in the family with a car who could take her to the clinic.

Activist Sara Medini told The Associated Press that feminist group Aswat Nissa had come to protest "in solidarity" with the victim, as well as to denounce the length of time it took for Makhlouf's legal proceedings to begin. Aswat Nissa originally administrated and monitored the #EnaZeda social media groups.

"Now it's already more than two years and no decision was taken, there has been no step forward," she said. "It is time to say no to impunity."

Aswat Nissa's executive director Sarra Ben Said noted that Makhlouf "had substantial power in the region where he's being put on trial. We wanted to tell women that whatever powers your aggressor uses against you or has on you, you can always seek justice and retribution."

Makhlouf insists he is innocent of sexual harassment and says that while the photo is real, it was a misunderstanding.

"All that is happening is the worst accusation of my life. I was imprisoned under the (former President Zine El Abidine) Ben Ali dictatorship three times, but this is the worst injustice I've suffered, it's stupid and absurd," he says.

Makhlouf said it could be challenging for a judge to withstand what he called immense public and political pressure against him. Asked about #EnaZeda, he said "it's good to have an energetic civil society. But they've done damage, they don't listen to both sides."

His accuser's lawyer, Naima Chabbouh, said that it was time for justice to decide on this "protracted case." The hearing is set to resume Nov. 11.

The complainant's close friend, Aya Aajmi, a 20-year-old law student, was sending photos of the demonstration outside to her while she sat in the courtroom. "At the beginning of all this she was just exhausted. But today she feels very strong and she's happy that people are with her," said Aajmi. "She's going to give

a lot of energy and courage to other girls to not keep silent. I think we can change things in the country if we continue with acts like this."

In 2017, the Tunisian parliament passed a law outlawing all forms of violence against women and girls, in theory making it easier to prosecute domestic abuse and impose penalties on sexual harassment in public spaces.

According to a 2017 report by the Tunisian Center for Research, Studies, Documentation, and Information on Women, which operates under the country's Ministry of Women and Families, in 97% of sexual harassment cases the victim does not file an official complaint.

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Bouazza ben Bouazza in Tunis contributed to this report.

UK's Johnson seeks 'G20 bounce' for key climate conference

By JILL LAWLESS Associated Press

LONDON (AP) — British Prime Minister Boris Johnson flies to a Group of 20 meeting in Rome on Friday with one big goal: to persuade the leaders of the world's biggest economies to put their money where their mouth is at the U.N. climate summit in Scotland.

Johnson will deploy his ebullience and his — admittedly divisive — charm to try to extract cash and carbon-cutting commitments from the G-20, which contains some of the world's biggest carbon emitters, including China, the United States, India and Russia.

Accounting for 75% of the world's trade and 60% of its population, the G-20 has often been accused of being too big and diffuse to take strong collective action. And Johnson's Brexit-tinged global image means his arm-twisting power may be limited.

The G-20 is meeting as the European Union and ex-member Britain wrangle over trade rules, and amid a simmering U.K.-France spat over fishing rights in the English Channel. France is also incensed over a U.S.-U.K.-Australia nuclear submarine deal that saw Australia cancel a multibillion-dollar contract to buy French subs.

Those disputes are clouding Johnson's hopes of a "G-20 bounce" to build momentum for the 12-day COP26 climate conference, which starts Sunday in Glasgow. He's hoping to leave Rome bearing a sheaf of global carbon-cutting pledges, a plan to curb coal use and a long-promised, never-delivered $100 billion a year in aid to help developing countries tackle the impacts of climate change.

"The biggest issue is ratcheting up ambition," said Jared Finnegan, a public policy expert at University College London. "Boris (Johnson) has been talking for some time about how he expects the largest economies, the G-20, to come forward with more ambitious pledges than what countries put forward in 2015" when the landmark Paris climate agreement was struck.

"Some countries have come forward with that and played ball, other countries have not," Finnegan added.

Major G-20 polluters, including Russia and Australia, have failed to improve on the carbon-cutting pledges made after the Paris conference. Neither Chinese President Xi Jinping nor Russian President Vladimir Putin, leaders of two of the biggest carbon emitters, plan to attend the G-20 or COP26 in person.

The world is currently far adrift of the goal set in Paris of limiting global warming to 1.5 degrees Celsius (2.7 degrees Fahrenheit) above pre-industrial levels, considered a threshold between manageable and disastrous climate change. Keeping "1.5 alive" is the focus of the Glasgow meeting. To do it, Britain has honed in on a mantra of "coal, cars, cash and trees" — eliminating fossil fuels, switching to clean vehicles, spending money and stopping deforestation.

Johnson said this week it was "touch and go" whether the climate summit would meet its goals.

"We might not get the agreements that we need," Johnson said during a question-and-answer session with children.

That may be a prudent lowering of expectations, but Johnson faces some big obstacles. Britain's leader is mistrusted by many European leaders for his role in Britain's 2016 decision to leave the EU and the years of rancorous divorce negotiations that have followed. U.S. President Joe Biden has also been wary,

seeing echoes in Johnson's crowd-pleasing antics of Donald Trump's populism.

Johnson insists that Brexit does not mean a U.K. retreat from the world, and has championed his vision of an outward-looking "Global Britain" during the country's presidency of the Group of Seven wealthy industrialized nations this year. A G-7 summit in England in June was considered a modest success by Britain, even though environmental groups said its climate commitments lacked substance.

Johnson makes a more credible green messenger than some rich nations' leaders. The U.K. has promised to reach net-zero carbon emissions by 2050, and has published a detailed plan for getting there. Unlike Australia, it is on course to eliminate coal from its energy mix within a few years. And unlike the United States, there's limited political opposition in the U.K. to tougher climate rules.

But the British government's decision this year to cut foreign aid spending from 0.7% of GDP to 0.5% because of the economic blow from the coronavirus pandemic alarmed aid groups and undercut the U.K.'s commitment to developing nations. The British government said this week that cut will remain at least until 2024.

The U.K.'s annual budget, announced Wednesday, made scant mention of climate change while slashing passenger taxes on domestic flights and freezing taxes on automobile fuel.

Johnson's spokesman, Max Blain, denied those measures undermined Britain's environmental image or net-zero target.

"I think anyone that's been tracking our commitments on climate change and net zero can see that the United Kingdom is leading the way on this," he said.

Pessimists might wonder — if G-20 can't agree how to fight climate change, what hope is there for the almost 200 nations who will gather at COP26 in Glasgow?

Yet Finnegan sees progress in the fact that a Conservative British government wants to be seen as a green leader, and in the way the global conversation on climate has shifted.

"Even the fact that we're talking about net zero by 2050 -- that is something that just wasn't on the table even five years ago," he said.

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A look at the top issues for this year's UN climate summit

By FRANK JORDANS and SETH BORENSTEIN Associated Press

BERLIN (AP) — This year's U.N. climate summit renews an urgent question to the international community: Can the world come together to confront the common enemy of global warming before it's too late?

The talks that start Sunday in Scotland were always bound to be tense, but the coronavirus pandemic, the ensuing economic crisis and the recent energy crunch have put even more pressure on the two-week meeting.

Here are five of the top issues that will need to be tackled in Glasgow:

RICH COUNTRIES OWE POOR ONES

The pledge by rich countries to mobilize $100 billion each year for poor nations to cope with climate change was likely missed in 2020. Estimates for 2019 show the funding was just shy of $80 billion.

The failure to deliver on a promise first made in 2009 has caused deep anger and distrust among poor nations, with some threatening to block any agreement until the money is provided.

There is no set formula for how much each country should contribute toward the total, or how. But the Washington-based World Resources Institute calculated that only a handful of rich countries, including France, Japan, Norway, Germany and Sweden, provided a fair share. The United States, Australia and Canada fell far short.

One solution proposed this week is for the payments to average $100 billion per year from 2021 to 2025, with the shortfall in earlier years made up for by higher payments later on.

Developing countries will use the Glasgow talks to press for half the money to be earmarked for projects aimed at adapting to climate change. At the moment, most of the funding goes toward reducing emissions.

Poor nations also insist it's also time to address who will pay for the damage to habitats and livelihoods from rising seas, growing deserts and more extreme weather.

"Our people are suffering in a variety of ways as a result of a crisis that they did little to cause," said Sonam P. Wangdi of Bhutan, who chairs the Least Developed Countries group at the talks.

CARBON TRADING

Some unfinished business from the Paris climate summit in 2015 involves the rules for international carbon trading, which is seen as a key instrument to harness market forces in the fight against global warming.

Negotiators failed to finalize this part of the Paris rulebook in Madrid two years ago. They will make another attempt in Glasgow. On one side will be countries that want tighter rules to avoid worthless carbon vouchers flooding the market. On the other side will be developing nations that insist certificates amassed under previous agreements should be honored.

The rules are critical because for many countries and companies to achieve "net zero" emissions by mid-century, pollution will have to be balanced out by an equal amount of carbon reliably captured elsewhere, such as through forests or technological means.

Establishing a truly international carbon market also presents an opportunity to raise money through transaction fees, but who manages those and how remains unresolved.

ENSURING TRANSPARENCY, COMMITTING TO NEW TARGETS

Transparency is a key element of the talks, because the voluntary nature of the Paris accord means countries closely watch what how much progress others make before ratcheting up their targets another notch.

Another debate centers around the time frame for reporting fresh pollution-reduction targets. Current agreements require developed countries to set new goals every five years, but some participants want to shift to annual pledges, at least until the world is on track to meet the Paris goals.

METHANE

Methane, the main component in natural gas and a byproduct of some agriculture, has been somewhat overlooked in past negotiations.

As a greenhouse gas, it's about 20 times more potent than carbon dioxide but stays in the air for only about a decade. Reducing emissions by fixing leaks in gas pipelines and limiting flaring at drilling sites would provide a small but noticeable improvement.

The world cannot solve the climate problem without cutting methane, said Kelly Levin, chief of science, data and systems change at the Bezos Earth Fund.

THE 45% PLEDGE

A proposed pledge to reduce emissions by 45% by 2030 compared with 2010 levels is not so much a negotiating point as a goal established by the U.N. for the talks to be considered a success. So far, emissions are going up, not down.

Halving emissions in the next decade is considered a key stepping stone on the path to net zero by 2050, which scientists say is the only way to achieve the Paris accord's goal of capping global warming at 1.5 Celsius (2.7 Fahrenheit) by the end of the century.

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Borenstein reported from Washington.

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Follow AP's coverage of the climate talks at http://apnews.com/hub/climate

'Everything is at stake' as world gathers for climate talks

By SETH BORENSTEIN and FRANK JORDANS Associated Press

More than one world leader says humanity's future, even survival, hangs in the balance when international officials meet in Scotland to try to accelerate efforts to curb climate change. Temperatures, tempers and hyperbole have all ratcheted up ahead of the United Nations summit.

And the risk of failure looms large for all participants at the 26th U.N. Climate Change Conference, known as COP26.

Six years ago, nearly 200 countries agreed to individualized plans to fight global warming in the historic 2015 Paris climate agreement. Now leaders will converge in Glasgow for two weeks starting Sunday to take the next step dictated by that pact: Do more and do it faster.

It's not easy. Except for a slight drop because of the pandemic, carbon pollution from the burning of coal, oil and natural gas is increasing, not falling.

Between now and 2030, the world will spew up to 28 billion metric tons (31 billion U.S. tons) of greenhouse gases beyond the amount that would keep the planet at or below the most stringent limit set in Paris, the United Nations calculated this week.

"Everything is at stake if the leaders do not take climate action," young Ugandan climate activist Vanessa Nakate said. "We cannot eat coal. We cannot drink oil, and we cannot breathe so-called natural gas."

Her words were echoed by a man tasked with steering one of the world's richest economic blocs through the climate transition.

"We are fighting for the survival of humanity," European Commission Vice President Frans Timmermans said. "Climate change and the threatening ecocide are the biggest threats humanity faces."

Climate change is fueling heat waves, flooding, drought and nastier tropical cyclones. Extreme weather also costs the globe about $320 billion a year in economic losses, according to risk modeling firm AIR Worldwide. And people die.

"The unhealthy choices that are killing our planet are killing our people as well," said Dr. Maria Neira, director of public health and environment at the World Health Organization.

Humanity and the Earth won't quite go off a cliff because of global warming, scientists say. But what happens in Glasgow will either steer the world away from the most catastrophic scenarios or send it careening down a dirt road with tight curves and peril at every turn. It's a situation where degrees, even tenths of a degree, translate into added risk.

"We are still on track for climate catastrophe," United Nations Secretary-General Antonio Guterres said Tuesday, even after some countries' recent emission pledges.

For months, United Nations officials have touted three concrete goals for these negotiations to succeed:

— Countries must promise to reduce carbon emissions by 45% by 2030 compared with 2010.

— Rich countries should contribute $100 billion a year in aid to poor countries.

— Half of that amount must be aimed at adapting to climate change's worst effects.

World leaders have recently softened those targets a bit, and they say the goals may not quite be finished by mid-November, when negotiations end. U.S. Climate Envoy John Kerry told The Associated Press: "There will be a gap" on emission targets.

Under the Paris pact, nations must revisit their previous pledges to curb carbon pollution every five years and then announce plans to cut even more and do it faster. Delayed a year by the pandemic, this year's meeting is the first to include the required ratcheting up of ambitions.

The hope is that world leaders will cajole each other into doing more, while ensuring that poorer nations struggling to tackle climate change get the financial support they need.

The headline goal set in Paris was to limit warming to 1.5 degrees Celsius (2.7 degrees Fahrenheit) since preindustrial times. The world has already warmed 1.1 degrees Celsius (2 degrees Fahrenheit) since then.

Former United Nations Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon said this month that the 1.5-degree mark "is the threshold for our survival, humanity, our planet Earth."

But every analysis of current climate-change pledges shows that they are not nearly enough to stop warming at that point but will instead lead to at least another degree or a degree and a half Celsius of warming (about 2 to 3 degrees Fahrenheit).

All five emissions scenarios studied in a massive UN scientific assessment in August suggest that the world will cross that 1.5-degree-Celsius threshold in the 2030s, though several researchers told the AP that it is still technically possible to stay within that limit or at least temporarily go over it and come back down.

Small island nations and other poor, vulnerable communities said in 2015 that 2 degrees would wipe them out, and insisted on the 1.5-degree threshold.

"Our way of life is at stake," said Tina Stege, the climate envoy for the Marshall Islands. "Our ability to provide our children with a safe and secure future is at stake. Atoll nations like the Marshall Islands do not have higher ground to retreat to."

In Glasgow, divisions between nations are big, and trust is a problem, say several United Nations officials and outside analysts.

Rich countries like the United States and European nations developed carbon-belching energy and caused most of the problem historically, but now they ask poor nations to cut or eliminate the use of fossil fuels. In return, they've promised $100 billion a year by 2020 to help developing countries switch to clean energy.

So far, the funding has fallen far short of that amount.

"Failure to fulfill this pledge is a major source of the erosion of trust between developed and developing nations," Guterres said.

The key to success may lie in the middle, with major emerging economies.

Three days before the meeting starts, China, the world's largest carbon emitter, submitted a new national target that is only marginally stronger than what was previously proposed.

China is so important that if every other nation cuts back in line with the 45% global emission reduction and China doesn't, the world's total will drop only by 30%, according to Claire Fyson, a top analyst at Climate Action Tracker, a group of scientists that monitor and analyze emission pledges.

In the end, every country, will be asked to do more in Glasgow, said United Nations Environment Programme Director Inger Andersen. But much of the effort, she said, comes back to China and the U.S.

"We need these two powers to put aside whatever else and to show true climate leadership because this is what it will take," Andersen told the AP.

But realistically, she added, leaders in Glasgow, will take anything "in terms of real, meaningful commitments that are backed by action — action that starts in 2022."

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Borenstein reported from Washington, Jordans from Berlin. Associated Press Writer Ellen Knickmeyer contributed from Washington. Follow Seth Borenstein on Twitter at https://twitter.com/borenbears and Frank Jordans at https://twitter.com/wirereporter.

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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.

In Afghanistan, a girls' school is the story of a village

By SAMYA KULLAB Associated Press

SALAR, Afghanistan (AP) — Mina Ahmed smears a cement mixture to strengthen the walls of her war-ravaged home in rural Afghanistan. Her hands, worn by the labor, are bandaged with plastic scraps and elastic bands, but no matter, she welcomes the new era of peace under the Taliban.

She was once apprehensive of the group's severe style of rule in her village of Salar. But being caught in the crosshairs of a two-decade long war has granted her a new perspective.

Taliban control comes with limits, even for women, and that is alright, the 45-year-old said. "With these restrictions we can live our lives at least."

But she draws the line on one point: Her daughters, ages 13, 12 and 6, must go to school.

From a bird's eye view, the village of Salar is camouflaged against a towering mountain range in Wardak province. The community of several thousand, nearly 70 miles from the capital Kabul, serves as a microcosm of the latest chapter in Afghanistan's history — the second round of rule by the Taliban — showing what has changed and what hasn't since their first time in power, in the late 1990s.

Residents of Salar, which has been under Taliban hold the past two years, are embracing the new stability now that the insurgents' war with the U.S. military and its Afghan allies is over. Those displaced by

fighting are returning home. Still, they fear a worsening economic crisis and a drought that is keenly felt in a province where life revolves around the harvest.

In Kabul and other cities, public discontent toward the Taliban is focused on threats to personal freedoms, including the rights of women.

In Salar, these barely resonate. The ideological gap between the Taliban leadership and the rural conservative community is not wide. Many villagers supported the insurgency and celebrated the Aug. 15 fall of Kabul which consolidated Taliban control across the country.

But even in Salar, changes are afoot, beginning with the villagers' insistence on their local elementary school for girls.

That insistence helped push the Taliban to accept a new, small school, funded by international donors. But what the school will become — a formal public school paving the way to higher education, a religious madrasa, or something in between — is uncertain, like the future of the village and the country.

A VILLAGE DEMAND

By 8 a.m., 38 small faces framed by veils are seated on a carpeted floor looking up at their teacher, Qari Wali Khan. With a stick in hand and furrowed brow, he calls on the girls to recite from the Quran.

Rokia, 10, is the unlucky first. Merely three words of classical Arabic escape her lips when Wali Khan interrupts, correcting her pronunciation. When she repeats again, he exclaims, "Afarin!" — "Excellent," in Pashtu.

In three hours, the students, ages 9-12, will cover Quranic memorization, mathematics, handwriting, and more Islamic study. Homework: What is 105 x 25?

The school opened two months ago, marking the first time in 20 years girls in the village have ever stepped foot in a classroom, or something like it. In the absence of a building, lessons are held in Wali Khan's living room.

The classes are the product of U.N. negotiations with the Taliban.

In 2020, the U.N. began working on a program to set up girls' learning centers in conservative and remote areas, including ones under Taliban control at the time, like Sayedabad district where Salar is located.

Taliban interlocutors were initially reluctant to embrace the idea, but an agreement was eventually reached in November 2020, said Jeanette Vogelaar, UNICEF's chief of education. International funding was secured, $35 million a year for three years to finance 10,000 such centers.

Launch was delayed by COVID-19. By the time centers were scheduled to open, the Taliban had taken over in Kabul. To everyone's surprise, they allowed the project to go ahead, even using the previous government's curriculum — though they have introduced more Islamic learning and insisted on gender segregation and female teachers.

Wali Khan, a madrasa teacher by training, got the job in Wardak because most educated women had left for the capital.

The program enables girls without formal schooling to complete six grades in three years. When completed, they should be ready to enter Grade 7.

It remains unresolved whether they can continue after that. In most districts, the Taliban have prohibited girls ages 12-17 from going to public school.

Still, it's a good start, Vogelaar said. "Based on what we see now, somehow the Taliban doesn't seem to be the same as how they behaved before," she said.

Ten years ago, the Taliban were at the forefront of a deadly campaign targeting government officials in Wardak, with particular venom reserved for those campaigning for girls' schools. Two village elders recounted the shooting death of Mirajuddin Ahmed, Sayedabad's director of education and a vocal supporter for girl's' access to education.

