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UpComing Events

Friday, Nov. 19

McGovern Debate & Oral Interp at Mitchell

Saturday, Nov. 20

McGovern Debate & Oral Interp at Mitchell

1 p.m.: JH GBB at Mobridge (7th at 1 p.m., 8th grade to follow)

Sunday, Nov. 21

7 p.m.: Snow Queen Contest at GHS Gym

Wed-Fri., Nov. 24-26: No School - Thanksgiving Vacation

Groton Prairie Mixed

Nov. 18 Team Standings: Chipmunks 8, Cheetahs 7, Foxes 7, Coyotes 6, Shih Tzus 5, Jackelopes 3

Men's High Games: Roger Spanier 257, Lance Frohling 202, Brody Sombke 197

Women's High Games: Sue Stanley 237, Nicole Kassube 175, Darci Spanier 170

Men's High Series: Roger Spanier 588, Lance Frohling 582, Tony Madsen 521

Women's High Series: Sue Stanley 508, Nicole Kassube 444, Karen Spanier 413

Groton Daily Independent
PO Box 34, Groton SD 57445
Paul's Cell/Text: 605-397-7460

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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Wolves Earn 76-67 Victory at South Dakota Mines

Rapid City, S.D. – The Northern State women’s basketball team secured a 76-67 road win at South Dakota Mines on Thursday night. In the win the Wolves saw all five starters score in double figures and combined to score 74 of the teams 76 points.

THE QUICK DETAILS

Final Score: NSU 76, SDM 67

Records: NSU 2-1, SDM 0-3

Attendance: 250

HOW IT HAPPENED

Northern State got off to a slow start in the game trailing 11-4 with 4:52 remaining at the first quarter media timeout

The Wolves scored four consecutive points to end the first quarter and tied the game at 15 with a layup by Laurie Rogers

The Hardrockers once again had a strong stretch of play in the opening minutes of the second quarter, using a 9-3 run to jump out to a 24-18 lead with 7:42 left in the period

Northern used a 15-0 run midway through the second period to take a 35-28 lead with 1:47 to go before halftime

A layup by Haley Johnson with 38 seconds remaining gave NSU a 37-33 halftime lead

Rianna Fillipi took the ball the length of the court on the final possession of the third quarter, and her driving layup gave the Wolves a six point lead entering the fourth quarter

The last second layup swung the momentum the Wolves direction as Rogers made layups on back-to-back possessions to start the fourth, pushing the lead to double digits for the first time all game

With 3:35 remaining, two free throws by Rogers gave Northern their largest lead of the game at 16

A late 7-0 run for Mines cut the lead back to single digits with under a minute remaining, but 6-8 shooting at the free throw line in the final minute secured a nine point victory for Northern State

NORTHERN STATE STATISTICAL STANDOUTS

Haley Johnson: 16 points, 7 rebounds, 3 steals

Lexi Roe: 15 points, 7 rebounds, 4 steals

Kailee Oliverson: 15 points, 5 rebounds, 2 assists

UP NEXT

The Northern State women’s basketball team will end their stretch of four consecutive road games when they travel to take on MSU Moorhead on Tuesday night. The NSIC opener is set to tip off at 5:30 p.m. from the Nemzek Fieldhouse in Moorhead, Minnesota.

South Dakota Medical Cannabis Program Issues First Patients Cards

PIERRE, S.D.— Today, in accordance with SDCL 34-20G and the unwavering commitment of Government Noem and the South Dakota Department of Health to deliver a safe and responsible medical cannabis program, the first medical cannabis patient cards were printed and issued. The first card issued went to a resident of Day County. Following its issuance, the following statement was released:

“Today marks the culmination of months of hard work in preparation for the kickoff of a responsive and efficient medical cannabis program for eligible South Dakotans,” said Geno Adams, Medical Cannabis Program Administrator. “In the months ahead, we will continue to ensure that patients and their caregivers, can continue to obtain medical cannabis permits in accordance with their written certifications.”

Patients, caregivers, and medical providers who wish to get more information on how to participate in South Dakota’s medical cannabis program can visit: [MedCannabis.sd.gov](https://www.southdakota.gov/medcannabis). The site features a ‘Frequently Asked Questions’ section, as well as a section for establishments, that is continuously updated by the Department.

All patients and caregivers who apply and are issued a medical cannabis card will also receive a flyer with helpful tips on the importance of safe and responsible storage of their medical cannabis at their homes. To view the flyer, go to the next page.

MEDICAL CANNABIS Safe Storage

Storing Medical Cannabis Safely

If you use medical cannabis, it's important to store it safely away from children and pets. Just like any other drug, medication, or household chemical, cannabis and edibles must be kept secure and out of reach.

Safe storage helps ensure that only the certified patient or designated caregiver has access. Furthermore, proper storage inhibits mold and bacteria growth that may negatively impact health.

Keep Your Medical Cannabis Safe in a Lockbox

Kids, pets, or even curious visitors can get into medical cannabis if it's not locked up and out of sight. It's always best to keep cannabis in child-resistant packaging, and invest in a safe or lockbox to ensure the only person who can get to your medical cannabis is you.

If a child accidentally eats cannabis in any form, immediately contact a medical professional or call the poison control hotline (1-800-222-1222). Symptoms of an accidental cannabis poisoning include problems walking or sitting up, difficulty breathing, and becoming sleepy. If the reaction seems more severe, call 911 or go to an emergency room right away.

Talking to Your Kids About Medical Cannabis in the Home

When talking with your children about medications or other potentially harmful products, include medical cannabis in the conversation. Children should learn what medical cannabis looks like and know that only certified patients, or their designated caregiver(s), should access it.



Medical Cannabis Safe Storage Checklist

MY MEDICAL CANNABIS IS...

- In child-resistant packaging
- In a clearly labeled medicinal container
- In a locked cabinet or lockbox
- In the trunk while I am driving
- In a cool, dark place
- In a dry place
- In an airtight container
- Out of direct sunlight
- Away from heat sources
- In a glass or plastic container, not a plastic bag



REMEMBER: USE IT RESPONSIBLY.
STORE IT RESPONSIBLY.

medcannabis.sd.gov



For more information SCAN the above using your smartphone.

The Life of Larry Wheeting



The funeral service for Larry L. Wheeting, 81, of Groton, SD will be 10:30 a.m., Monday, November 22, at Groton United Methodist Church, Groton. Pastor Brandon Dunham will officiate. Burial will be at Bath Memorial Cemetery, Bath SD under the direction of Paetznick-Garness Funeral Chapel, Groton. Larry died Wednesday, November 17, at Avantara Nursing Home in Groton, following a long battle with Lewy Body Dementia.

Visitation will be from 5:00-6:30 p.m., Sunday, followed by a prayer service at 6:30 p.m. at Paetznick-Garness Funeral Chapel.

Larry Lee Wheeting was born February 8, 1940 to John and Doris (Jones) Wheeting in Aberdeen, SD. Larry spent most of his childhood on the family farm north of Bath and attended Bath School. He graduated with the class of 1958 and attended Northern State College for a short period.

Larry was united in marriage to Sharon Hofer on November 21, 1958. They lived the early years of marriage mainly at Bath, SD. They had three children while living at Bath: Teresa, Cheryl and John. Larry and Sharon moved to Fargo in May of 1980 and later moved to Yankton, SD. They moved back to Aberdeen/Groton area in 1990. Weekends when kids were at home were spent

with friends and family showing horses throughout North and South Dakota. Later in life, he enjoyed owning race horses and following their training and watching them race. Larry cherished these memories.

Larry and his father started Wheeting Farm Service in 1960, specializing in liquid fertilizer sales and application. In 1963, Wheeting Farm Service sold to South Dakota Wheat Growers, where Larry served as Feed and Seed Division Manager until 1979. Larry then went to work for Interstate Seed in Fargo, ND. This opportunity allowed him to travel throughout North America, Europe, and Japan. Larry became General Manager at Yankton Farmers Cooperative in 1986 and moved to Yankton, SD. In 1990 they moved back to Groton area where he ran his own seed business, most recently LW Sales, Inc. He specialized in small grains for cover crop and the bird food industry. He was proud that his son, John, and granddaughter Meagan continued the business upon his retirement in 2018. Larry had many long-term friendships made throughout his years of working in agriculture.

Larry was a past president of the Brown County Fair Board and the South Dakota Seed Trade Association. He served on the South Dakota Board for the Blind and Visually Impaired. He enjoyed serving the Groton Community on the Chamber of Commerce, Kiwanis, and Lions. He served for many years as a 4-H leader in Brown County.

Grateful for having shared Larry's life are his wife Sharon Wheeting, of Groton, his children: Teresa Kaye Sharp, deceased, Cheryl (Randy) Walker of Wall, SD, John (Chris) Wheeting of Groton. Additional surviving family includes his sisters, Gayle Aamold of Hartford, SD and Karna (Frank) Smith of Dallas, TX, his in-laws, Ed (Margaret) Hofer of Bath, SD and Patricia (Ted) Corley of Payson, AZ, cousins, Dennis, Ron, and Lucian Jones and Marion Miller of Colorado Springs, CO.

Larry and Sharon had 10 grandchildren: Riley (Lacey) Walker of Clarksville, TN, Tyler (Angela) Walker of Caputa, SD, Kirstin (Ben) Sweet of Bridger, MT, Meagan (Dylan) Stearns of Oakes, ND, Karri (Clay) Sweet of Billings, MT, Todd (Jaci) Sharp of Billings, MT, Amanda (Ryan) Kjerstad of Wall, SD, Lauren Wheeting of Groton, Abbie (Dustin) Robinson of Sioux Falls, Carly Wheeting of Aberdeen. They had 21 great-grandchildren.

Larry was preceded in death by his parents John and Doris, daughter Teresa, in-laws, Everett and Marjorie Hofer and niece Lisa Hofer.

Memorials will be forwarded to Groton Area School Backpack Program and Lions Club Global Vision Program.

The Life of Robert "Bob" Meister



Funeral services for Robert "Bob" Meister, 78, of Groton will be 10:30 a.m., Saturday, November 20th at Emmanuel Lutheran Church, Groton. Pastor Kari Foss will officiate. Burial will follow in Union Cemetery under the direction of Paetznick-Garness Funeral Chapel.

Visitation will be held at the church from 5-7 p.m. on Friday with a prayer service at 7:00 p.m.

Bob passed away November 16, 2021 at Bethesda Home of Aberdeen.

Robert was born on December 12, 1942 in Groton to Erwin and Georgia (Gibbs) Meister. He attended school in Groton, graduating in 1961. Bob was united in marriage with Shirley Stolsmark on August 8, 1965 in Langford. He was employed with Servall Linens for many years before beginning a career at James Valley Telecommunications in August of 1983. Bob worked primarily as a lineman prior to his retirement in December of 2006. Over the years, he and Shirley also flipped 13 homes in Groton.

Bob was a member of Emmanuel Lutheran Church, Groton. He also served on the Lion's Club and was a 36 1/2 year volunteer with the Groton Fire Department. Bob enjoyed collecting all things John Deere and attending auction sales.

Celebrating his life is his wife, Shirley of Groton, his four children, Sherri Profeta (Fred Hockhalter) of Groton, Rhonda (Steve) Foote of Loveland, CO, Randy (Kelli) Meister of Aberdeen, Amber (Jeff) Miller of Las Vegas, NV, ten grandchildren: Justin (Katlyn) Perkins, Jordan Perkins (Ana Medrano), Madison (Phil) Vornhagen, Kate Profeta, Nicole (Jared) Embury, Alex (Kaitlynn) Foote, Riley Meister, Reece Meister, Ryker Meister and Ava Miller. He is also survived by great-grandchildren: Hallie Perkins, Hayden Perkins, the Medrano family, Charlotte Foote and siblings Ila (Darrell) Jesme, Mervyn (Linda) Meister, Maxine Haywood and Terry (Bette) Meister.

Preceding him in death were his parents, two infant children, Randy & Rodney Meister and siblings, Jackie, Jodean, Marian, Jerald, Donnie, Charles, Dale, James and Denny.

Honorary Casketbearers will be Members of the Groton Fire Department.

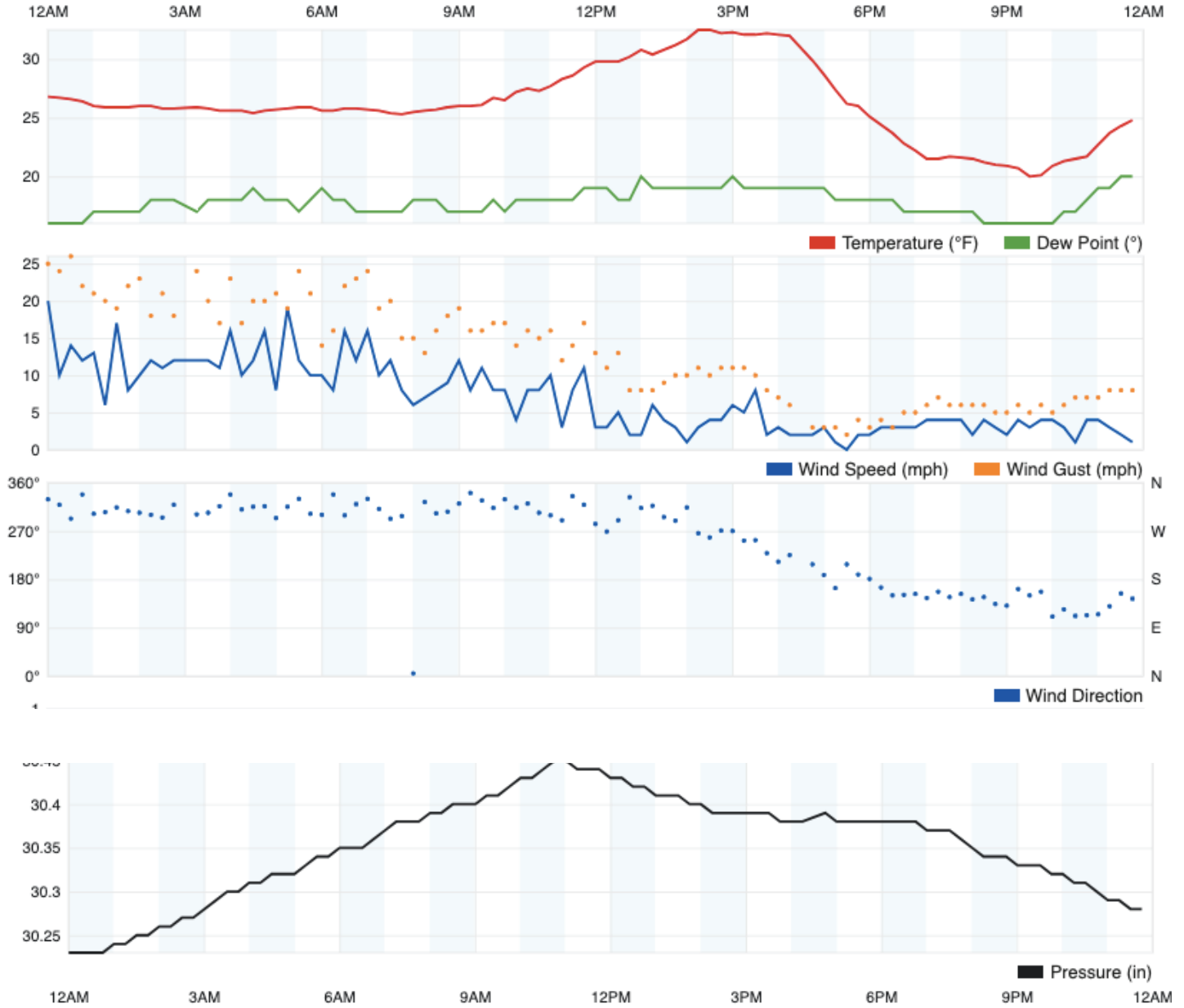
Casketbearers will be Bob's Grandsons.

Memorials may be directed to Groton Fire & Rescue, PO Box 352, Groton, SD 57445 or the Aberdeen Bethesda Foundation, 1224 S. High Street, Aberdeen, SD 57401.

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Yesterday's Groton Weather Graphs



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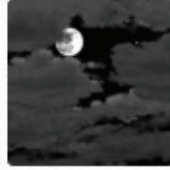
Today



Mostly Cloudy and Breezy then Mostly Sunny

High: 46 °F

Tonight



Increasing Clouds

Low: 25 °F

Saturday



Partly Sunny

High: 37 °F

Saturday Night



Partly Cloudy

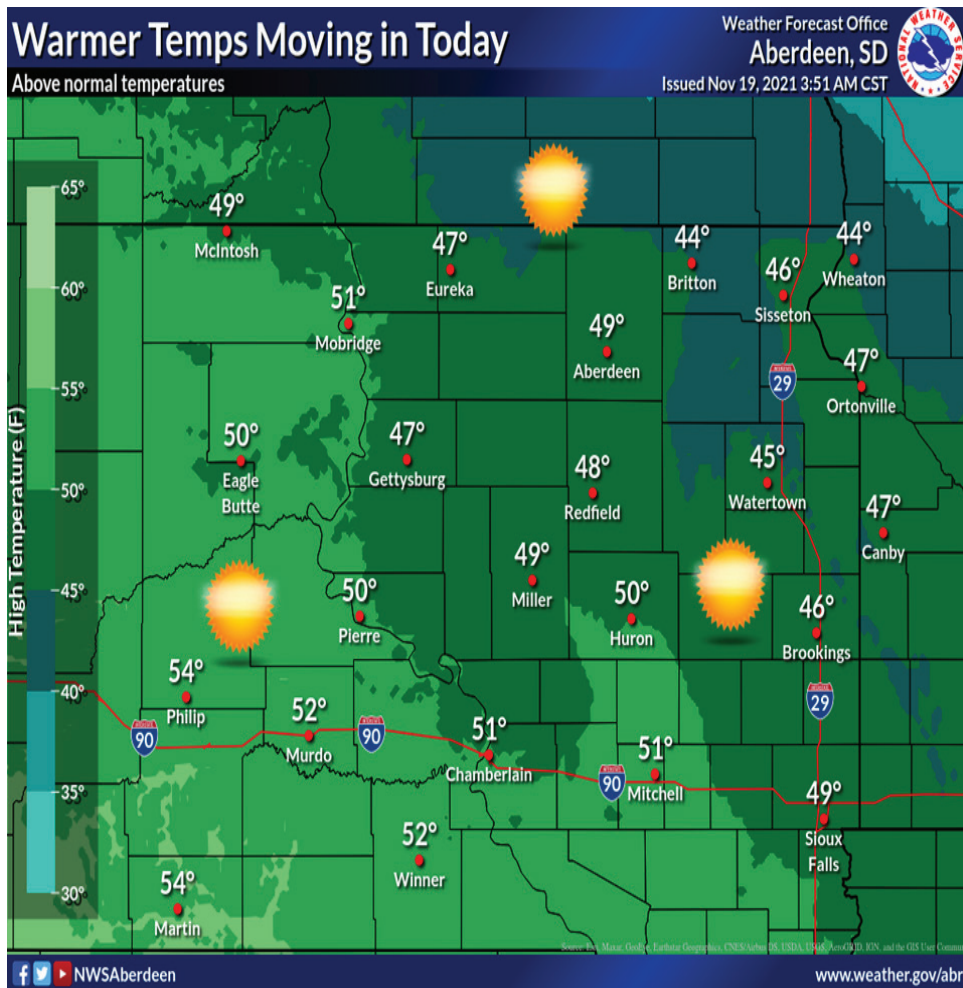
Low: 20 °F

Sunday



Mostly Sunny and Blustery

High: 31 °F



Breezy and gusty southerly winds this morning will usher in warmer temperatures today. By later today, winds will subside as a weak surface trough moves into the region. Passing high clouds will move from west to east over the region today as high temperatures rise into the mid 40s to low 50s for most areas.

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Today in Weather History

November 19, 1981: A storm system moved from southeast Nebraska through Iowa on the 18th and spread rain and sleet as well as a few thunderstorms into southern Minnesota. Rain and sleet began changing over to snow during the afternoon on the 18th and continued through the 19th. The most substantial snowfall was in the Minneapolis area. The 10.4 inches of snow reported from the National Weather Service office in the Twin Cities was the heaviest snowfall recorded at the office since March 22nd, to the 23rd, 1965 when 13.6 inches fell. The storm knocked out power and phones to many in the Twin Cities metropolitan area. Damage was also done to the Humber H. Humphrey Metrodome, where the weight of the heavy snow caused the newly inflated, fabric dome collapsed and ripped.

November 19, 1996: Widespread freezing rain spread a layer of ice across a large area before changing over to snow during November 19-20. Snowfall amounts were 1 to 3 inches in central South Dakota, 3 to 7 inches across north central South Dakota, 5 to 6 inches in west central Minnesota, and 4 to 12 inches across northeast South Dakota. Travel was difficult, and several schools were closed or delayed. Mail delivery was also slowed or postponed for a day or two. Several, mainly minor accidents, resulting in several minor injuries, occurred as a result of the ice and snow covered roads. Two Milbank buses slid into ditches. Strong north winds led to near-blizzard conditions across northeast South Dakota on the 20th. Some snowfall totals included; 12.0 inches in Clear Lake and near Milbank; 10.1 inches near Mellette; 9.0 inches in Browns Valley; 8.3 inches near Big Stone City; 8.0 inches in Faulkton; and 7.0 inches in Britton and Conde.

1921: The Columbia Gorge ice storm finally came to an end. In Oregon, 54 inches of snow, sleet, and glaze blocked the Columbia River Highway at The Dalles. Apart from traffic on the river itself, all transportation between Walla Walla WA and Portland, OR came to a halt. Nine trains were stopped as railroads were blocked for several days.

1930: A rare, estimated F4 tornado struck the town of Bethany, Oklahoma. Between 9:30 am and 9:58 am CST, it moved north-northeast from 3 miles west of the Oklahoma City limits, and hit the eastern part of Bethany. About 110 homes and 700 other buildings, or about a fourth of the town, were damaged or destroyed. Near the end of the damage path, 3.5 miles northeast of Wiley Post Airfield, the tornado hit the Camel Creek School. Buildings blew apart just as the students were falling to the floor and looking for shelter, and five students and a teacher were killed. A total of 23 people were killed and another 150 injured, with 77 being seriously injured. Damage estimates were listed at \$500,000.