Several public girls' schools were burned down in 2007 in the province. To this day, not a single one stands.

Times have changed.

"If they don't allow girls to go to this school now, there will be an uprising," said village elder Abdul Hadi Khan.

The shifting attitudes may be part of a broader trend in support of education. In 2000, when the Taliban

were last in power, there were just 100,000 girls in school, out of a total 1 million schoolchildren. Now they are 4 million out of 10 million schoolchildren, according to the U.N.

Salar's villagers wanted no different. They convinced Wali Khan to teach.

"They put their trust in me, they told me, this is a need in our society," he said.

That might be one reason why the Taliban decided to cooperate; with the economy in ruins, they could not risk alienating a constituency that supported them throughout the insurgency.

There are concerns of how much the Taliban will shape the schooling. The U.N. is aware the Taliban enter villages and insist on more Islamic study, said Vogelaar.

Most families are not against it, either. Sayedabad district is composed primarily of Afghanistan's dominant Pashtun ethnic group, from which the Taliban are mostly drawn. Religion and conservatism are central to daily village life.

But a madrasa-type education "was not the intention," said Vogelaar.

Wali Khan said he received specific orders from the Taliban-controlled education directorate in Sayedabad to "include more religious study" in the curriculum. He obeyed.

In late October, local Taliban officials came to visit Wali Khan. They wanted to know how the classes were going.

"The girls have a hunger to learn," he told them.

A FATHER'S PRIDE

After class, 12-year-old Sima runs home, whizzing past Salar's mud-brick houses, a cloud of dust in her wake.

Her father, Nisar, is away picking tomatoes in the fields for 200 afghanis ($2.5) a day. He is their only breadwinner.

Her mother, Mina, is still mixing cement.

Mina expects it will be a long time before her home is in one piece again.

She's rebuilding bit by bit, buying cement bags for the equivalent of $1 whenever she can. She has accumulated some 100,000 afghanis ($1,100) in debt to relatives and friends.

The family returned home just a month ago. Only one of the house's four rooms was usable. Walls are still riddled with bullet holes.

They had fled more than 11 years earlier, moving to the other side of the village where it was safer. Their home was too dangerous, located on a strategic incline overlooking Highway One, which connects Kabul to the south and was a hotbed of insurgent activity throughout the war.

She remembers standing out in the cold as American troops inspected their house for insurgents. By 2007, ambushes of army convoys on the highway became frequent. Many times, Mina saw army tanks burst into flames from her kitchen window. She has lost two brothers-in-law.

The ruins of an army checkpoint lie above Mina's home. The Afghan army held it for 18 years, until the Taliban took over the area decisively two years ago.

Mina has made slow progress with the house but fears what will happen as temperatures drop and market prices rise.

Afghanistan is grappling with an economic crisis after the U.S. froze Afghan assets in line with international sanctions against the Taliban. Foreign aid that once accounted for 75% of state expenditure has also paused.

Mina has six children and they all need to be fed, she said.

Everyone who has returned has a similar story.

"You won't find one person in this village who is in a good situation," said Mahmad Rizak, 38, standing outside his home with a face flecked with cement.

Food shortages are taking a toll. The Mohammed Khan Hospital, the only one in the district, is struggling with a rising number of malnourished newborns wailing in the maternity ward.

In the surgical ward, an unusual museum of mementos hangs on the wall. It consists of bullets and kidney stones removed from patients — the first from the war, the second from poor water quality.

"Tells you everything about this place," said Dr. Gul Makia.

Drought has decimated the harvest, leaving many whose lives revolve around tilling the earth and raising livestock with no means to make a living.

When October ends, so does tomato-picking season, and Nisar will be out of work.

He joins his wife in mixing cement.

He points to the room once occupied by Afghan soldiers, and then Taliban insurgents after them. "My daughter will become a teacher one day, and we will make this into a school for her to educate other girls."

"She will be our pride," he said.

Japan keeps tourism freeze despite plunge in virus cases

By YURI KAGEYAMA AP Business Writer

TOKYO (AP) — Filled with pink and fuzzy things and cuddly bears, 6%DOKIDOKI, a tiny store in the heart of Tokyo's Harajuku district, is bursting with "kawaii," the Japanese for "cuteness."

What it doesn't have enough of, as in zero, are foreign tourists. And it could sure use some.

Like much of Asia, including Taiwan, Vietnam and Australia, Japan's borders remain closed to tourists. While other Asian countries are inching toward reopening, Japanese borders will likely remain shut for some time to come. That's a hardship for the many businesses that had come to rely on foreign tourists, who numbered 32 million in 2019, before the pandemic.

"Foreigners understand 'kawaii' more emotionally than do Japanese. They use, 'Kawaii!,' in the same way they say, 'Wonderful,' 'Awesome,' or 'Lovely,' " said manager Yui Yoshida, noting Japanese tend to use the word mainly for tangible things like cute puppies.

"We had so many foreign customers before the pandemic," she said. "Then suddenly no one could come."

6%DOKIDOKI opened 26 years ago and has a loyal following: when it was imperiled by the pandemic downturn, supporters in and outside Japan started up crowd-funding campaigns to keep it afloat. It is also boosting mail-order sales and has introduced colorful face masks in a psychedelic flurry of hues and bear-shaped pouches useful for carrying hand sanitizers.

Yoshida doesn't expect foreign visitors to return until cherry blossom season next year.

That even might be optimistic.

While mandatory quarantine requirements have been eased somewhat after the number of new coronavirus cases plunged from hundreds per day to a few dozen per day in Tokyo, unlike the Indonesian resort island of Bali and some destinations in Thailand, Japan remains off-limits to foreign tourists.

Japan has also effectively shut out foreign students and business travelers. A big exception, much criticized, was made for athletes and officials arriving for the Tokyo Olympics earlier this year.

People remain nervous about foreign travel in this insular "island culture," said Kotaro Toriumi, a tourism analyst and travel books author.

Toriumi, who teaches at Tokyo's Teikyo University, thinks foreign tourism won't revive for another year or two, even though about 73% of Japanese are fully vaccinated. That's a much higher rate than most other Asian countries, except for Singapore.

Even if the borders reopen, tourism won't revive if Japan continues to require 10-day quarantines by travelers arriving from overseas, he said.

"Even one day of quarantine is going to squelch tourism," Toriumi said, having just returned from a business trip to France, still the No. 1 destination for global tourists.

Much depends on whether COVID-19 cases will be contained. Medical experts worry infections might shoot up again in another seasonal wave.

For now, the government is preparing to restart its "GoTo" promotions for domestic travel, which provide discounts for travel, lodging and other spending. Last year the program was canceled after five months when the virus surged back.

The campaign is estimated to have generated nearly 1.8 trillion yen ($16 billion) in revenue from 52.6 million travelers within Japan, according to the Japan Travel Bureau Foundation.

But domestic travel still cannot fully offset the loss of business from tens of millions of foreign tourists.

Tourism from abroad to Japan started zooming in 2014, strongly encouraged by then-Prime Minister Shinzo Abe. In 2019, the travel and tourism sector contributed 7.1% to Japan's economy, according to the World Travel & Tourism Council.

The target for 2020 was 40 million people. But instead, after the New Year holidays visitors dwindled as pandemic travel restrictions were imposed. Travel and tourism revenues fell to 4.7% of economic activity. Meanwhile, the number of people employed in tourism and travel, including people working at hotels, airlines, travel agencies and restaurants catering to tourists, fell to 5.4 million from 5.7 million,, the council said.

Before the pandemic, foreign tourists were spending more than 4 trillion yen ($35 billion) per year. Asian visitors intent on hoarding designer products led to the coining of the phrase "baku-gai," meaning "explosive shopping."

In those days, popular destinations like the ancient capital of Kyoto were jampacked with tourists. Now the crowds are mostly children on school excursions. Kiyomizu-Dera temple, famous for its spectacular hillside overlooking the city, has lost about a third of the 5 million annual visitors it had before the pandemic, even with the recent recovery in domestic travel.

Itsuo Nishida, a manager at the temple, didn't want to venture a guess as to when things might return to normal.

"This is one place everyone wants to visit at least once in their lives," he said.

At 6%DOKIDOKI, so named for the bit of "flutter" to the heart imparted by cute things, pink-haired store clerk Emiry, spelled with that Japanese-y "R," and no last name, says she has only worked in the shop during the quiet days of the pandemic.

Some shops in Harajuku are shuttered, especially in the winding back lanes.

"Only two foreign customers came," the pink-haired Emiry said sadly of a recent day at the store.

And they lived in Japan. They were not tourists.

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Yuri Kageyama is on Twitter https://twitter.com/yurikageyama

Virginia Beach confronts inescapable costs of rising seas

By BEN FINLEY Associated Press

VIRGINIA BEACH, Va. (AP) — Voters in the sprawling coastal city of Virginia Beach will decide whether to approve one of the larger municipal bonds in the U.S. that would be used to protect against rising seas and intensifying hurricanes.

If it passes Tuesday, the $568 million would fund anything from elevating roads to closing a 100-acre (40-hectare) city golf course to collect stormwater.

If it fails, economists say the city could lose billions of dollars in the next half-century as recurrent flooding inundates roads, businesses and homes.

The referendum underscores the mounting costs of adapting to climate change for U.S. cities. But it will also be a measure of Americans' willingness to approve such bonds as more communities seek funding.

"I'm not confident that it will pass," said Virginia Wasserberg, whose Virginia Beach home was among 1,400 houses and businesses flooded by heavy rains from the remnants of Hurricane Matthew in 2016.

Wasserberg, 41, is a conservative Republican who home-schools her children and supports the bond. She's campaigned for more flood protections ever since her neighborhood's drainage systems were overwhelmed by weeks of rain that culminated with Matthew.

Homes that are miles from the city's beaches on the Atlantic Ocean and Chesapeake Bay were inundated for the first time. Wasserberg said she and her family fled to the second floor and called 911 --- only to be told that responders couldn't reach them.

"I like to say it took a disaster to wake me up," Wasserberg said.

Voter approval is far from guaranteed in this city of nearly half a million people, which some political observers say can lean libertarian. If the bond passes, property taxes would rise by $115 to $171 a year for a home of median assessed value, city officials say.

The need for money to protect communities against climate change is growing across the globe, particu-

larly in the world's poorest countries. It will be an area of discussion at an upcoming UN Climate Change Conference, which starts Sunday in Glasgow.

In the U.S., 26% of ZIP codes are "highly exposed to floods," according to Moody's ESG Solutions, which tracks climate risks and sustainable finance.

"As climate change becomes a greater threat, more governments will focus on climate adaptation and resilience projects," said Matt Kuchtyak, the group's vice president of outreach & research.

Several cities have already approved significant bonds. For instance, Miami residents voted in 2017 to fund a $400 million bond, nearly half of which would pay for such things as storm drain upgrades and sea walls.

San Francisco voters passed a $425 million bond to pay for the first phase of strengthening a sea wall that protects against earthquakes and rising oceans. The same year, Houston-area voters supported $2.5 billion in bonds for flood-control projects in the wake of Hurricane Harvey.

Bonds could emerge as the principal vehicle for funding, said Richard Wiles, executive director of the Center for Climate Integrity, which argues that oil companies should cover such costs because of fossil fuels' link to climate change.

"None of these cities has hundreds of millions of dollars hanging around," Wiles said, adding that Virginia Beach has proposed one of the biggest bonds.

The city could prove to be an interesting testing ground.

A 2021 telephone survey of 400 residents found that just over half were willing to pay more in taxes for flood-protection projects, according to a report by Old Dominion University. But half also agreed that people who do not experience flooding on their properties should not have to pay for such projects.

And yet, the land in Virginia Beach is sinking and the seas are rising at an alarming rate. Since 1960, sea levels have risen by nearly a foot (0.3 meter). And they're likely to rise by 1.5 feet to 3 feet (0.5 to 1 meter) over the next half-century.

Much of Virginia Beach sits on low coastal plains. Water can drain slowly into tidal rivers and tributaries, sometimes with nowhere to go during heavy rains and high tides.

The bond-funded projects could help the city avoid up to $8 billion in losses to flooding as well as associated economic impacts in the coming decades, according to the Old Dominion University report. The losses are equivalent to about a quarter of Virginia Beach's gross domestic product — or its total output of goods and services.

"As flooding becomes more prevalent, insurers will raise premiums, refuse coverage and at some point exit Virginia Beach entirely," economics professor Robert McNab said. "Businesses will have more difficulty in moving goods to market and, of course, residents will have more problems moving around the region."

John Moss, a city councilman who's been a large force behind the referendum, said Virginia Beach could still complete the flood-protection projects if the referendum fails. But he said it would take 25 years instead of about a decade.

And even if the bond passes, the projects will make up about a third of what's needed overall protect to against 1.5 feet of sea-level rise, Moss said.

"It's a big ask," Moss said of the bond. "But the threat is real."

State Dept. urges investigation of Myanmar military torture

By KRISTEN GELINEAU and VICTORIA MILKO Associated Press

SYDNEY (AP) — The U.S. State Department expressed outrage and demanded an investigation on Friday after The Associated Press reported that Myanmar's military has been torturing detainees in a systemic way across the country.

The United Nations' top expert on human rights in Myanmar also called for strong international pressure on the military. And lawmakers in Washington urged Congress to act in the wake of AP's investigation, which was based on interviews with 28 people, including women and children, imprisoned and released since the military took control of the government in February.

"We are outraged and disturbed by ongoing reports of the Burmese military regime's use of 'systematic torture' across the country," the State Department said, using Myanmar's other name, Burma. "Reports

of torture in Burma must be credibly investigated and those responsible for such abuses must be held accountable."

AP's report, which included photographic evidence, sketches and letters from prisoners, along with testimony from three recently defected military officials, provides the most comprehensive look since the takeover into a highly secretive detention system that has held more than 9,000 people. The AP identified a dozen interrogation centers in use across Myanmar, in addition to prisons and police lockups, based on interviews and satellite imagery.

Security forces have killed more than 1,200 people since February, including at least 131 detainees tortured to death.

The AP found that the military, known as the Tatmadaw, has taken steps to hide evidence of its torture. An aide to a high-ranking commander told the AP that he watched security forces torture two prisoners to death. Afterwards, he said, soldiers attached glucose drip lines to their corpses to make it look like the men were still alive, then forced a military doctor to falsify their autopsy reports.

"The AP's investigation sheds important light on the scope and systemic nature of the junta's criminal torture campaign," U.N. special rapporteur on Myanmar, Tom Andrews, said in a statement. "The confession of military personnel who directly witnessed detainees being tortured to death will be important for accountability efforts, as well as the AP's uncovering of torture and interrogation center locations."

Given the military's efforts to hide its abuses, Andrews said the accounts in AP's report are "very likely just the tip of the iceberg."

U.S. Rep. Michael McCaul of Texas, the top Republican on the House Foreign Affairs Committee, urged the House to hold a vote on the BURMA Act in light of the findings. The legislation would authorize additional targeted sanctions against the military.

While the U.S., United Kingdom and European Union have already placed sanctions on high-ranking Myanmar military members and state-owned enterprises, they have yet to sanction American and French oil and gas companies working in Myanmar. That has allowed the military to maintain its single-largest source of foreign currency revenue, which the Tatmadaw uses, in part, to purchase weapons.

"The disturbing reporting by the Associated Press on the sadistic torture and horrific violence committed by the Burmese military junta are sadly the latest in a long string of their atrocities, including genocide against the Rohingya," McCaul said in a statement, referring to the military's mass slaughter and rape of thousands of Rohingya Muslims in 2017.

Rep. Gregory Meeks of New York, the Democratic chairman of the House Foreign Affairs Committee, also urged Congress to pass the legislation.

"I condemn the Burmese military's unconscionable treatment of detainees, allegedly including victims as young as 16 years old, in the strongest possible terms," Meeks said in a statement.

The administration is considering sanctions that could impact Myanmar's oil and gas industry but has yet to make a decision, according to officials familiar with the process. These officials say privately that there is great internal debate among the National Security Council, the State Department and Treasury about how best to ensure that any sanctions imposed do not negatively affect the people of Myanmar.

Human rights groups also urged an immediate international response.

"The AP's searing and expansive investigation sheds light into the black-box of the Myanmar military's detention facilities. The Tatmadaw's methodical torture regime – and attempts to hide it from public view – demand immediate global acknowledgement and action," said Susannah Sirkin, director of policy at Physicians for Human Rights. The group concluded that the wounds seen in photographs sent by the AP of three torture victims were consistent with deliberate beatings by sticks or rods.

The military did not respond to a request for comment on AP's report. Earlier this week, it dismissed questions from the AP about its findings as "nonsense."

Milko reported from Jakarta, Indonesia. AP Diplomatic Writer Matthew Lee in Washington contributed to this report.

Groton Daily Independent
Friday, Oct. 29, 2021 ~ Vol. 30 - No. 114 ~ 42 of 91

Medicaid issues, not Medicare's, get fixes in Biden budget

By RICARDO ALONSO-ZALDIVAR Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — Medicaid issues are turning up as winners in President Joe Biden's social agenda framework even as divisions force Democrats to hit pause on far-reaching improvements to Medicare.

The budget blueprint Biden released Thursday would fulfill a campaign promise to help poor people locked out of Medicaid expansion across the South due to partisan battles, and it would provide low-income seniors and disabled people with more options to stay out of nursing homes by getting support in their own homes. It also calls for 12 months of Medicaid coverage after childbirth for low-income mothers, seen as a major step to address national shortcomings in maternal health that fall disproportionately on Black women.

But with Medicare, Democrats were unable to reach consensus on prescription drug price negotiations. Polls show broad bipartisan support for authorizing Medicare to negotiate lower prices, yet a handful of Democratic lawmakers—enough to block the bill—echo pharmaceutical industry arguments that it would dampen investment that drives innovation. Advocacy groups are voicing outrage over the omission, with AARP calling it "a monumental mistake." Some Democratic lawmakers say they haven't given up yet.

The immediate consequence: Without expected savings from lower drug prices, Medicare dental coverage for seniors is on hold, as is vision coverage. The Biden framework does call for covering hearing aids, far less costly. Also on hold is a long-sought limit on out-of-pocket drug costs for Medicare recipients.

While Medicare has traditionally been politically favored, Medicaid was long regarded as the stepchild of health care programs because of its past ties to welfare. Just a few years ago, former President Donald Trump and a Republican-led Congress unsuccessfully tried to slap a funding limit on the federal-state program.

In that battle, "many people realized the importance of Medicaid for their families and their communities," said Judy Solomon of the Center for Budget and Policy Priorities, a nonprofit that advocates for low-income people. "I think there was a new appreciation of Medicaid, and we are seeing that."

As Medicaid grew to cover more than 80 million people, nearly 1 in 4 Americans, it became politically central for Democrats. Biden's Medicaid-related provisions have a strong racial justice dimension, since many of the people who would benefit from access to health insurance in the South or expanded coverage for new mothers across the land are Black or Hispanic.

Expanding Medicaid has been the top policy priority for Democrats in Deep South states for years, citing the poverty and poor health that plagues much of the region. The decision by some Republican-led states to reject expansion of Medicaid under the Obama health law meant that 2 million poor people were essentially locked out of coverage in a dozen states, and another 2 million unable to afford even subsidized plans. Texas, Florida and Georgia are among the Medicaid hold-outs.

Georgia Sens. Raphael Warnock and Jon Ossoff campaigned on closing the Medicaid coverage gap, and it was their election that put the Senate in Democratic hands this year. Warnock made getting a Medicaid fix his signature issue.

"Georgians showed up in historic numbers to change the shape of our federal government, and many did so with the hope that Washington would finally close the circle on the promise of the Affordable Care Act and make health care coverage accessible to the hundreds of thousands of Georgians who are currently uninsured," Warnock, the state's first Black U.S. senator, said in a statement Thursday.

Delivering a big achievement is most urgent for the freshman, as he faces reelection next year in a quest for a full six-year term. Multiple Republican opponents including former football great Herschel Walker are vying to face him. Warnock argues that it's unfair that Georgians can't access the federally subsidized care available to residents of 38 other states that expanded Medicaid, calling it "a matter of life and death."

Under the Biden blueprint eligible uninsured people in states that have not expanded Medicaid could get subsidized private coverage through HealthCare.gov at no cost to them. The fix is only funded for four years, a budgetary gimmick intended to make the official cost estimates appear lower. Biden would also

extend through 2025 more generous financial assistance that's already being provided for consumers who buy "Obamacare" plans.

Another major element of Biden's framework would allocate $150 billion through Medicaid for home- and community-based care for seniors and disabled people. That's less than half the money Biden originally had sought for his long-term care plan, but it will help reduce waiting lists for services while also improving wages and benefits for home health aides.

The plan "marks a historic shift in how our country cares for people with disabilities and older Americans," said Sen. Patty Murray, D-Wash., chair of the Health, Education, Labor and Pensions Committee. "Getting this crucial care won't just be for the lucky few who can get off a wait list."

About 4 million people receive home and community-based services, which are less expensive than nursing home care. An estimated 800,000 people are on waiting lists for such services.

The coronavirus pandemic underscored the importance of a viable home care option for elders, as nursing homes became deadly incubators for COVID-19.

In a coda of sorts, the Biden framework also provides permanent funding for Medicaid in U.S. territories, including Puerto Rico. And it would permanently reauthorize the popular Children's Health Insurance Program, avoiding periodic nail-biting over coverage for nearly 10 million kids.

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Associated Press reporter Jeff Amy in Atlanta contributed.

Baldwin shooting highlights risks of rushed film production

By JAKE COYLE AP Film Writer

NEW YORK (AP) — The fatal shooting by Alec Baldwin on a movie set has put a microscope on an often-unseen corner of the film industry where critics say the pursuit of profit can lead to unsafe working conditions.

With a budget around $7 million, the Western "Rust" was no micro-budget indie. The previous best-picture winner at the Academy Awards, "Nomadland," was made for less. But the New Mexico set where Baldwin shot cinematographer Halyna Hutchins had inexperienced crew members, apparent safety lapses and a serious labor dispute.

For some in the business, the failures reflect larger issues in a fast-evolving movie industry.

"Production is exploding, corners are being cut even more and budgets are being crunched down even more," said Mynette Louie, a veteran independent film producer. "Something's got to give."

The shooting happened at a busy time: Production is ramping up following the easing of pandemic restrictions. Streaming services are increasing demand for content. And all the while, the industry is wrestling with standards for movie sets.

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 suspected live rounds, even though the set's firearms specialist, armorer Hannah Gutierrez Reed, said real ammo should never have been present.

Attention has focused on the 24-year-old Gutierrez Reed, who had worked on only one previous feature, and assistant director Dave Halls, who handed the gun to Baldwin. According to a search warrant affidavit, Halls called out "cold gun" to indicate it was safe to use but told detectives he did not check all of the weapon's chambers.

The lack of proper weapons protocol stunned veteran film workers.

"This was incompetence, inexperience and — I hate to say this — lack of caring about your job. If there's a whole bunch of ammunition thrown together in a box, that's not how it's done," said Mike Tristano, a longtime professional armorer.

Several "Rust" camera crew members walked off the set amid discord over working conditions, including safety procedures. A new crew was hired that morning, according to director Joel Souza, who spoke to detectives. He was standing near Hutchins and was wounded by the shot.

The New Mexico chapter of the International Alliance of Theatrical Stage Employees union called reports of nonunion workers being brought in "inexcusable." The union will soon vote on a new standards agreement covering 60,000 film and TV crew members — a deal reached with major studios after IATSE prepared for the first strike in its 128-year existence.

In a statement, "Rust" executive producer Allen Cheney said the six producers on the film collectively had more than 35 years of experience in film and television. He called "Rust" a "union-certified production."

James Gunn, the "Guardians of the Galaxy" filmmaker, suggested a slipshod culture could be partly to blame.

"Dozens have died or been grievously injured on movie sets because of irresponsibility, ignoring safety protocols, improper leadership and a set culture of mindless rushing," Gunn said on Twitter.

The gaffer on "Rust," Serge Svetnoy, faulted the movie's producers for "negligence."

"To save a dime sometimes, you hire people who are not fully qualified for the complicated and dangerous job," Svetnoy said in a Facebook post.

Veteran prop master Neal W. Zoromski told The Los Angeles Times that he declined an offer to work on "Rust" because producers insisted that one person could serve as both assistant prop master and armorer.

Gary Tuers, property master of "Tomorrow War" and "Jurassic World: Fallen Kingdom," said the shooting was "an indictment of the modern production culture, which for the last 30 years has pursued tax credits and found every way imaginable (and several that weren't) to sacrifice crew health and safety in the name of budget consciousness."

"This tragedy was an apparent accident," he wrote on Instagram. "But it was also a predictable outcome of the incentive structure within the modern film industry."

Several companies came together to finance and produce "Rust," including Baldwin's El Dorado Pictures. The film, which is based on a story by Souza and Baldwin, was financed in part by Las Vegas-based Streamline Global, which describes its business model as "acquiring films that offer certain tax benefits" that may "reduce the owner's federal income tax liability from income earned from other sources."

BondIt Media, an independent film financier, also bankrolled "Rust." The Santa Monica, California-based company has helped finance other male-fronted action thrillers like Liam Neeson's "Honest Thief," Mel Gibson's "Force of Nature" and Bruce Willis' "Hard Kill."

Even before the shooting, the most likely destination for "Rust" was probably video on demand. Last year, Baldwin promoted the movie to buyers at the virtual Cannes film market. The actor told The Hollywood Reporter that the script reminded him of "Unforgiven," a 1992 Western starring Clint Eastwood.

Days after the shooting, the production of "Rust" was suspended indefinitely.

The movie was being made under a tax provision called Section 181, which applies to films costing $2.75 million to $7.5 million. It can allow investors to break even before a film reaches any screen, particularly in a state with generous tax credits like New Mexico. The state has been a popular place for productions in recent years. Some of its regulations, including for on-set weapons experts, are less stringent than in California.

In his 30-year career, the armorer Tristano hasn't often experienced producers or crew members who cut corners on safety. But when safety is in question, he has not hesitated to pull his team off a set.

"Whenever I was on a set where there was a lot of panic going on, or the AD (assistant director) was rushing, I would say, 'OK, I'm locking the guns back in the truck,' " Tristano said. "I'd say, 'When you guys are ready to do it right, we'll do it. If you don't like that, fire me.' "

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Follow AP Film Writer Jake Coyle on Twitter at: http://twitter.com/jakecoyleAP

For tribes, 'good fire' a key to restoring nature and people

By JOHN FLESHER AP Environmental Writer

WEITCHPEC, Calif. (AP) — Elizabeth Azzuz stood in prayer on a Northern California mountainside, arms outstretched, grasping a handmade torch of dried wormwood branches, the fuel her Native American

ancestors used for generations to burn underbrush in thick forest.

"Guide our hands as we bring fire back to the land," she intoned before crouching and igniting dead leaves and needles carpeting the ground.

Others joined her. And soon dancing flames and pungent smoke rose from the slope high above the distant Klamath River.

Over several days in early October, about 80 acres (32.4 hectares) on the Yurok reservation would be set aflame. The burning was monitored by crews wearing protective helmets and clothing — firefighting gear and water trucks ready. They were part of a program that teaches Yurok and other tribes the ancient skills of treating land with fire.

Such an act could have meant jail a century ago. But state and federal agencies that long banned "cultural burns" in the U.S. West are coming to terms with them — and even collaborating — as the wildfire crisis worsens.

Wildfires have blackened nearly 6,000 square miles (15,540 square kilometers) in California the past two years and more elsewhere amid prolonged drought and rising temperatures linked to climate change. Dozens have died; thousands of homes have been lost.

Scientific research increasingly confirms what tribes argued all along: Low-intensity burns on designated parcels, under the right conditions, reduce the risk by consuming dead wood and other fire fuels on forest floors.

To the Yurok, Karuk and Hupa in the mid-Klamath region, the resurgence of cultural burning is about reclaiming a way of life violently suppressed with the arrival of white settlers in the 1800s.

Indigenous people had their land seized, and many were killed or forced onto reservations. Children were sent to schools that forbade their languages and customs. And their hunter-gatherer lifestyle was devastated by prohibitions on fire that tribes had used for thousands of years to treat the landscape.

It enriched the land with berries, medicinal herbs and tan oak acorns while killing bugs. It opened browsing space for deer and elk. It let more rainwater reach streams, boosting salmon numbers. It spurred hazelnut stems and bear grass used for intricate baskets and ceremonial regalia.

Now, descendants of those who quietly kept the old ways alive are practicing them openly, creating "good fire."

"Fire is a tool left by the Creator to restore our environment and the health of our people," said Azzuz, board secretary for the Cultural Fire Management Council, which promotes burning on ancestral Yurok lands.

"Fire is life for us."

PERSECUTION AND PERSEVERANCE

Nine years ago, Margo Robbins got a facial tattoo — two dark stripes from the edges of her mouth to below her chin, and another midway between them. It once was a common mark for Yurok women, including her great-grandmother.

"I got mine to represent my commitment to continuing the traditions of our ancestors," said Robbins, 59, whose jokes and cackling laugh mask a steely resolve.

She would become a leading voice in the struggle to return fire to her people's historical territory, much under state and federal management. The more than 5,000-member tribe's reservation courses along a 44-mile (70.8-kilometer) stretch of the Klamath.

Since 1910, when infernos consumed more than 3 million (1.2 million hectares) western acres, federal policy had considered fire an enemy. "Only you can prevent forest fires," Smokey Bear later proclaimed in commercials.

"They considered tribal people arsonists, didn't understand the relationship between fires and a healthy forest," said Merv George, 48, a former Hoopa Valley Tribe chairman who now supervises Rogue River-Siskiyou National Forest in Northern California. "I heard stories of people getting thrown in jail if they were caught."

But when George joined the U.S. Forest Service as a tribal relations manager in 2008, western wildfires were growing bigger and more frequent; officials knew something needed to change.

Two national forests — Six Rivers and Klamath — joined a landscape restoration partnership with the Karuk tribe and nonprofit groups. It released a 2014 plan endorsing "prescribed," or intentional, burns.

A year earlier, the California Department of Forestry and Fire Protection, or Cal Fire, had approved a small cultural burn on Yurok land.

It was a victory for Robbins. As a young girl of Yurok, Hupa and Irish descent, she learned the basketry fundamental to her native identity. Tribes use baskets for gathering food and medicinal plants, trapping eels, ceremonial dancing, cradling babies, even prayer.

"Weaving is really, really soothing. It's kind of like medicine for your soul," she said, displaying finely crafted baskets at a Yurok firehouse near the village of Weitchpec.

But weaving materials had become scarce, particularly hazel wood. Burns in bygone days helped the shoots grow straight and strong. Under no-fire management, hazel was stunted by shrubs, downed trees, matted leaves.

With grandchildren on the way, Robbins wanted them carried in traditional baby baskets. She needed tribal forests to produce high-quality hazel once more. That meant fire.

After the state-sanctioned Yurok small burn, Robbins and other community members established the Cultural Fire Management Council to push for more.

They allied with Karuk and Hupa activists and The Nature Conservancy to create the Indigenous Peoples Burning Network, which conducts training burns that have drawn hundreds of participants from across the U.S. and other countries. It has expanded into Oregon, Minnesota and New Mexico.

"It's really exciting and gives me a lot of hope that the tide is changing," Robbins said. "We revived our language, our dances, and now, bringing back fire, we'll restore the land."

'FINALLY BEING HEARD'

To prepare for the one this month in the Klamath region, Yurok leaders studied weather forecasts, scouted mountainous burn areas, positioned water tanks, uncoiled fire hoses, equipped and drilled 30-plus crew members.

As Azzuz finished her ceremonial prayer, the wormwood that coaxed the first flames was replaced with modern "drip torches" — canisters of gasoline and diesel with spouts and wicks. Team members moved quickly along a dirt trail, flicking droplets of burning fuel.

Smoke billowed. Flames crackled and hissed. Tangles of green and brown foliage were reduced to ash. Young Douglas firs that squeeze out other species were another target.

But larger trees — oaks, madrones, conifers — were largely unscathed, aside from patches of scorched bark.

"It's beautiful and black," Azzuz exulted. "By next spring, there will be a lot of hazel shoots."

Hour by hour, torch bearers moved down the slope, igniting swaths of forest floor. Co-workers in radio contact watched firebreaks, ready to douse or beat down stray flames.

There were young and middle-aged, native and non-native, novices and veterans — some from area tribes, others from far away.

Jose Luis Dulce, a firefighter in his native Spain and Ecuador, said he wanted to help revive Indigenous techniques in Europe and South America. Stoney Timmons said his tribe — the Robinson Rancheria Pomo Indians of California — wants to host its own training session next year.

"I'm getting some good lessons to take back," Timmons said.

The exercise was especially satisfying for Robert McConnell Jr., who spent years with Forest Service wildfire crews, attacking from helicopters and driving bulldozers. Now a prescribed fire specialist with Six Rivers National Forest, he works with fire instead of against it.

"I get to feel like I'm Indian again when I get to burn," he said. "It's encoded in my DNA. It's like there's a spark in my eye when I see fire get put on the ground."

As shadows lengthened, cheery yips gave way to shrieks: "Log! Log!" A chunk of flaming timber jounced down a sharply angled slope, smacked onto a two-lane road and hurtled into a thicket below, igniting brush along the way.

Although crew members quickly extinguished the flames, the runaway log was a reminder of the job's hazards.

Nick Hillman, 18, his face glistening with grimy sweat, was unfazed. "I know my ancestors want me to be doing this," he said.

When Yurok forestry director Dawn Blake helped light the hillside, she felt a connection with her grandmother, who wove baskets and set fires in the area long ago.

"We've been talking and begging about doing this for so long, just spinning our wheels," said Blake, 49. "It feels like we're finally being heard."

BIGGER AMBITIONS

But tribes want to go beyond training exercises and "family burns" on small plots. They're pushing to operate throughout the vast territories their ancestors occupied.

"My ultimate goal is to restore all this land back to a natural state," said Blaine McKinnon, battalion chief for the Yurok Fire Department and a leader of the recent cultural burn.

Relations with federal and state authorities have improved, but complaints persist about permits denied, burns postponed and heavy-handed oversight.

Cultural fire leaders say pledges of cooperation from agency higher-ups aren't always carried out by local officials, who fear dismissal if fires get out of hand.

It's a fair point, said Craig Tolmie, chief deputy director of Cal Fire, which struggles to balance the tribes' desires for more fire with opposition from a jittery public.

"People have really been traumatized and shocked by the last two fire seasons," Tolmie said.

Under state laws enacted this year, tribal burners and front-line regulators will work more closely, he said. One measure requires his department to appoint a cultural burning liaison and provide training and certification for prescribed fire "burn bosses."

Another makes it easier to get liability insurance by raising the bar for requiring burn professionals to pay for extinguishing out-of-control fires — a rarity but always a risk. Lawmakers also budgeted $40 million for a prescribed fire insurance fund and tribal burn programs.

Still, prescribed burns alone can't rid forests of more than a century's accumulation of woody debris, Tolmie said, arguing that many areas should be "pre-treated" with mechanical grinding and tree thinning before fires are set.

Ancient wisdom and scientific research show otherwise, said Chad Hanson, forest ecologist with the John Muir Project of Earth Island Institute in California. Regulators are "trying to extort tribes" by making cultural burns contingent on logging, he said.

Bill Tripp, the Karuk tribe's natural resources director, said the solution is empowering tribes to handle prescribed burns while Cal Fire and the Forest Service focus on suppressing wildfires.

The mid-Klamath area is ideal for a teaching center where cultural burners could "guide us into a new era of living with fire," said Tripp, who learned from his great-grandmother and was setting small blazes in his remote village by age 8.

Tribes are uniquely positioned to train younger generations about stewardship-oriented fire management, said Scott Stephens, an environmental policy professor at the University of California, Berkeley.

"We'd need literally thousands of people doing this burning to ramp it up to a scale that's meaningful," he said.

Talon Davis, 27, a member of the Yurok crew, welcomed the opportunity "to show the world what good fire is." He is Robbins' son-in-law; his own toddler has been carried in her baskets, as she wished.

"This is how we're supposed to care for Mother Earth," he said. "Put fire back on the ground, bring our home back into balance."

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Associated Press reporter Gillian Flaccus contributed to this story.

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Follow John Flesher on Twitter: @JohnFlesher

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.

Illinois Dems embrace gerrymandering in fight for US House

By SARA BURNETT Associated Press

CHICAGO (AP) — In the neck-and-neck fight to keep control of the U.S. House of Representatives, Democrats need help from the few places where state lawmakers can make 2022 difficult for Republicans.

Illinois Democrats delivered Thursday, using their dominance in state government to advance new congressional district maps intended to eliminate two Republican-held districts and send more Democrats to Washington.

To do it, Illinois Democrats have embraced gerrymandering, the practice of drawing district boundaries for political benefit that party leaders including former President Barack Obama and former Attorney General Eric Holder have railed against as "rigging" elections. The new map is a collection of odd shapes resembling abstract art and, critics say, a symbol of Democrats' hypocrisy.

"This is a desperate map from a desperate party," said Adam Kincaid, executive director of the National Republican Redistricting Trust, which coordinates redistricting for the GOP. He called it "America's most extreme gerrymander."

Both parties use gerrymandering, though Democrats more actively opposed it after the GOP used the practice in 2011 to create huge advantages for the next decade. Obama traveled to the Illinois Capitol where he once served as a state senator to deliver a speech about America's broken political system, saying gerrymandering — packing a party's supporters into one district or dispersing the other party's voters for political advantage — was the reason nothing could get done in Congress.

Democrats in some states even gave up their own power by pushing for independent commissions to draw boundaries. And Holder became chairman of the National Democratic Redistricting Committee, which has backed legal challenges to GOP-drawn maps in places like North Carolina and Virginia.

Democrats in Illinois, meanwhile, have done all they can to exert control and ensure it benefits their candidates for elections through 2030. Even with Illinois losing a seat due to population loss, the map was drawn to create a congressional delgation of 14 Democrats and three Republicans starting in 2022, a change from the current 13-5 split. The Princeton Gerrymandering Project, a nonpartisan group that evaluates maps, gave Illinois' maps an "F" grade, saying they give Democrats a significant advantage and are "very uncompetitive."

The maps — along with maps in other Democrat-controlled states like New York — could be pivotal as Democrats try to hold their narrow majority in next year's midterms, when the party in the White House has historically performed poorly. Republicans are in charge of the mapmaking known as redistricting in more than twice the number of states as Democrats, including large, growing states like Texas and Florida.

Illinois Democrats defended the maps they released late Thursday and passed a short time later, saying they ensure minorities and other Illinois residents have an equal voice in government.

"I'm proud of this map," said Illinois Senate President Don Harmon, a sponsor of the redistricting legislation. "This is a fair map and it reflects the diversity of the state of Illinois." He also said lawmakers chose to unite communities "that shared political philosophies and policy objectives."

Democrats added a second predominantly Latino district, after census data showed Illinois' Latino population grew over the past decade. They also maintained three predominantly Black districts.

GOP Reps. Adam Kinzinger, one of 10 House Republicans to vote to impeach former President Donald Trump, and Darin LaHood were put into the same heavily Republican district, as were GOP Reps. Mike Bost and Mary Miller.

Republican Rep. Rodney Davis, who said he may challenge Democratic Gov. J.B. Pritzker next year depending on the final map, was drawn into a safe GOP district that meanders from one side of the state to the other. It surrounds another Democrat-leaning district that was carved as a narrow squiggle stretching

nearly 200 miles from the home of the University of Illinois to Democrat-friendly communities east of St. Louis. A former aide to Pritzker who worked in the Biden administration, Democrat Nikki Budzinski, is running for the seat.