1957 - Nineteen inches of snow covered the ground at Cresco, IA, a record November snow depth for the state. (The Weather Channel)

1981 - An unusually early snowstorm struck the Twin Cities of Minnesota, with as much as a foot of snow reported. The weight of the heavy snow caused the newly inflated fabric dome of the Hubert Humphrey Metrodome in downtown Minneapolis to collapse and rip. (The Weather Channel)

1987 - A sharp cold front pushed across the Great Lakes Region and the Mississippi Valley. Northwest winds gusting to 50 mph in Iowa caused some property damage around Ottumwa, and wind chill readings reached 16 degrees below zero at Hibbing MN. Showers and thunderstorms over Florida produced 5.80 inches of rain in six hours at Cocoa Beach. (The National Weather Summary)

1988 - Strong thunderstorms developed during the mid morning hours and produced severe weather across eastern Texas and the Lower Mississippi Valley into the wee hours of the night. Thunderstorms spawned twenty-one tornadoes, including thirteen in Mississippi. One tornado killed two persons and injured eleven others at Nettleton MS, and another tornado injured eight persons at Tuscaloosa AL. Thunderstorms produced baseball size hail in east Texas and northern Louisiana, and Summit MS was deluged with six inches of rain in four hours. (The National Weather Summary) (Storm Data)

1989 - Gale force winds continued to produce squalls in the Lower Great Lakes Region early in the day. Snowfall totals in western New York State reached 24 inches in southern Lewis County, with 21 inches reported at Highmarket. Unseasonably warm weather prevailed across the Northern and Central Plains Region. Eight cities reported record high temperatures for the date, including Denver CO with a reading of 79 degrees. (Storm Data) (The National Weather Summary)

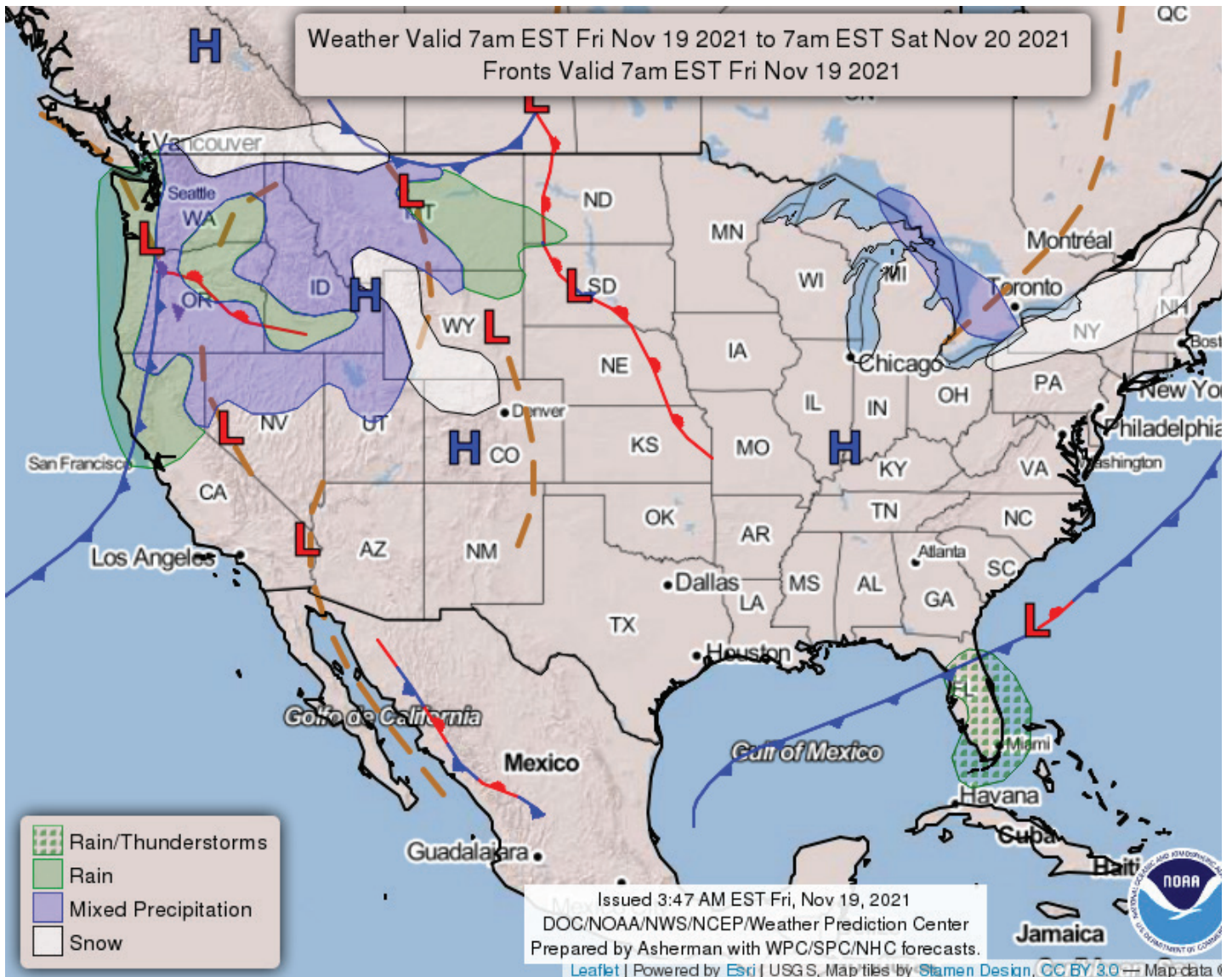
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Yesterday's Groton Weather Today's Info

High Temp: 32.5 °F at 2:30 PM
Low Temp: 20.0 °F at 09:30 AM
Wind: 26 mph at 12:30 AM
Precip: 0.00

Record High: 75° in 1908
Record Low: -11° in 1914
Average High: 41°F
Average Low: 18°F
Average Precip in Nov.: 0.51
Precip to date in Nov.: 0.16
Average Precip to date: 20.98
Precip Year to Date: 19.88
Sunset Tonight: 5:00:01 PM
Sunrise Tomorrow: 7:37:04 AM



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DO RIGHT!

"Blessed are they..." said the Psalmist, "who constantly do what is right." Jesus, too, emphasized the importance of righteousness when He began His public ministry. "Blessed," said Jesus, "are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled."

Doing what is right and hungering and thirsting for righteousness is not a priority in the lives of many who call themselves "Christian." It sounds like a lifestyle that is more suitable for monks who live in a monastery and spend their time reading the Bible and praying than for people who work for a living. Monks can avoid the "real things" of life and "be righteous."

Perhaps when we think of being "righteous" and "doing what is right," we shudder because it sounds so "limiting" on the one hand, and "impossible" on the other. "What fun is there in being righteous?" we ask. Or "If I 'do right,' I'll live a life of gloom and doom with no room for happiness and joy." What a grim prospect.

But the exact opposite is true. God has a specific plan for each of our lives and will enable us to fulfill it. Ultimately, we will become like His Son. If we seek and follow the plan and purpose He has for our lives, we will walk in paths of "righteousness for His name's sake." If we want to know the "path of righteousness" He has for our lives, we must study His Word. And, the more we study His Word, the more we will become like Him. If we desire to "do right" and become "righteous," we will need to spend time with Him, get to know Him, and love Him. If we "do right," we will "become right."

Prayer: Lord, we all want to "do right." But we cannot "do right" unless we are willing to spend time with You. Teach us to be You-like. In Jesus' Name, Amen.

Scripture For Today: Blessed are those who act justly, who always do what is right. Psalm 106:3

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2021 Community Events

- Cancelled** Legion Post #39 Spring Fundraiser (Sunday closest to St. Patrick's Day, every other year)
03/27/2021 Lions Club Easter Egg Hunt 10am Sharp at the City Park (Saturday a week before Easter Weekend)
04/10/2021 Dueling Pianos Baseball Fundraiser at the American Legion Post #39 6-11:30pm
04/24/2021 Firemen's Spring Social at the Fire Station 7pm-12:30am (Same Saturday as GHS Prom)
04/25/2021 Princess Prom (Sunday after GHS Prom)
05/01/2021 Lions Club Spring City-Wide Rummage Sales 8am-3pm (1st Saturday in May)
05/31/2021 Legion Post #39 Memorial Day Services (Memorial Day)
6/7-9/2021 St. John's Lutheran Church VBS
06/17/2021 Groton Transit Fundraiser, 4-7 p.m.
06/18/2021 SDSU Alumni & Friends Golf Tournament at Olive Grove
06/19/2021 U8 Baseball Tournament
06/19/2021 **Postponed to Aug. 28th:** Lions Crazy Golf Fest at Olive Grove Golf Course, Noon
06/26/2021 U10 Baseball Tournament
06/27/2021 U12 Baseball Tournament
07/04/2021 Firecracker Golf Tournament at Olive Grove
07/11/2021 Lions Club Summer Fest/Car Show at the City Park 10am-4pm (Sunday Mid-July)
07/22/2021 Pro-Am Golf Tournament at Olive Grove Golf Course
07/30/2021-08/03/2021 State "B" American Legion Baseball Tournament in Groton
08/06/2021 Wine on Nine at Olive Grove Golf Course
08/13/2021 Groton Basketball Golf Tournament
Cancelled Lions Club Crazy Golf Fest 9am Olive Grove Golf Course
08/29/2021 Groton Firemen Summer Splash Day at GHS Parking Lot (4-5 p.m.)
09/11/2021 Lions Club Fall City-Wide Rummage Sales 8am-3pm (1st Saturday after Labor Day)
09/12/2021 Sunflower Classic Golf Tournament at Olive Grove
09/18-19 Groton Fly-In/Drive-In, Groton Municipal Airport
10/08/2021 Lake Region Marching Band Festival (2nd Friday in October)
10/09/2021 Pumpkin Fest at the City Park 10am-3pm (Saturday before Columbus Day)
10/29/2021 Downtown Trick or Treat 4-6pm
10/29/2021 Groton United Methodist Trunk or Treat (Halloween)
11/13/2021 Legion Post #39 Turkey Party (Saturday closest to Veteran's Day)
11/11/2021 Veteran's Day Program at the GHS Arena
11/21/2021 Groton Area Snow Queen Contest
11/25/2021 Community Thanksgiving at the Community Center 11:30am-1pm (Thanksgiving)
11/30/2021 James Valley Telecommunications Holiday Open House 10am-4pm
12/04/2021 Olive Grove Tour of Homes
12/11/2021 Santa Claus Day at Professional Management Services 9am-Noon

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The Groton Independent Printed & Mailed Weekly Edition

Subscription Form

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News from the  Associated Press

Thursday's Scores

The Associated Press undefined

PREP VOLLEYBALL=

SDHSAA State Tournament=

First Round=

Class A=

Dakota Valley def. Hamlin, 29-27, 25-21, 25-15

Garretson def. Elkton-Lake Benton, 23-25, 18-25, 25-15, 25-20, 15-5

Sioux Falls Christian def. Parkston, 25-6, 25-14, 25-18

Wagner def. Hill City, 25-18, 25-21, 11-25, 26-24

Class AA=

Brandon Valley def. Pierre, 20-25, 22-25, 25-22, 25-17, 15-11

Sioux Falls O'Gorman def. Sioux Falls Lincoln, 25-18, 25-19, 25-18

Sioux Falls Roosevelt def. Harrisburg, 25-21, 25-21, 23-25, 25-23

Sioux Falls Washington def. Huron, 25-27, 25-10, 25-14, 25-14

Class B=

Colman-Egan def. Chester, 23-25, 20-25, 25-22, 26-24, 15-12

Faulkton def. Arlington, 25-22, 28-26, 22-25, 25-17

Platte-Geddes def. Burke, 25-15, 16-25, 25-23, 21-25, 16-14

Warner def. Aberdeen Christian, 25-15, 25-16, 25-18

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

Cannabis bust on Indigenous land highlights legal divide

By MORGAN LEE Associated Press

SANTA FE, N.M. (AP) — A federal raid on a household marijuana garden on tribal land in northern New Mexico is sowing uncertainty and resentment about U.S. drug enforcement priorities on Native American reservations, as more states roll out legal marketplaces for recreational pot sales.

In late September, Bureau of Indian Affairs officers confiscated nine cannabis plants from a home garden at Picuris Pueblo that was tended by Charles Farden, a local resident since childhood who is not Native American. The 54-year-old is enrolled in the state's medical marijuana program to ease post-traumatic stress and anxiety.

Farden said he was startled to be placed in handcuffs as federal officers seized mature plants laden with buds — an estimated yearlong personal supply.

New Mexico first approved the drug's medical use in 2007, while Picuris Pueblo decriminalized medical pot for members in 2015. A new state law in June broadly legalized marijuana for adults and authorized up to a dozen home-grown plants per household for personal use — with no weight limit.

"I was just open with the officer, straightforward. When he asked what I was growing, I said, 'My vegetables, my medical cannabis,'" Farden said of the Sept. 29 encounter. "And he was like, 'That can be a problem.'"

The raid has cast a shadow over cannabis as an economic development opportunity for Indigenous communities, as tribal governments at Picuris Pueblo and at least one other reservation pursue agreements with New Mexico that would allow them to open marijuana businesses. The state is home to 23 federally recognized Native American communities. It's aiming to launch retail pot sales by April.

More than two-thirds of states have legalized marijuana in some form, including four that approved recreational pot in the 2020 election and four more by legislation this year. The U.S. government has avoided

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cracking down on them, even though the drug remains illegal under federal law to possess, use or sell.

The September raid has some scrutinizing its approach on tribal lands like Picuris Pueblo, where the Bureau of Indian Affairs provides policing to enforce federal and tribal laws in an arrangement common in Indian Country. Other tribes operate their own police forces under contract with the BIA.

In a recent letter to Picuris Pueblo tribal Gov. Craig Quanchello obtained by The Associated Press, a BIA special agent in charge said the agency won't tell its officers to stand down in Indian Country — and that marijuana possession and growing remains a federal crime, despite changes in state and tribal law.

"Prior notification of law enforcement operations is generally not appropriate," the letter states. "The BIA Office of Justice Services is obligated to enforce federal law and does not instruct its officers to disregard violations of federal law in Indian Country."

Officials with the BIA and its parent agency, the Interior Department, declined to comment and did not respond to the AP's requests for details of the raid and its implications. Farden has not been charged and does not know if there will be further consequences.

President Joe Biden this week ordered several Cabinet departments to work together to combat human trafficking and crime on Native American lands, where violent crime rates are more than double the national average.

He did not specifically address marijuana, though he has said he supports decriminalizing the drug and expunging past pot use convictions. He has not embraced federally legalizing marijuana.

Portland-based criminal defense attorney Leland Berger, who last year advised the Oglala Sioux Tribe after it passed a cannabis ordinance, notes that Justice Department priorities for marijuana in Indian Country were outlined in writing under President Barack Obama then overturned under President Donald Trump, with little written public guidance since.

"It's remarkable for me to hear that the BIA is enforcing the federal Controlled Substances Act on tribal land where the tribe has enacted an ordinance that protects the activity," he said.

Across the U.S., tribal enterprises have taken a variety of approaches as they straddle state and federal law and jurisdictional issues to gain a foothold in the cannabis industry.

In Washington, the Suquamish Tribe forged a pioneering role under a 2015 compact with the state to open a retail marijuana outlet across Puget Sound from Seattle on the Port Madison reservation. It sells cannabis from dozens of independent producers.

Several Nevada tribes operate their own enforcement division to help ensure compliance with state- and tribal-authorized marijuana programs, including a registry for home-grown medical marijuana. Taxes collected at tribal dispensaries stay with tribes and go toward community improvement programs.

In South Dakota, the Oglala Sioux in early 2020 became the only tribe to set up a cannabis market without similar state regulations, endorsing medical and recreational use in a referendum at the Pine Ridge Reservation. Months later, a statewide vote legalized marijuana in South Dakota, with a challenge from Republican Gov. Kristi Noem's administration now pending at the state Supreme Court.

The U.S. government recognizes an "inherent and inalienable" right to self-governance by Native American tribes. But federal law enforcement agencies still selectively intervene to enforce cannabis prohibition, Berger said.

"The tribes are sovereign nations, and they have treaties with the United States, and in some cases there is concurrent jurisdiction. ... It's sort of this hybrid," he said.

In late 2020, a combination of state, federal and tribal law enforcement cooperated in a raid on sprawling marijuana farms with makeshift greenhouses in northwestern New Mexico with the consent of the Navajo Nation president. Authorities seized more than 200,000 plants. At the time, New Mexico limited marijuana cultivation to 1,750 plants per licensed medical cannabis producer.

At Picuris Pueblo, Quanchello said the cannabis industry holds economic promise for tribal lands that are too remote to support a full-blown casino. Picuris operates a smoke shop out of a roadside trailer and is close to opening a gas station with a sandwich shop and mini-grocery.

"We're farmers by nature. It's something we can do here and be good at it," Quanchello said. "We don't want to miss it."

He described the BIA raid as an affront to Picuris Pueblo, with echoes of federal enforcement in 2018 that uprooted about 35 cannabis plants grown by the tribe in a foray into medical marijuana.

State lawmakers in 2019 adopted uniform regulations for medical marijuana on tribal and nontribal land.

In legalizing recreational marijuana this year, New Mexico's Democratic-led Legislature and Gov. Michelle Lujan Grisham emphasized the need to create jobs, shore up state revenue and address concerns about harm inflicted on racial and ethnic minorities by drug criminalization.

Judith Dworkin, a Scottsdale, Arizona-based attorney specializing in Native American law, said tribal cannabis enterprises confront less risk of interference from federal law enforcement where states have robust legal markets for pot.

"It's a lot easier for a tribe to take a position that they want to do something similar" to the state, she said. "It's still a risk."

Quanchello said he sees federal enforcement of cannabis laws at Picuris Pueblo as unpredictable and discriminatory.

"We as a tribe can end up investing a million dollars into a project, thinking it's OK. And because of a rogue officer or somebody that doesn't believe something is right, it could be stopped," he said.

Wilson, Freidel lift S. Dakota St. past NAIA Presentation

BROOKINGS, S.D. (AP) — Douglas Wilson and Noah Freidel scored 14 points apiece and South Dakota State rolled past Presentation 99-62 on Thursday night.

Matt Dentlinger added 12 points, Alex Arians scored 11 and Zeke Mayo 10 for the Jackrabbits.

Denzel McDuffey had 11 points for the NAIA-level Saints. Ian Kelly also scored 11 and Kiegan Phung had seven rebounds.

For more AP college basketball coverage: <https://apnews.com/hub/college-basketball> and http://twitter.com/AP_Top25

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Noem's office lays out plan for \$975M in federal virus funds

By STEPHEN GROVES Associated Press

SIOUX FALLS, S.D. (AP) — South Dakota Gov. Kristi Noem's administration is looking to boost scores of infrastructure projects that address drinking water, sewage, broadband internet and emergency services as the state looks to spend nearly \$1 billion in federal coronavirus relief funding.

The Republican governor's office outlined some of its plan on Thursday to lawmakers, who are tasked with making the final decision on how to spend the money. The governor's plan would spend the \$974.5 million from the federal government over the next five years. Cities and towns would get another \$275.5 million to spend on a wide variety of projects that qualify under the American Rescue Plan Act that Congress passed in March.

"These need to be long-term investments, transformational things for our state," Aaron Schiebe, the governor's chief of staff, told a legislative committee.

Under the governor's proposal, most of the money — more than \$710 million — would be allocated for water and sewage infrastructure projects. Broadband expansion, which has been a key project for the governor, would get \$50 million. A tourism marketing project would receive \$35 million and projects that upgrade emergency health services would get \$37 million.

Republican Sen. Lee Schoenbeck said the unprecedented financial windfall has changed the way lawmakers approach the budget.

"This just overwhelms our system," he said. "The Legislature has to learn more now than they ever did about funding."

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The dollar amounts are far from final. Congress is also considering changing the parameters for the funding, which could potentially add other projects to the list. The Legislature expects to get more details during the governor's budget address next month before it decides on the projects.

"Now we've got a roadmap of what they're looking at and now we'll be exploring what is in the details," said Republican Sen. Jean Hunhoff, who chairs the Appropriations Committee.

Survey shows continued growth in rural economy in November

OMAHA, Neb. (AP) — The economy in rural parts of 10 Plains and Western states remains on the rise, but confidence in the economy's future continues to drop, according to a new monthly survey of bankers in region released Thursday.

The overall Rural Mainstreet economic index rose in November to 67.7 from October's 66.1. Any score above 50 suggests a growing economy, while a score below 50 suggests a shrinking economy.

"Solid grain prices, the Federal Reserve's record-low interest rates and growing exports have underpinned the Rural Mainstreet Economy," said Creighton University economist Ernie Goss, who oversees the survey. "USDA data show that 2021 year-to-date agriculture exports are more than 23.2% above that for the same period in 2020. This has been an important factor supporting the Rural Mainstreet economy."

But the survey's confidence index, which reflects bank CEO expectations for the economy six months out, sank for the fifth straight month to 48.4 in November. That's the lowest level since August of last year and down from October's 51.8.

While the six-month outlook continued to wane, survey respondents were optimistic about about about this year's holiday shopping season. On average, bankers expect holiday and Christmas sales in their area to expand by 5.7% from the same period last year.

Bankers from Colorado, Illinois, Iowa, Kansas, Minnesota, Missouri, Nebraska, North Dakota, South Dakota and Wyoming were surveyed.

30 years in prison for defendant in drug conspiracy case

SIOUX FALLS, S.D. (AP) — A South Dakota man has been sentenced to 30 years in prison in a drug trafficking conspiracy case.

Acting U.S. Attorney Dennis Holmes announced Thursday that Wicahpe "Chops" Milk was sentenced on charges of conspiracy to distribute a controlled substance, obstruction of justice and illegally possessing a firearm. Milk was found guilty of the charges at a jury trial that ended July 2.

According to prosecutors, the 38-year-old Wanblee man obtained methamphetamine in California beginning in January 2015 and transported it to South Dakota where he recruited 15 others to help sell it.