Not all Democrats are happy. First-term Democratic Rep. Marie Newman was drawn into the same majority-Latino district as Rep. Jesus "Chuy" Garcia, a late-in-the-game move that Newman said was done "to appease one person and a small handful of affluent insiders at the expense of workers and working families" in her current district.

Democrats say that move — sacrificing one of their own party — proves the new maps are fair and should survive expected court challenges.

The Illinois Senate approved the maps late Thursday, with all Republicans voting no. The House was expected to consider it later Thursday.

Democrats' aggressive mapmaking started earlier this year, when they insisted on approving new state legislative maps — which will strengthen their hold on the state House and Senate for another decade — using population estimates rather than census bureau data, making Illinois the only state in the nation to do so. Legislative leaders said they faced a deadline set by the state constitution, but that deadline was only for Democrats to have total control of the process, rather than a bipartisan commission.

Lawmakers had to redo those maps after census data showed they were unconstitional because the districts varied dramatically in population. Lawsuits seeking to have the new maps thrown out are pending.

Pritzker signed both the first set of legislative maps and the do-over maps, despite pledging during his 2018 campaign that he would veto any legislative maps drawn by politicians. He is expected to sign Democrats' congressional maps as well.

US in talks to compensate families separated at border

By ELLIOT SPAGAT Associated Press

SAN DIEGO (AP) — The U.S. Justice Department is in talks to pay hundreds of thousands of dollars to each child and parent who was separated under a Trump-era practice of splitting families at the border, a person familiar with discussions to settle lawsuits said Thursday.

The Wall Street Journal first reported that the government was considering payments around $450,000 to each person affected. A person familiar with the talks told The Associated Press that figure was under consideration but changed, though not dramatically. The person spoke on condition of anonymity because the discussions are private.

The discussions continue, and there is no guarantee the two sides will strike agreement.

About 5,500 children were split from their parents under President Donald Trump's "zero tolerance" policy, under which parents were separated from their children to face criminal prosecution for crossing the border illegally, according to court filings in a federal case in San Diego. Inadequate tracking systems caused many to be apart for an extended time. The payments are intended to compensate for the psychological trauma.

Attorneys for the families are also seeking permanent legal status in the United States for those separated under the practice, which a judge halted in June 2018, six days after Trump stopped it amid an international backlash.

The Justice Department did not immediately respond to a request for comment Thursday night.

The settlement talks involve several law firms. The American Civil Liberties Union is representing parents in the San Diego case.

The National Immigration Litigation Alliance represents five mothers and their children who were separated for more than two months, including four children who were sent to holding facilities in New York. A federal judge in Arizona denied the government's bid to dismiss the case last year.

"No amount of money can compensate for the amount of pain and suffering these parents and children endured under this unconscionable and unprecedented policy," said Trina Realmuto, executive director of the National Immigration Litigation Alliance.

A Justice Department inspector general's report in January said a "single-minded focus on increasing immigration prosecutions came at the expense of careful and appropriate consideration of the impact of family unit prosecutions and child separations."

Cuomo accused of groping woman, a misdemeanor sex crime

By MICHAEL HILL Associated Press

ALBANY, N.Y. (AP) — Former New York Gov. Andrew Cuomo was accused in a criminal complaint Thursday of committing a misdemeanor sex crime, two months after he resigned under pressure in a sexual harassment scandal.

But prosecutors said Thursday they didn't know the document had been filed, and the woman's attorney said she hadn't been given a chance to decide whether she wanted to go through with a case.

The one-page complaint, filed by an investigator with the Albany County Sheriff's Office, accused Cuomo of putting his hand under a woman's shirt on Dec. 7, 2020. The document didn't name the woman but Cuomo had been publicly accused of groping an aide, Brittany Commisso, at the executive mansion in Albany last year around that date.

The office of the county's district attorney, David Soares, which would handle any prosecution and was involved in the investigation, issued a statement saying it had been caught off guard by the filing.

"Like the rest of the public, we were surprised to learn today that a criminal complaint was filed in Albany City Court by the Albany County Sheriff's Office against Andrew Cuomo," it said. "The Office of Court Administration has since made that filing public. Our office will not be commenting further on this case."

The Times Union newspaper quoted unnamed officials as saying the complaint had been issued "prematurely" before a final decision had been made about whether Cuomo would face charges.

The office of Albany County Sheriff Craig Apple didn't directly address that report, but confirmed in a statement that Albany City Court had issued a criminal summons ordering Cuomo to appear at 2:30 p.m. on Nov. 17.

The statement suggested it was court officials, not prosecutors or a law enforcement agency, that made the decision to issue the summons. It said sheriff's investigators had determined there was "probable cause" to present evidence to the court "for their review to determine the most appropriate legal pathway moving forward on the investigation."

Cuomo's lawyer, Rita Glavin, said in a statement that the Democrat never assaulted anyone and that the sheriff's "motives here are patently improper."

"Sheriff Apple didn't even tell the District Attorney what he was doing. But Apple's behavior is no surprise given (1) his August 7 press conference where he essentially pronounced the Governor guilty before doing an investigation, and (2) his Office's leaking of grand jury information. This is not professional law enforcement; this is politics."

The crime of forcible touching is punishable in New York by up to year in jail and up to three years probation, with discretion for the court to impose lesser penalties including no jail time.

Commisso, an executive assistant for Cuomo, says he groped her when they were alone in an office at the governor's mansion in Albany.

She said Cuomo pulled her in for a hug as she prepared to leave. When she told him, "you're going to get us in trouble," Cuomo replied, "I don't care," and slammed the door, according to her account. Commisso said Cuomo slid his hand up her blouse and grabbed her breast.

Cuomo has adamantly denied groping her, saying once, "I would have to lose my mind to do such a thing."

Commisso's lawyer, Brian Premo, said in a statement to the Times Union that she hadn't been consulted about the criminal complaint.

"It was my client's understanding that the district attorney's office was in agreement with the sheriff's department that it was going to conduct a thorough, impartial and apolitical evaluation of the case, and only after completion of the investigation, speak to my client to allow her to make an informed decision as to whether she would proceed as a victim in the case," Premo said. "Like the district attorney's office,

she was informed about this recent filing through media."

The Associated Press doesn't identify alleged sexual assault victims unless they decide to tell their stories publicly, as Commisso has done in interviews.

Commisso filed a complaint with the sheriff in August in the same week a report from state Attorney General Letitia James concluded Cuomo sexually harassed 11 women. Other accusations outlined in the report range from planting unwanted kisses to asking unwelcome personal questions about sex and dating.

Cuomo announced his resignation a week after the release of the report, marking a dramatic downfall for the third-term governor who had been seen as a beacon of sturdy competence during his daily COVID-19 briefings in 2020. He attacked the attorney general's report as inaccurate and biased.

James, whose office is not involved in the criminal investigation, issued a statement saying her civil probe had been conducted "without fear or favor."

"The criminal charges brought today against Mr. Cuomo for forcible touching further validate the findings in our report," she said.

James is said to be close to announcing a run for governor, multiple people with knowledge of her plans have told The Associated Press.

The complaint filed by the sheriff's department investigator said evidence in the case included police BlackBerry messages, cell phone records, building security records, Cuomo's flight records and a text message from his mobile phone. The complaint was signed by the officer Monday and stamped by the court as received Thursday.

Cuomo's attorney, Glavin, has claimed records show the two were unlikely to have spent time alone during the period in question. Cuomo's spokesman, Rich Azzopardi, ridiculed Thursday's turn of events.

"'Accidentally' filing a criminal charge without notification and consent of the prosecuting body doesn't pass the laugh test and this process reeks of Albany politics and perhaps worse. The fact that the AG — as predicted — is about to announce a run for governor is lost on no one. The truth about what happened with this cowboy sheriff will come out," he said.

District attorneys in Oswego, Manhattan, suburban Westchester and Nassau counties also had said they asked for investigative materials from the attorney general's inquiry to see if any of the allegations could result in criminal charges.

The Assembly Judiciary Committee is completing a wide-ranging impeachment investigation of Cuomo that began before he resigned. The also were looking at the administration's handling of COVID-19 data and efforts to rush COVID-19 testing for Cuomo's inner circle in spring 2020.

Oklahoma executes inmate who dies vomiting and convulsing

By SEAN MURPHY Associated Press

McALESTER, Okla. (AP) — Oklahoma administered the death penalty Thursday on a man who convulsed and vomited as he was executed for the 1998 slaying of a prison cafeteria worker, ending a six-year execution moratorium brought on by concerns over its execution methods,

John Marion Grant, 60, who was strapped to a gurney inside the execution chamber, began convulsing and vomiting after the first drug, the sedative midazolam, was administered. Several minutes later, two members of the execution team wiped the vomit from his face and neck.

Before the curtain was raised to allow witnesses to see into the execution chamber, Grant could be heard yelling, "Let's go! Let's go! Let's go!" He delivered a stream of profanities before the lethal injection started. He was declared unconscious about 15 minutes after the first of three drugs was administered and declared dead about six minutes after that, at 4:21 p.m.

Someone vomiting while being executed is rare, according to observers.

"I've never heard of or seen that," said Robert Dunham, executive director of the nonpartisan Death Penalty Information Center. "That is notable and unusual."

Michael Graczyk, a retired Associated Press reporter who still covers executions for the organization on a freelance basis, has witnessed the death penalty being carried out about 450 times. He said Thursday

he could only recall one instance of someone vomiting while being put to death.

The Oklahoma attorney general and governor did not respond to questions about Grant's reactions to the drugs. In fact, Department of Corrections spokesman Justin Wolf said by email that the execution "was carried out in accordance with Oklahoma Department of Corrections' protocols and without complication."

A statement from Republican Gov. Kevin Stitt referenced a section of the Oklahoma Constitution in which voters overwhelmingly enshrined the death penalty.

"Today, the Department of Corrections carried out the law of the State of Oklahoma and delivered justice to Gay Carter's family," Stitt said.

Grant was the first person in Oklahoma to be executed since a series of flawed lethal injections in 2014 and 2015. He serving a 130-year prison sentence for several armed robberies when witnesses say he dragged prison cafeteria worker Gay Carter into a mop closet and stabbed her 16 times with a homemade shank. He was sentenced to die in 1999.

"At least now we are starting to get justice for our loved ones," Carter's daughter, Pamela Gay Carter, said in a statement. "The death penalty is about protecting any potential future victims. Even after Grant was removed from society, he committed an act of violence that took an innocent life. I pray that justice prevails for all the other victims' loved ones. My heart and prayers go out to you all."

Oklahoma moved forward with the lethal injection after the U.S. Supreme Court, in a 5-3 decision, lifted stays of execution that were put in place on Wednesday for Grant and another death row inmate, Julius Jones, by the 10th U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals.

The state's Pardon and Parole Board twice denied Grant's request for clemency, including a 3-2 vote this month to reject a recommendation that his life be spared.

Oklahoma had one of the nation's busiest death chambers until problems in 2014 and 2015 led to a de facto moratorium. Richard Glossip was just hours away from being executed in September 2015 when prison officials realized they received the wrong lethal drug. It was later learned the same wrong drug had been used to execute an inmate in January 2015.

The drug mix-ups followed a botched execution in April 2014 in which inmate Clayton Lockett struggled on a gurney before dying 43 minutes into his lethal injection — and after the state's prisons chief ordered executioners to stop.

While the moratorium was in place, Oklahoma moved ahead with plans to use nitrogen gas to execute inmates, but ultimately scrapped that idea and announced last year that it planned to resume executions using the same three-drug lethal injection protocol that was used during the flawed executions. The three drugs are: midazolam, a sedative, vecuronium bromide, a paralytic, and potassium chloride, which stops the heart.

Oklahoma prison officials recently announced that they had confirmed a source to supply all the drugs needed for Grant's execution plus six more that are scheduled to take place through March.

"Extensive validations and redundancies have been implemented since the last execution in order to ensure that the process works as intended," the Department of Corrections said in a statement.

More than two dozen Oklahoma death row inmates are part of a federal lawsuit challenging the state's lethal injection protocols, arguing that the three-drug method risks causing unconstitutional pain and suffering. A trial is set for early next year.

Dale Baich, an attorney for some of the death row inmates in that suit, said eyewitness accounts of Grant's lethal injection show Oklahoma's death penalty protocol isn't working as it was designed.

"This is why the U.S. Supreme Court should not have lifted the stay," Baich said in a statement. "There should be no more executions in Oklahoma until we go (to) trial in February to address the state's problematic lethal injection protocol."

Grant and five other death row inmates were dismissed from the lawsuit after none of them selected an alternative method of execution, which a federal judge said was necessary. But a three-member panel of the Denver-based 10th U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals determined that the inmates did identify alternative methods of execution, even if they didn't specifically check a box designating which technique they would use. The panel had granted stays of execution on Wednesday for Grant and Jones, whose lethal injection is set for Nov. 18.

Jones — whose case has drawn national attention since being featured in 2018 on the ABC television documentary series "The Last Defense" — has a clemency hearing set for Tuesday. Jones, 41, has maintained his innocence in the 1999 shooting death of an Oklahoma City-area businessman. The state Pardons and Parole Board in March recommended that Stitt, the governor, commute his death sentence to life imprisonment.

Stitt has said he will not decide whether to spare Jones' life until the clemency hearing.

Grant and his attorneys did not deny that he killed Carter.

"John Grant took full responsibility for the murder of Gay Carter, and he spent his years on death row trying to understand and atone for his actions, more than any other client I have worked with," attorney Sarah Jernigan said Thursday in a statement after the execution.

But Grant's attorneys argued that key facts about the crime and Grant's troubled childhood were never presented to the jury. They maintained that Grant developed deep feelings for Carter and was upset when she fired him after he got in a fight with another kitchen worker.

"Jurors never heard that Mr. Grant killed Ms. Gay Carter while in the heat of passion and despair over the abrupt end of the deepest and most important adult relationship of his life," his attorneys wrote in his clemency application.

Pamela Carter, who also worked at the prison and was there the day her mother was killed, rejected the idea that her mother and Grant had anything more than a professional relationship and urged state officials to move forward with the execution.

"I understand he's trying to save his life, but you keep victimizing my mother with these stupid allegations," she told the Pardon and Parole Board this month. "My mother was vivacious. She was friendly. She didn't meet a stranger. She treated her workers just as you would on a job on the outside. For someone to take advantage of that is just heinous."

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Associated Press writer Adam Kealoha Causey in Dallas contributed to this report.

Biden announces 'historic' deal — but still must win votes

By LISA MASCARO, AAMER MADHANI and FARNOUSH AMIRI Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — President Joe Biden announced Thursday that he and Democrats in Congress have reached a "historic" framework for his sweeping domestic policy package. But he still needs to lock down votes from key colleagues for what's now a dramatically scaled-back bill.

Eager to have a deal in hand before his departure late in the day for global summits, Biden made his case privately on Capitol Hill to House Democrats and publicly in a speech at the White House. He's now pressing for a still-robust package — $1.75 trillion of social services and climate change programs — that the White House believes can pass the 50-50 Senate.

The fast-moving developments put Democrats closer to a hard-fought deal, but battles remain as they press to finish the final draft in the days and weeks ahead.

"Let's get this done," Biden exhorted.

"It will fundamentally change the lives of millions of people for the better," he said about the package, which he badly wanted before the summits to show the world American democracy still works.

Together with a nearly $1 trillion bipartisan infrastructure bill, Biden claimed the infusion of federal investments would be a domestic achievement modeled on those of Franklin Roosevelt and Lyndon Johnson.

"I need your votes," Biden told the lawmakers at the Capitol, according to a person who requested anonymity to discuss the private remarks.

But final votes will not be called for some time. The revised package has lost some top priorities, frustrating many lawmakers as the president's ambitions make way for the political realities of the narrowly divided Congress.

Paid family leave and efforts to lower prescription drug pricing are now gone entirely from the package, drawing outrage from some lawmakers and advocates.

Still in the mix, a long list of other priorities: free prekindergarten for all youngsters, expanded health care programs — including the launch of a new $35 billion hearing aid benefit for people with Medicare — and $555 billion to tackle climate change.

There's also a one-year extension of a child care tax credit that was put in place during the COVID-19 rescue and new child care subsidies. An additional $100 billion to bolster the immigration and border processing system could boost the overall package to $1.85 trillion if it clears Senate rules.

One pivotal Democratic holdout, Sen. Kyrsten Sinema of Arizona, said, "I look forward to getting this done."

However, another, Joe Manchin of West Virginia, was less committal: "This is all in the hands of the House right now."

The two Democrats have almost single-handedly reduced the size and scope of their party's big vision, and are crucial to sealing the deal.

Republicans remain overwhelmingly opposed, forcing Biden to rely on the Democrats' narrow majority in Congress with no votes to spare in the Senate and few in the House.

Taking form after months of negotiations, Biden's emerging bill would still be among the most sweeping of its kind in a generation, modeled on New Deal and Great Society programs. The White House calls it the largest-ever investment in climate change and the biggest improvement to the nation's healthcare system in more than a decade.

In his meeting with lawmakers at the Capitol, Biden made clear how important it was to show progress as he headed to the summits.

"We are at an inflection point," he said. "The rest of the world wonders whether we can function."

With U.S. elections on the horizon, he said it's not "hyperbole to say that the House and Senate majorities and my presidency will be determined by what happens in the next week."

At one point, Biden "asked for a spirited, enthusiastic vote on his plan," said Rep. Richard Neal, D-Mass.

Twice over the course of the hour-long meeting Democratic lawmakers rose to their feet and started yelling: "Vote, vote, vote," said Rep. Gerald Connolly of Virginia.

Biden's proposal would be paid for by imposing a new 5% surtax on income over $10 million a year, and instituting a new 15% corporate minimum tax, keeping with his plans to have no new taxes on those earning less than $400,000 a year, officials said. A special "billionaires tax" was not included.

Revenue to help pay for the package would also come from rolling back some of the Trump administration's 2017 tax cuts, along with stepped-up enforcement of tax-dodgers by the IRS. Biden has vowed to cover the entire cost of the plan, ensuring it does not pile onto the debt load.

With the framework being converted to a 1,600-page legislative text for review, lawmakers and aides cautioned it had not yet been agreed to.

Rep. Pramila Jayapal, D-Wash., the progressive leader, said her caucus endorsed the framework, even as progressive lawmakers worked to delay further action. "We want to see the actual text because we don't want any confusion and misunderstandings," she said.

House Speaker Nancy Pelosi said Biden asked the House to vote on the related $1 trillion infrastructure bill, which already cleared the Senate but became tangled in deliberations over the broader bill. But Jayapal said she did not hear an urgent request from him, which emboldened progressives to halt the hoped-for Thursday vote.

"When the president gets off that plane we want him to have a vote of confidence from this Congress," Pelosi told lawmakers, the person at the private meeting said.

But no votes were scheduled. Progressives have been withholding their support for the roads-and-bridges bill as leverage until they have a commitment that Manchin, Sinema and the other senators are ready to vote on Biden's bigger package.

"Hell no," said Rep. Rashida Tlaib, D-Mich., about allowing the smaller infrastructure bill to pass.

Rep. Cori Bush, D-Mo., shared her own story of making "pennies" at low-wage work, struggling to afford child care and wanting to ensure constituents have better.

"We need both bills to ride together. And we don't have that right now," Bush said. "I feel a bit bamboozled because this was not what I thought was coming today."

Instead, Congress approved an extension to Dec. 3 of Sunday's deadline for routine transportation funds that were at risk of expiring without the infrastructure bill.

The two holdout Democratic senators now hold enormous power, essentially deciding whether Biden will be able to deliver on the Democrats' major campaign promises.

Sinema has been instrumental in pushing her party off a promise to undo the Republicans' 2017 tax cuts. And Manchin's resistance forced serious cutbacks to a clean energy plan, the elimination of paid family leave and the imposition of work requirements for parents receiving the new child care subsidies.

At the same time, progressives achieved one key priority — Vermont Independent Bernie Sanders' proposal to provide hearing aid benefits for people on Medicare. However, his ideas to also include dental and vision care were left out.

Other expanded health care programs build on the Affordable Care Act by funding subsidies to help people buy insurance policies and coverage in states that declined the Obamacare program.

Overall, the new package also sets up political battles in future years. The enhanced child care tax credit expires alongside next year's midterm elections, while much of the health care funding will expire in 2025, ensuring a campaign issue ahead of the next presidential election.

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Associated Press writers Zeke Miller in Rome and Colleen Long, Kevin Freking, Alan Fram and Padmanand Rama in Washington contributed to this report.

Biden arrives in Rome as domestic agenda still unfulfilled

By JOSH BOAK and ZEKE MILLER Associated Press

ROME (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 was struggling to finalize a major domestic legislative package.

After a fitful day of talks over the fate of twin infrastructure and social spending bills that he cast as a choice between "leading the world, or letting the world pass us by," Biden landed in Rome aboard Air Force One in the dark early Friday with the answer still undetermined.

Headed first to a Group of 20 summit in Rome and then to Glasgow, Scotland, for a U.N. climate summit, 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 meeting in Rome: "People, Planet, Prosperity."

It was a reflection of his promise 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.

Before leaving Washington, Biden pitched House Democrats to get behind a scaled-back $1.75 trillion "framework" that he believes could pass the 50-50 Senate. It remained to be seen whether lawmakers would embrace the package or send Biden back to the negotiating table, as some key priorities like paid family leave and steps to lower prescription drug costs were excised from the bill, which will be paid for with hiked taxes on the nation's wealthiest and corporations.

"The rest of the world wonders whether we can function," Biden told the lawmakers, according to a source familiar with his remarks.

House Speaker Nancy Pelosi invoked the trip as she tried to rally Democratic votes around the separate $1 trillion infrastructure package, attempting, unsuccessfully, to build support for a vote on Thursday before Biden arrived in Rome.

"When the president gets off that plane we want him to have a vote of confidence from this Congress," she said. "In order for us to have success, we must succeed today."

While Biden was in the air, Pelosi, facing opposition from progressives who also want assurances that the scaled-back social spending plan will pass, pulled the plug on a Thursday vote and instead set out to pass yet another stop-gap funding measure for a range of transportation initiatives.

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. 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 that foreign leaders can see beyond ongoing backroom 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.

National security adviser Jake Sullivan, though, has framed the bills as vital to the nation's security. "Making these investments in American strength will be very important to our national security going forward," he 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 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.

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AP Director of Public Opinion Research Emily Swanson contributed to this report.

In the middle of a crisis, Facebook Inc. renames itself Meta

By BARBARA ORTUTAY AP Technology Writer

OAKLAND, Calif. (AP) — Like many companies in trouble before it, Facebook is changing its name and logo.

Facebook Inc. is now called Meta Platforms Inc., or Meta for short, to reflect what CEO Mark Zuckerberg said Thursday is its commitment to developing the new surround-yourself technology known as the " metaverse." But the social network itself will still be called Facebook.

Also unchanged, at least for now, are its chief executive and senior leadership, its corporate structure and the crisis that has enveloped the company.

Skeptics immediately accused the company of trying to change the subject from the Facebook Papers, the trove of leaked documents that have plunged it into the biggest crisis since it was founded in Zuckerberg's Harvard dorm room 17 years ago. The documents portray Facebook as putting profits ahead of ridding its platform of hate, political strife and misinformation around the world.

The move reminded marketing consultant Laura Ries of when energy company BP rebranded itself to "Beyond Petroleum" to escape criticism that the oil giant harmed the environment.

"Facebook is the world's social media platform, and they are being accused of creating something that is harmful to people and society," she said. "They can't walk away from the social network with a new corporate name and talk of a future metaverse."

Facebook the app is not changing its name. Nor are Instagram, WhatsApp and Messenger. The company's corporate structure also won't change. But on Dec. 1, its stock will start trading under a new ticker symbol, MVRS.

The metaverse is sort of the internet brought to life, or at least rendered in 3D. Zuckerberg has described it as a "virtual environment" you can go inside of, instead of just looking at on a screen. People can meet, work and play, using virtual reality headsets, augmented reality glasses, smartphone apps or other devices.

It also will incorporate other aspects of online life such as shopping and social media, according to Victoria Petrock, an analyst who follows emerging technologies.

Zuckerberg's foray into virtual reality has drawn some comparisons to fellow tech billionaires' outer space adventures and jokes that perhaps it's understandable he would want to escape his current reality amid calls for his resignation and increasing scrutiny of the company.

On Monday, Zuckerberg announced a new segment for Facebook that will begin reporting its financial results separately from the company's Family of Apps segment starting in the final quarter of this year. The entity, Reality Labs, will reduce Facebook's overall operating profit by about $10 billion this year, the company said.

Other tech companies such as Microsoft, chipmaker Nvidia and Fortnite maker Epic Games have all been outlining their own visions of how the metaverse will work.

Zuckerberg said that he expects the metaverse to reach a billion people within the next decade and that

he hopes the new technology will creates millions of jobs for creators.

The announcement comes amid heightened legislative and regulatory scrutiny of Facebook in many parts of the world because of the Facebook Papers. A corporate rebranding isn't likely to solve the myriad problems revealed by the internal documents or quiet the alarms that critics have been raising for years about the harm the company's products are causing to society.

Zuckerberg, for his part, has largely dismissed the furor triggered by the Facebook Papers as unfair.

In an interesting twist, the Chan Zuckerberg Initiative, the philanthropic organization run by Zuckerberg and his wife, Priscilla Chan, bought a Canadian scientific literature analysis company called Meta in 2017.

By Thursday afternoon, though, its website Meta.org announced that it will "sunset" at the end of March. The Meta.com domain, meanwhile, redirected to the former Facebook's rebranded corporate site.

At headquarters in Menlo Park, California, the iconic thumbs up sign that has long been outside was repainted to a blue, pretzel-shape logo resembling an infinity symbol.

Some of Facebook's biggest critics seemed unimpressed by the name change. The Real Facebook Oversight Board, a watchdog group focused on the company, announced that it will keep its name.

"Changing their name doesn't change reality: Facebook is destroying our democracy and is the world's leading peddler of disinformation and hate," the group said in a statement. "Their meaningless name change should not distract from the investigation, regulation and real, independent oversight needed to hold Facebook accountable."

In explaining the rebrand, Zuckerberg said the name Facebook no longer encompasses everything the company does. In addition to the social network, that now includes Instagram, Messenger, its Quest VR headset, its Horizon VR platform and more.

"Today we are seen as a social media company," Zuckerberg said. "But in our DNA we are a company that builds technology to connect people."

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Associated Press writers Mae Anderson and Tali Arbel in New York and Matt O'Brien in Providence, R.I., contributed to this report.

A World Series short on drama so far shifts scene to Atlanta

By BEN WALKER AP Baseball Writer

ATLANTA (AP) — His day on the diamond almost done, Jose Altuve walked over to a clutch of Astros fans clustered behind the netting down the right field line at Minute Maid Park.

For five minutes, he autographed World Series programs, No. 27 jerseys and other items, many of them for kids. A young girl got a ball with Altuve's signature and joyfully turned to her mother.

"I'm about to cry," the mom said Wednesday night.

Altuve's team liked the signs they saw from him earlier in the evening, too.

In a Fall Classic devoid of drama so far, the big-swinging leadoff man is among the few stars to deliver any huge hits.

Bouncing back from the first three-strikeout game of his postseason career, plus a prolonged slump in the AL Championship Series, Altuve homered and doubled as Houston beat the Atlanta Braves 7-2, tying the matchup at 1-all.

But teammates Carlos Correa, Alex Bregman and AL Championship Series MVP Yordan Alvarez have been mostly silent. Freddie Freeman, Austin Riley and NLCS MVP Eddie Rosario haven't done much damage for the Braves, either.

"You can be 0 for 20, but what about if you get the big hit? So that's what playoffs is about," Altuve said. "I don't care if I went 0 for 5 last night."

As Astros manager Dusty Baker said: "My dad used to tell me it's OK to get down, just don't stay down. So he didn't stay down."

After a rainy day off, they'll play Game 3 Friday night at Truist Park, provided the weather is OK. Luis Garcia is set to pitch for the Astros against Ian Anderson. Both of them threw well in the games their

teams won to clinch these spots.

It will be the first World Series pairing of rookie starters since the 2006 opener.

That night, Anthony Reyes led St. Louis over Detroit and its newcomer, Justin Verlander. This season, Verlander was on Houston's injured list while recovering from Tommy John surgery.

Astros reserve Marwin Gonzalez is the only player who has batted against the other team's starter.

"Hank Aaron used to say, if you've never faced a pitcher, you initiate him right away and then kind of kill his spirits," Baker said. "So hopefully, we can initiate him."

At 23, Anderson is already an October veteran. He's made seven postseason starts in two years, going 3-0 with a 1.47 ERA.

"He's been through a lot in a short major league career, a lot of big experiences, pitched a lot of big games here," Braves manager Brian Snitker said Thursday.

Garcia, meanwhile, will be forced to bat with no designated hitter in the National League park.

"I like to hit," said Garcia, who's hitless in six career at-bats.

The Braves are 5-0 at home this year in the playoffs and are expecting a loud crowd.

"The atmosphere is awesome. Like I say, Braves country is real. It's real," Snitker said.

The Astros haven't visited Truist Park since 2017, the year it opened, meaning many of their players will be seeing it for the first time. The Astros hoped to work out at the stadium Thursday to get familiar with the "dimensions and the caroms and the corners," Baker said, but rain limited their activity.

The tarp covered the field all day and a few Astros tossed the ball in the outfield before the drizzle turned to showers. The temperatures were in the 50s — a far cry from Houston — and the same kind of weather was in the forecast for Game 3.

Altuve helped the Astros earn their split at home. A postseason perennial, the All-Star second baseman pushed aside a 3-for-24 skid in the ALCS and a hitless opener against the Braves.

Altuve tied former Yankees star Bernie Williams for second on the career postseason home run list with 22, trailing only the 29 by Manny Ramirez.

To Baker, there was nothing surprising about Altuve's performance. And he figures the other Astros infielders -- Correa, Bregman and Yuli Gurriel -- also will play key roles.

"They expect good things to happen and they expect to play well. They expect to do good. I found that out last year," he said.

"We had some guys struggling and they said, well, wait till the playoffs, and we barely squeaked in," he said. "They said, hey, man, we're going to turn it on in the playoffs. I haven't seen many people in this game who can kind of turn it on when they want to."

Altuve has shown that. In 11 seasons, he's averaged a home run every 35 at-bats in the regular season; in 75 postseason games, he's homered once every 14 at-bats.

Baker recalled a slugger he managed in San Francisco, and a speedster who played across the Bay.

"Come to mind like Barry Bonds. He's like, I'm going to take over this game today, and he takes it over. Rickey Henderson says, hey, man, I'm going to steal three or four bases, and I'm going to take this game over by myself," Baker said.

"Like I said, you don't find many players like that, where they have the ability or the mindset or the mind control to do it," he said.

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AP freelance writer Joshua Koch contributed to this report.

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

'Stupid' and 'insane': Some billionaires vent over tax plan

By HALELUYA HADERO AP Business Writer

Elon Musk isn't happy.

With a personal fortune that is flirting with $300 billion, the Tesla CEO — the richest person on earth —

has been attacking a Democratic proposal to tax the assets of billionaires like him.

The idea behind the Democratic plan is to use revenue from a billionaires tax to help pay for a domestic policy package being negotiated in Congress that would, among other things, help combat climate change, provide universal prekindergarten and expand health care programs. The proposal wasn't included in President Joe Biden's framework for the domestic policy package released Thursday, though that deal among Congressional Democrats isn't final.

Musk, who recently blew past Amazon founder Jeff Bezos as the world No. 1 in wealth thanks to Tesla's soaring share price, would be liable for perhaps a one-time $50 billion tax hit under the Democratic proposal.

Forget it, he says.

"My plan," the SpaceX founder tweeted Thursday about his fortune, "is to use the money to get humanity to Mars and preserve the light of consciousness."

He may well get his wish, with the proposal removed from the White House framework.

Earlier this week, Musk argued, the fundamental problem is that government spends too much money — and he warned that the billionaire tax proposal could lead over time to tax hikes for more Americans.

"Eventually," he tweeted Monday, "they run out of other people's money, and then they come for you."

The Democratic proposal, unveiled Wednesday by Sen. Ron Wyden, would tax the gains of people with either $1 billion or more in assets, or three consecutive years of income of $100 million or more, at the capital gains tax rate of 20% and the 3.8% net investment income tax rate. It would apply to fewer than an estimated 800 people, who would have to pay tax on the value of tradable items, like stocks, even if they don't sell them. Under current law, such assets are subject to tax only when they're sold.

Supporters have said the tax could raise $200 billion over 10 years that could help fund Biden's legislative priorities. Republicans are unified in opposition to the proposal. And some have suggested it would be challenged in court.

The Democrats' proposal came against the backdrop of growing concerns about vast economic inequality, with the wealth of many American multi-billionaires having accelerated during the COVID-19 pandemic, thanks to increased stock and home equity, even more than before the virus struck.

John Catsimatidis, the billionaire grocery chain and real estate magnate who owns Gristedes, condemned the proposal as something you would "expect Putin to do," referring to President Vladimir Putin of Russia.

The billionaire tax plan, Catsimatidis told The Associated Press, is "a little bit insane."

"The American people have reached the point where they're saying, 'Enough is enough'," said Catsimatidis, who lost a bid for the Republican nomination for New York City mayor in 2013.

"Stop spending the money stupidly. They come up with budgets that are stupid budgets, and they want to make everybody else suffer for it."

"Do we need infrastructure?" Catsimatidis added. "Sure, we need infrastructure. Do we need bridges to nowhere? No, we don't need those."

"You're talking about the people that create the jobs," he said of billionaires. "We can get up and go somewhere else."

Leon Cooperman, the outspoken billionaire investor who has long denounced Sen. Elizabeth Warren's own proposal for a wealth tax, has added his voice to the exasperation coming from some of the uber-wealthy.

In an interview with The Daily Beast, Cooperman said of the tax, "I doubt it's legal, and it's stupid."

"What made America great," he said, "was the people who started with nothing like me making a lot of money and giving it back. A relentless attack on wealthy people makes no sense."

Not every billionaire shares such outrage. A spokesperson for George Soros, the investor and liberal philanthropist, told the AP that Soros is "supportive of the proposed billionaires tax."

And while Warren Buffett has yet to comment publicly on the proposal, the billionaire head of Berkshire Hathaway has long called for higher taxes on the ultra-wealthy like himself.

Bob Lord, a tax lawyer and associate fellow at the progressive think tank Institute for Policy Studies, said that even if this particular proposal doesn't pass, it does reflect how concerns about financial inequality are gathering momentum.

ProPublica reported in June that some of the richest Americans have paid no income tax, or nearly

none, in some years — including Musk, who, the report said, paid zero income taxes in 2018. Critics argue that Musk's criticism of the billionaire tax proposal overlooks the fact that Tesla's rise has been aided by government incentives and loans.

Lord noted, for example, that the run-up in Tesla stock Monday, after a major order of Teslas from Hertz, increased Musk's wealth by roughly $37 billion — more than what the IRS collects in estate and gift tax revenue from the entire country in one year.

Wyden's proposal, Lord suggested, might need to close some loopholes.

"But I think they've done a pretty good job with it," he said. "There are folks out there who are saying the billionaires will just put their money into non-publicly traded assets. But it's not going to be that easy. It's a pretty well-crafted bill."

Such tax changes could also shift how billionaire philanthropists make donations.

Brian Mittendorf, a professor of accounting at Ohio State University, said he believes that in the short term, the billionaire proposal would lead some of the uber-wealthy to rush philanthropic contributions into so-called donor-advised funds. Such funds would allow them to receive tax deductions up front without distributing any of the money. (Donors can't get the money back from these funds).

"If, in fact, this were to pass," Mittendorf said, "it creates huge incentives to donate some of these assets that have gone up in value before the tax hits."

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AP Business Writer Glenn Gamboa contributed to this article.

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Oil giants deny spreading disinformation on climate change

By MATTHEW DALY Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — Top executives of ExxonMobil and other oil giants denied spreading disinformation about climate change as they sparred Thursday with congressional Democrats over allegations that the industry concealed evidence about the dangers of global warming.

Testifying at a landmark House hearing, ExxonMobil CEO Darren Woods said the company "has long acknowledged the reality and risks of climate change, and it has devoted significant resources to addressing those risks."

The oil giant's public statements on climate "are and have always been truthful, fact-based … and consistent" with mainstream climate science, Woods said.

Democrats immediately challenged the statements by Woods and other oil executives, accusing them of engaging in a decades-long, industry-wide campaign to spread disinformation about the contribution of fossil fuels to global warming.

"They are obviously lying like the tobacco executives were," said Rep. Carolyn Maloney, D-N.Y., chairwoman of the House Oversight Committee.

She was referring to a 1994 hearing with tobacco executives who famously testified that they didn't believe nicotine was addictive. The reference was one of several to the tobacco hearing as Democrats sought to pin down oil executives on whether they believe in climate change and that burning fossil fuels such as oil contributes to global warming.

Maloney said at the end of the nearly seven-hour hearing that she will issue subpoenas for documents requested by the committee but not furnished by the oil companies.

Republicans accused Democrats of grandstanding over an issue popular with their base as President Joe Biden's climate agenda teeters in Congress.

Kentucky Rep. James Comer, the top Republican on the oversight panel, called the hearing a "distraction from the crises that the Biden administration's policies have caused," including gasoline prices that have

risen by $1 per gallon since January.

"The purpose of this hearing is clear: to deliver partisan theater for primetime news," Comer said.

The 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 fossil fuel industry has had scientific evidence about the dangers of climate change since at least 1977, yet spread denial and doubt about the harm its products cause— undermining science and preventing meaningful action on climate change, Maloney and other Democrats said.

"Do you agree that (climate change) is an existential threat? Yes or no?" Maloney asked Shell Oil President Gretchen Watkins.

"I agree that this is a defining challenge for our generation, absolutely," Watkins replied.

Watkins, Woods and other oil executives said they agreed with Maloney on the existence and threat posed by climate change, but they refused her request to pledge that their companies would not spend money — either directly or indirectly — to oppose efforts to reduce planet-warming greenhouse gas emissions.

"We're pledging to advocate for low-carbon policies that do in fact take the company and the world to net-zero" carbon emissions, said BP America CEO David Lawler.

Rep. Ro Khanna, D-Calif., who leads a subcommittee on the environment, said he hopes "Big Oil will not follow the same playbook as Big Tobacco" in misrepresenting the facts to Congress.

"As I'm sure you realize, that didn't turn out too well for them," Khanna said. "These companies must be held accountable."

The committee released a memo Thursday charging that the oil industry's public support for climate reforms has not been matched by meaningful actions, and that the industry has spent billions of dollars to block reforms. 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.

Maloney and other 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 Biden's climate agenda, including a a bipartisan infrastructure bill and a sweeping climate and social policy bill currently moving through Congress.

In the video, 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, Exxon said last month.

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.

Chevron CEO Michael Wirth also denied misleading the public on climate change. "Any suggestion that Chevron has engaged in an effort to spread disinformation and mislead the public on these complex issues is simply wrong," he said.

Maloney and Khanna sharply disputed that. They 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."

Rep. Katie Porter, D-Calif., accused the oil industry of "greenwashing" its climate pollution through misleading ads that focus on renewable energy rather than on its core business, fossil fuels. Shell spends nearly 10 times as much money on oil, gas and chemical production than it does on renewables such as wind and solar power, Porter said, citing the company's annual report.

"Shell is trying to fool people into thinking that it's addressing the climate crisis when what it's actually doing is continuing to put money into fossil fuels," she told Watkins.

While U.S. leaders and the oil industry rightly focus on lowering carbon emissions, the world consumes 100 million barrels of oil per day — an amount not likely to decrease any time soon, said Mike Sommers, president of the American Petroleum Institute, the oil industry's top lobbying group.