The communities where the methamphetamine was distributed include Rapid City, Wanblee, Pine Ridge, Kyle, Mission, Box Elder, Martin, and Allen.

In August 2016, Milk was a passenger in a vehicle stopped by Pennington County sheriff's deputies. Milk fled from the deputies and was arrested after a short foot pursuit. In the vehicle, Milk possessed a firearm and methamphetamine.

After his arrest, authorities say Milk repeatedly engaged in efforts to obstruct the case by writing letters to witnesses that included threats, promises, and coercion.

Milk was returned to the custody of the U.S. Marshals Service following sentencing.

Cheyenne River Sioux chairman slams Biden's tribal summit

By STEPHEN GROVES Associated Press

SIOUX FALLS, S.D. (AP) — The chairman of a tribe in South Dakota said Thursday he was left frustrated by President Joe Biden's Tribal Nations Summit after he was unable to speak about the health care situation on the Cheyenne River Sioux Reservation.

Tribal chairman Harold Frazier sharply criticized the format of the two-day summit, which was held virtually

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due to the COVID-19 pandemic that has affected Native Americans and Alaska Natives at disproportionate rates. It is the first summit since 2016.

"I waited two days for the opportunity to inform someone about what is actually happening here on the Cheyenne River reservation to no avail," he said in a statement, adding, "This President and his administration are leaving my people in the hallways and parking lots while they fill computer meeting screens with panels of people that are not a part of our healthcare system where we live."

Biden used the summit to announce steps to improve public safety and justice for Native Americans and to protect private lands, treaty rights and sacred places. He has also touted his administration's work on fighting the pandemic in Native American communities.

But Frazier said people have faced long waits to get a bed at the local Indian Health Services clinic.

Meta Financial Group, Inc.® Declares Cash Dividend

SIOUX FALLS, S.D.--(BUSINESS WIRE)--Nov 18, 2021--

Meta Financial Group, Inc. ® (Nasdaq: CASH) (the "Company") announced that the Company will pay a cash dividend of \$0.05 per share for the first fiscal quarter of 2022. This dividend will be payable on January 3, 2022 to shareholders of record as of December 9, 2021.

At September 30, 2021, the Company had total assets of \$6.69 billion and shareholders' equity of \$871.9 million.

This press release and other important information about the Company are available at metafinancialgroup.com.

About Meta Financial Group, Inc. ®

Meta Financial Group, Inc. ® ("Meta") (Nasdaq: CASH) is a South Dakota-based financial holding company. At Meta, our mission is financial inclusion for all ®. Through our subsidiary, MetaBank ®, N.A., we strive to remove barriers to financial access and promote economic mobility by working with third parties to provide responsible, secure, high quality financial products that contribute to the social and economic benefit of communities at the core of the real economy. Meta works to increase financial availability, choice, and opportunity for all. Additional information can be found by visiting www.metafinancialgroup.com.

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EXPLAINER: What drives high-profile disappearances in China

BEIJING (AP) — The disappearance of tennis star Peng Shuai in China following her accusation of sexual assault against a former top Communist Party official has shined a spotlight on similar cases involving political dissidents, entertainers, business leaders and others who have run afoul of the authorities.

A look at those cases and the background on such actions.

WHAT HAPPENED TO PENG SHUAI?

Despite an outcry in the tennis world and global media, Chinese officials have not directly addressed the

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accusation posted online by Grand Slam doubles champion Peng more than two weeks ago. Peng said she was sexually assaulted by Zhang Gaoli, a former vice premier and member of the party's all-powerful Politburo Standing Committee.

Peng, 35, is a former No. 1-ranked player in women's doubles who won titles at Wimbledon in 2013 and the French Open in 2014. She also participated in three Olympics, making her disappearance all the more prominent with Beijing set to host the Winter Games starting Feb. 4.

Peng wrote in a lengthy social media post on Nov. 2 that Zhang had forced her to have sex three years ago, despite her repeated refusals. The post was quickly deleted from her verified account on Weibo, a leading Chinese social media platform, but screenshots of the explosive accusation quickly spread across China's internet.

WHY DO PEOPLE DISAPPEAR IN CHINA?

China says it is a nation "ruled by law," but the Communist Party ultimately holds sway and there are large gray areas of enforcement. Control over the press and social media allows authorities to keep word of disappearances quiet and to stonewall critics, although such news often gradually surfaces through underground and foreign sources.

Among Chinese celebrities in the entertainment world, tangling with the authorities can be a career killer. For business leaders, it can mean a loss of status, market access and possible incarceration. With political dissidents, it often means disappearance into the vast security state, without access to family or legal recourse.

Even before taking power in 1949, the Communist Party underwent numerous rounds of vicious interne-cine struggles during which those on the losing side were disposed of without due process. The 1966-76 Cultural Revolution saw politicians, educators and musicians locked up for years without charge, often in solitary confinement.

Today, the party's Central Commission for Discipline Inspection handles most major charges against ranking officials, who may drop out of sight for months before a terse statement is issued saying they are under investigation for "severe violations of rules and regulations." Heavy sentences are later announced, with little or no details given about the charges or the evidence brought against them.

WHAT FAMOUS PEOPLE HAVE GONE MISSING?

Notable people who have dropped from sight under circumstances that remain unclear include business leader Jack Ma and famous actress Fan Bingbing.

Ma, China's most prominent entrepreneur and the founder of Alibaba Group, the world's biggest e-commerce company, stopped appearing in public after he criticized regulators as being too conservative in an October 2020 speech.

Days later, the government ordered Ma's Ant Group, a financial service that grew out of Alibaba's online payments business, to suspend a planned stock market debut in Hong Kong and Shanghai.

Rumors on social media questioned whether Ma had been detained. Friends of Ma reportedly said he wasn't detained but decided to stay quiet following criticism of his comments. Ma reappeared two months later in a January 2020 video released by Alibaba but made no mention of his disappearance.

Fan disappeared for three months before news emerged that tax authorities had ordered her and companies she represented to pay taxes and penalties totaling \$130 million.

People can drop off the map if they are linked to disputes with the politically well-connected involving business and reputation.

Businesswoman Duan Weihong disappeared in 2017 and her husband, Desmond Shum, said he didn't hear from her for four years until he was preparing to publish a book about corruption among Chinese elites. Shum told Time magazine his wife begged him in a phone call not to publish his book, "Red Roulette."

Duan, also known as Whitney Duan, was cited by The New York Times in a 2012 series of articles about the family wealth of then-Premier Wen Jiabao, China's No. 2 leader. It remains unclear what exactly prompted her disappearance.

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A real estate mogul, Ren Zhiqiang, disappeared from public view in March 2020 after criticizing President Xi Jinping's handling of the coronavirus pandemic. Ren was sentenced later that year to 18 years in prison on corruption charges.

WHAT OTHER KINDS OF PEOPLE DISAPPEAR?

In a rare case that appeared in the open, Swedish citizen Gui Minhai disappeared in 2015, when he was believed to have been abducted by Chinese agents from his seaside home in Thailand.

He and four others who worked for the same Hong Kong company that published books critical of the Communist Party all went missing at about the same time and turned up months later in police custody in mainland China.

A court in eastern China later sentenced him to 10 years in prison for "illegally providing intelligence overseas."

China has also snatched some foreigners.

Canadians Michael Kovrig and Michael Spavor were detained in China in December 2018, shortly after Canada arrested Meng Wanzhou, the chief financial officer of Chinese telecommunications giant Huawei, on a U.S. extradition request. China delayed announcing their detentions for days, then denied that the arrests were linked. The two were released in September after Meng was allowed to return to China.

Even a scientist, gene-editing researcher He Jiankui, disappeared from public view for almost a year after announcing his controversial research at a conference in Hong Kong. He was eventually convicted of practicing medicine without a license in December 2019.

Accompanying the news of Peng's disappearance, the wife of the former president of Interpol, who was taken into custody on a trip back to China in September 2018, told The Associated Press that she and her lawyers have been unable to contact him since that date.

State media reported that Meng Hongwei admitted taking bribes, but Grace Meng said her husband was the victim of a political vendetta.

EXPLAINER: Why did Modi repeal India farm laws after a year?

By SHEIKH SAALIQ and KRUTIKA PATHI Associated Press

NEW DELHI (AP) — Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi made a surprise announcement Friday that he will withdraw agriculture laws that triggered a year of farmer protests, in what is seen as a major climb-down by his government. The nationwide demonstrations were the biggest challenge faced to date by his government. Experts say elections could be a major reason behind the sudden decision.

WHY DID MODI'S GOVERNMENT WITHDRAW THE LAWS?

Experts say elections are a major reason.

Farmers form the most influential voting bloc in India and politicians have long considered it unwise to alienate them. They are also particularly important to Modi's Bharatiya Janata Party but have been up in arms since the laws were passed in September last year.

Elections are due early next year in some key states such as Uttar Pradesh, India's largest and most populated, and Punjab, and Modi's party hopes to win them back.

Both states have a sizeable farmer population, particularly Punjab.

Modi's party already rules Uttar Pradesh but is under immense pressure over its response to the pandemic and the struggling economy. If farmers desert his party during the polls, it will not only shrink its prospects to form the state government for a second term but also weaken its chances to get an overwhelming majority in 2024 national elections.

Uttar Pradesh state sends the most legislators — 80 — to the national Parliament, which has 552 seats.

Modi's party has a very little footprint in Punjab but hopes to form a government there and strengthen its fledgling voter base in neighboring agricultural state Haryana, ruled by his party.

But experts say the surprise decision may end up not helping the party.

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"It is still early so it's not clear how a policy loss is going to convert into an electoral gain," said Gilles Verniers, a professor of political science at New Delhi's Ashoka University.

Modi's party welcomed the move, with some painting it as a decision that prioritized farmers.

Jagat Prakash Nadda, president of Modi's party, said the prime minister "has again proved that he is committed to the welfare of farmers."

WHAT DOES IT MEAN FOR THE PROTESTING FARMERS?

It is a win for them — at least for now.

Since the laws were passed last year, farmers have camped out on the outskirts of New Delhi, through a harsh winter and a devastating coronavirus surge. There also were demonstrations against the laws nationwide.

The government initially negotiated with the protesters and offered to suspend the laws for 18 months, but the farmers continued to press for a full repeal.

Over the past year, dozens of farmers died due to suicide, bad weather conditions and COVID-19 during the demonstrations, which drew international support.

"It's a big victory for the farmers' movement and a big boost for those who have been agitating for over a year," said Kiran Vissa, a farmer leader from southern Telangana state.

Verniers, the political science professor, agreed.

"Farmers will perceive it as their victory and not as a gesture of benevolence from the prime minister," he said.

DOES THIS MEAN THE PROTESTS HAVE ENDED?

They have not.

Farmer groups have said they will continue to protest until the laws are officially withdrawn during the Parliament session set to begin in December.

They say the protests will also continue until the government assures them of guaranteed prices for certain essential crops — a system introduced in the 1960s to help India shore up its food reserves and prevent shortages.

"We welcome the decision but the movement doesn't end here. Many of us don't have a high degree of confidence in the PM or the central government and we won't stop until we see it is repealed in Parliament" Vissa said.

WHAT WERE THE LAWS ALL ABOUT?

Modi's government said the laws were necessary reforms to modernize Indian farming. But farmers feared that the government's move to introduce market reforms in agriculture would leave them poorer.

The laws also were not clear about whether the government would continue to guarantee prices for certain essential crops.

Farmers worried that the laws signaled that the government was moving away from a system in which an overwhelming majority of farmers sell only to government-sanctioned marketplaces.

They worried this would leave them at the mercy of corporations that would have no legal obligation to pay them guaranteed prices.

House moves toward OK of Dems' sweeping social, climate bill

By ALAN FRAM Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — Democrats brushed aside monthslong divisions and approached House passage of their expansive social and environment bill Friday, as President Joe Biden and his party neared a defining win in their drive to use their control of government to funnel its resources toward their domestic priorities.

Final passage, which had been expected Thursday, was delayed as Minority Leader Kevin McCarthy, R-Calif., held it up with an hourslong broadside criticizing Biden, Democrats and the bill. Most Democrats

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abandoned the chamber after midnight with McCarthy still talking, and House Majority Leader Steny Hoyer, D-Md., told reporters that leaders planned for passage later Friday.

House approval was still expected on a near party-line vote. That would send the measure to a Senate where cost-cutting demands by moderate Sen. Joe Manchin, D-W.Va., and that chamber's strict rules seem certain to force significant changes. That will prompt fresh disputes between party centrists and moderates that will likely take weeks to resolve.

Even so, House passage would mark a watershed for a measure remarkable for the breadth and depth of the changes it would make in federal policies. Wrapped into one bill were far-reaching changes in taxation, health care, energy, climate change, family services, education and housing. That underscored Democrats' desire to achieve their goals while controlling the White House and Congress — a dominance that could well end after next year's midterm elections.

"Too many Americans are just barely getting by in our economy," Hoyer said. "And we simply can't go back to the way things were before the pandemic."

House passage would also give Biden a momentary taste of victory, and probably relief, during perhaps the rockiest period of his presidency. He's been battered by falling approval numbers in polls, reflecting voters' concerns over inflation, gridlocked supply chains and the persistent coronavirus pandemic, leaving Democrats worried that their legislative efforts are not breaking through to voters.

Biden this week signed a \$1 trillion package of highway and other infrastructure projects, another priority that overcame months of internal Democratic battling. The president has spent recent days promoting that measure around the country.

McCarthy spent more than eight hours on his feet, at times shouting or rasping hoarsely. Democrats sporadically booed and groaned as McCarthy glared back, underscoring partisan hostility only deepened by this week's censure of Rep. Paul Gosar, R-Ariz., for threatening tweets aimed at Rep. Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez, D-N.Y.

McCarthy, who hopes to become speaker if Republicans capture the chamber in next year's elections, recited problems the country has faced under Biden, including inflation, China's rise and large numbers of immigrants crossing the Southwest border. "Yeah, I want to go back," he said in mocking reference to the "Build Back Better" name Biden uses for the legislation.

House rules do not limit how long party leaders may speak. In 2018, House Speaker Nancy Pelosi, D-Calif., minority leader at the time, held the floor for more than eight hours demanding action on immigration. McCarthy passed that mark just before 5 a.m. Friday, and he finished his epic speech around 5:10 a.m.

The House inched toward a final vote after the nonpartisan Congressional Budget Office said the package would worsen federal deficits by \$160 billion over the coming decade. The agency also recalculated the measure's 10-year price tag at \$1.68 trillion, though that figure wasn't directly comparable to a \$1.85 trillion figure Democrats have been using.

The 2,100-page bill's initiatives include bolstering child care assistance, creating free preschool, curbing seniors' prescription drug costs and beefing up efforts to slow climate change. Also included are tax credits to spur clean energy development, bolstered child care assistance and extended tax breaks for millions of families with children, lower-earning workers and people buying private health insurance.

Most of it would be paid for by tax increases on the wealthy, big corporations and companies doing business abroad.

The measure would provide \$109 billion to create free preschool for 3- and 4-year-olds. There are large sums for home health care for seniors, new Medicare coverage for hearing and a new requirement for four weeks of paid family leave. The family leave program, however, was expected to be removed in the Senate, where it's been opposed by Manchin.

There is also language letting the government issue work permits to millions of immigrants that would let them stay in the U.S. temporarily, and \$297 billion in savings from letting the government curb prescription drug costs. The fate of both those provisions is uncertain in the Senate, where the chamber's nonpartisan parliamentarian enforces rules that limit provisions allowed in budget bills.

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In one major but expected difference with the White House, CBO estimated that the bill's added \$80 billion to beef up IRS tax enforcement would let it collect \$207 billion in new revenue over the coming decade. That meant net savings of \$127 billion, well below the White House's more optimistic \$400 billion estimate.

In a scorekeeping quirk, CBO officially estimated that the overall legislation would drive up federal deficits by \$367 billion over the coming decade. But agency guidelines require it to ignore IRS savings when measuring a bill's deficit impact, and it acknowledged that the measure's true impact would worsen shortfalls by \$160 billion when counting added revenue the IRS would collect.

Biden and other Democratic leaders have said the measure would pay for itself, largely through tax increases on the wealthy, big corporations and companies doing business abroad.

Both parties worry about deficits selectively. Republicans passed tax cuts in 2017 that worsened red ink by \$1.9 trillion, while Democrats enacted a COVID-19 relief bill this year with that same price tag.

Republicans said the latest legislation would damage the economy, give tax breaks to some wealthy taxpayers and make government bigger and more intrusive. Drawing frequent GOP attacks was a provision boosting the limit on state and local taxes that people can deduct from federal taxes, which disproportionately helps top earners from high-tax coastal states.

After months of talks, Democrats appeared eager to wrap it up and begin selling the package back home. They said they were planning 1,000 events across the country by year's end to pitch the measure's benefits to voters.

Facing uniform Republican opposition, Democrats could lose no more than three votes to prevail in the House, but moderates seemed reassured by CBO's figures. Some said projections about IRS savings are always uncertain, others said the bill need not pay for it roughly half-trillion dollars for encouraging cleaner energy need because global warming is an existential crisis.

Florida Democratic Rep. Stephanie Murphy, a leading centrist, said she would back the measure after the latest numbers showed the legislation "is fiscally disciplined" and "has a lot of positive elements."

Vice President Kamala Harris' tie-breaking vote gives Democrats control of the 50-50 Senate. That leaves Democrats with zero votes to spare, giving enormous leverage to Manchin in upcoming bargaining. The altered bill would have to return to the House before going to Biden's desk.

The nonpartisan Committee for a Responsible Federal Budget, which preaches fiscal constraint, estimated that the bill's overall cost would be nearly \$5 trillion if Democrats hadn't made some of its programs temporary. For example, tax credits for children and low-earning workers are extended for just one year, making their price tags appear lower, even though the party would like those programs to be permanent.

AP Congressional Correspondent Lisa Mascaro and reporter Farnoush Amiri contributed to this report.

Modi vows to repeal India farm laws after prolonged protests

By SHEIKH SAALIQ Associated Press

NEW DELHI (AP) — In a surprise announcement, India's Prime Minister Narendra Modi said Friday his government will withdraw the controversial agriculture laws that prompted yearlong protests from tens of thousands of farmers and posed a significant political challenge to his administration.

The decision is a major climbdown by Modi's Bharatiya Janata Party government, which enjoys a brute majority in Parliament but has been often accused by opposition leaders and constitutional experts of ramming through laws without enough consultation. The decision also came ahead of key elections in states like Uttar Pradesh and Punjab, and on the day of the Guru Purab festival, when Sikhs, who made up most of the protesters, celebrate their founder Guru Nanak's birthday.

Modi made the announcement during a televised speech that was broadcast live, a medium he has chosen over the years to make public some of his government's landmark, sometimes contentious, decisions. He urged the protesters to return home and said the constitutional process to repeal the laws will begin in December when Parliament sits for the winter session.

"While apologizing to the nation, I want to say with a sincere and pure heart that maybe something

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was lacking in our efforts that we could not explain the truth to some of our farmer brothers," Modi said during the address. He then went on to say: "Let us make a fresh start."

The laws were passed in September last year and Modi's party had refused to extend the debate despite repeated requests from the opposition.

For a year, the government defended the laws, saying they were necessary reforms to modernize India's agricultural sector and boost production through private investment. But the farmers protested, saying the legislation would devastate their earnings by ending guaranteed pricing and force them to sell their crops to corporations at cheaper prices.

The perceived threats to their income terrified farmers, who mostly work on a small scale: More than two-thirds of them own less than 1 hectare (2 1/2 acres) of land.

Clauses in the legislation also prevented farmers from resolving contract disputes in court, leaving them with no independent means of redress apart from government-appointed bureaucrats.

The protests escalated in November last year as farmers hunkered down on the outskirts of New Delhi, where they have camped out for nearly a year, including through a harsh winter and a coronavirus surge that devastated India earlier this year.

While the protests have been largely peaceful, demonstrators in January broke through police barricades to storm the historic Red Fort in the capital's center. Clashes with police left one protester dead and hundreds injured.

"At last, all of our hard work paid off. Thanks to all the farmer brothers and salute to the farmer brothers who were martyred in this battle," said Rakesh Tikait, a prominent farmers' leader.

Dozens of farmers died due to suicide, hostile weather conditions and COVID-19 during the demonstrations that have since drawn international support from rights campaigners and celebrities, including climate activist Greta Thunberg and U.S. singer Rihanna.

At Ghazipur, one of the demonstration sites on the outskirts of New Delhi, celebrations were subdued even though some farmers distributed sweets and burst crackers.

Samyukt Kisan Morcha, the group of farm unions organizing the protests, said it welcomed the government's announcement. But it said the protests would continue until the government assures them guaranteed prices for certain essential crops — a system that was introduced in the 1960s to help India shore up its food reserves and prevent shortages.

Modi's party welcomed the move, with some painting it a decision that prioritized the farmers.

Jagat Prakash Nadda, president of the ruling BJP, in a tweet said Modi "has again proved that he is committed to the welfare of farmers."

The government initially engaged with farmers and offered to suspend the laws for 18 months in an effort to end the most serious challenge to Modi. But the farmers continued to press for a full repeal and called for strikes across the country.

Modi's unexpected decision is seen as a political masterstroke ahead of key state polls, particularly in northern Punjab, where the Sikh community was facing growing alienation because of the laws. His government is already under pressure over its response to the pandemic and a struggling economy.

The 71-year-old leader has stood firm in the face of fierce criticism over other steps his government took, like abruptly banning high-denomination currency notes in 2016, and revoking Muslim majority Kashmir's semiautonomous powers in 2019.

Modi also backed a citizenship law that Muslims consider to be indiscriminate even though most of the country convulsed in sometimes violent protests against it in 2019.

Gilles Verniers, a professor of political science at New Delhi's Ashoka University, said the announcement was very significant but the government will find it hard to convince the farmers that it repealed the laws for reasons other than electoral gains.

"It is highly unusual for the Modi government to retreat or backpedal on a major political decision," said Verniers. "The government is likely to spin this as the PM listening to the people, but after a year of hard protest, acrimony and violence, it's going to be difficult to make that notion adhere."