The industry group supports climate action, Sommers added, "yet legislative proposals that punitively

target American industry will reverse our nation's energy leadership, harm our economy and American workers, and weaken our national security."

Pandemic restrictions fuel recall efforts on fall ballots

By HEATHER HOLLINGSWORTH Associated Press

MISSION, Kan. (AP) — Hospitals in Missouri were inundated with COVID-19 patients last summer when a group opposed to a mask mandate that had already expired gathered enough signatures to trigger a recall vote against the mayor who enacted it.

Now the question about Mayor Brian Steele is on the ballot Tuesday in the small city of Nixa. Meanwhile in Kansas, voters will decide whether to recall a school board member who backed a mask mandate. And in Anchorage, Alaska, a member of the city's governing body has been targeted for removal because, according to critics, she was the 15th person at a public meeting where 14 was the limit under COVID-19 protocols.

Across the country, dozens of recall campaigns are underway, many led by people who oppose any COVID-19-related rules. The recalls illustrate the contentiousness that has upended usually sleepy school board and city council meetings. The tension is almost sure to last into 2022, when more recall efforts are expected in the spring.

Nationally, more than 500 attempts to recall elected officials have happened this year, up from about 400 in a typical year, said Joshua Spivak, a senior fellow at the Hugh L. Carey Institute at Wagner College. He said most of the increase stems from a spike in school board recalls, with about 200 this year, up from 70 in a normal year.

In some cases, multiple members of the same board have been targeted, often over mask requirements or school closures.

But he said fewer recall attempts are advancing to the ballot and more are failing to get enough votes. California Gov. Gavin Newsom, who came under fire because of pandemic closures, is the best known elected official to survive a recall this year. But there have been others, including a failed bid last spring to oust several members of two Idaho districts over masks and virtual instruction.

While the pandemic helped motivate people to sign petitions and get recalls on the ballot, "it is not necessarily enough to get the person removed," said Spivak, who writes the Recall Elections Blog and is the author of "Recall Elections: From Alexander Hamilton to Gavin Newsom."

Steele, who designs computer systems when he isn't leading the city of 21,000 people in the Springfield, Missouri, area, found himself at the center of controversy as COVID-19 case numbers began to spike a year ago.

When the city council gave him emergency powers to deal with the pandemic, he approved the mask mandate through an executive order. "You want to protect your friends and your family," he explained.

Backers of the recall argue that the full council should have approved the mandate, which expired in April.

"The rules need to be followed," said Ron Sanders, who supports the recall and is opposed to mandating masks. "If they can write me a ticket for speeding or if they can write me a summons for not cutting my grass, then they should be held accountable for not following the rule of law also."

He and other recall proponents got the issue on the ballot with 73 valid signatures — six more than the minimum.

In Kansas, it took only eight signatures to trigger the recall of Amy Sudbeck, a school board member for the 635-student Nemaha Central district. Sudbeck was appointed to the board in 2020 and attended her first meeting just one week before the governor closed schools for the rest of that academic year.

The recall effort started after Sudbeck, who is a nurse, voted with the majority of the board to keep a mask mandate in place through the end of the last school year. Masks are now optional in the district northwest of Kansas City. Even without the recall, Sudbeck was up for election. She is running against one of the organizers of the recall effort.

In Anchorage, a former Democratic state representative and gubernatorial candidate described the effort

against Assembly member Meg Zaletel as "one of the most hypocritical recall campaigns in state history." Speaking on Twitter, Les Gara said the same people who regularly pack the Assembly chamber to fight mask rules want to recall her for surpassing a COVID-19 capacity limit.

Zaletel, who recently helped push through a mask mandate, said recall supporters are furious because of unrelated policy decisions, including a debate about where to locate a substance abuse treatment center.

Another round of recalls are expected in the spring. In Colorado's Boulder Valley School District, parents seeking to recall three pro-mask school board members have until late November to collect enough signatures.

Among the targets is board member Kathy Gebhardt, a mother of five who says she has been called a Nazi, a child abuser and a "eugenicist technocrat" for backing masks.

In the past, she said, she appreciated that school board races offered "one place where we could still hold out some hope of being nonpartisan and have conversations about what people believed was in the best interest of a student," said Gebhardt, an attorney who practices school-finance law. "And those days are gone, at least for now."

In the San Juan Unified School District in California, a group opposed to the district going virtual for most of last school year attempted to recall the entire board but failed to collect enough signatures.

Paula Villescaz, the school board president, said the situation was so contentious that she added lights and cameras around her home for safety.

"I don't like feeling like people are coming after me," Villescaz said. But, she added, "I would rather keep the line and keep our folks safe."

Schools debate: Gifted and talented, or racist and elitist?

By BOBBY CAINA CALVAN Associated Press

NEW YORK (AP) — Communities across the United States are reconsidering their approach to gifted and talented programs in schools as vocal parents blame such elite programs for worsening racial segregation and inequities in the country's education system.

A plan announced by New York City's mayor to phase out elementary school gifted and talented programs in the country's largest school district — if it proceeds — would be among the most significant developments yet in a push that extends from Boston to Seattle and that has stoked passions and pain over race, inequality and access to a decent education.

From the start, gifted and talented school programs drew worries they would produce an educational caste system in U.S. public schools. Many of the exclusive programs trace their origins to efforts to stanch "white flight" from public schools, particularly in diversifying urban areas, by providing high-caliber educational programs that could compete with private or parochial schools.

Increasingly, parents and school boards are grappling with difficult questions over equity, as they discuss how to accommodate the educational aspirations of advanced learners while nurturing other students so they can equally thrive. It's a quandary that is driving the debate over whether to expand gifted and talented programs or abolish them altogether.

"I get the burn-it-down and tear-it-down mentality, but what do we replace it with?" asked Marcia Gentry, a professor of education and the director of the Gifted Education Research and Resource Institute at Purdue University.

Gentry coauthored a study two years ago that used federal data to catalogue the stark racial disparities in gifted and talented programs.

It noted that U.S. schools identified 3.3 million students as gifted and talented but that an additional 3.6 million should have been similarly designated. The additional students missing from those rolls, her study said, were disproportionately Black, Latino and Indigenous students.

Nationwide, 8.1% of white and 12.7% of Asian American children in public schools are considered gifted, compared with 4.5% of Hispanic and 3.5% of Black students, according to an Associated Press analysis of the most recent federal data.

Gifted and talented programs aim to provide outlets for students who feel intellectually constrained by the instruction offered to their peers. Critics of the push to eliminate them say it punishes high achievers and cuts off a prized opportunity for advancement, particularly for low-income families without access to private enrichment programs.

In Seattle, a schools superintendent who left her job in May sought to do away with the district's Highly Capable Cohort program, as the district's gifted and talented program is called, blaming it for causing de facto segregation. In its own recent analysis, Seattle public schools found only 0.9% of Black children had been identified as gifted, compared with 12.6% of its white students.

The school board has approved changes that will do away with eligibility testing and make all grade schoolers automatically eligible for consideration for advanced instruction. In addition to grades, the selection committee will consider testimonials from teachers, family and community members.

The changes don't go far enough for critics like Rita Green, the education chair of the Seattle Chapter of the NAACP. She has called for more work to build environments that nurture the intellectual development of all the district's 50,000 schoolchildren.

"We want the program just abolished. Period. The Highly Capable Cohort program is fundamentally flawed, and it's inherently racist," Green said.

Debates over the criteria for admission to advanced courses and elite schools predate the latest national discussion about racial inequities, but have intensified since the killing of George Floyd.

In Boston, the school committee voted this summer to expand eligibility to its exclusive exam schools and guarantee spots to high-achieving students from poor and disadvantaged neighborhoods.

Latino students account for roughly 42% of Boston's 53,000 public school students -- about twice the number as whites -- but are vastly underrepresented in advanced courses. By the district's account, fewer than 20% of the fourth graders invited to participate in advanced work classes were Latino, while 43% of those invited were white.

Many children are overlooked because of language and cultural barriers, said Iván Espinoza-Madrigal, the executive director of Boston's Lawyers for Civil Rights. Subconscious bias among teachers who nominate students for the program also play a role, he said.

Elsewhere, the renowned Lowell High School in San Francisco in February scrapped admissions exams in favor of a lottery system. In Fairfax County, Virginia, parents recently lost a legal bid to undo their school district's decision to do away with testing for admissions to a campus catering to high achievers in science and technology.

Most gifted and talented programs have relied on tests to determine eligibility, with some families spending thousands of dollars on tutoring and expensive specialized programs to boost scores and increase their children's chances of getting a coveted spot.

Controversy over admissions into advanced education programs has simmered in other cities, including Los Angeles and Chicago. But nowhere has the debate been as intense as in New York, where Mayor Bill de Blasio said last month that he would begin to dismantle the program in elementary schools, calling it "exclusive and exclusionary."

Some parents, including Rose Zhu, have called on the city to expand the program, not do away with it. She joined dozens of other parents outside the city's Department of Education building this month to protest de Blasio's proposal, bringing along her 21-month-old daughter, who Zhu hopes will follow two older siblings into the city's gifted and talented program.

"I live in Queens, and our traditional schools in our districts aren't really good," she said. "So the G and T program is the best school I can put them in."

De Blasio's likely successor, fellow Democrat Eric Adams, has said he does not support eliminating the program, which would put him at odds with some of his Black constituents. Adams himself is African American.

One such constituent, Zakiyah Ansari, the New York City director for the Alliance for Quality Education, wants Adams to follow through with de Blasio's pledge.

"We believe every child is a gifted child, every child is a talented child," Ansari said. "We have to have

people as angry about taking away one program that impacts a few people and be more upset about the Black and brown kids who haven't had access to excellent education."

But Gentry, the director of the Gifted Education Research and Resource Institute, agreed that it was time for "a revolution to fix the problem that's been long standing in terms of equity" in access to gifted and talented instruction.

She urged parents and school administrators to do the hard work of finding a compromise.

"I worry that the easy solution is to stop doing it," she said. "I know the inequities exist. But the thing is, there's a huge distinction between overhauling or eliminating."

With Manfred's support, Braves bring chop to World Series

By CHARLES ODUM AP Sports Writer

ATLANTA (AP) — As the World Series shifts to Atlanta, some TV viewers may be offended to see Braves fans still chopping and chanting in force.

After teams in the NFL and Major League Baseball have dropped names considered racist and offensive to Native Americans the last two years, the Braves chop on — with the support of baseball Commissioner Rob Manfred.

What matters most to Manfred is the Braves have the support of the Eastern Band of Cherokee Indians, based in North Carolina about three hours from Atlanta.

"The Native American community in that region is wholly supportive of the Braves program, including the chop," Manfred said Tuesday. "For me, that's kind of the end of the story. In that market, we're taking into account the Native American community."

Manfred's decision to accept input from only one Native American group doesn't sit well with the Oklahoma-based Muscogee Nation.

"I think on a subject like that and when you're dealing with Indian country you have to look at it as a whole instead of one or two specific places," Jason Salsman, press secretary for the Muscogee Nation, told The Associated Press on Thursday.

"You have to look far and wide and how all Indian nations feel."

Richard Sneed, principal chief of the Eastern Band of Cherokee Indians, would like to see more outrage about what he says are far bigger issues facing Native Americans, including poverty, unemployment, child abuse, sexual assaults and suicide.

"I'm not offended by somebody waving their arm at a sports game," Sneed told the AP on Tuesday. "I'm just not. If somebody is, that's their prerogative, it's their right. They can be offended. ... I don't know very many, maybe one or two, from my tribe who say, 'Yeah, I don't like that.' But at the end of the day, we've got bigger issues to deal with."

Sneed said the problems with crime and poverty remain largely ignored when the national attention has been on team names and the tomahawk chop.

"There's just so much happening and the frustrating part for me as a tribal leader is when the only issue that seems to be discussed is ... 'How offended are you by the chop and should the Braves change their name?' ... Really, it's the least of our problems, I guess is what I'm saying."

There is no indication the Braves plan to change their name or discourage the chop, which has been a tradition for their fans since the early 1990s. Former Braves outfielder Deion Sanders is credited with bringing the chop, which was part of his college football background at Florida State, to Atlanta.

Sanders, now Jackson State's football coach, declined an interview request from the AP.

The Braves are following the lead of Florida State and the minor league Spokane Indians in nurturing relationships and developing support from local Native American groups.

The Braves temporarily attempted to deemphasize the chop in the 2019 NL Division Series against St. Louis after Cardinals reliever Ryan Helsley, a member of the Cherokee nation, said he found it insulting.

Following Helsley's complaint, the Braves stopped distributing the red foam tomahawks used by fans doing the chop during the series. They also stopped having the accompanying music played to encourage

the chant.

The coronavirus pandemic emptied stadiums and took attention away from it.

Now fans have returned and the chop is fully revived, complete with drumbeats, stadium music and the tomahawk images posted on video boards around Truist Park.

From Georgia Gov. Brian Kemp to University of Georgia standout defensive tackle Jordan Davis to Braves fans, there is widespread local support for the chop.

Kemp wrote "Chop On, and Go @Braves!" on his Twitter account after Atlanta beat the Los Angeles Dodgers in the NL Championship Series.

Davis, asked Monday if he was pulling for the Braves, said: "Definitely. Chop on Braves. We're definitely rooting for them."

Braves fans even brought the chop and chant to Houston. A small number of fans began doing the chop when the Braves took an early lead Tuesday night in Game 1 and remained in the stadium to pick up the chop again following a 6-2 win.

No dissenting opinion on the chop could be found from a line of fans who were waiting to buy World Series tickets Tuesday morning at Truist Park.

"It's freaking awesome," said Sarah Oldham. "I think it's part of our winning strategy, making all that noise at the stadium. It's like voodoo going on. I'd be afraid."

Said Caleb Godfrey, who works near Truist Park: "I like it. I love it," when asked about the chop.

"I understand both sides of the argument for it and against it, but I also don't feel like it's a Redskins scenario where it's offensive," Godfrey said.

The Braves declined to comment on their renewed support of the chop.

The NFL's Washington Football Team dropped the Redskins name. MLB's Cleveland Indians have announced Guardians as their new name. The NFL's Kansas City Chiefs face pressure to discontinue the chop chant by their fans.

Sneed said Redskins was "the only name I felt was derogatory. Yeah, that's offensive. The rest of them never really bothered me and still don't bother me to this day."

The Braves dedicated their July 17 game against Tampa Bay to the Eastern Band of Cherokee Indians. The team said the night will be an annual event designed in part to educate fans on the history and culture of the group.

The Braves have placed a "We are still here" display in their stadium's Monument Garden. The display is designed to educate fans on the EBCI's history.

Sneed said the Braves have "really been instrumental and really a trailblazer in setting an example for using their platform because it is a national platform and in some cases international."

Manfred also praised the Braves, saying "they've done a great job with the Native Americans" in the region.

"The Native American community is the most important group to decide whether it's appropriate or not and they have been unwaveringly supportive of the Braves," Manfred said.

The Harrah's Cherokee Resort and Casino in Cherokee, North Carolina, is a Braves sponsor.

"That's separate from what we do on the governmental side," Sneed said, adding he and other elected officials on the tribal council "don't have any input or any say in that."

The casino generates funds "so we have the resources to really help our people, especially when dealing with things like substance abuse, mental behavioral issues and so forth," Sneed said. "So we're fortunate.

"But I'm also very cognizant of the fact there are ... a lot of tribes that still live in abject poverty with extremely high rates of unemployment."

Sneed said he sees the relationship with the Braves "as one where it gives us a platform to be able to discuss the issues that are really important to Indian country and that need to be addressed.

"They're not new issues for us. They're things that tribal nations have dealt with really since government intervention and the Indian Removal Act and tribes being forced off their reservations."

The support of Sneed's group means everything to Manfred, who didn't waver when pressed on the Braves' chop.

Might other Native Americans be offended by the chop?

"I don't know how every Native American group around the country feels," Manfred said. "I am 100% certain that the Braves understand what the Native American community in their region believes and that they've acted in accordance with that understanding."

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

Sen. Burr under investigation again for pandemic stock sales

By BRIAN SLODYSKO Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — North Carolina Sen. Richard Burr and his brother-in-law are being investigated by the Securities and Exchange Commission for potential insider trading, a case that stems from their abrupt sales of financial holdings during the early days of the coronavirus pandemic, according to recent federal court filings.

Burr, a Republican, is among several lawmakers from both parties who faced outrage over their aggressive trading in early 2020, before the economic threat from the virus was widely known. That fueled accusations that the members of Congress were acting on inside information gained through their official duties to benefit financially, which is illegal under a law known as the STOCK Act.

Burr was previously investigated by the Trump administration's Justice Department for offloading $1.6 million from his portfolio in January and February 2020. The department cleared him of wrongdoing almost a year later — on Jan. 19, Donald Trump's last full day in office.

But the SEC continued to investigate Burr, according to court documents filed in the Southern District of New York that were first made public last week. The agency enforces federal securities law.

Attorneys for Burr as well as for Gerald Fauth, who is the brother of Burr's wife, did not immediately respond to requests for comment. Burr has previously denied any wrongdoing.

The filings stem from a case brought by the SEC to force Fauth to comply with a subpoena. The agency argued that his close relationship with Burr and a phone call between the two, followed by calls to Fauth's brokers, made his testimony "critical."

"Whether Fauth was himself tipped with inside information from Senator Burr, and whether Fauth knew Senator Burr was violating his duties under the STOCK Act by conveying that information, are matters Fauth is uniquely positioned to speak to," the SEC said in a filing.

To bolster their case, SEC attorneys released a timeline of phone calls from Feb. 13, 2020, the day Burr sold off the vast majority of his portfolio. It was roughly one week before the stock market went into a tailspin.

At the time Burr had "material nonpublic information concerning Covid-19 and its potential impact on the U.S. and global economies" some of which he "learned through his position" as chairman of the Senate Intelligence Committee and from former staffers directing the government's coronavirus response, the SEC alleges in the court filing.

That day, after Burr instructed his own broker to sell, he spoke with Fauth in a call that lasted 50 seconds.

One minute later, the court document states, Fauth called one of his brokers. Two minutes later, he called another broker and gave instructions to sell shares in his wife's account.

Later that day, Burr, who was staying at the Fauths' home in suburban Washington, logged into his online brokerage account from an IP address registered to Fauth's wife, court records state.

Burr has drawn perhaps the most scrutiny of all members of Congress for his trades in the early days of the pandemic. He was captured in a recording privately warning a group of influential constituents in early 2020 to prepare for economic devastation.

Burr denied trading on private information, but stepped aside from his position as chairman of the Senate Intelligence Committee after the FBI obtained a search warrant to seize a cellphone.

Burr is not seeking reelection next year. He was elected to the Senate in 2004 after a 10-year run in the House.

The STOCK Act, the statute which Burr and Fauth are being investigated under, was passed with bipartisan support in 2012 following a congressional stock-trading scandal. It was cheered by government ethics groups and watchdogs as a long-overdue step.

But in the nearly decade since, no one has been convicted under the law. Meanwhile, congressional stock trading has continued apace.

Legal experts say such insider trading cases are exceptionally difficult to prosecute because they require definitively proving whether someone acted on nonpublic information. That hinges on demonstrating intent — a high burden.

That's part of why SEC investigators are trying to get a court order to force Fauth to testify a-year-and-a-half after they first issued a subpoena.

Fauth, a government official who serves as chairman of the National Mediation Board, has repeatedly cited his health as a reason for not complying. His attorneys have said it is a valid reason.

But he has continued to tend to his duties for the mediation board, participating in calls and meetings. He was recently nominated for another three-year term and appeared last month with the agency's attorney to be interviewed by Republican Senate staffers before his confirmation hearing for the post.

"When he appeared for that interview, Fauth does not appear to have followed (his) physician's advice that he avoid 'stressful situations,'" the SEC wrote in the court filing.

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Associated Press writer Eric Tucker contributed to this report.

Gordon Wood and Woody Holton clash over past and present

By HILLEL ITALIE AP National Writer

NEW YORK (AP) — Gordon Wood has engaged in many debates during his long and celebrated career, but rarely had he been confronted so starkly as by fellow scholar Woody Holton last weekend at the Massachusetts Historical Society.

The two American Revolution historians had been billed to discuss their most recent books and their differing views of the country's origins. But midway through the 60-minute event the subject turned to The New York Times' 1619 Project, the Pulitzer Prize winning series from 2019 that placed slavery at the center of the American narrative. The mood soon resembled less a spirited, but academic gathering than a court of law, with Wood on the stand.

Holton's allegation: Wood's criticism of the 1619 project, which he and four other historians have condemned for saying the preservation of slavery was a "primary reason" the colonists sought independence, helped make credible the current backlash from such Republican politicians as Florida Gov. Ron DeSantis and Arkansas Sen. Tom Cotton, along with school boards around the country.

"You did an open letter putting that project beyond the pale, outside the wire, and making it vulnerable to the attack by these demagogues," Holton told Wood, who appeared startled but reiterated his criticism of the Times and 1619 project creator Nikole Hannah-Jones even as he acknowledged the language he objected to had since been modified to "some of the colonists" wanting independence over fears of slaves aligning with the British.

"You are a founding father, Professor Wood, of a massive campaign of censorship. You're not the most responsible, but the five of you are responsible. And that's why, right now, I want to ask you to write another open letter to Sen. Cotton, and to Gov. DeSantis, and to all the other demagogues who are using your letter to ban the 1619 project, to say, 'I am Gordon Wood, and damnit, I am not in favor of censorship.'"

During a telephone interview a few days later, Wood called the debate a "disaster," said he was "blindsided" by Holton's attack and that Holton was carrying out his role as "the primary defender" among historians of the 1619 project. Asked if he found any positive qualities in the series, which includes essays on politics, culture, criminal justice and religion among other subjects, he criticized it for encouraging a sense of "victimhood" and feeling "aggrieved" that he called understandable but "self-destructive" in the long run.

The letter Holton asked for will not be written.

"I had no idea of what DeSantis was doing," he said of the Florida governor, who has labeled the 1619 project "critical race theory" and backed the state's board of education's decision last summer to ban the book from classrooms. "It's out of my hands. We can't do our historical research ... (worrying) that it might be misused by politicians."

Hannah-Jones declined comment through a spokesperson for the Penguin Random House imprint One World, which next month will publish a book-length edition of the project.

Wood and Holton already have books out this fall: Wood's "Power and Liberty: Constitutionalism in the American Revolution" is a brief summation of his views on the Revolution that centers on the country's political, economic and legal foundations. Holton's "Liberty Is Sweet: The Hidden History of the American Revolution" is a 700-plus page account that, as its subtitle indicates, seeks to broaden the traditional story of the country's founding beyond Washington, Jefferson and other leaders to include the contributions of women, Black and indigenous people among others.

Authors providing blurbs for "Liberty is Sweet" include Hannah-Jones ("His book rightly decenters the almost exclusively white revolutionary narratives that we've all been taught") and Pulitzer Prize winner Annette Gordon-Reed ("A deeply researched and bracing retelling of the origins of the American Revolution"). Wood, in his blurb, called it a "spirited account of the Revolution that brings everybody and everything into the story."

Wood, 87, is likely the most honored living scholar of the American Revolution — "He's Muhammad Ali," the 62-year-old Holton says of him — and he has become a prime target for historians who see him as the embodiment of a traditional, top-down view of the country's origins. During their debate at the historical society, Wood and Holton repeatedly disagreed on the role of slavery in the Revolution, especially the importance of a 1775 proclamation by the Virginia royal governor, the Earl of Dunsmore, offering freedom to any enslaved person who joined the British cause.

"An act of sheer desperation," Wood called it.

"It was a desperate measure," Holton agreed, but one that resonated. He backed his argument by handing Wood a printout of dozens of tweets he has sent in recent weeks (he plans 76 in all) that show evidence of ties between Blacks and the British and how it frightened white colonists.

"I know you're not on Twitter," Holton said.

Wood does not see himself as a "triumphalist" or champion of "any great white man" and says he follows no agenda beyond where the scholarship leads him. He calls the Revolution both "ironic" and "tragic." He has portrayed it, most famously in his Pulitzer Prize winning "The Radicalism of the American Revolution," as having a profoundly democratizing effect on the new country, well beyond what Washington and other leaders had desired.

He said he objects to the 1619 Project and to some of Holton's book because he believes they apply contemporary standards to the past. During the debate, Wood praised Holton as a "superb" narrator of military battles, but said he was misguided in other ways. He cited Holton's emphasizing that the vast majority of Americans in the early years, notably women and those enslaved, were unable to vote, when the same was true virtually everywhere in the world.

"He does see the past through modern eyes," Wood said. "Woody's a good activist-historian who wants a usable past to solve problems in the present."

Wood and Holton don't just disagree about the 18th century, but about last weekend. Holton said that Wood had no reason to feel "blindsided" because they had discussed ground rules, raised the subject of the 1619 project and agreed only that it shouldn't be the primary focus of conversation. Holton's memory was backed by Massachusetts Historical Society President, Catherine Allgor, who moderated the event, and by Gavin Kleespies, the society's director of public programs.

Both showed the AP notes they took — showing references to the 1619 project — when Holton and Wood met prior to the debate.

"I'm blindsided that he said he was blindsided," Allgor said.

Holton and Wood, who at the start of the debate greeted Holton as "my old buddy," have met before.

In 2013, they debated at the University of Carolina over the influence of capitalism on the framing of the Constitution. They had been on friendly terms. Holton told the AP during a recent interview that he had reached out to Wood in hopes of receiving a blurb from him for "Liberty Is Sweet" and called him a "really decent person" when not arguing his own historical viewpoints.

Wood said he found Holton "very charming," but also "a little underhanded."

"I get along with the guy and I like him," he added, "but now I'm not so happy."

China offers few new climate targets ahead of UN conference

By CHRISTINA LARSON AP Science Writer

WASHINGTON (AP) — China is offering no significant new goals for reducing climate-changing emissions ahead of the UN climate summit set to start next week in Glasgow.

China, the world's top emitter of carbon dioxide and other greenhouse gasses that cause global warming, formally submitted its goals Thursday. The highly-anticipated announcement includes targets previously established in speeches by President Xi Jinping and domestic policy documents.

China says it aims to reach peak emissions of carbon dioxide — which is produced mainly through burning coal, oil and natural gas for transportation, electric power and manufacturing — "before 2030." The country is aiming for "carbon neutrality" — no net emissions of CO2 — before 2060.

"It's not surprising, but it is disappointing that there wasn't anything new" in terms of goals, said Joanna Lewis, an expert in China, climate and energy at Georgetown University.

Lewis said the document released today "gave more detail about China will meet those goals," however, by measures including increasing its wind and solar power capacity, as well as carbon-absorbing forest cover.

Climate experts say key questions about China's future carbon emissions remain unanswered.

"The document gives no answers on the major open questions about the country's emissions," said Lauri Myllyvirta, lead analyst at the Centre for Research on Energy and Clean Air in Helsinki. "At what level will emissions peak and how fast should they fall after the peak?"

Nations participating in the UN climate conference, known as the 26th Conference of Parties, or COP26, submit what are called "nationally determined contributions" that lay out emissions reduction plans.

It's still possible that China may have additional announcements at the climate summit related to financing for renewable energy overseas, said Lewis.

Sam Geall, CEO of nonprofit China Dialogue and associate fellow at Chatham House in London said China's pledge is "consistent with everything that we've seen from Xi Jinping's previous statements."

He and other experts are concerned that pledges on emissions targets and also on financial support to help reduce emissions and adapt to a changing climate, especially for developing countries, "are coming in far too late, far too small."

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China's NDC is "consistent with everything that we've seen from Xi Jinping's previous statements," said Sam Geall, CEO of nonprofit China Dialogue and associate fellow at Chatham House in London.

"It may not be enough to get us to 1.5 degrees, which is where we want to go," he said, referring to the target set under the Paris Agreement of keeping global warming under 1.5 degrees C above pre-industrial levels.

At the summit, Geall said he is looking to see countries take steps to "restore trust in the process" of climate negotiations, after widespread economic disruptions caused by the COVID-19 pandemic. "Promises on climate finance" — money pledged by rich countries to fund climate responses in developing countries — "are coming in far too late, far too small," he said.

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Florida sues Biden over contractor vaccine mandate

By ANTHONY IZAGUIRRE Associated Press

TALLAHASSEE, Fla. (AP) — The state of Florida on Thursday sued President Joe Biden's administration over its coronavirus vaccine mandate for federal contractors, opening yet another battleground between Republican Gov. Ron DeSantis and the White House.

The lawsuit, announced by DeSantis at a news conference, alleges the president doesn't have the authority to issue the rule and that it violates procurement law.

DeSantis has vowed legal action over federal vaccination requirements and fought masking and vaccine rules implemented by local governments in Florida. He recently announced he would call state lawmakers to the Capitol next month to pass legislation to combat vaccine mandates enacted by private businesses. DeSantis is eyeing a possible 2024 presidential run and has been consistent in his criticism of Biden's handling of the pandemic and other issues.

The case was filed in U.S. District Court in Tampa and names Biden, NASA Administrator Bill Nelson as well as White House contracting officials as defendants.

In addition to a vaccine mandate for federal contractors, which is set to go into effect in December, Biden has also announced that private employers with 100 or more workers will have to require them to be vaccinated or tested weekly. The roughly 17 million workers at health facilities that receive federal Medicare or Medicaid also will have to be fully vaccinated. Additional details on the policies are expected to be released soon.

Biden has argued that the sweeping mandates will help end a pandemic that has claimed the lives of more than 740,000 Americans.

But Republicans nationwide have opposed the vaccination requirements and have threatened to bring similar legal challenges. On Wednesday, 21 Republican state attorneys general sent a letter to the president saying they think his vaccination mandate for federal contractors "stands on shaky legal ground," is confusing to contractors and could exacerbate supply-chain problems.

US to pay $88M to families, victims of SC church massacre

By MEG KINNARD Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — Families of nine victims killed in a racist attack at a Black South Carolina church have reached a settlement with the Justice Department over a faulty background check that allowed Dylann Roof to purchase the gun he used in the 2015 massacre.

The Justice Department will pay $88 million, which includes $63 million for the families of the nine people killed and $25 million for five survivors who were inside the church at the time of the shooting, it was announced Thursday.

Bakari Sellers, an attorney who helped broker the agreement, told The Associated Press the "88" figure was purposeful. It's a number typically associated with white supremacy and the number of bullets Roof said he had taken with him to the attack.

"We've given a big 'F you' to white supremacy and racism," Sellers told the AP. "We're doing that by building generational wealth in these Black communities, from one of the most horrific race crimes in the country."

According to the Justice Department, settlements for the families of those killed range from $6 million to $7.5 million per claimant. Survivors' settlements are $5 million per claimant.

Months before the June 17, 2015 church shooting, Roof was arrested on Feb. 28 by Columbia, South Carolina police on the drug possession charge. But a series of clerical errors and missteps allowed Roof to buy the handgun he later used in the massacre.

The errors included wrongly listing the sheriff's office as the arresting agency in the drug case, according to court documents. An examiner with the National Instant Criminal Background Check System found some information on the arrest but needed more to deny the sale, so she sent a fax to a sheriff's office. The sheriff's office responded it didn't have the report, directing her to the Columbia police.

Under the system's operating procedures, the examiner was directed to a federal listing of law enforcement agencies, but Columbia police did not appear on the list. After trying the separate West Columbia Police Department and being told it was the wrong agency, the examiner did nothing more.

After a three-day waiting period, Roof went back to a West Columbia store to pick up the handgun.

The lawsuit for a time was thrown out, with a judge writing that an examiner followed procedures but also blasting the federal government for what he called its "abysmally poor policy choices" in how it runs the national database for firearm background checks. The suit was subsequently reinstated by a federal appeals court.

"The mass shooting at Mother Emanuel AME Church was a horrific hate crime that caused immeasurable suffering for the families of the victims and the survivors," Attorney General Merrick Garland said in a statement. "Since the day of the shooting, the Justice Department has sought to bring justice to the community, first by a successful hate crime prosecution and today by settling civil claims."

In 2017, Roof became the first person in the U.S. sentenced to death for a federal hate crime. Authorities have said Roof opened fire during the Bible study at the church, raining down dozens of bullets on those assembled. He was 21 at the time.

The slain included the Rev. Clementa Pinckney, pastor of the AME Emanuel Church, a state senator, as well as other pillars of the community. They all shared deep devotion to the church, known as Mother Emanuel, and passed that faith along to their families, many of whom offered Roof forgiveness when he appeared in court just days after the attack.

The FBI has acknowledged that Roof's drug possession arrest should have prevented him from buying a gun.

Speaking with AP in Washington ahead of the news conference, Pinckney's eldest daughter recalled the night of the shooting and said she was committed to maintaining the legacy of her father, who died when she was 11.

"I've done whatever I can to keep his memory alive and to carry on his legacy throughout my life," Eliana Pinckney, 17, told the AP. "Just to make sure that the memories that I have with him can be shared with other people, so that other people are inspired by the life that he lived, and the life that he would keep living if he was still here."

The deal, which was reached earlier this month, is still pending a judge's approval, Sellers said.

"All nine of these families have been so strong, and they deserve this closure," Sellers said. "Of course we wanted more, but this is just, and this is justice, and finally, these families can say that they got it."

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Meg Kinnard can be reached at http://twitter.com/MegKinnardAP.

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This story has been corrected to show the age of the pastor's daughter is 17, not 11.

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."

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, the World Health Organization's Europe COVID-19 incident manager.

"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 countries, the whole vaccine issue is politicized."

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.

An official in Hungary announced Thursday that private companies can require that employees get vaccinated to work, a measure that could boost in the nation's stagnant vaccination rate. Government employees, including teachers, will also be required to vaccinate, the official said.

Poland on Thursday reported the highest number of daily new infections since May at over 8,000.

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 in 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, Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy chaired a meeting on how to combat the counterfeits. Police suspect workers at 15 hospitals of being involved. They have opened 800 criminal cases into such fakes and deployed 100 mobile units to track down users, said Interior Minister Denys Monastyrsky. They even caught a former lawmaker with one last week.

Kyiv mayor Vitaly Klitschko on Thursday announced new restrictions in the capital to stem the virus' spread. Beginning Nov. 1, restaurants, shopping centers and gyms will be closed and public transport limited to those who can show proof of vaccination or a negative PCR test.

Ukraine's 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 hospital surgical ward in the town of Biliaivka, near the Black Sea port of Odessa, is now treating only coronavirus patients, with 50 of its 52 beds filled. Drugs and oxygen are in short supply.

"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 in 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 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 number of COVID-19 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. 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 nightclubs are closed for 30 day, 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.

Bulgaria, which has only a quarter of its 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 for 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.

For Melnik, the Ukrainian truck driver, the fear of getting COVID-19 outweighed all 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 there is no alternative to vaccination."

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

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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 $1.75 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 set of priorities and a means to pay for them. The White House unveiled a long-awaited framework of an agreement Thursday morning, though it was unclear when legislation would be ready or when a vote would occur.

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.

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 was not included in the framework unveiled by the White House on Thursday.

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.

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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.

Venezuela sought to swap Americans for Maduro ally

By JOSHUA GOODMAN Associated Press

MIAMI (AP) — Venezuela's government quietly offered last year to release imprisoned Americans in exchange for the U.S. letting go a key financier of President Nicolás Maduro, according to people with knowledge of the proposal and message exchanges seen by The Associated Press.

The offer was discussed at a previously reported meeting in Mexico City in September 2020 between a top Maduro aide and Richard Grenell, a close ally of former President Donald Trump, one of the people involved in organizing the meeting said.

The offer, which was rejected by the Trump administration, has taken on new relevance following the extradition this month to Miami of businessman Alex Saab, who prosecutors believe was the main conduit for corruption in Maduro's inner circle. In retaliation, Venezuela reimprisoned six executives of Houston-based Citgo, a subsidiary of Venezuela's state-owned oil giant, who had been under house arrest.

A little over a year ago, Maduro's government was looking to release the so-called Citgo 6 along with two former Green Berets tied to a failed cross-border raid in exchange for Saab, according to former Miami Congressman David Rivera, who says he helped organize the meeting.

Grenell declined to say what the September 2020 meeting was about but adamantly denied it had anything to do with hostage negotiations.

"I never discussed a swap. It wasn't something we were interested in nor was it a point of negotiation — ever," he said in a brief statement. "The purpose of the meeting was clear to everyone who was actually negotiating."

However, Venezuela's interest in negotiating for Saab was corroborated by another individual with knowledge of the proposal on the condition of anonymity to discuss the private diplomatic effort. The AP also saw text messages from right after the meeting between some of the organizers — but not Grenell — in which follow-up steps for a deal to return the American prisoners is discussed.

Rivera's account raises fresh questions about the nature and scope of the back-channel diplomacy. It's also likely to add pressure on the Biden administration, which is already facing criticism for not doing enough to bring home Americans wrongfully detained abroad, to pursue a prisoner deal of its own with Maduro — something it has resisted until now.

Among new details to emerge: Grenell was joined in Mexico City by Erik Prince, the founder of controversial security firm Blackwater and whose sister, Betsy DeVos, was Trump's education secretary.

In Rivera's telling, he was asked to get involved by Raul Gorrín, a Venezuelan businessman who had been trying to bridge differences between the U.S. and Maduro before being indicted himself on charges of bribing top Maduro officials. Rivera, a Republican who served a single term in Congress, said he was a translator in encrypted conference calls over Wickr, a messaging app, ahead of the meeting in which Gorrín explained to Prince that Maduro was willing to swap the Americans for Saab.

"Both Gorrín in Spanish and me in English made it crystal clear to Prince repeatedly that the purpose of the meeting was to discuss freeing the Americans in exchange for Saab," Rivera said.

Saab had been arrested a few months earlier in Cape Verde en route to Iran and was fighting tooth and nail against extradition to the U.S. He was joined by Maduro's government, which considers the previously low-profile Colombian-born businessman a diplomatic envoy and keeper of state secrets that, if revealed, would compromise Venezuela's national security.

According to Rivera, after several back-and-forth calls Prince arranged for him and Grenell to travel to Mexico City to meet with Jorge Rodríguez, a top aide to Maduro and now president of the pro-government congress. In 2019, Prince traveled to Caracas to meet with Rodríguez's sister, Vice President Delcy Rodríguez, cementing his role as one of the few American interlocutors to the otherwise isolated Maduro government.

Rivera said he was supposed to be present for the meeting as well, but got delayed while making a connection in Houston. When he arrived to the Mexican capital, the meeting at The Westin hotel had already blown up over Grenell's insistence that any prisoner swap be accompanied with an exit plan for Maduro, Rivera said.

In a subsequent call, Prince told Gorrín "that the Citgo 6 were simply not valuable enough to the Trump administration for a straight prisoner swap for Saab," Rivera said.

It's not clear how seriously the Trump administration considered Maduro's offer — if at all. The trip to Mexico City surprised some senior Trump officials, who learned about it from reporters and worried it could undermine efforts to undermine Maduro through sanctions and ongoing investigations into corruption.

Unlike prisoner exchanges the U.S. has recently carried out with other hostile governments, from Cuba to Iran, Saab hasn't yet been tried for his alleged crimes. Moreover, his arrest was the result of a years-long effort by law enforcement that had been cheered on by foreign policy hawks and influential Venezuelan exiles in Florida for whom Saab — the architect of efforts to circumvent U.S. sanctions — was a trophy too valuable to give up before he was behind bars in the U.S.

"There was no way we were going to swap for Saab. Grenell and the others had absolutely no authority to offer that," said Elliott Abrams, who served as the U.S. special representative for Venezuela under Trump. "The move to detain and try Saab was an all-of-government interagency effort. These freelancers represented no one but themselves."