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Initially, Modi's government had tried to discredit the Sikh farmers by dismissing their concerns as motivated by religious nationalism. Some leaders in Modi's party called them "Khalistanis," a reference to a movement for an independent Sikh homeland called "Khalistan" in the late 1980s and early 1990s.

Such allegations backfired, further angering the farmers.

Opposition leaders, who earlier called the laws exploitative and supported the protests, congratulated the farmers.

"The country's farmers, through their resistance, made arrogance bow its head," tweeted Rahul Gandhi from India's main opposition Congress party. "Congratulations on the victory against injustice!"

Farmers form the most influential voting bloc in India. Politicians have long considered it unwise to alienate them, and farmers are particularly important to Modi's base. Northern Haryana and a few other states with substantial farmer populations are ruled by his party.

Associated Press journalists Krutika Pathi and Shonal Ganguly contributed to this report.

Austria to enter lockdown, bring in mandatory vaccinations

By KIRSTEN GRIESHABER Associated Press

BERLIN (AP) — Austrian Chancellor Alexander Schallenberg said Friday that the country will go into a national lockdown to contain a fourth wave of coronavirus cases.

Schallenberg said the lockdown will start Monday and initially last for 10 days. Most stores will close, and cultural events will be canceled.

He initially said all students would have to go back into home schooling. Wolfgang Mueckstein, the country's health minister, later said that kindergartens and schools would remain open for those who needed to go there but all parents were asked to keep their children at home if possible.

Starting on Feb. 1, the country will also make vaccinations mandatory, public broadcaster ORF reported. "We do not want a fifth wave," Schallenberg said, according to ORF. "Not do we want a sixth or seventh wave."

Austria had initially introduced a national lockdown only for the unvaccinated that started Monday, but as virus cases continued to skyrocket the government said it had no choice but to extend it to everyone.

"This is very painful," Schallenberg said.

The national lockdown will initially last for 10 days, then the effects will be assessed and if virus cases have not gone down sufficiently, it can be extended to a maximum of 20 days.

Austria's intensive care doctors welcomed the government's decision.

"The record infection figures that we have now experienced day after day will only be reflected in normal and intensive care units with a time lag. It really is high time for a full stop," Walter Hasibeder, the president of the Society for Anesthesiology, Resuscitation and Intensive Care Medicine told Austrian news agency APA.

"Given the current infection developments, we believe there are no alternatives to even greater contact restriction than recently, so any measures that help curb the momentum are welcome," he added.

For the past seven days, the country has reported more than 10,000 new infection cases daily. Hospitals have been overwhelmed with many new COVID-19 patients, and deaths have been rising again, too. So far, 11,525 people have died of the virus in Austria.

Austria, a country of 8.9 million, has one of the lowest vaccination rates in Western Europe — only 65.7% of the population are fully vaccinated.

Despite all the persuasion and campaigns, too few people have decided to get vaccinated, Schallenberg said, leaving the country no other choice but to introduce mandatory vaccinations in February.

The chancellor said the details would be finalized in the coming weeks but those who continued to refuse to get vaccinated would have to expect to get fined.

"For a long time, the consensus in this country was that we didn't want mandatory vaccination," Schallenberg said. "For a long time, perhaps too long."

Spain faces its past in mass graves bill. Will it be enough?

By MANU FERNÁNDEZ and JOSEPH WILSON Associated Press

GUADALAJARA, Spain (AP) — Carnations in hand, 94-year-old Julio López del Campo has come decade after decade to mark the spot where he believes the body of his brother, Mariano, was tossed into a pit along with other victims of the brutal regime of Francisco Franco in Spain.

"They took him to the prison in Guadalajara and in 1940 he was shot," Julio said at the site next to a cemetery chapel. "I have come here every year since. I bring carnations and leave a few. I will keep coming until my strength gives out."

More than 70 years on, the mass grave in Guadalajara, a small city just east of Spain's capital, Madrid, has finally been dug up, and 26 bodies were recovered. Julio now hopes that a genetic test will confirm that Mariano's remains are among them.

The Guadalajara exhumation was carried out by volunteer associations who, along with some of Spain's regional authorities, have led the fight to recover the missing and return them a shred of the dignity they have been denied for over half a century.

Until now, there has been little or no help from Spain's central authorities, and families have seen time running out as a generation quickly fades away. But now there is some hope.

A bill is working its way through parliament that Spain's left-wing coalition government says will deliver on its pledge to respond to the plight of families. The bill aims to improve on a 2007 Law for Historical Memory which experts and activists agree fell way short of emptying the hundreds of still-untouched mass graves.

The bill faces hurdles on both sides in parliament. The minority government needs the backing of smaller left-wing parties who want it to go further. Meanwhile, right-wing parties are vowing to vote against it.

If it passes, the law will recognize the families of victims have the "right to the truth" and will make the central government responsible for the recovery and identification of the missing. To help do so, it establishes a national DNA bank as well as an office to support families.

Like tens of thousands of others, Mariano disappeared after returning home from fighting for Spain's Second Republic that Franco's right-wing military uprising destroyed in the 1936-39 Spanish Civil War. He turned himself in to police and, despite promises that he would not be harmed, was never seen again. He was 23.

Only 19,000 bodies of an estimated 114,000 victims of Franco's regime during and after the war have been recovered in the four decades since the dictator's death. Spain's government calculates that it is likely only 20,000 bodies are still in a condition to be found.

The president of the association that carried out the exhumation in Guadalajara and others across Spain is skeptical that the new law will achieve justice.

"These are just words that won't lead to acts," Emilio Silva, the president of the Association for the Recovery of Historical Memory, told The Associated Press.

The bill "talks about the truth, but it focuses on the victims and says nothing about the executioners; it talks about justice, but does not force anyone to face trial; it talks about reparation, but is not going to give anything back to the families of the dictatorship's victims," said Silva, whose grandfather was also buried in a mass grave.

In the past two years, the government of Prime Minister Pedro Sánchez, the leader of Spain's Socialist Party, has dedicated 5 million euros (\$5.6 million) to finance 300 exhumations of mass graves and it has budgeted another 5.5 million euros for more exhumations next year.

But for Silva, the law won't stop what he calls the "clientele politics" that has plagued efforts to recover bodies, because it won't oblige future governments to dedicate funds to exhumations. The previous government of the conservative Popular Party, which is currently leading the opposition, cut off all central funds for exhumations when in power from 2011-18.

The Popular Party has already warned that it would replace the new law once back in power because, in the words of lawmaker Macarena Montesinos, it "seeks to destroy our legacy of concord" that crossed

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ideological lines and made possible Spain's 1978 Constitution when democracy was restored.

One of the highlights of the bill is the creation of a new State Prosecutors' Office for Human Rights and Democratic Memory. The government ministry that oversees the protection of Spain's Democratic Memory said in an email that the office will "guarantee the right to investigate the human rights violations during the (Spanish Civil) War and Dictatorship."

Experts, including the United Nation's Committee on Enforced Disappearances, say that this new figure, however, will be hamstrung as long as Spain does not amend its 1977 Amnesty Law. That law freed thousands of political prisoners of Franco's regime but also prevented the prosecution of any politically motivated crime prior to that date.

The law was a critical part of Spain's peaceful transition to democracy following Franco's death in 1975. It is still defended by right-wing political parties and some center-left Socialists who want to preserve the initial foundation of Spain's parliamentary monarchy, but others see it as a bar to justice for the families of the victims.

This week, a group of small left-wing regionalist and separatist parties presented an amendment to the new bill that would overturn the Amnesty Law as well as strip Felipe VI of his title as Spain's King. They argue that the monarchy is also a vestige of the dictatorship since Felipe's father, Juan Carlos, was put back on the throne by an aging Franco.

The amendments have little chance of passing, but the Socialists and the junior member of their governing coalition felt pressured enough to tweak their own bill by adding language that they say will allow for the prosecution of war crimes or acts of genocide carried out by Franco's regime without reforming the Amnesty Law. Critics argue that won't be enough.

The sensitive negotiations in parliament point to the heart of a debate in Spain about the role of the monarchy, which for many is seen as another keystone of democracy's return in the late 1970s. Franco had hoped to maintain his regime by restoring Juan Carlos to the throne. Instead, the king provided support to the country's fragile moves toward democracy after Franco's death, never more so when he was key in defusing an attempted military coup by reactionaries in 1981.

Margalida Capellà, Professor of International Public Law at the University of the Balearic Islands and expert in historical memory, said that while the new law would be a big step forward, Spain won't be able to have a reckoning with its past until Juan Carlos's son Felipe and its prime minister take an important symbolic step.

"Reparation won't be complete until the Head of State and the Head of the Government ask for forgiveness," Capellà said. "During the dictatorship its victims were of course not treated as such, but during democracy it has (also) taken a long time for them to earn that recognition and what has happened to their families has been a disaster. That is the original sin of Spain's democracy."

___ Joseph Wilson reported from Barcelona.

Scientists mystified, wary, as Africa avoids COVID disaster

By MARIA CHENG and FARAI MUTSAKA Associated Press

HARARE, Zimbabwe (AP) — At a busy market in a poor township outside Harare this week, Nyasha Ndou kept his mask in his pocket, as hundreds of other people, mostly unmasked, jostled to buy and sell fruit and vegetables displayed on wooden tables and plastic sheets. As in much of Zimbabwe, here the coronavirus is quickly being relegated to the past, as political rallies, concerts and home gatherings have returned.

"COVID-19 is gone, when did you last hear of anyone who has died of COVID-19?" Ndou said. "The mask is to protect my pocket," he said. "The police demand bribes so I lose money if I don't move around with a mask." Earlier this week, Zimbabwe recorded just 33 new COVID-19 cases and zero deaths, in line with a recent fall in the disease across the continent, where World Health Organization data show that infections have been dropping since July.

When the coronavirus first emerged last year, health officials feared the pandemic would sweep across Africa, killing millions. Although it's still unclear what COVID-19's ultimate toll will be, that catastrophic

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scenario has yet to materialize in Zimbabwe or much of the continent.

Scientists emphasize that obtaining accurate COVID-19 data, particularly in African countries with patchy surveillance, is extremely difficult, and warn that declining coronavirus trends could easily be reversed.

But there is something “mysterious” going on in Africa that is puzzling scientists, said Wafaa El-Sadr, chair of global health at Columbia University. “Africa doesn’t have the vaccines and the resources to fight COVID-19 that they have in Europe and the U.S., but somehow they seem to be doing better,” she said.

Fewer than 6% of people in Africa are vaccinated. For months, the WHO has described Africa as “one of the least affected regions in the world” in its weekly pandemic reports.

Some researchers say the continent’s younger population -- the average age is 20 versus about 43 in Western Europe — in addition to their lower rates of urbanization and tendency to spend time outdoors, may have spared it the more lethal effects of the virus so far. Several studies are probing whether there might be other explanations, including genetic reasons or exposure to other diseases.

Christian Happi, director of the African Center of Excellence for Genomics of Infectious Diseases at Redeemer’s University in Nigeria, said authorities are used to curbing outbreaks even without vaccines and credited the extensive networks of community health workers.

“It’s not always about how much money you have or how sophisticated your hospitals are,” he said.

Devi Sridhar, chair of global public health at the University of Edinburgh, said African leaders haven’t gotten the credit they deserve for acting quickly, citing Mali’s decision to close its borders before COVID-19 even arrived.

“I think there’s a different cultural approach in Africa, where these countries have approached COVID with a sense of humility because they’ve experienced things like Ebola, polio and malaria,” Sridhar said.

In past months, the coronavirus has pummeled South Africa and is estimated to have killed more than 89,000 people there, by far the most deaths on the continent. But for now, African authorities, while acknowledging that there could be gaps, are not reporting huge numbers of unexpected fatalities that might be COVID-related. WHO data show that deaths in Africa make up just 3% of the global total. In comparison, deaths in the Americas and Europe account for 46% and 29%.

In Nigeria, Africa’s most populous country, the government has recorded nearly 3,000 deaths so far among its 200 million population. The U.S. records that many deaths every two or three days.

The low numbers have Nigerians like Opemipo Are, a 23-year-old in Abuja, feeling relieved. “They said there will be dead bodies on the streets and all that, but nothing like that happened,” she said.

Oyewale Tomori, a Nigerian virologist who sits on several WHO advisory groups, suggested Africa might not even need as many vaccines as the West. It’s an idea that, while controversial, he says is being seriously discussed among African scientists — and is reminiscent of the proposal British officials made last March to let COVID-19 freely infect the population to build up immunity.

That doesn’t mean, however, that vaccines aren’t needed in Africa.

“We need to be vaccinating all out to prepare for the next wave,” said Salim Abdool Karim, an epidemiologist at South Africa’s University of KwaZulu-Natal, who previously advised the South African government on COVID-19. “Looking at what’s happening in Europe, the likelihood of more cases spilling over here is very high.”

The impact of the coronavirus has also been relatively muted in poor countries like Afghanistan, where experts predicted outbreaks amid ongoing conflict would prove disastrous.

Hashmat Arifi, a 23-year-old student in Kabul, said he hadn’t seen anyone wearing a mask in months, including at a recent wedding he attended alongside hundreds of guests. In his university classes, more than 20 students routinely sit unmasked in close quarters.

“I haven’t seen any cases of corona lately,” Arifi said. So far, Afghanistan has recorded about 7,200 deaths among its 39 million people, although little testing was done amid the conflict and the actual numbers of cases and deaths are unknown.

Back in Zimbabwe, doctors were grateful for the respite from COVID-19 — but feared it was only temporary.

"People should remain very vigilant," warned Dr. Johannes Marisa, president of the Medical and Dental Private Practitioners of Zimbabwe Association. He fears that another coronavirus wave would hit Zimbabwe next month. "Complacency is what is going to destroy us because we may be caught unaware."

Cheng reported from London. Rahim Faiez in Islamabad, Pakistan, and Chinedu Asadu in Lagos contributed to this report.

Hungary opposition leader vows to restore western alliances

By JUSTIN SPIKE Associated Press

HODMEZOVASARHELY, Hungary (AP) — Hungary's opposition leader wants to restore his country's frayed ties with the West — and also has a message for American fans of right-wing Prime Minister Viktor Orban.

"Let me state very strongly for all Americans that to be a part of Putin's fan club doesn't make you a conservative," said Peter Marki-Zay, a self-described conservative Christian running against Orban in next year's elections, in an interview with The Associated Press.

"Orban is betraying Europe, Orban is betraying NATO, Orban is betraying the United States," he said.

Marki-Zay, the 49-year-old mayor of the small city of Hodmezovasarhely, is leading a diverse coalition of six opposition parties aiming to defeat Hungary's hard-line leader and his ruling Fidesz party in parliamentary elections scheduled for April.

If elected, Marki-Zay says, he will reverse the closer ties Orban has pursued with autocracies in Russia and China, and improve his country's relations with the European Union and other Western allies.

"I still stand for Western values, and we cannot accept a corrupt thug ... who betrays Western values and who is now a servant of Communist China and Russia," he said.

Governing Hungary with a two-thirds majority in parliament since 2010, the right-wing populist Orban and his anti-immigration party have dominated the fractured opposition in all subsequent elections, and cemented their power through changes to election laws, stacking institutions with loyalists and dominating large portions of Hungary's media.

While Orban's critics in Europe have warned of an alarming erosion of democracy in Hungary as its relations with EU have frayed, some of his policies — like his staunch rejection of refugees and generous financial support to families with children — have attracted glowing praise from right-wing American commentators.

Fox News host Tucker Carlson broadcast from Budapest for a week this summer, and praised Orban's migration policy and rejection of the EU's liberal mainstream. Rod Dreher, senior editor of U.S. publication *The American Conservative*, spent several months in Budapest this year on a fellowship financed by a right-wing think tank close to Orban's government.

But Marki-Zay, a devout Catholic with seven children and a former Fidesz voter himself, says that despite Orban's proclamations of building an illiberal "Christian democracy" in the Central European country, he considers the leader neither a Christian, nor a conservative, nor even a democrat.

"Real conservatives consider Christianity to be something very much (the) opposite" of Orban's policies, he said.

Orban's party has accused Marki-Zay of being a left-wing candidate posing as a conservative, a charge stemming from his cooperation with several left-of-center parties in the opposition coalition.

Last week, Marki-Zay travelled to Brussels where he met with some key EU figures — spurring further accusations that he aims to undermine Hungary's sovereignty in favor of adhering to EU dictates.

A fierce critic of the 27-member bloc, which Hungary joined in 2004, Orban has compared EU membership to the Soviet domination Hungary endured for 40 years, and has pursued close diplomatic and economic ties with China and Russia.

But agreements with those countries on major investment projects have both weakened Hungary's geopolitical position and come at the expense of Hungarian taxpayers, Marki-Zay says.

He cites as an example a roughly \$2.3 billion Chinese-led project to modernize the railway between the capital cities of Hungary and Serbia, part of China's Belt and Road global trade initiative that is financed

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by the Hungarian state primarily from a loan from a Chinese state bank.

Another project — a no-bid contract awarded to Russia's state nuclear energy corporation Rosatom to expand a Hungarian nuclear power plant at an estimated cost of over \$11 billion — is "against the national interests of Hungary," he said.

Sitting in his office in Hodmezovasarhely's city hall, the candidate wears a blue ribbon on the lapel of his jacket, something he said represents an "anti-corruption fight" against the kind of governance that has plagued Hungary since its democratic transition from Communism in 1990.

Hungary has become a "country with no consequences," he said, where corruption "has been totally centralized and it's absolutely a part of the system. It is now organized by the government itself."

If elected, Marki-Zay says he will immediately join the European Public Prosecutors Office, an independent EU anti-fraud and corruption body, and set up a domestic anti-corruption office in Hungary.

"Most people in Hungary recognize that there is a corruption problem," he said. "I really hope that in the last four years I have already proven here in Hodmezovasarhely that not all politicians are corrupt."

Running as an independent outsider with no past ties to Hungary's liberal opposition parties, Marki-Zay has vowed to tackle corruption even-handedly, whether it was committed by those currently in government or by the earlier Socialist-led governments that are now in opposition. Two of the parties in his own coalition have been associated with past corruption cases.

Recent polling shows the six-party coalition in a tight race with Orban and his party, suggesting the race will be the closest since Fidesz took power 11 years ago.

Still, Marki-Zay says a media environment which favors the ruling party and an imbalance in financial resources will mean elections next year will not be free and fair.

In an effort to safeguard next year's ballot, the opposition coalition has launched a campaign to recruit 20,000 civilian vote counters to be present at every polling station in the country.

While Marki-Zay expects a highly competitive campaign, he believes that his conservative bona fides and political outsider status can mobilize both disaffected Fidesz supporters and undecided voters who are turned off by corruption.

"We have to get the truth to even the last house in the last village," he said. "We have to give them true and credible information that they were robbed."

De Klerk's death sparks debate over his role in apartheid

By ANDREW MELDRUM Associated Press

JOHANNESBURG (AP) — Liberator of Nelson Mandela? Or a leader responsible for racist murders? South Africa is engrossed in debate over the legacy of apartheid's last president, F.W. de Klerk, who died last week at 85 and is to be buried Sunday.

The controversy following de Klerk to the grave comes 27 years after the official end of the brutal regime that oppressed the country's Black majority for generations. Stoking the furor is a video that he released posthumously in which he said he was sorry.

"I, without qualification, apologize for the pain and the hurt and the indignity and the damage that apartheid has done to Black, brown and Indians in South Africa," said de Klerk, an apparition emaciated by mesothelioma cancer who nonetheless chose his words carefully.

Some South Africans were moved by de Klerk's final appearance, but many were critical, saying he avoided acknowledging that apartheid was a crime against humanity in which he was complicit.

"It's the last of a series of half-baked apologies," the Rev. Michael Lapsley told The Associated Press. "It's good that he apologizes for the pain and hurt, but there's no reckoning. There's no accountability. There's no accepting of responsibility for what happened under his watch."

An Anglican priest and anti-apartheid activist, Lapsley was hit by a parcel bomb that blew off his hands and blinded him in one eye in 1990, months after de Klerk freed Nelson Mandela and began negotiations that eventually dismantled apartheid.

"De Klerk's rule was one of the most violent periods of our history," Lapsley said.

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As the chairman of the State Security Council, de Klerk was present at meetings where violence against anti-apartheid leaders was ordered, right up to the 1994 elections that brought to power Mandela and his party, the African National Congress, according to Lapsley and others who have studied minutes of the council's meetings.

He hopes de Klerk's death "will lead to a lot of soul-searching by us as a nation about what kind of nation we want to be. We have to deal with the psychological, emotional and spiritual issues which are part of the grim legacy of apartheid."

Lapsley, who founded the Institute for the Healing of Memories to help mend the wounds of apartheid, said another problem that de Klerk contributed to is economic inequality.

"Apartheid, like slavery before it, was always about profit," Lapsley said. "Apartheid was always about political oppression and economic exploitation. We have slayed one monster, but we leave the other one very much intact."

Referring to studies that show South Africa is one of the world's most unequal countries, Lapsley said, "If we remain the most unequal society on Earth, our grandchildren will not live in peace."

South Africa resisted the historic wave of democracy that ended colonial-era minority rule across much of Africa in the 1960s. Mozambique, Angola and Portugal's other African colonies became independent in 1975. White-minority-ruled Rhodesia fought a war against Black nationalists, becoming majority-ruled Zimbabwe in 1980.

Apartheid, imposed in 1948, denied the vote and basic rights to South Africa's Black majority and other people of color. Resistance grew for decades, and by the 1980s the country had built up a large military and security apparatus to battle uprisings in the townships where Blacks were confined.

The South African military also fought in neighboring countries, including Angola and what became independent Namibia. South African forces raided Zimbabwe, Zambia and Mozambique.

By the time de Klerk came to power in late 1989, South Africa was internationally isolated, convulsed by domestic violence and battling a contracting economy. The country was on a precipice from which de Klerk pulled it back by releasing Mandela and beginning negotiations.

For working together to end apartheid, de Klerk and Mandela were jointly awarded the Nobel Peace Prize in 1993. Some in South Africa feel that de Klerk should be remembered for averting catastrophe.

South Africa "lost a father who served the country with distinction," said Chief Mandla Mandela, grandson of Nelson Mandela. He said many may not agree with his views, but he felt that de Klerk should be honored as an elder statesman.

Others, however, celebrated de Klerk's death. The Black People's National Crisis Committee slaughtered a sheep in Cape Town's Khayelitsha township to hail his passing.

"De Klerk, who denied that the legislated separate development, exploitation, torture and murder of Black people was a crime against humanity, dies with no honor, and with the dark cloud of having maimed and traumatized families across our nation," said the Economic Freedom Fighters, an opposition party which vowed to disrupt any state funeral.

South Africa is flying its flags at half-staff for four days to honor de Klerk but is not having a state burial. De Klerk is to be buried in a private family ceremony amid tight security as there have been threats to disrupt it.

"De Klerk died a Nobel Peace Prize laureate, an accolade that can never be taken away from him," wrote Mondli Makhanya, editor of the City Press newspaper. "But a man of peace he was not. He was a member of the State Security Council, a body that authorized the killings and brutalization of thousands of South Africans and citizens of neighboring countries. In short, he was a killer."

A more forgiving approach toward de Klerk is urged by South African academic Adam Habib.

"In a single act, he did more for humanity than most people do in a lifetime. And in his last message, he did again apologize for apartheid, this time without any qualifications," wrote Habib, director of SOAS University of London, who said that de Klerk's leadership saved South Africa from years of violence and turmoil.

"So let's remember for the moment the de Klerk who released Mandela and unbanned political parties.

We don't have to forget the victims of apartheid, we don't have to ignore them, but it is only human for us to remember the kinder side of de Klerk."

Thousands of Afghans seek temporary US entry, few approved

By PHILIP MARCELO Associated Press

LOWELL, Mass. (AP) — More than 28,000 Afghans have applied for temporary admission into the U.S. for humanitarian reasons since shortly before the Taliban recaptured Afghanistan and sparked a chaotic U.S. withdrawal, but only about 100 of them have been approved, according to federal officials.

U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services has struggled to keep up with the surge in applicants to a little-used program known as humanitarian parole but promises it's ramping up staff to address the growing backlog.

Afghan families in the U.S. and the immigrant groups supporting them say the slow pace of approvals threatens the safety of their loved ones, who face an uncertain future under the hard-line Islamic government because of their ties to the West.

"We're worried for their lives," says Safi, a Massachusetts resident whose family is sponsoring 21 relatives seeking humanitarian parole. "Sometimes, I think there will be a day when I wake up and receive a call saying that they're no more."

The 38-year-old U.S. permanent resident, who asked that her last name not be used for fear of retribution against her relatives, is hoping to bring over her sister, her uncle and their families. She says the families have been in hiding and their house was destroyed in a recent bombing because her uncle had been a prominent local official before the Taliban took over.

The slow pace of approvals is frustrating because families have already paid hundreds if not thousands of dollars in processing fees, says Chiara St. Pierre, an attorney at the International Institute of New England in Lowell, Massachusetts, a refugee resettlement agency assisting Safi's family.

Each parole application comes with a \$575 filing charge, meaning USCIS, which is primarily fee-funded, is sitting on some \$11.5 million from Afghans in the last few months alone, she and other advocates complain.

"People are desperate to get their families out," said St. Pierre, whose nonprofit has filed more than 50 parole applications for Afghan nationals. "Do we not owe a duty to the people left behind, especially when they are following our immigration laws and using the options they have?"

Victoria Palmer, a USCIS spokesperson, said the agency has trained 44 additional staff to help address the application surge. As of mid-October, the agency had only six staffers detailed to the program.

Of the more than 100 approved as of July 1, some are still in Afghanistan and some have made it to third countries, she said, declining to provide details. The program typically receives fewer than 2,000 requests annually from all nationalities, of which USCIS approves an average of about 500, according to Palmer.

Part of the challenge is that humanitarian parole requires an in-person interview, meaning those in Afghanistan need to travel to another country with an operating U.S. embassy or consulate after they've cleared the initial screening. U.S. officials warn it could then take months longer, and there's no guarantee parole will be granted, even after the interview.

Humanitarian parole doesn't provide a path to lawful permanent residence or confer U.S. immigration status. It's meant for foreigners who are unable to go through the asylum or other traditional visa processes, but who need to leave their country urgently.

The backlog of parole requests comes on top of the more than 73,000 Afghan refugees already evacuated from the country as part of Operations Allies Welcome, which was focused on Afghans who worked for the U.S. government as interpreters and in other jobs.

Most have arrived in the country and have been staying on military bases awaiting resettlement in communities across the country, though about 2,000 still remain overseas awaiting clearance to enter the U.S., according to Palmer.

But advocates question some of USCIS's recent decisions for Afghan humanitarian parole, such as prioritizing applications from those already living in other countries. They say that approach is at odds with

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the program's purpose of helping those most at risk.

The Biden administration should instead focus on applications from women and girls, LGBTQ people and religious minorities still in the country, said Sunil Varghese, of the New York-based International Refugee Assistance Project.

It could also dispense with some of the financial documentation required for applicants and their sponsors, since Congress has passed legislation making Afghan evacuees eligible for refugee benefits, said Lindsay Gray, CEO of Vecina, an Austin, Texas-based group that trains attorneys and volunteers on immigration matters.

Palmer didn't directly address the critiques but said the agency, in each case, determines if there's a "distinct, well-documented reason" to approve humanitarian parole and whether other protections are available. USCIS also considers whether the person already has U.S. ties, such as a family member with legal status or prior work for the U.S. government, among other factors.

In the meantime, Afghans in the U.S. have little choice but to wait and fret.

Bahara, another Afghan living in Massachusetts who asked her last name be withheld over concerns for her family, says she's been wracked with guilt for her decision to leave her country to attend a local university.

The 29-year-old boarded a plane on Aug. 15 just hours before the Taliban swept into the capital of Kabul, leading to one of the largest mass evacuations in U.S. history.

"It was my dream, but it changed completely," said Bahara, referring to enrolling in a U.S. master's degree program. "I couldn't stop thinking about my family. I couldn't sleep the first few weeks. All I did was cry, but it didn't help."

Bahara said her family is worried because Taliban officials have been paying unannounced visits to people like her father who worked with the U.S. government after the militant group was originally ousted from power by the U.S. following the Sept. 11, 2001, terrorist attacks.

An American family is now sponsoring her family for humanitarian parole, giving Bahara hope even as she grieves over her country's current situation.

"I cannot believe how everything just collapsed," said Bahara, who founded a children's literacy program in Afghanistan. "All the achievements and hard work just added up to zero, and now people are suffering."

Baktash Sharifi Baki, a green-card holder who has been living in the U.S. since 2014, was compelled to take more drastic measures as Afghanistan quickly unraveled this summer.

The Philadelphia resident, who served as an interpreter for the U.S. government, traveled back in August in the hopes of shepherding his wife, daughter, mother and godson to safety.

But the family wasn't able to board any of the final commercial flights out of Kabul. Baki has appealed to the U.S. government to allow them to board one of the charter flights that have recently resumed.

Meanwhile, a friend in Louisiana has offered to serve as the family's sponsor for a humanitarian parole application, even covering the costly fees himself.

Baki and his family are staying for now with relatives in the northern city of Mazar-e-Sharif. But he worries his modest cash savings is dwindling just as the region's harsh winter sets in and Afghanistan's economic crisis is deepening.

"We are really facing a bad situation here," Baki said. "We need to get out."

Associated Press writer Julie Watson in San Diego contributed to this report.

Christmas in Bethlehem: Gilded treasures, but few tourists

By ILAN BEN ZION Associated Press

BETHLEHEM, West Bank (AP) — Ahead of Christmas, a towering wooden screen — once blackened with soot from millions of worshippers' candles — is being restored to its gilded glory in the Church of the Nativity, built at the site where many believe Jesus was born.

But few visitors are expected to see it during the upcoming Christmas holiday season.

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Biblical Bethlehem has struggled since the start of the coronavirus pandemic almost two years ago. Christmas is normally peak season for tourism in Jesus' traditional birthplace, located in the Israeli-occupied West Bank. In pre-pandemic times, thousands of pilgrims and tourists from around the world celebrated in the Church of the Nativity and the adjacent Manger Square.

Israel reopened its borders to vaccinated tourists earlier this month, but relatively few are expected to travel to Bethlehem this holiday season, and not nearly as many as in the record-breaking year preceding the pandemic. Most tourists visiting Bethlehem fly into Israel as the West Bank does not have an airport.

Many of Bethlehem's hotels have shut and shopkeepers have struggled to keep afloat. Aladdin Subuh, a shopkeeper whose store sits just off Manger Square, said he only opens his doors to air out the shop.

"It's almost Christmas and there's nobody. Imagine that," he said, surveying the few passersby in the hopes of spotting a foreigner in search of a souvenir. "For two years, no business. It's like dying slowly."

Though the pandemic has blighted the Holy Land's once thriving tourism industry for Israelis and Palestinians alike, for tourism-dependent Bethlehem, the impact has been especially severe. Israel, the primary gateway for foreign tourists, had banned most foreign visitors for the past year and half before this month's reopening.

Just over 30,000 tourists entered Israel in the first half of November, compared to 421,000 in November 2019, according to Israel's Interior Ministry.

The Palestinian self-rule government which administers autonomous enclaves in the West Bank has only provided limited support, in the form of tax exemptions and training programs, to hoteliers, tour operators and tour guides, said Majed Ishaq, director of marketing at the Palestinian Tourism Ministry. He said the ministry was launching a campaign to encourage Palestinian citizens of Israel to visit Bethlehem and other West Bank cities over the holiday season. He added that he hopes the number of foreign tourists would be 10% to 20% of pre-pandemic figures.

Others are not so optimistic.

"I don't think tourism will come back very soon," said Fadi Kattan, a Palestinian chef and hotelier in Bethlehem's Old City. The pandemic forced him to close his Hosh Syrian guesthouse in March 2020, and over the months he had to let his staff go.

He said it was neither financially nor practically feasible to reopen ahead of Christmas, particularly in light of a new wave of coronavirus infections sweeping across Europe. He said it will take years to recover the pandemic's "compounded impact over two years" on Bethlehem's economy — from hotels and restaurants on down to the farmers, grocers and dry cleaners who depended on their business,

"To reopen in security we need to see that there's a long-term prospect," he said.

On a recent day at the Church of the Nativity, the crown jewel of Bethlehem, a solitary group of Italian tourists entered the 6th-century basilica that in years before COVID-19 would have a line stretching out the door. Municipal workers were starting to string up Christmas lights behind them in Manger Square.

The church has undergone a multi-million dollar facelift since 2013 that was organized by a Palestinian presidential committee. It has restored gold-tiled mosaics and marble floors to their former glory and made major structural repairs to the UNESCO heritage site, one of the oldest churches in Christendom.

Additional work remains to be done, said Mazen Karam, director of the Bethlehem Development Foundation, the group spearheading some of the restorations at the church. The undertaking has already cost \$17 million, but Karam said an additional \$2 million are needed to refurbish the church's flagstones and install firefighting and micro-climate systems.

A separate project by the Greek Orthodox Church to refurbish the once soot-encrusted iconostasis — a late 18th-century wooden screen separating the sanctuary from the building's nave — was delayed by the coronavirus outbreak, but is now nearing completion ahead of Christmas after three years of painstaking work.

"It's a big challenge," said Saki Pappadopoulos, a woodcarver with Artis, a Greek restoration company leading the project.

But Father Issa Thaljih, a Greek Orthodox priest at the Church of the Nativity, remains optimistic ahead of the holiday season.

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"Thank God, a little bit day by day we can see more groups coming to Bethlehem — not staying in Bethlehem, only maybe for a visit — but it is a good sign," he said, standing on church's recently refinished marble bema, or raised platform. "Bethlehem without tourists, without people coming to Bethlehem, is nothing."

Goal in sight, Democrats confront need to sell agenda

By MARY CLARE JALONICK Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — Polls show that a strong majority of Democrats — and a majority of the American public — support the broad priorities of the \$1.85 trillion social and environmental spending bill that the House was poised to approve Friday. Democratic lawmakers predict that President Joe Biden's bill, once enacted, will be "transformational" for the country.

Yet it may not be politically transformational for the Democratic Party. At least not immediately.

Both parties know that hard-fought victories in Congress can come before electoral defeat. Democrats saw it in 2010, when they lost their majority months after passing a landmark health care overhaul. Republicans suffered the same fate in 2018, when their House majority was wiped away after enactment of a long-sought tax overhaul that slashed tax rates.

But the political difficulties for Democrats could be especially severe in next year's elections. Republicans are poised to gain seats through redistricting. Biden's poll numbers have slumped. And recovery from the coronavirus crisis has been robust but rocky amid soaring inflation. Democrats have spent months squabbling over the details of the legislation, obscuring the benefits they hope to deliver to the country.

"We do need to turn a corner," says Illinois Rep. Cheri Bustos, a former chairwoman of House Democrats' campaign arm who decided not to run for re-election next year. "We're not in a good place right now, as far as the perception of what we're doing is different than the reality of what we're doing."

Democrats "have to talk about it in ways that matter to people's lives," Bustos said. "And that's not easy."

Assuming the bill passes the House, it will head to the Senate, where revisions are likely and passage could take several weeks.

In the meantime, to save their already-narrow majority, House Democrats are working to revamp their message, move on from the infighting and emphasize the bill's marquee programs. Among them: Billions of dollars to pay for child care, reduce pollution, expand health care access and curb prescription drug costs for older Americans.

They are also trying to get the word out about the separate, \$1 trillion infrastructure bill that Biden signed into law this week. House Democrats said they planned to hold 1,000 public events in the coming weeks — five for every member of their caucus — to tout the upgrades that will be coming to roads, bridges, public transit, internet and more.

Still, Speaker Nancy Pelosi acknowledged Thursday that what Democrats do on the inside "can only get us so far." They will also need Biden's "bully pulpit" and the support of outside grassroots organizers.

The effort to promote the legislation, Pelosi promised, will be "immediate, and it will be intense, and it will be eloquent, and it will make the difference."

There's clearly a steep hill to climb.

October polling from the Associated Press-NORC Center for Public Affairs Research found that fewer than half of Americans approved of how the negotiations over Biden's big bill were being handled. And only about 4 in 10 said they knew a lot or some about what was in it.

At the same time, most Americans supported several elements in the package, with majorities saying that funding for health care and education programs should be high priorities, and close to half saying the same about programs that address climate change. Majorities said that subsidies for child care and paid family leave, also included in the House bill, should at least be moderate priorities.

Like the 2010 health care law, though, it could be years before Americans can take advantage of the programs — and even longer before they become politically popular.

The new entitlement for child care costs, for example, would attempt to guarantee that most Americans

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don't spend more than 7% of their income on child care. But it would be phased in over three years, meaning some parents won't be able to participate until after the next presidential election in 2024. The programs would have to be set up by the federal government and in many cases by the states — a convoluted process that was near-disastrous for Democrats in 2010 as the website for new health care signups crashed at launch.

"The problem Democrats had in their last rough midterm election, in 2010, was that we were passing a blizzard of legislation but people didn't feel the benefits until after 2012," says former Democratic Rep. Steve Israel, who led the party's House campaign arm at the time. "So the strategic imperative for Democrats isn't just getting stuff done, it's getting stuff done that has demonstrable positive impact for voters."

Bustos, who held the same campaign post a few years later, said Democrats have to strike a balance by telling people what the legislation will mean to their lives while also managing expectations. "Rollouts of huge new programs are complicated," she said.

It took a full eight years for Democrats to find electoral success with the health care law. In 2018, after former President Donald Trump and the Republican-led Congress tried and failed to repeal it, Democratic candidates across the country argued that Republican policies endangered the law's protections for people with pre-existing conditions. Democrats won the majority by a resounding margin.

They hope to employ a similar strategy this time around, but with quicker results.

Headed to their districts for the Thanksgiving holidays, lawmakers were testing different strategies. Sen. Chris Murphy, D-Conn., said he plans to not only tell constituents that the bill would cut costs for families, but also that Democrats plan to pay for the legislation by taxing the wealthiest Americans. Rep. Jim Himes, also a Connecticut Democrat, said he will point out the contrast between the Democrats' bill and Republicans' main policy achievement when they were in control — tax cuts that benefitted those same wealthy people.

Ohio Rep. Tim Ryan, who is running for the Senate, says he'll talk about putting money in people's pockets, but also about improving economic conditions so the United States can better compete with China. "I think that the problem we've always had as Democrats is that there's never any context" to the party's priorities, Ryan said.

Republicans who saw gains in this month's off-year elections are lockstep in opposition to the bill, and have spent months railing against it. House Republican Leader Kevin McCarthy called the social and environmental spending package "anti-worker, anti-family, anti-jobs, anti-energy, and anti-American."

Sen. Mazie Hirono, D-Hawaii, said Democrats need to stay on message and make it clear to families what the measure will do for them.

"They just need to make the connection that it's the Democrats who did it," she said.

Associated Press writers Lisa Mascaro, Hannah Fingerhut and Emily Swanson contributed to this report.

Swaggering Pats stifle Falcons 25-0 for 5th straight victory

By PAUL NEWBERRY AP Sports Writer

ATLANTA (AP) — Led by a defense that is downright nasty, the New England Patriots are suddenly playing with the swagger of their Tom Brady years.

Mac Jones threw a 19-yard scoring pass to Nelson Agholor for the game's only offensive touchdown and Kyle Van Noy and the New England defense took care of the rest, blanking the Atlanta Falcons 25-0 on Thursday night for the Patriots' fifth straight victory.

New England (7-4) has allowed just 13 points in its last three games.

"We're catching our stride," said linebacker Matthew Judon, who picked up another sack to push his total for the season to a career-best 10.5. "We're playing with a lot of confidence."

New England (7-4) wasn't as dominating as four days earlier, when the Patriots blew out the Browns 45-7, but it was a thorough beatdown of a feeble Falcons team that hasn't scored a touchdown in nearly nine quarters.

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New England has its longest winning streak since an 8-0 start to the 2019 season, which turned out to be Brady's final year with the Patriots.

"I feel like we've got one of the best defenses in the league," said cornerback J.C. Jackson, who had one of the four picks by the Patriots.

Atlanta (4-6) was shut out for the first time since a 38-0 loss to Carolina on Dec. 13, 2015.

Matt Ryan was sacked four times and intercepted twice, ending another miserable performance — this one in prime time — after posting the lowest passer rating of his career in a 43-3 rout by the Dallas Cowboys last Sunday.

"It's been a tough five days offensively," Ryan said. "We haven't thrown the ball well enough, we haven't run the ball well enough."

The Patriots drove 76 yards in seven plays for a touchdown early in the second quarter.

Damien Harris did most of the dirty work, running four times for 34 yards and grabbing a 9-yard pass, before Agholor got open over the middle against busted coverage, hauled in the throw from Jones and scooted to the end zone.

Jones completed 22 of 26 for 207 yards.

"It was a good team win," the rookie quarterback said. "The defense stepped up and played really well."

Van Noy had two sacks and capped his brilliant defensive performance with a 35-yard interception return for a touchdown off Falcons backup QB Josh Rosen.

Nick Folk booted field goals of 32, 44, 53 and 33 yards.

Atlanta's only chance to make a game of it came after A.J. Terrell's 35-yard interception return sparked a drive that reached the New England 16 in the final minute of the third quarter.

On fourth and 1, the Falcons handed the ball to Qadree Ollison, who had been promoted from the practice squad just before the game. He was swallowed up by the Patriots for no gain.

Atlanta simply had no offensive punch with hybrid star Cordarrelle Patterson unable to go because of an ankle injury.

The Patriots devoted much of their attention to rookie tight end Kyle Pitts, limiting the first-round pick to three catches for 29 yards.

Of course, any meeting between these two teams is sure to bring back memories of the greatest comeback — and collapse — in Super Bowl history. In 2017, the Falcons squandered a 28-3 lead late in the third quarter and lost to the Brady-led Patriots 34-28 in overtime.

The Falcons should've known they were in a for a long night when a lunar eclipse occurring after the game was set to last three hours — and 28 minutes.

Yep, another reminder of 3-28.

The Patriots social media team couldn't resist a little poke, sending out a tweet before the game that said, "We weren't going to mention it but ... You can't make this stuff up."

FINISHING IT OFF

The Patriots didn't let up, even after the Falcons essentially put up the white flag by pulling Ryan.

Van Noy dropped back into coverage to pick off a pass that was intended for Russell Gage, returning it for the TD that finished off the scoring.

The Falcons then sent in third-string quarterback Feleipe Franks, who received the same treatment from the New England defense.

On his only play, Franks was intercepted by Adrian Phillips.

The Falcons became the first team since Nov. 12, 2000, to have three QBs picked off in the same game. It last occurred when San Diego's Jim Harbaugh, Ryan Leaf and Moses Moreno threw interceptions in a 17-7 loss to the Dolphins.

FALCON FOLLIES

A terrible sequence in the second quarter epitomized Atlanta's offensive woes.

On third and less than a yard at the New England 14, Ryan was thrown down by Van Noy for a 13-yard loss.

The Falcons still appeared to salvage some points when Younghoe Koo kicked a 45-yard field goal, only

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to have it wiped off the board by an illegal formation penalty on lineman Jason Springs.

Forced to kick again, Koo's 50-yarder veered wide left of the upright.

UP NEXT

Patriots: Host the AFC-leading Tennessee Titans (8-2) Nov. 26 in what is shaping up to be one of the biggest games of the year.

Falcons: Travel to Jacksonville on Nov. 26 to face the woeful Jaguars (2-7).

Follow Paul Newberry on Twitter at <https://twitter.com/pnewberry1963> and find his work at <https://ap-news.com/search/paulnewberry>

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White supremacist prison guards work with impunity in Fla.

By JASON DEAREN Associated Press

In June, three Florida prison guards who boasted of being white supremacists beat, pepper sprayed and used a stun gun on an inmate who screamed "I can't breathe!" at a prison near the Alabama border, according to a fellow inmate who reported it to the state.

The next day, the officers at Jackson Correctional Institution did it again to another inmate, the report filed with the Florida Department of Corrections' Office of Inspector General stated.

"If you notice these two incidents were people of color. They (the guards) let it be known they are white supremacist," the inmate Jamaal Reynolds wrote. "The Black officers and white officers don't even mingle with each other. Every day they create a hostile environment trying to provoke us so they can have a reason to put their hands on us."