Rodríguez and Prince didn't respond to requests for comment. A U.S. government official told the AP the State Department "is not in a position to comment on reports of deliberations of a prior administration."

Rivera said he decided to get involved in the prisoner swap because he believed Gorrín had played a positive behind the scenes role securing the release from jail of Venezuela's most prominent anti-governmental activist, Leopoldo López. He also knew a few of the jailed Citgo executives from his time as a consultant working for another U.S. subsidiary of PDVSA.

That work, for which Rivera was to be paid $50 million, is the subject of a lawsuit by Maduro's opponents, who now run Citgo and other PDVSA operations in the U.S. They say Rivera never performed any meaningful work. Rivera, a target of past state and federal investigations into improper campaign dealings, has countersued, arguing breach of contract.

Whatever the extent of Trump's closed-door dealings with Maduro, families of nine Americans jailed in Caracas are less hopeful about the prospects for a deal under the Biden administration.

Unlike Trump, who regularly hosted former American captives at the White House and whose unconventional foreign policy gave a boost to informal hostage negotiations, the Biden team has so far been short on high-profile detainee releases.

"Mr. President, we are frustrated by the lack of action by your administration," the families wrote to Biden in a letter this month. "The people-in-charge of protecting and returning wrongfully detained Americans have not even taken the basic first step of directly engaging with the Venezuelans that are holding our loved ones."

The lack of urgency is especially troubling to the family of José Pereira, the former president of Citgo, who over the weekend was rushed to a private clinic in Caracas for emergency treatment for a cardiac condition that his family says has worsened since his detention four years ago.

Pereira and the other Citgo executives were sentenced last year to long prison sentences over a never-executed plan to refinance billions in the oil company's bonds. They're being held at Caracas' infamous Helicoide prison along with two former Green Berets — Mark Denman and Airan Berry — who were arrested for their involvement in a confusing plot to overthrow Maduro. Also detained is former U.S. Marine

Matthew Heath, who is being held on weapons charges.

Former New Mexico Gov. Bill Richardson, a veteran hostage negotiator who has traveled to Caracas to push for the American prisoners' release, said the new details of the Mexico City meeting should serve as a wake up call.

"My involvement and discussions with the Venezuelans and Maduro on behalf of the families of the American prisoners leads me to believe Maduro is interested in negotiating for their release," he said. "I think the Biden Administration should approach this with an open mind."

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AP writer Eric Tucker in Washington contributed to this report.

Follow Goodman on Twitter: @APJoshGoodman

Prayer for kidnappers deeply rooted in mission group's faith

By PETER SMITH Associated Press

When Amish gather for worship each week, they regularly sing the solemn, German-dialect hymns that their spiritual forebears composed nearly five centuries ago in a condition akin to that of 17 missionaries recently kidnapped in Haiti — captivity.

Those hymns emerged from miserable prison conditions experienced by early Anabaptists — founders of the movement carried on today by Amish, Mennonites, Brethren and others — and their words extolled the virtues of loving one's tormentors and persevering at risk of persecution, even martyrdom.

So when kidnappers in Haiti abducted 12 adult missionaries and five of their children, including an infant, it wasn't surprising that those sharing that Christian tradition would draw on these values as they joined around-the-clock prayer vigils.

The words of the captors' families and supporters, while holding out hope for the safety of the hostages, put a heavy emphasis on different themes: "Love your enemies." "Forgive them." "Pray for the kidnappers."

One joint statement by the hostages' families even spoke of the situation in welcoming terms. "God has given our loved ones the unique opportunity to live out our Lord's command to, 'love your enemies, bless them that curse you, do good to them that hate you,'" said the statement, issued by Christian Aid Ministries. It is based in Ohio's Amish heartland of Holmes County, and has operated in Haiti and other lands for nearly four decades.

Such statements may seem surprising, even callous, to those who might expect the prayers to focus on the well-being of loved ones.

But these statements are deeply rooted in the unique religious tradition of conservative Anabaptists — a group that shares some beliefs with mainstream evangelical Christians, such as salvation through Jesus, but also has stark differences.

Conservative Anabaptists largely seek to live separate from mainstream society and are distinctive for their plain dress, with women wearing head coverings. They emphasize a "non-resistance" to evil and violence, a stance that goes far beyond their refusal to serve in the military. They also have a deep tradition of martyrdom – well-earned, since their forebears suffered fierce persecutions from their 16th century Reformation origins, when they were deemed too radical to Catholics and fellow Protestants alike.

Anabaptists in particular draw on the biblical Sermon on the Mount, which contains some of Jesus' most radical and counter-cultural sayings — to love enemies, live simply, bless persecutors, turn the other cheek, endure sufferings joyfully.

"Living out the Sermon on the Mount principles is one of the key tenets of our faith," said Wayne Wengerd, a member of a steering committee that represents the Amish in church-state relations. "That is something that we take literally."

Those principles mandate "we do good to those who hurt or persecute us, and we pray for not only those that are likeminded but those that are not yet within the faith," he said.

Wengerd, who lives in Wayne County, adjacent to Holmes, said it would be a misunderstanding to view such a mindset as callous to the real suffering involved with the kidnappings.

"People are still concerned, they are aware, they talk about it, they pray and of course hope for a good outcome," he said. At the same time, "We realize as Christians, as followers of Christ, there will be persecution."

The missionary group was kidnapped Oct. 16 while returning from a visit to an orphanage supported by CAM. The 400 Mawozo gang has threatened to kill the 16 Americans and one Canadian if ransom demands aren't met.

CAM says those kidnapped are from Amish, Mennonite and other conservative Anabaptist communities in Ohio, Michigan, Wisconsin, Tennessee, Pennsylvania, Oregon and Ontario. Conservative Anabaptists make up the core of CAM's missionary staff, donors and volunteers.

Wengerd said Anabaptists draw on resources such as the "Ausbund," a hymnal that includes the 16th century prison hymns, and the book, "Martyrs Mirror," for "reminding us of the cost of discipleship in Christ's kingdom."

"Martyrs Mirror" tells of hundreds of Anabaptists and other Christians who died for their faith. One entry tells of Dirk Willems, a 16th century Dutch Anabaptist who was fleeing authorities in winter — but turned around to saved the life of a pursuer who had fallen through the ice. Willems was arrested and executed anyway. His example of sacrificial love for an enemy is still widely taught.

An often-cited modern example of Anabaptist values is the response of the Amish community around Nickel Mines, Pennsylvania, after a gunman killed five Amish schoolgirls and wounded five more in 2006 before taking his own life. Local Amish immediately expressed forgiveness for the killer and supported his widow. "If we do not forgive, how can we expect to be forgiven?" the Amish leaders said in a statement.

Marcus Yoder, executive director of the Amish & Mennonite Heritage Center in Holmes County, said he often tells the story of Dirk Willems to groups touring the museum. One tour included a survivor of the Nickel Mines shooting.

"She cried and cried and cried," Yoder recalled. "Her father had used the story to talk to his own family about forgiveness. These pieces of our history really do reside a long time in our worldview and theology."

Yoder, a Mennonite minister, said these examples shouldn't obscure the ordeal of those whose loved ones were kidnapped. "I cannot imagine the anguish that the families are going through," he said.

Steven Nolt, professor of History and Anabaptist Studies at Elizabethtown College in Pennsylvania, recalled attending one of the Nickel Mines funerals in which the preacher said within a span of a few minutes, "We don't understand but we just accept what happened as God's will" and "It's not God's will that people shoot other people."

That seems contradictory, said Nolt. But it reflects a profound belief in "divine providence" — that believers can't always understand why things happen, but they "can know what God wants and how humans are to live."

Ron Marks, pastor of Hart Dunkard Brethren Church in Hart, Michigan, whose members include a parent with children who are among the hostages, said it is "our Lord's command" to pray for one's persecutors and seek their conversion. "That would be the ultimate positive outcome of this ordeal," he said.

Many in the outside world have valorized Anabaptists' beliefs in forgiveness.

But it has a dark side, say advocates for victims of sexual abuse in Anabaptist communities. They say victims and their families are often forced to reconcile with abusers after the latter make a confession and undergo a brief period of discipline.

Hope Anne Dueck, co-founder of A Better Way — an Ohio-based group that provides education on sexual abuse and advocates for victims in Anabaptist and other church settings — said the current focus needs to be on the safety of the hostages.

But the kidnappings follow by two years the eruption of a sexual-abuse scandal involving one of CAM's former longtime missionaries to Haiti, Jeriah Mast. He was sentenced in Holmes County in 2019 to nine years in prison for having earlier abused two boys in Ohio, and his judge said at his sentencing that Mast had also confessed to molesting at least 30 boys in Haiti.

The current hostage crisis "has caused a lot of pain in the survivor and advocacy community for those who have experienced sexual abuse or grieved what has happened to Jeriah's victims," Dueck said.

She strongly endorsed the current prayer chain on behalf of the hostages but lamented: "As far as I know, there were no 24/7, around-the-clock prayer chains for Jeriah's victims."

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Associated Press religion coverage receives support from the Lilly Endowment through The Conversation U.S. The AP is solely responsible for this content.

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 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 lock-ups, 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.'"

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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 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.'"

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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."

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, cofounder 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.

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."

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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.

"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."

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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."

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

UN, US officials urge action to avert climate disaster

By FRANK JORDANS Associated Press

BERLIN (AP) — The U.N.'s top human rights official and U.S. President Joe Biden's climate envoy called Thursday for countries to step up the fight against global warming, describing it as an issue of sheer survival for humankind.

In a statement ahead of the U.N. climate summit in Glasgow, the global body's High Commissioner for Human Rights said "only urgent, priority action can mitigate or avert disasters that will have huge — and in some cases lethal — impacts on all of us, especially our children and grandchildren."

Michelle Bachelet urged governments taking part in the Oct. 31-Nov. 13 climate meeting to make good on pledges of financial aid to help poor countries that are most at risk to reduce their greenhouse gas emissions and cope with the impacts of global warming.

"This is a human rights obligation and a matter of survival," she said. "Without a healthy planet to live on, there will be no human rights — and if we continue on our current path — there may be no humans."

Her words were echoed by U.S. climate envoy John Kerry, who warned of the dramatic impacts that exceeding the 2015 Paris accord's goal on global warming will have on nature and people.

"Devastating consequences follow if we exceed the 1.5 degrees (Celsius, 2.7 Fahrenheit)," he said in a speech Thursday at the London School of Economics. "And we are now already just about at 1.2 C."

"No one is exaggerating when they call this an existential threat. Just ask the people in the Marshall Islands, Fiji or in the vulnerable nations of the world," said Kerry.

Still, the diplomat tried to strike an upbeat note ahead of the summit, which brings together tens of thousands of officials, scientists and climate activists.

"I head to Glasgow as an optimist," he said, noting that governments have put forward more ambitious climate plans than ever before.

Kerry cited recent commitments by the Biden administration for the United States to aim for "net zero" greenhouse gas emissions by mid-century, similar moves by other nations and business, and a growing awareness of the urgency of tackling climate change.

Citing a recent U.N. report highlighting the gap between countries' pledges and what scientists say is needed to cap warming at 1.5 C by the end of the century, Kerry said particular responsibility lies with the top 20 economies of the world. Many of those countries will be gathering for a G-20 meeting in Rome this weekend, where climate is expected to be a major topic.

Kerry noted that China, the world's top polluter, is alone emitting about 80% of the greenhouse gas the entire world can afford to pump into the atmosphere if it wants to meet the Paris goal.

Beijing has said it plans to peak emissions before 2030 and hit net zero by 2060 — a decade later than the United States and the European Union, which have historically contributed the most to global warming.

Kerry said Glasgow "is not the end of the road" and countries must keep raising their targets over the coming years.

A report released Thursday by climate think tanks says changes in sectors from power generation to industry and agriculture need to speed up.

It looked at 40 indicators and "the bad news is right now that none of them are on track," said report co-author Kelly Levin, the chief of Science, Data and Systems Change at the Bezos Earth Fund.

"The bright spots are few and far between, to be honest," Levin said. "And for the large majority of the indicators, even when we're seeing change headed in the right direction, one would need to accelerate that pace of change, and by a factor, often times, of more than double."

Separately, the Red Cross federation said climate and weather-related disasters have caused more than

30 million people to flee their homes in 2020 — three times more than the number of people displaced by war.

These included countries such as Iraq, Yemen and Mozambique, but also rich nations such as Germany, which this year saw devastating floods in the west.

"While climate change affects everyone, it has a disproportionate impact on the world's poorest people, those who are contributing the least to climate change," Red Cross Secretary-General Jagan Chapagain said in the report.

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Seth Borenstein in Washington contributed to this report.

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Follow AP's coverage of the climate summit at http://apnews.com/hub/climate

How it happened: Inside movie set where Baldwin's gun fired

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.

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.

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

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 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 want to be extra cautious: Set up candy bowls away from front doors.

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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?

EU chief calls for leadership at climate 'moment of truth'

BRUSSELS (AP) — The European Union's chief executive called Thursday for a show of climate leadership ahead of two major international meetings focused on curbing global warming, warning that world leaders face "a moment of truth."

"What we need is, first of all, leadership," European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen said before she heads to a weekend summit in Rome of the Group of 20 most developed nations. The 26th U.N. Climate Change Conference, known as COP26, starts Sunday in Glasgow, Scotland.

"We need leadership for credible commitments for decarbonization to reach the goal of net-zero mid-century. But we also need sufficient commitments to really cut the emissions this decade," von der Leyen told reporters in Brussels.

A new report by the U.N. Environment Programme has found that fresh pledges by governments to cut emissions are raising hopes but aren't strict enough to keep global warming from exceeding 1.5 degrees Celsius (2.7 degrees Fahrenheit) by the end of the century.

It concluded that recent announcements by dozens of countries, including the 27-nation EU, to aim for "net-zero" emissions by 2050 could, if fully implemented, limit a global temperature rise to 2.2 degrees Celsius (4 F). That's closer but still above the less stringent target agreed upon in the 2015 Paris climate accord of capping global warming at 2 degrees Celsius (3.6 F) compared to pre-industrial times.

Von der Leyen said the world remains "on a very dangerous course" and that leaders must take immediate steps to limit the global temperature rise to less than 2 degrees.

"It's not a question of 30-40 years. It's now. It's this decade where we have to get better, otherwise we risk to reach irreversible tipping points," she said.

Leaders, diplomats, scientists and environmental activists meet in Glasgow from Oct. 31-Nov. 12 to discuss how countries and businesses can adjust their targets to avert the more extreme climate change scenarios that would result in a significant sea-level rise, more frequent wild weather and more droughts.

On Tuesday, U.N. Secretary-General Antonio Guterres warned that global warming could pose "an existential threat to humanity." He said that he would use his trip to the G20 summit to press all countries, including major emerging economies such as China, to do more on climate change.

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

Groton Daily Independent
Friday, Oct. 29, 2021 ~ Vol. 30 - No. 114 ~ 90 of 91

Today in History

By The Associated Press undefined

Today in History

Today is Friday, Oct. 29, the 302nd day of 2021. There are 63 days left in the year.

Today's Highlight in History:

On Oct. 29, 2018, a new-generation Boeing jet operated by the Indonesian budget airline Lion Air crashed in the Java Sea minutes after takeoff from Jakarta, killing all 189 people on board; it was the first of two deadly crashes involving the 737 Max, causing the plane to be grounded around the world for nearly two years as Boeing worked on software changes to a flight-control system.

On this date:

In 1618, Sir Walter Raleigh, the English courtier, military adventurer and poet, was executed in London for treason.

In 1929, "Black Tuesday" descended upon the New York Stock Exchange. Prices collapsed amid panic selling and thousands of investors were wiped out as America's "Great Depression" began.

In 1956, during the Suez Canal crisis, Israel invaded Egypt's Sinai Peninsula. "The Huntley-Brinkley Report" premiered as NBC's nightly television newscast.

In 1957, former MGM studio boss Louis B. Mayer died in Los Angeles at age 75.

In 1960, a chartered plane carrying the California Polytechnic State University football team crashed on takeoff from Toledo, Ohio, killing 22 of the 48 people on board.

In 1987, following the confirmation defeat of Robert H. Bork to serve on the U.S. Supreme Court, President Ronald Reagan announced his choice of Douglas H. Ginsburg, a nomination that fell apart over revelations of Ginsburg's previous marijuana use. Jazz great Woody Herman died in Los Angeles at age 74.

In 1994, gunman Francisco Martin Duran fired more than two dozen shots from a semiautomatic rifle at the White House. (Duran was later convicted of trying to assassinate President Bill Clinton and was sentenced to 40 years in prison.)

In 1998, Sen. John Glenn, at age 77, roared back into space aboard the shuttle Discovery, retracing the trail he'd blazed for America's astronauts 36 years earlier.

In 2004, four days before Election Day in the U.S., Osama bin Laden, in a videotaped statement, directly admitted for the first time that he'd ordered the September 11 attacks and told Americans "the best way to avoid another Manhattan" was to stop threatening Muslims' security.

In 2012, Superstorm Sandy slammed ashore in New Jersey and slowly marched inland, devastating coastal communities and causing widespread power outages; the storm and its aftermath were blamed for at least 182 deaths in the U.S.

In 2015, Paul Ryan was elected the 54th speaker of the U.S. House of Representatives.

In 2017, all but 10 members of the Houston Texans took a knee during the national anthem, reacting to a remark from team owner Bob McNair to other NFL owners that "we can't have the inmates running the prison."

Ten years ago: A Taliban suicide bomber rammed a vehicle loaded with explosives into an armored NATO bus on a busy thoroughfare in Kabul, killing 17 people, including 12 Americans. A "white Halloween" storm with record-setting snowfalls brought down trees across the northeastern U.S., knocking out power to millions; 39 deaths were blamed on the weather. Joe Paterno broke Eddie Robinson's record for victories by a Division I coach with No. 409 in Penn State's sloppy 10-7 win over Illinois.

Five years ago: Hillary Clinton lashed out at the FBI's handling of a new email review, leading a chorus of Democratic leaders who declared the bureau's actions just days before the election were "unprecedented" and "deeply troubling."

One year ago: The Commerce Department estimated that the U.S. economy grew at a sizzling 33.1% annual rate in the July-September quarter — by far the largest quarterly gain on record — rebounding

from an epic plunge in the spring, when the coronavirus closed businesses and threw tens of millions out of work. Six people were dead and millions were without power after Hurricane Zeta tore across the South, leaving shattered buildings and thousands of downed trees as it weakened to a tropical storm. An attacker identified as an Islamic extremist who had recently arrived from Tunisia stabbed three people to death at a church in the French city of Nice before being seriously wounded by police. The Vatican ended Pope Francis' general audiences with the public amid a surge in coronavirus cases in Italy and a confirmed infection at the previous week's encounter.

Today's Birthdays: Former Liberian President Ellen Johnson Sirleaf is 83. Country singer Lee Clayton is 79. Rock musician Denny Laine is 77. Singer Melba Moore is 76. Actor Richard Dreyfuss is 74. Actor Kate Jackson is 73. Country musician Steve Kellough (Wild Horses) is 65. Actor Dan Castellaneta (TV: "The Simpsons") is 64. Comic strip artist Tom Wilson ("Ziggy") is 64. Actor Finola Hughes is 62. Singer Randy Jackson is 60. Rock musician Peter Timmins (Cowboy Junkies) is 56. Actor Joely Fisher is 54. Rapper Paris is 54. Actor Rufus Sewell is 54. Actor Grayson McCouch (mih-KOOCH') is 53. Rock singer SA Martinez (311) is 52. Actor Winona Ryder is 50. Actor Tracee Ellis Ross is 49. Actor Gabrielle Union is 49. Actor Trevor Lissauer is 48. Olympic gold medal bobsledder Vonetta Flowers is 48. Actor Milena Govich is 45. Actor Jon Abrahams is 44. Actor Brendan Fehr is 44. Actor Ben Foster is 41. Rock musician Chris Baio (Vampire Weekend) is 37. Actor Janet Montgomery is 36. Actor India Eisley is 28.