Both incidents occurred in view of surveillance cameras, he said. Reynolds' neatly printed letter included the exact times and locations and named the officers and inmates. It's the type of specific information that would have made it easier for officials to determine if the reports were legitimate. But the inspector general's office did not investigate, corrections spokeswoman Molly Best said. Best did not provide further explanation, and the department hasn't responded to The Associated Press' August public records requests for the videos.

Some Florida prison guards openly tout associations with white supremacist groups to intimidate inmates and Black colleagues, a persistent practice that often goes unpunished, according to allegations in public documents and interviews with a dozen inmates and current and former employees in the nation's third-largest prison system. Corrections officials regularly receive reports about guards' membership in the Ku Klux Klan and criminal gangs, according to former prison inspectors, and current and former officers.

Still, few such cases are thoroughly investigated by state prison inspectors; many are downplayed by officers charged with policing their own or discarded as too complicated to pursue.

"I've visited more than 50 (prison) facilities and have seen that this is a pervasive problem that is not going away," said Democratic Florida state Rep. Dianne Hart. "It's partly due to our political climate. But, those who work in our prisons don't seem to fear people knowing that they're white supremacists."

The people AP talked to, who live and work inside Florida's prison system, describe it as chronically understaffed and nearly out of control. In 2017, three current and former Florida guards who were Ku Klux Klan members were convicted after the FBI caught them planning a Black former inmate's murder.

This summer, one guard allowed 20-30 members of a white supremacist inmate group to meet openly inside a Florida prison. A Black officer happened upon the meeting, they told The AP, and later confronted the colleague who allowed it. The officer said their incident report about the meeting went nowhere, and the guard who allowed it was not punished.

The officer spoke on the condition of anonymity because they were not cleared to discuss official prison business. They told The AP that, after the report went nowhere, they did not feel safe at work and are seeking to leave.

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Officers who want to blow the whistle on colleagues are often ostracized and labeled a "snitch," according to current and former officers.

Mark Caruso, a former sergeant with Florida corrections who was twice fired and reinstated after blowing the whistle on fellow officers, described the department as a "good old boy" network.

He said that senior officers-in-charge have the power to censor any allegations of corrupt behavior that occurs on their watch. This keeps reports inside prison walls.

Caruso worked at three prisons in central Florida and reported inmate beatings and officer misconduct multiple times. Being a whistleblower did not work out well for him. He was fired after reporting on a colleague at the first prison where he worked as a sergeant, he said.

He was reinstated after the officers' union challenged the firing, and he moved to a new prison. There, he again reported an officer's use of force and was later fired and reinstated after the union challenged it again.

In 2019, he reported for duty at another new post, the Central Florida Reception Center. He was soon greeted with signs on an employee bulletin board where his name had been crossed out and "SNITCH" scrawled instead, according to testimony at a union grievance hearing. Another officer spit on his car windshield, he said.

Despite the intimidation, Caruso continued reporting inmate abuse and other illegal activity by fellow officers.

"I have reported people when physically seeing them abuse inmates," he testified in another grievance hearing earlier this year. The AP obtained video of the hearing at which multiple officers and leadership testified in detail about the system's reporting structure and culture.

Corrections officers are required to file "incident reports" if they see a co-worker acting inappropriately. In some Florida prisons, supervisors often tell them not to email the reports, according to officers who testified at Caruso's hearing. Instead, they're told to tell their supervisor verbally what happened or write it longhand. A superior officer then types it up, choosing the language and framing the event.

A sergeant testified that the reason he typed up his officers' incident reports was because most struggle with writing. Also, most do not have computer access at the prison.

Caruso said he refused to report incidents of corruption verbally because it left no record, and he worried that prison leadership would censor his reports. So he emailed them to create an electronic record, a decision that, he says, irked prison leadership.

After seeing his reports go nowhere, he finally went over his superior officers' heads. Caruso made contact with an investigator in the Office of Inspector General and emailed Florida Corrections Secretary Mark Inch directly. Inch responded to him expressing concern, Caruso said, and referred the matter to the IG's office. That did not end well, either.

"For at least two years I reported to (the IG's office) all of the corruption I saw. He didn't respond or follow up," Caruso said of the inspector general's investigator.

Caruso was eventually fired again after officials said he'd failed to report an inmate beating — one Caruso said he did not actually witness. It was a baffling charge given his active campaign of reporting others throughout his corrections career. He claimed, unsuccessfully this time, that the firing was retaliation.

If the inspector general were motivated to aggressively investigate reports of abuse by white supremacists or other gang members working as correctional officers he would face barriers, the former investigators told AP.

That's because state law limits the use of inmates as confidential informants, they said, and guards are reluctant or afraid to snitch on their colleagues.

For an inmate to act as an informant, the FBI would have to take over the case because Florida law limits the inspector general's office's interactions with inmates, the former investigators said. "We don't have the authority to do anything," one said.

Officers, meantime, fear retaliation.

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"Officers are saying their colleagues are members, but they can have me killed," one former investigator said.

After the three guards in Florida were captured on FBI recordings plotting a Black inmate's murder upon his release, Florida corrections spokeswoman Michelle Glady insisted there was no indication of a wider problem of white supremacists working in the prisons, so the state would not investigate further.

After the statement, an AP reporter in April visited the employee parking lot of one facility in the state's rural north and photographed cars and trucks adorned with symbols and stickers that are often associated with the white supremacist movement: Confederate flags, Q-Anon and Thin Blue Line images.

Florida has grappled with this issue for decades. In the early 2000s, the corrections department was forced by a St. Petersburg Times expose to investigate a clique of racist guards who all carried rope keychains with a noose. The Times reported that the noose keychains were used to signal a racist officer who was willing to inflict pain, particularly on Black inmates.

The state investigated the keychains and complaints from Black guards of workplace discrimination. Department inspectors interviewed the white guards who were known to carry the noose keychains and eventually cleared them all.

"This is a pattern all over the country," said Paul Wright, a former inmate who co-founded the prisoner-rights publication Prison Legal News. Wright helped expose Ku Klux Klan members working in a Washington state prison in the 1990s. He and Prison Legal News have since reported cases of Nazis and klan members working as correctional officers in California, New York, Texas, Illinois and many other states.

"There's an institutional acceptance of this type of racism," Wright said. "What's striking about this is that so many of them keep their jobs."

Most state prisons and police departments throughout the U.S. do very little background checking to see if new hires have extremist views, said Greg Ehrie, former chief of the FBI's New York domestic terrorism squad, who now works with the Anti-Defamation League.

"There are 513 police agencies in New Jersey, and not one bans being part of outlaw motorcycle gangs. A prison guard who is the patched member of the Pagans, he can be out about it and tell you about it (with no punishment) because it's not stipulated in the employment contract," Ehrie said. The ADL lists the Pagans among biker gangs with white supremacist group affiliations.

This dynamic can lead to what the former Florida prison investigator described as "criminals watching over criminals."

"If you have a heartbeat, a GED and no felony conviction you can get a job. That's sad," said Caruso, the former Florida correctional sergeant.

Florida state Rep. Hart and Caruso have called for a thorough investigation of the issue and a federal takeover of the prison system.

The FBI said it would neither confirm nor deny if such an investigation had been launched, but Ehrie said it is likely.

"I would be extremely surprised if this wasn't an open bureau investigation," he said of Florida's prison system. "It's almost impossible that they're not investigating."

Meanwhile, reports of racist behavior by correctional officers continue, according to inmates and current and former Florida corrections employees.

In late September, at another Panhandle prison, a 25-year-old Black inmate reported being beaten by a white officer who said "You're lucky I didn't have my spray on me, cuz I would gas yo Black ass." The inmate's lip was split open and his face swollen.

The inmate's family requested anonymity for fear of retaliation.

His mother reported the incident to the Inspector General's office on Oct. 1 and requested a wellness check on him. The office sent an investigator to the facility to interview her son, according to emails provided by the family.

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After the interview, the IG refused to investigate the officer's conduct. The mother was told it was her son's word versus the officer's, and there was nothing they could do. The IG's office referred the matter instead to the prison warden.

The officer continued working in the inmate's dorm and threatened him, the inmate said in letters home. "All them is a click (sic), a gang. Ya feel me, they all work together," the inmate wrote in October. For weeks, he sent desperate letters saying he was still being terrorized. He urged his mother to continue fighting.

"Don't let up Mom. This has extremely messed up my mental. Got me shell shock, feel less of a man, violated ya feel me? But I love you."

She eventually helped him get transferred in early November to a facility with a reputation for being even more lawless and brutal, according to the family and a current officer. He is four years into a 12-year sentence for attempted robbery with a gun or deadly weapon.

"I do look forward to seeing my son one day and I can only pray," the mother told AP. "I'm overwhelmed, tired and doing my best to hold on for my son's sake."

Michael Balsamo in Washington contributed to this report.

Email AP's Global Investigations Team at investigative@ap.org or <https://www.ap.org/tips/>. See other work at <https://www.apnews.com/hub/ap-investigations>.

Follow Jason Dearen on Twitter: <http://www.twitter.com/JHDearen>

Cannabis bust on Indigenous land highlights legal divide

By MORGAN LEE Associated Press

SANTA FE, N.M. (AP) — A federal raid on a household marijuana garden on tribal land in northern New Mexico is sowing uncertainty and resentment about U.S. drug enforcement priorities on Native American reservations, as more states roll out legal marketplaces for recreational pot sales.

In late September, Bureau of Indian Affairs officers confiscated nine cannabis plants from a home garden at Picuris Pueblo that was tended by Charles Farden, a local resident since childhood who is not Native American. The 54-year-old is enrolled in the state's medical marijuana program to ease post-traumatic stress and anxiety.

Farden said he was startled to be placed in handcuffs as federal officers seized mature plants laden with buds — an estimated yearlong personal supply.

New Mexico first approved the drug's medical use in 2007, while Picuris Pueblo decriminalized medical pot for members in 2015. A new state law in June broadly legalized marijuana for adults and authorized up to a dozen home-grown plants per household for personal use — with no weight limit.

"I was just open with the officer, straightforward. When he asked what I was growing, I said, 'My vegetables, my medical cannabis,'" Farden said of the Sept. 29 encounter. "And he was like, 'That can be a problem.'"

The raid has cast a shadow over cannabis as an economic development opportunity for Indigenous communities, as tribal governments at Picuris Pueblo and at least one other reservation pursue agreements with New Mexico that would allow them to open marijuana businesses. The state is home to 23 federally recognized Native American communities. It's aiming to launch retail pot sales by April.

More than two-thirds of states have legalized marijuana in some form, including four that approved recreational pot in the 2020 election and four more by legislation this year. The U.S. government has avoided cracking down on them, even though the drug remains illegal under federal law to possess, use or sell.

The September raid has some scrutinizing its approach on tribal lands like Picuris Pueblo, where the Bureau of Indian Affairs provides policing to enforce federal and tribal laws in an arrangement common in Indian Country. Other tribes operate their own police forces under contract with the BIA.

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In a recent letter to Picuris Pueblo tribal Gov. Craig Quanchello obtained by The Associated Press, a BIA special agent in charge said the agency won't tell its officers to stand down in Indian Country — and that marijuana possession and growing remains a federal crime, despite changes in state and tribal law.

"Prior notification of law enforcement operations is generally not appropriate," the letter states. "The BIA Office of Justice Services is obligated to enforce federal law and does not instruct its officers to disregard violations of federal law in Indian Country."

Officials with the BIA and its parent agency, the Interior Department, declined to comment and did not respond to the AP's requests for details of the raid and its implications. Farden has not been charged and does not know if there will be further consequences.

President Joe Biden this week ordered several Cabinet departments to work together to combat human trafficking and crime on Native American lands, where violent crime rates are more than double the national average.

He did not specifically address marijuana, though he has said he supports decriminalizing the drug and expunging past pot use convictions. He has not embraced federally legalizing marijuana.

Portland-based criminal defense attorney Leland Berger, who last year advised the Oglala Sioux Tribe after it passed a cannabis ordinance, notes that Justice Department priorities for marijuana in Indian Country were outlined in writing under President Barack Obama then overturned under President Donald Trump, with little written public guidance since.

"It's remarkable for me to hear that the BIA is enforcing the federal Controlled Substances Act on tribal land where the tribe has enacted an ordinance that protects the activity," he said.

Across the U.S., tribal enterprises have taken a variety of approaches as they straddle state and federal law and jurisdictional issues to gain a foothold in the cannabis industry.

In Washington, the Suquamish Tribe forged a pioneering role under a 2015 compact with the state to open a retail marijuana outlet across Puget Sound from Seattle on the Port Madison reservation. It sells cannabis from dozens of independent producers.

Several Nevada tribes operate their own enforcement division to help ensure compliance with state- and tribal-authorized marijuana programs, including a registry for home-grown medical marijuana. Taxes collected at tribal dispensaries stay with tribes and go toward community improvement programs.

In South Dakota, the Oglala Sioux in early 2020 became the only tribe to set up a cannabis market without similar state regulations, endorsing medical and recreational use in a referendum at the Pine Ridge Reservation. Months later, a statewide vote legalized marijuana in South Dakota, with a challenge from Republican Gov. Kristi Noem's administration now pending at the state Supreme Court.

The U.S. government recognizes an "inherent and inalienable" right to self-governance by Native American tribes. But federal law enforcement agencies still selectively intervene to enforce cannabis prohibition, Berger said.

"The tribes are sovereign nations, and they have treaties with the United States, and in some cases there is concurrent jurisdiction. ... It's sort of this hybrid," he said.

In late 2020, a combination of state, federal and tribal law enforcement cooperated in a raid on sprawling marijuana farms with makeshift greenhouses in northwestern New Mexico with the consent of the Navajo Nation president. Authorities seized more than 200,000 plants. At the time, New Mexico limited marijuana cultivation to 1,750 plants per licensed medical cannabis producer.

At Picuris Pueblo, Quanchello said the cannabis industry holds economic promise for tribal lands that are too remote to support a full-blown casino. Picuris operates a smoke shop out of a roadside trailer and is close to opening a gas station with a sandwich shop and mini-grocery.

"We're farmers by nature. It's something we can do here and be good at it," Quanchello said. "We don't want to miss it."

He described the BIA raid as an affront to Picuris Pueblo, with echoes of federal enforcement in 2018 that uprooted about 35 cannabis plants grown by the tribe in a foray into medical marijuana.

State lawmakers in 2019 adopted uniform regulations for medical marijuana on tribal and nontribal land.

In legalizing recreational marijuana this year, New Mexico's Democratic-led Legislature and Gov. Michelle Lujan Grisham emphasized the need to create jobs, shore up state revenue and address concerns about harm inflicted on racial and ethnic minorities by drug criminalization.

Judith Dworkin, a Scottsdale, Arizona-based attorney specializing in Native American law, said tribal cannabis enterprises confront less risk of interference from federal law enforcement where states have robust legal markets for pot.

"It's a lot easier for a tribe to take a position that they want to do something similar" to the state, she said. "It's still a risk."

Quanchello said he sees federal enforcement of cannabis laws at Picuris Pueblo as unpredictable and discriminatory.

"We as a tribe can end up investing a million dollars into a project, thinking it's OK. And because of a rogue officer or somebody that doesn't believe something is right, it could be stopped," he said.

Transplant-waiting children victims of Venezuela's crises

By REGINA GARCIA CANO and JUAN PABLO ARRAEZ Associated Press

CARACAS, Venezuela (AP) — Zoe Martano is no stranger to misery. At 6, she has spent half of her life in and out of a Venezuelan hospital, being prodded and poked, rushed to the ICU and hooked up to IV lines meant to keep her alive until her country's crises dissipate.

Only then might the young leukemia victim be able to undergo the bone marrow transplant doctors say she desperately needs.

Except for a few charity-aided cases, poor Venezuelan children have not received organ or bone marrow transplants since 2017. Dozens of children have died since, including 25 this year, according to a parent organization. Only the wealthy in this socialist country can get a transplant.

For Andrea Velázquez, Zoe's mom, the lives of her daughter and the other roughly 150 children awaiting transplants are in the hands of the government of President Nicolás Maduro.

"It is very difficult to explain to a mother who lost her son that 'Look, we don't have the resources to make the hospital optimal to do a transplant,'" Velázquez said.

"If the resources were better managed, obviously, we would have better hospitals and we would not be going through what we are going through."

The troubled South American country once had a successful transplant program. Between 1967 and 2000, more than 3,100 kidney procedures alone took place. By 2016, that number would more than double thanks to a public-private partnership that included public awareness campaigns, an organ procurement system and assistance for low-income patients.

The National Transplant Organization of Venezuela, which was privately administered and publicly funded, served minors and adults in need of a variety of organs, including heart, liver and kidneys. But after Maduro took office following the death of President Hugo Chavez in 2013, the government demanded full control of the program.

In June 2017, health officials told the country's 14 transplant centers that they would be closed for three months to resolve medication-related issues, according to Lucila Cárdenas de Velutini, a member of the organization's board of directors. The service interruption became permanent.

The country now lacks a program to harvest organs from dead people, which was overseen by the organization.

Even some charitable options have been lost. For years, the Houston-based Simon Bolivar Foundation, a charity funded by Citgo, a subsidiary of Venezuela's state-run oil giant PDVSA, covered the costs of transplants for Venezuelan children in other countries. But the foundation stopped paying the bills in 2019 after the U.S. imposed economic sanctions blocking companies from dealing with PDVSA.

Many of the children waiting for a transplant, including Zoe, receive care at a hospital in the capital of Caracas. The organization their parents created to push the government into action, Santi y sus Amigos, estimates that more than 100 children have died since 2017.

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Children like 9-year-old Jeannys Herrera, who died three months ago after about two years of waiting for a kidney transplant. Her mother, Gineth Gil, periodically visits her grave at a municipal cemetery in Caracas, sweeping it with a makeshift hand broom and playing music for her child.

"Just as my daughter died with hope, there are other children who are still alive and want hope, want to have a quality of life, (want) to be transplanted," Gil said.

In September, Santi y sus Amigos proposed equipping an abandoned area of a hospital to exclusively provide bone marrow transplants -- a move it estimated could save at least 60 lives in less than a year.

The group also suggested that the government enter into agreements with private Venezuelan hospitals that have the capacity to carry out pediatric transplants.

"We see how day by day, the children's health is deteriorating without much hope," they wrote.

Cárdenas said costs can range between \$70,000 and \$100,000 for a transplant. That's a daunting price tag in a country where the average minimum monthly wage is about \$2.

Parents also placed pairs of shoes -- each with the date of death of the child who once wore them -- outside the Mexican embassy in an effort to draw attention to their plight as discussions between the government and opposition kicked off in Mexico City.

But the negotiations -- intended to find a way out of the years-long stalemate that has afflicted Venezuela -- were suspended last month.

The Venezuelan government did not respond to requests for comment.

Maduro during a televised event Tuesday announced a plan to resume bone marrow transplants.

"Now, we are going to advance in a plan to accelerate transplants for those who are waiting for their operation," Maduro said. "We are going to fully guarantee it with all the treatments, with all the loving care and overcoming difficulties, sanctions, blockade."

With a long wait, a child's need for a transplant can be overwhelming for the entire family.

Velazquez works as an in-home hairdresser, taking appointments only when Zoe is not at the hospital. But Marcos Brito did not have a work-from-home option. He quit his job as a public-school teacher in 2016 after his son was diagnosed with steroid-resistant nephrotic syndrome, a rare condition, and was told a kidney transplant would be needed.

Maykol Brito's illness typically progresses to end-stage kidney failure, but transplants can help achieve remission. Since his diagnosis, he has spent months at a time at a Caracas hospital, to the point his father calls it their home.

At 13, he is better able to understand the consequences of delaying transplant than younger patients. His father sometimes covers his ears when a nearby patient is having a medical crisis.

"What are they waiting for? That all the children go to heaven?" Maykol said, after logging in a notebook all medications he had just taken. "It is important that transplants are reactivated for everyone."

His father said lab work for each kidney disease patient costs \$20 a month. His partner chips in to help pay the \$300 a month it costs to buy food for Maykol's low-carb diet.

Marcos Brito is part of the parents' group, which he said is waging "a humanitarian campaign" aimed at convincing authorities to "make the right decision in this matter because we no longer want to lose more babies, more children."

Dr. Pedro Rivas Vetencourt, who headed the National Transplant Organization before the government takeover, co-leads a foundation working to expand access to pediatric liver transplants across Latin America. He said governments often fail to allocate money for transplants because of the expense.

But he said research has shown that a transplant is more cost effective than long-term treatment.

If a child has been in and out of a hospital since she was born, Vetencourt said, that "means her mother has a lot of limitations to work because you have to take care of the child."

"So, the child cannot go to school like she's supposed to when you're 9 years old, (and) the child is falling out of place. It affects a very vulnerable population, and then increases the chances of them living in poverty. What we try to do is explain to the governments that they can do a better use of resources."

Three times a week, 14-year-old Ángel Céspedes and his mother make a roughly 45-mile journey by bus

from a rural community to Caracas. A bandaged catheter protrudes from his neck, a port for the dialysis that removes waste products and extra fluid from his blood.

Yohelys Céspedes knows her son's pain all too well. She, too, has end-stage kidney failure, undergoes dialysis and needs a transplant.

Ángel has relied on dialysis since he was diagnosed with chronic kidney disease in 2017. The hours-long treatments and catheter infections have weakened him. He has lost weight and is susceptible to fevers; without transplants, his mother fears for his future, and for her own.

"I don't know whose fault it is," Céspedes said after she and Ángel underwent dialysis on the same day. "This is not the time to look for someone to blame, whoever has the solution that is what we want."

Rittenhouse jury to return for 4th day of deliberations

By MICHAEL TARM, SCOTT BAUER and AMY FORLITI Associated Press

KENOSHA, Wis. (AP) — The jury at Kyle Rittenhouse's murder trial was to return Friday for a fourth day of deliberations, after a quiet day behind closed doors that ended with one juror asking if she could take home the jury instructions.

Thursday's court session was notable largely for Judge Bruce Schroeder banning MSNBC from the courthouse after a freelancer was accused of following the jurors in their bus.

Rittenhouse, 18, is on trial for killing two men and wounding a third with a rifle during a turbulent night of protests that erupted in Kenosha in the summer of 2020 after a Black man, Jacob Blake, was shot by a white police officer.

Even as the jury weighed the evidence, two mistrial requests from the defense hung over the case, with the potential to upend the verdict if the panel were to convict Rittenhouse. One of those requests asks the judge to go even further and bar prosecutors from retrying him.

Schroeder banned MSNBC after police said they briefly detained a man who had followed the jury bus and may have tried to photograph jurors.

NBC News said in a statement that the man was a freelancer who received a citation for a traffic violation that took place near the jury vehicle, and he "never photographed or intended to photograph them."

Before the jurors retired around 4 p.m. at what the judge said was their own request, one of them asked if she could take the jury instructions home, and the judge said yes but told her she couldn't talk to anyone about them. Before deliberations, Schroeder read the jury some 36 pages of instructions on the charges and the laws of self-defense.

After the jury departed, Rittenhouse attorney Mark Richards told the judge he feared that letting members take home instructions would lead to jurors looking things up in the dictionary or doing their own research.

Tom Grieve, a Milwaukee attorney and former prosecutor who's not involved in the case, called the move "definitely unusual in my experience."

"The natural issue is that it will precipitate armchair research and table discussion," he said.

At the end of the day, jurors looked tired, but no more than they did at the end of their first day. No one seemed visibly upset. Two jurors spoke genially to each other as they walked out the door.

Rittenhouse was a 17-year-old former police youth cadet when he went to Kenosha in what he said was an effort to protect property after rioters set fires and ransacked businesses on previous nights.

He shot and killed Joseph Rosenbaum, 36, and Anthony Huber, 26, and wounded Gaije Grosskreutz, now 28. Rittenhouse is white, as were those he shot.

Rittenhouse said he acted in self-defense after coming under attack, while prosecutors argued he instigated the bloodshed.

The case has exposed deep divides among Americans over guns, racial injustice, vigilantism and self-defense in the U.S.

To some civil rights activists, the shootings were an attack on the movement for racial justice, and some have complained of a racial double standard in the way Rittenhouse was treated by law enforcement that night.

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The defense has twice asked the judge to declare a mistrial, alleging that they were given an inferior copy of a potentially crucial video and that the prosecution asked improper questions of Rittenhouse during cross-examination.

Schroeder has said the mistrial bid will have to be addressed if there is a guilty verdict. If Rittenhouse is acquitted, the dispute won't matter. But if he is convicted and the judge then declares a mistrial, that would void the verdict.

Rittenhouse could get life in prison if convicted of the most serious charge against him.

Forliti reported from Minneapolis, Bauer from Madison, Wisconsin. Associated Press writers Tammy Webber in Fenton, Michigan, and Todd Richmond in Madison contributed to this story.

Find the AP's full coverage of the Rittenhouse trial: <https://apnews.com/hub/kyle-rittenhouse>

House moves toward OK of Dems' sweeping social, climate bill

By ALAN FRAM Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — Democrats brushed aside months-long divisions and approached House passage of their expansive social and environment bill late Thursday, as President Joe Biden and his party neared a defining win in their drive to use their control of government to funnel its resources toward their domestic priorities.

House approval, expected on a near party-line vote, would send the measure to a Senate where cost-cutting demands by moderate Sen. Joe Manchin, D-W.Va., and that chamber's strict rules seemed certain to force significant changes. That will prompt fresh disputes between party centrists and moderates that will likely take weeks to resolve.

Even so, House passage would mark a watershed for a measure remarkable for the breadth and depth of the changes it would make in federal policies. Wrapped into one bill were far-reaching changes in taxation, health care, energy, climate change, family services, education and housing. That underscored Democrats' desire to achieve their goals while controlling the White House and Congress — a dominance that could well end after next year's midterm elections.

"Too many Americans are just barely getting by in our economy," said House Majority Leader Steny Hoyer, D-Md. "And we simply can't go back to the way things were before the pandemic."

House passage would also give Biden a momentary taste of victory, and probably relief, during perhaps the rockiest period of his presidency. He's been battered by falling approval numbers in polls, reflecting voters' concerns over inflation, gridlocked supply chains and the persistent coronavirus pandemic, leaving Democrats worried that their legislative efforts are not breaking through to voters.

Biden this week signed a \$1 trillion package of highway and other infrastructure projects, another priority that overcame months of internal Democratic battling. The president has spent recent days promoting that measure around the country.

The House moved toward a final vote after the nonpartisan Congressional Budget Office said the package would worsen federal deficits by \$160 billion over the coming decade. The agency also recalculated the measure's 10-year price tag at \$1.68 trillion, though that figure wasn't directly comparable to a \$1.85 trillion figure Democrats have been using.

The 2,100-page bill's initiatives include bolstering child care assistance, creating free preschool, curbing seniors' prescription drug costs and beefing up efforts to slow climate change. Also included are tax credits to spur clean energy development, bolstered child care assistance and extended tax breaks for millions of families with children, lower-earning workers and people buying private health insurance.

Most of it would be paid for by tax increases on the wealthy, big corporations and companies doing business abroad.

Final approval, which had been expected in late evening, was delayed indefinitely as House Minority Leader Kevin McCarthy, R-Calif., spoke for over three hours criticizing the legislation, Biden and Democrats.

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Democrats sporadically booed and groaned as McCarthy glared back, underscoring partisan hostility only deepened by this week's censure of Rep. Paul Gosar, R-Ariz., for threatening tweets aimed at Rep. Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez, D-N.Y.

McCarthy, who hopes to become speaker if Republicans capture the chamber in next year's elections, recited problems the country has faced under Biden, including inflation, large numbers of immigrants crossing the Southwest border and the chaotic U.S. withdrawal from Afghanistan. "Yeah, I want to go back," he said in mocking reference to the "Build Back Better" name Biden uses for the legislation.

House rules do not limit how long party leaders may speak. In 2018, House Speaker Nancy Pelosi, D-Calif., minority leader at the time, held the floor for over eight hours demanding action on immigration.

The measure would provide \$109 billion to create free preschool for 3- and 4-year-olds. There are large sums for home health care for seniors, new Medicare coverage for hearing and a new requirement for four weeks of paid family leave. The family leave program, however, was expected to be removed in the Senate, where it's been opposed by Manchin.

There is also language letting the government issue work permits to millions of immigrants that would let them stay in the U.S. temporarily, and \$297 billion in savings from letting the government curb prescription drug costs. The fate of both those provisions is uncertain in the Senate, where the chamber's nonpartisan parliamentarian enforces rules that limit provisions allowed in budget bills.

In one major but expected difference with the White House, CBO estimated that the bill's added \$80 billion to beef up IRS tax enforcement would let it collect \$207 billion in new revenue over the coming decade. That meant net savings of \$127 billion, well below the White House's more optimistic \$400 billion estimate.

In a scorekeeping quirk, CBO officially estimated that the overall legislation would drive up federal deficits by \$367 billion over the coming decade. But agency guidelines require it to ignore IRS savings when measuring a bill's deficit impact, and it acknowledged that the measure's true impact would worsen shortfalls by \$160 billion when counting added revenue the IRS would collect.

Biden and other Democratic leaders have said the measure would pay for itself, largely through tax increases on the wealthy, big corporations and companies doing business abroad.

Both parties worry about deficits selectively. Republicans passed tax cuts in 2017 that worsened red ink by \$1.9 trillion, while Democrats enacted a COVID-19 relief bill this year with that same price tag.

Republicans said the latest legislation would damage the economy, give tax breaks to some wealthy taxpayers and make government bigger and more intrusive. Drawing frequent GOP attacks was a provision boosting the limit on state and local taxes that people can deduct from federal taxes, which disproportionately helps top earners from high-tax coastal states.

After months of talks, Democrats appeared eager to wrap it up and begin selling the package back home. They said they were planning 1,000 events across the country by year's end to pitch the measure's benefits to voters.

Facing uniform Republican opposition, Democrats could lose no more than three votes to prevail in the House, but moderates seemed reassured by CBO's figures. Some said projections about IRS savings are always uncertain, others said the bill need not pay for it roughly half-trillion dollars for encouraging cleaner energy need because global warming is an existential crisis.

Florida Democratic Rep. Stephanie Murphy, a leading centrist, said she would back the measure after the latest numbers showed the legislation "is fiscally disciplined" and "has a lot of positive elements."

Vice President Kamala Harris' tie-breaking vote gives Democrats control of the 50-50 Senate. That leaves Democrats with zero votes to spare, giving enormous leverage to Manchin in upcoming bargaining. The altered bill would have to return to the House before going to Biden's desk.

The nonpartisan Committee for a Responsible Federal Budget, which preaches fiscal constraint, estimated that the bill's overall cost would be nearly \$5 trillion if Democrats hadn't made some of its programs temporary. For example, tax credits for children and low-earning workers are extended for just one year, making their price tags appear lower, even though the party would like those programs to be permanent.

AP Congressional Correspondent Lisa Mascaro and reporter Farnoush Amiri contributed to this report.

Biden praises Canada, Mexico as leaders discuss strains

By AAMER MADHANI, ROB GILLIES, and MARIA VERZA Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — Reviving three-way North American summitry after a five-year break, President Joe Biden on Thursday joined with the leaders of Canada and Mexico to declare their nations can work together and prove “democracies can deliver” even as they sort out differences on key issues.

But as Biden, along with Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau and Mexican President Andrés Manuel López Obrador, spoke of their mutual respect, the three leaders also found themselves dealing with fresh strains on trade, immigration, climate change and other matters.

“We can meet all the challenges if we just take the time to speak to one another, by working together,” said Biden, who hosted the North American neighbors for what had been a near-annual tradition in the decade before President Donald Trump came to office.

It was a day of full-on diplomacy that required careful choreography as Trudeau and Lopez Obrador each met separately with Biden and Vice President Kamala Harris before gathering for a three-way conversation in the East Room that featured a language mix of English, French and Spanish.

The leaders issued a post-summit statement saying they had agreed to collaborate on addressing migration, climate change and the coronavirus pandemic — without specifying how they would resolve their differences.

As they played up the closeness of the alliance, points of tension were also clear.

They include differences between Washington and Ottawa over proposed tax incentives that would benefit U.S. electric car auto manufacturers; frustration from López Obrador that the U.S. isn't moving to issue more temporary work visas even as American businesses complain they are suffering from a worker shortage; and disappointment by the U.S. and Canada that Mexico is not moving faster to address climate change.

Biden met first with Trudeau, calling the U.S.-Canada relationship one of the easiest in the early going of his presidency. Trudeau said his values are deeply aligned with Biden, but there are issues of disagreement.

As they sat down for talks, Biden confirmed their differences over proposed electric vehicle tax incentives in his massive social services and climate bill, and noted the legislation hadn't “even passed yet in the House.”

The provision in Biden's proposed spending plan would offer American consumers a \$7,500 tax credit if they buy electric vehicles through 2026. The following year, only purchases of electric vehicles made in the U.S. would qualify for the credit. The base credit would go up by \$4,500 if the vehicle was made at a U.S. plant that operates under a union-negotiated collective bargaining agreement.

“It doesn't recognize the level to which auto production has been incredibly integrated between our two countries over the past 50 years,” Trudeau said after the meetings. “It's possible for an auto part to crisscross the border six or seven times before it finally rolls off an assembly line in a completed vehicle.”

Trudeau said the credit would pose quite a problem for vehicle production in Canada.

“The Americans are very aware of Canada's position on this and our concerns around it, and quite frankly the threats it poses to over 50 years of integrated auto-making in our two countries which was mostly reaffirmed in the Canada, U.S., Mexico free trade agreement, the new NAFTA,” Trudeau said.

Canadian Deputy Prime Minister Chrystia Freeland on Wednesday called the incentive a clear violation of an updated trade agreement among the three countries that aimed to protect U.S. jobs and products made in North America.

The union provision has also sparked pushback from some non-union shops and U.S. lawmakers. Still, White House press secretary Jen Psaki said Biden “is pretty committed to the bill providing good-paying union jobs.”

Trump had an icy relationship with López Obrador's predecessor, pressing Enrique Peña Nieto to never publicly say that Mexico wouldn't pay for a wall along its border with the southern U.S.

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But López Obrador appeared to reach a one-issue understanding with Trump: Mexico slowed the flow of Central American migrants trying to reach the U.S. border, and Trump often appeared to turn a blind eye to just about every other facet of the complicated relationship.

López Obrador offered warm words for Biden when they appeared before the cameras Thursday. The two leaders discussed Mexico's relations with the U.S. under Abraham Lincoln and Franklin D. Roosevelt before the portraits of both that Biden has displayed prominently in the Oval Office.

The Mexican president praised Biden for treating his government with respect, something he noted has not always been a given in the two countries' long history, and for including funding in his spending bill to overhaul the immigration system. But he also alluded to his desire to see the U.S. move quickly on temporary visas.

López Obrador has mentioned on multiple occasions his interest in the U.S. government expanding its work visa program so more Mexicans and Central Americans can fill the demand for labor in the U.S. The temporary workers in turn could have access to the higher pay they seek in the U.S. without becoming part of the illegal immigration flow.

"Why not study the workforce demand and open the migratory flow in an orderly manner?" López Obrador said.

After the meetings ended, Mexican Foreign Affairs Secretary Marcelo Ebrard characterized the day as "very successful," adding, "There is an ideological, political affinity and good chemistry between the three and that is going to mean a new stage in the relationship."

Ebrard said the U.S. had agreed to put in motion a development program for Central America similar to what Mexico has proposed, but he did not specify what the program would entail. Mexico has pushed an expansion of one of López Obrador's signature social programs that pays farmers to plant trees on their land to relieve the economic pressure to migrate.

Thursday's meetings at the White House marked the first trilateral get-together for North American leaders since a June 2016 gathering of Trudeau, Barack Obama and Enrique Peña Nieto in Ottawa. The tradition of three-way meetings started when George W. Bush played host to Mexico's Vicente Fox and Canada's Paul Martin in 2005 at his ranch in Texas.

Mexico's priorities heading into the summit were to obtain concrete advances on immigration and more equitable access to COVID-19 vaccines.

The U.S. and Canada have expressed frustration that López Obrador has failed to get on board with global efforts to curb climate emissions. The Mexican president skipped this month's U.N. climate summit in Glasgow and has accused elite nations of demonstrating "hypocrisy" when it comes to environmentalism.

Trudeau and Biden also discussed the future of an oil pipeline that crosses part of the Great Lakes and is the subject of rising tension over whether it should be shut down. Biden is caught in a battle over Enbridge's Line 5, a key segment of a pipeline network that carries Canadian oil across the U.S. Midwest.

Michigan Gov. Gretchen Whitmer, a Democrat and Biden ally, has demanded closure of the 68-year-old line because of the potential for a catastrophic rupture along a 4-mile section (6.4 kilometers) in the Straits of Mackinac, which connects Lake Huron and Lake Michigan. The Biden administration has not taken a position but is under increasing pressure to do so.

Canada last month invoked a 1977 treaty that guarantees the unimpeded transit of oil between the two nations.

Associated Press writer Colleen Long in Washington contributed to this report. Gillies reported from Halifax, Nova Scotia. Verza reported from Mexico City.

Brazil's Amazon deforestation surges to worst in 15 years

By DAVID BILLER Associated Press

RIO DE JANEIRO (AP) — The area deforested in Brazil's Amazon reached a 15-year high after a 22% jump from the prior year, according to official data published Thursday.

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The National Institute for Space Research's Prodes monitoring system showed the Brazilian Amazon lost 13,235 square kilometers of rainforest in the 12-month reference period from Aug. 2020 to July 2021. That's the most since 2006.

The 15-year high flies in the face of Bolsonaro government's recent attempts to shore up its environmental credibility, having made overtures to the administration of U.S. President Joe Biden and moved forward its commitment to end illegal deforestation at the United Nations climate summit in Glasgow this month. The space agency's report, released Thursday, is dated Oct. 27 — before talks in Glasgow began.

The Brazilian Amazon hadn't recorded a single year with more than 10,000 square kilometers of deforestation in over a decade before Jair Bolsonaro's term started. In Jan. 2019. Between 2009 and 2018, the average was 6,500 square kilometers. Since then, the annual average leapt to 11,405 square kilometers, and the three-year total is an area bigger than the state of Maryland.

"It is a shame. It is a crime," Márcio Astrini, executive secretary of the Climate Observatory, a network of environmental nonprofit groups, told The Associated Press. "We are seeing the Amazon rainforest being destroyed by a government which made environmental destruction its public policy."

Bolsonaro took office with promises to develop the Amazon, and dismissing global outcry about its destruction. His administration has defanged environmental authorities and backed legislative measures to loosen land protections, emboldening land grabbers. This week at a conference in the United Arab Emirates to attract investment, he told the crowd that attacks on Brazil for deforestation are unfair and that most of the Amazon remains pristine.

Brazil's environment ministry didn't immediately respond to an AP email requesting comment on the Prodes data showing higher deforestation.

The state of Para accounted for 40% of deforestation from Aug. 2020 to July 2021, according to the data, the most of any of nine states in the Amazon region. But its year-on-year increase was slight compared to Mato Grosso and Amazonas states, which together accounted for 34% of the the region's destruction. The two states suffered 27% and 55% more deforestation, respectively.

And early data for the 2021-2022 reference period signals further deterioration. The space agency's monthly monitoring system, Deter, detected higher deforestation year-on-year during both September and October. Deter is less reliable than Prodes, but widely seen as a leading indicator.

"This is the real Brazil that the Bolsonaro government tries to hide with fantastical speeches and actions of greenwashing abroad," Mauricio Voivodic, international environmental group WWF's executive director for Brazil, said in a statement after release of the Prodes data. "The reality shows that the Bolsonaro government accelerated the path of Amazon destruction."

Ohtani voted AL MVP for 2-way season, Harper wins NL honor

By RONALD BLUM AP Baseball Writer

NEW YORK (AP) — Shohei Ohtani's two-way season was so incredible, MVP voters filled out the top of their ballots only one way.

Ohtani was a unanimous winner of the American League MVP award Thursday for a hitting and pitching display not seen since Babe Ruth, and Bryce Harper earned the National League honor for the second time.

Ohtani received all 30 first-place votes and 420 points in balloting by members of the Baseball Writers' Association of America.

"American fans, the U.S.A. baseball, is more accepting and welcoming to the whole two-way idea compared to when I first started in Japan, so it made the transition a lot easier for me," Ohtani said through translator Ipppei Mizuhara. "I'm very thankful for that."

Ohtani batted .257 with 46 homers, 100 RBIs and a .965 OPS as the Los Angeles Angels' full-time designated hitter, and went 9-2 with a 3.18 ERA in 23 pitching starts with 156 strikeouts and 44 walks in 130 1/3 innings. It was the first full season on the mound for the 27-year-old right-hander since Tommy John surgery in 2019.

He averaged 95.6 mph with his fastball, 28th in the major leagues among qualified pitchers, and had a 93.6 mph exit velocity at the plate, which ranked sixth among qualified batters, according to MLB Statcast.

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"MVP is something I was shooting for," Ohtani said. "I think every player is, as long as they're playing baseball professionally."

Ohtani won AL Rookie of the Year in 2018 after leaving the Pacific League's Hokkaido Nippon-Ham Fighters to sign with the Angels. This year he became the first two-way starter in the history of the All-Star Game, which began in 1933.

He called that the highlight of his season.

"It was my first one and I got to play with a lot of players that I've always watched on TV," Ohtani said. "That was a great experience."

Ruth had just two seasons in which he thrived at the plate while pitching regularly. He batted .300 with 11 homers and 61 RBIs in 1918 while going 13-7 with a 2.22 ERA for Boston, then hit .322 with 29 homers and 113 RBIs in 1919 while going 9-5 with a 2.97 ERA. Ruth was sold to the Yankees that December and made just five mound appearances in his final 16 seasons.

Ohtani became the second Japanese MVP winner after Seattle outfielder Ichiro Suzuki in 2001.

"I've dealt with a lot of doubters, especially from my days in Japan, but tried not to let that get to me, let the pressure get to me," Ohtani said. "I just wanted to have fun and see what kinds of numbers I could put up and what type of performance I could put up."

Harper received 17 of 30 first-place votes and 348 points from a separate panel. Washington outfielder Juan Soto was second with six firsts and 274 points, and San Diego shortstop Fernando Tatis Jr. was third with two firsts and 244 points.

Harper overcame getting hit on the left cheek with a 96.9 mph pitch from Génesis Cabrera of the St. Louis Cardinals on April 28, a ball that ricocheted off Harper's left wrist. Tears came to his eyes when he learned he had won, and he talked about what he had overcome.

"I was, 'Oh, I'm great. I'm fine.' I'm pressing my face, 'I'm good and I'm OK to get back,' not knowing that maybe it was a little bit too soon for myself," Harper said.

He hit .211 with three RBIs in May, then went on the injured list between May 22 and June 5.

"I had to take a break and understand that my wrist was still hurt, my face and my mental state probably wasn't the greatest," Harper said.

He finished with a .309 average and 35 homers for Philadelphia. The 29-year-old slugger led the majors with a .465 slugging percentage and 1.044 OPS, tied for the lead with 42 doubles and had 84 RBIs.

Harper was a unanimous MVP winner with Washington in 2015 and became the fifth player to win MVPs for different teams after Jimmie Foxx, Frank Robinson, Barry Bonds and Alex Rodriguez.

"This one just felt a little bit different," Harper said. "I think being a little bit older, a little bit more mature, being able to have the teammates I do, have the family now that I do with my kids."

Harper earned a \$500,000 bonus for winning MVP in his third season of a \$330 million, 13-year contract. He thanked his personal chef, Dan.

"Knowing I wasn't going to have an empty stomach any night," Harper said. "Having family dinner each night is big for us. So after a game, no matter if I'm 0 for 4 or 4 for 4, no matter if we lost or if we won, and everybody's happy, everybody's sad, I was getting home and we were going to have dinner together each night. And being able to sit down with your family and have dinner kind of puts things in perspective."

Soto, a first-time All-Star at age 23, hit .313 with 29 homers and 95 RBIs. He led the majors with 145 walks and a .465 on-base percentage.

Tatis, 22, led the NL with 42 home runs, hitting .282 with 97 RBIs.

Toronto first baseman Vladimir Guerrero Jr. was second in the AL vote with 29 seconds and 269 points, and Blue Jays second baseman Marcus Semien was third with 232 points. Kansas City catcher Salvador Perez got the other second-place vote.

Guerrero, 22, tied for the major league lead with 48 homers, batting .311 with 111 RBIs. His father, Vladimir, won the 2004 AL MVP award with the Anaheim Angels.

Semien batted .265 with 42 homers and 102 RBIs. The 31-year-old is among the top free agents this offseason.

This marked the first time since the Chicago Cubs' Andre Dawson and Toronto's George Bell in 1987 that neither MVP's team made the playoffs.

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

Defense attorneys rest their cases at Arbery death trial

By RUSS BYNUM Associated Press

BRUNSWICK, Ga. (AP) — Defense attorneys rested their case in the Ahmaud Arbery trial Thursday after calling just seven witnesses, including the shooter, who testified that Arbery did not threaten him in any way before he pointed his shotgun at the 25-year-old Black man.

Superior Court Judge Timothy Walmsley scheduled closing arguments in the trial for Monday, setting up the possibility of verdicts before Thanksgiving for the three white men charged with murder in Arbery's death.

Under cross-examination by the prosecution on his second day of testimony, Travis McMichael said that Arbery hadn't shown a weapon or spoken to him at all before McMichael raised his shotgun. But, McMichael said, he was "under the impression" that Arbery could be a threat because he was running straight at him and he had seen Arbery trying to get into the truck of a neighbor who had joined in a pursuit of Arbery in their coastal Georgia neighborhood.

"All he's done is run away from you," prosecutor Linda Dunikoski said. "And you pulled out a shotgun and pointed it at him."

Cellphone video from the Feb. 23, 2020, shooting — replayed in court Thursday — shows Arbery running around the back of McMichael's pickup truck after McMichael first points the shotgun while standing next to the open driver's side door. Arbery then runs around the passenger side as McMichael moves to the front and the two come face to face. After that, the truck blocks any view of them until the first gunshot sounds.

McMichael's testimony Wednesday marked the first time any of the three defendants has spoken publicly about the killing. The other two defendants did not testify. McMichael said Arbery forced him to make a split-second "life-or-death" decision by attacking him and grabbing his shotgun.

Dunikoski noted Thursday that's not what McMichael told police in an interview about two hours after the shooting occurred.

"So you didn't shoot him because he grabbed the barrel of your shotgun," Dunikoski said. "You shot him because he came around that corner and you were right there and you just pulled the trigger immediately."

"No, I was struck," McMichael replied. "We were face to face, I'm being struck and that's when I shot."

McMichael said he had approached Arbery because neighbors indicated something had happened down the road and he wanted to ask Arbery about it. Arbery was running in the Brunswick neighborhood at the time. He said Arbery stopped, then took off running when McMichael told him police were on the way.

Asked how many times he had previously pulled up behind strangers in the neighborhood to ask them what they were doing there, McMichael said never.

"You know that no one has to talk to anyone they don't want to talk to, right?" Dunikoski said.

The prosecutor also pressed McMichael on why he didn't include some details of his testimony Wednesday in his written statement to police, namely the part about his telling Arbery police were on the way.

McMichael said he was "under stress, nervous, scared" at the time of his police interview and "probably being choppy."

"What were you nervous about?" Dunikoski asked.

"I just killed a man," McMichael responded. "I had blood on myself. It was the most traumatic event of my life."

"You were nervous because you thought you were going to jail, right?" Dunikoski asked.

"No. I gave them a statement," McMichael said.

McMichael and his father, Greg McMichael, armed themselves and pursued Arbery in a pickup truck after

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he ran past their home from the house under construction. A neighbor, William "Roddie" Bryan, joined the chase in his own truck and recorded cellphone video. Arbery's killing deepened a national outcry over racial injustice after the video leaked online.

Defense attorneys have argued that their clients were lawfully trying to stop burglaries in their neighborhood and that McMichael opened fire in self-defense. Prosecutors say there's no justification for what the men did and no evidence that Arbery had committed any crimes.

Six neighbors testified Thursday about sharing reports of property crimes and suspicious people on their subdivision's Facebook page. Brook Perez said one neighbor's 2019 post about a car break-in prompted her to check her husband's truck and discover some of his tools missing.

"I'm home by myself with the kids," Perez said. "So it just felt like a violation."

Outside the Glynn County courthouse, hundreds of pastors gathered, while a defense lawyer renewed his bid to keep Black ministers out of the courtroom. The Rev. Jesse Jackson again joined Arbery's family in the courtroom, as he had on some other days this week. Walmsley declined to take the issue up again, noting he'd already rejected the same motion from Bryan attorney Kevin Gough twice.

Gough first asked the judge last week to remove the Rev. Al Sharpton from the court, saying the civil rights activist was trying to influence the disproportionately white jury. He also has complained that activists outside the courthouse are trying to influence the jury with banners and signs, and likewise objected to the pastors' rally.

"We had a huge protest at lunchtime that was so loud, with bullhorns literally 20 feet from the front door of this courthouse, that you could literally hear what was being said at the doors of this courtroom," Gough told the judge.

'Fundamental justice:' Judge clears 2 in Malcolm X slaying

By MICHAEL R. SISAK and JENNIFER PELTZ Associated Press

NEW YORK (AP) — More than half a century after the assassination of Malcolm X, two of his convicted killers were exonerated Thursday after decades of doubt about who was responsible for the civil rights icon's death.

Manhattan judge Ellen Biben dismissed the convictions of Muhammad Aziz and the late Khalil Islam, after prosecutors and the men's lawyers said a renewed investigation found new evidence that undermined the case against the men and determined that authorities withheld some of what they knew.

"The event that has brought us to court today should never have occurred," Aziz told the court. "I am an 83-year-old man who was victimized by the criminal justice system."

It pained Islam's sons, Ameen Johnson and Shahid Johnson, that their parents died before seeing the conviction reversed. Still, Ameen Johnson said his father would have been ecstatic to clear his name.

"His reputation meant a lot to him," the son said, and now "we don't have to watch over our backs, worrying about any repercussions from anybody who thought that he might have been the one that killed Malcolm X."

Aziz and Islam, who maintained their innocence from the start in the 1965 killing at Upper Manhattan's Audubon Ballroom, were paroled in the 1980s. Islam died in 2009.

"There can be no question that this is a case that cries out for fundamental justice," Biben said.

Malcolm X gained national prominence as the voice of the Nation of Islam, exhorting Black people to claim their civil rights "by any means necessary." His autobiography, written with Alex Haley, remains a classic work of modern American literature.

Near the end of Malcolm X's life, he split with the Black Muslim organization and, after a trip to Mecca, started speaking about the potential for racial unity. It earned him the ire of some in the Nation of Islam, who saw him as a traitor.

He was shot to death while beginning a speech Feb. 21, 1965. He was 39.

Aziz and Islam, then known as Norman 3X Butler and Thomas 15X Johnson, and a third man were convicted of murder in March 1966. They were sentenced to life in prison.

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The third man, Mujahid Abdul Halim — also known as Talmadge Hayer and Thomas Hagan — admitted to shooting Malcolm X but said neither Aziz nor Islam was involved. The two offered alibis, and no physical evidence linked them to the crime. The case hinged on eyewitnesses, although there were inconsistencies in their testimony.

Halim was paroled in 2010. Through a relative, he declined to comment Thursday. He identified some other men as accomplices, but no one else has ever been held accountable for the crime.

The re-investigation found that the FBI and police failed to turn over evidence that cast significant doubt on Islam and Aziz as suspects, according to a court filing.

The evidence included witnesses who couldn't identify Islam, implicated other suspects and groups, and described a shotgun-wielding assassin who didn't match Islam, the man prosecutors said bore that weapon. Investigators also found an FBI file on a man Halim identified after the trial as one of his accomplices and who fit some other leads.

And the records showed that the late FBI Director J. Edgar Hoover ordered agents to tell witnesses not to reveal that they were informants when talking with police and prosecutors, Manhattan District Attorney Cyrus Vance Jr. said Thursday.

New York Police Department records showed there were undercover officers in the ballroom at the time of the killing, a fact prosecutors apparently knew before trial but don't appear to have told defense lawyers, the court filing said. One undercover officer later testified at an unrelated trial that he'd been acting as part of Malcolm X's security team and had walloped Halim with a chair — a blow that didn't jibe with testimony from other witnesses at the alleged assassins' trial.

Meanwhile, a witness who came forward in recent years told investigators that he had spoken with Aziz shortly after the killing on Aziz's home phone. Aziz has said from the start that he was home that day with a leg injury.

"There is one ultimate conclusion: Mr. Aziz and Mr. Islam were wrongfully convicted of this crime," and there is no prospect of retrying a 56-year-old case in which every eyewitness who testified has died and the physical evidence is gone, Vance said. He apologized for law enforcement's "serious, unacceptable violations of law and the public trust."

The FBI and NYPD had evidence of Aziz's and Islam's innocence within hours but ignored and suppressed it, said one of their attorneys, Deborah Francois, who worked on the case with civil rights lawyer David Shanies and the Innocence Project.

"The bigger questions of how or why this happened still remain unanswered," Innocence Project co-founder Barry Scheck said.

The court filing recounts numerous tips and leads but doesn't draw any conclusions about who might have been involved, besides Halim.

The NYPD and the FBI said Wednesday that they had cooperated fully with the re-investigation. They declined to comment further.

NYPD Chief of Patrol Juanita Holmes said Thursday she felt for Malcolm X's family and for Aziz and Islam "if we are responsible for withholding information."

Attorneys, scholars, journalists and others have long raised questions about the convictions, and alternate theories and accusations have swirled around the case. After Netflix aired the documentary series "Who Killed Malcolm X?" early last year, Vance's office said it was taking a fresh look.

"It would be great if this murder was solved, but it's not solved," said Tamara Payne, who co-authored the Pulitzer Prize-winning "The Dead are Arising: The Life of Malcolm X" with her late father, Les Payne.

"The damage is done, but my hope ... is that we learn from this," Payne said.

Associated Press writers Ted Shaffrey, Bobby Caina Calvin, Deepti Hajela and Karen Matthews contributed to this report.

Virus surge worsens in Midwest as states expand boosters

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By ED WHITE Associated Press

A surge in cases in the Upper Midwest has some Michigan schools keeping students at home ahead of Thanksgiving and the military sending medical teams to Minnesota to relieve hospital staffs overwhelmed by COVID-19 patients.

The worsening outlook in the Midwest comes as booster shots are being made available to everyone in a growing number of locations. Massachusetts and Utah became the latest to say anyone 18 or older can roll up a sleeve for a booster shot, and an advisory committee for the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention is meeting Friday to discuss expanding boosters.

Cold weather states are dominating the fresh wave of cases over the last seven days, including New Hampshire, North Dakota and Wisconsin, according to federal data. But the Southwest had trouble spots, too, with more than 90% of inpatient hospital beds occupied in Arizona.

In Detroit, where only 35% of eligible residents were fully vaccinated, the school district said it would switch to online learning on Fridays in December because of rising COVID-19 cases, a need to clean buildings and a timeout for "mental health relief." One high school has changed to all online learning until Nov. 29.

At another high school, some students and teachers briefly walked out Wednesday, saying classes still were too large for a pandemic and the school needed a scrubbing.

Detroit health officer Denise Fair Razo said new cases have skyrocketed in the city in the last 14 days to 3,858, compared to 2,322 in the previous two-week period.

"We're in Michigan so we're not finding ourselves spending time outdoors in flip-flops and tank tops," Fair Razo said Thursday. "We are indoors and we're frankly becoming a little bit too relaxed. We're no longer wearing our masks. We're no longer washing our hands as frequently as we should. But we know these precautions."

Fair Razo is urging people to get tested for COVID-19 before gathering at Thanksgiving, even if they're vaccinated. She "absolutely" predicts a post-holiday spike.

Elsewhere in Michigan, some schools are taking next week off for the Thanksgiving holiday instead of just three days.

"This school year has presented some major stressors that are noticed and recognized," Superintendent Greg Helmer told parents, citing staff shortages and student absences in Ravenna.

In Minnesota, the U.S. Defense Department will send two 22-member medical teams to Hennepin County Medical Center and St. Cloud Hospital next week to immediately treat patients and assist weary health care workers.

"I need Minnesotans to recognize, as we've been saying, this is a dangerous time," Gov. Tim Walz said in pushing vaccinations.

New Hampshire reported 327 people with COVID-19 in hospitals, passing its previous pandemic high from last Dec. 31. Neighboring Maine also hit a high mark for COVID-19 hospitalizations this week.

Vermont Gov. Phil Scott is calling legislators into a special session next week to pass a bill giving local governments the power to adopt temporary mask mandates. He has been opposed to a statewide mask order even as Vermont's new daily cases approach numbers not seen since the earliest days of the pandemic.

In Florida, Republican Gov. Ron DeSantis signed a law that prevents businesses from ordering workers to be vaccinated unless they also allow them to opt out for a variety of reasons, including regular testing. Schools and local governments are barred from making vaccination mandates, and parents can sue schools over masks.

Florida lately has one of the lowest rates of new cases in the country. DeSantis has become one of the nation's most prominent Republicans through his opposition to lockdowns and other virus rules.

The U.S. is now averaging nearly 87,000 new coronavirus cases per day, up from 72,000 two weeks ago, and hospitalizations are starting to increase again after steadily falling since the peak of the summer delta variant surge. The country is still averaging more than 1,100 deaths a day, and the number of Americans to die from COVID-19 now stands at 768,000.

About 59% of the U.S. population is fully vaccinated, or about 195 million Americans. The government and health officials are urging more people to get vaccinated, especially the 60 million people who have

yet to receive a first dose.

Rittenhouse jury deliberates for third day without a verdict

By MICHAEL TARM, SCOTT BAUER and AMY FORLITI Associated Press

KENOSHA, Wis. (AP) — The jury at Kyle Rittenhouse's murder trial deliberated for a third full day without reaching a verdict Thursday, while the judge banned MSNBC from the courthouse after a freelancer for the network was accused of following the jurors in their bus.

The jury members will return on Friday morning to resume their work. Unlike on previous days, they had no questions and no requests to review any evidence Thursday in the politically and racially fraught case.

Rittenhouse, 18, is on trial for killing two men and wounding a third with a rifle during a turbulent night of protests that erupted in Kenosha in the summer of 2020 after a Black man, Jacob Blake, was shot by a white police officer.

Even as the jury weighed the evidence, two mistrial requests from the defense hung over the case, with the potential to upend the verdict if the panel were to convict Rittenhouse. One of those requests asks the judge to go even further and bar prosecutors from retrying him.

Also Thursday, Circuit Judge Bruce Schroeder banned MSNBC after police said they briefly detained a man who had followed the jury bus and may have tried to photograph jurors.

NBC News said in a statement that the man was a freelancer who received a citation for a traffic violation that took place near the jury vehicle, and he "never photographed or intended to photograph them."

Before the jurors retired around 4 p.m. at what the judge said was their own request, one of them asked if she could take the jury instructions home, and the judge said yes but told her she couldn't talk to anyone about them. Before deliberations, Schroeder read the jury some 36 pages of instructions on the charges and the laws of self-defense.

After the jury departed, Rittenhouse attorney Mark Richards told the judge he feared that letting members take home instructions would lead to jurors looking things up in the dictionary or doing their own research.

Tom Grieve, a Milwaukee attorney and former prosecutor not involved in the case, called the move "definitely unusual in my experience." "The natural issue is that it will precipitate armchair research and table discussion," he said.

At the end of the day, jurors looked tired, but no more than they did at the end of their first day. No one seemed visibly upset. Two jurors spoke genially to each other as they walked out the door.

Rittenhouse was a 17-year-old former police youth cadet when he went to Kenosha in what he said was an effort to protect property after rioters set fires and ransacked businesses on previous nights.

He shot and killed Joseph Rosenbaum, 36, and Anthony Huber, 26, and wounded Gaige Grosskreutz, now 28. Rittenhouse is white, as were those he shot.

Rittenhouse said he acted in self-defense after coming under attack, while prosecutors argued he instigated the bloodshed.

The case has exposed deep divides among Americans over guns, racial injustice, vigilantism and self-defense in the U.S.

To some civil rights activists, the shootings were an attack on the movement for racial justice, and some have complained of a racial double standard in the way Rittenhouse was treated by law enforcement that night.

The defense has twice asked the judge to declare a mistrial, alleging that they were given an inferior copy of a potentially crucial video and that the prosecution asked improper questions of Rittenhouse during cross-examination.

Schroeder has said the mistrial bid will have to be addressed if there is a guilty verdict. If Rittenhouse is acquitted, the dispute won't matter. But if he is convicted and the judge then declares a mistrial, that would void the verdict.

Rittenhouse could get life in prison if convicted of the most serious charge against him.

Forliti reported from Minneapolis, Bauer from Madison, Wisconsin. Associated Press writers Tammy Webber in Fenton, Michigan, and Todd Richmond in Madison contributed to this story.

Find the AP's full coverage of the Rittenhouse trial: <https://apnews.com/hub/kyle-rittenhouse>

Slain rapper Young Dolph left a lasting legacy in Memphis

By ADRIAN SAINZ Associated Press

MEMPHIS, Tenn. (AP) — Two days before he was gunned down while buying cookies at his favorite bakery in Memphis, Tennessee, rapper Young Dolph visited a cancer center where a relative had received treatment.

The 36-year-old who grew up on the Memphis streets was in town to hand out turkeys at a church and other locations ahead of Thanksgiving. He stopped by West Cancer Center in the Memphis suburb of Germantown on Monday, spending time with clinical staff and thanking them for compassionate care given to a relative, the center said in a statement.

Return trips like this one had become common in his life, which ended Wednesday when he was shot multiple times inside Makeda's Cookies, a popular bakery owned by a Black family and known for tasty butter cookies and banana pudding. The gritty southern city where Young Dolph grew up helped him forge the material that fueled his influential career in the hip-hop world — and was ultimately where his life was taken from him.

"Our associates were deeply touched by his sincerity and effort to extend such gratitude," the cancer center's statement said. "During his visit, Dolph explained that he would soon venture to donate turkeys to the Memphis community at a variety of community centers across the city before Thanksgiving — which is yet another testament to his gracious heart."

Police continued to search for suspects in the killing, which shook Memphis and shocked the entertainment world as another senseless act of gun violence against an African American man. Police on Thursday released photos taken from surveillance video that shows two men exiting a white Mercedes-Benz and shooting Young Dolph before fleeing.

Since his killing, social media has been filled with messages of respect and love for the rapper, whose music discussed drug dealing, street crime and his crack-addicted parents alongside hard-earned lessons of strength and perseverance in the face of difficult circumstances. His legacy as a fiercely independent artist and businessman was cemented in the hip-hop universe.

His acts of charity galvanized his reputation in Memphis, a city dealing with poverty, gun violence and disproportionately high incarceration rates of Black people. In 2020, Young Dolph donated \$25,000 to Hamilton High School for new sports equipment at his alma mater.

Earlier this year, he visited children on the day before Easter at St. James Missionary Baptist Church. There, he met Pastor Rodney Herron, who asked him to return to the modest church to hand out turkeys to families before Thanksgiving.

The rapper happily agreed and was planning to hand out the food on Friday. Despite his death, the event will go on, Herron said.

"This is a nice young man, he was down to earth," Herron said. "I am distraught, because I knew what the young man was doing for the community, how far he was going to go in the community. ... He came back to where his heart was, and he always gave."

Herron said Young Dolph had discussed buying a local community center. Herron said he wants to push to rename the center after the hip-hop artist.

The rapper also was scheduled to attend a holiday event for children of incarcerated parents at a church in December, said Tameka Greer, executive director of Memphis Artists for Change.

"His generosity knew no bounds," she said in a statement. "Young Dolph didn't deserve to die, and neither do the children, youth, and adults who lose their lives to gun violence every day."

Young Dolph, whose real name was Adolph Thornton Jr., began his career by handing out CDs in the

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streets. He later released numerous mixtapes, starting with 2008's "Paper Route Campaign," and multiple studio albums. He collaborated with fellow rappers Key Glock, Megan Thee Stallion, T.I., Gucci Mane, 2 Chainz and others.

"The streets know me, everyone already knows who I am," he said in a 2014 interview with VICE. "Real respects real, so if you can get Memphis to love you, you have to have something real there. Memphis doesn't just support anybody."

Like the Los Angeles rapper Nipsey Hussle, who was killed in 2019, Young Dolph pursued an independent approach to the music business. His Paper Route Empire label retained control over his music.

Fans have descended on the cookie shop, where a memorial of balloons and stuffed animals steadily grew in front of the store's boarded up windows. Makeda's Cookies issued a statement saying its owners are heartbroken by the death of Young Dolph, who recently appeared in an Instagram post promoting the store.

Smoking a cigarette outside the store, Marquize Brand, a 31-year-old Memphis native, said he used to visit the cookie shop as a boy with his grandmother and still does today. Brand said he was disgusted by the rapper's killing.

"It's really sour for the worst to happen, and you're trying to do the best you can, with the best heart," Brand said. "I heard stories about how good Dolph was to people. Why get rid of good people?"

Associated Press reporters Ryan Pearson in Los Angeles and Joshua Housing in Munster, Indiana, contributed to this report.

2 Iranians charged with threatening US voters in 2020

By ERIC TUCKER Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — Two suspected Iranian computer hackers have been charged in a broad campaign of election interference aimed at intimidating American voters during last year's presidential race and undermining confidence that the results of the contest could be trusted.

The activities, prosecutors say, exploited not only computer vulnerabilities but also existing social divisions to sow discord and confusion among voters. The Iranian cyber campaign included bogus emails that targeted Democratic and Republican voters with different messages, the distribution of a fabricated video that purported to show acts of election fraud and an unsuccessful effort the day after the election to gain access to an American media company's network.

The overall effort attracted publicity in the run-up to the November 2020 election, when law enforcement and intelligence officials held an unusual evening news conference to accuse Iran of orchestrating an email campaign aimed at intimidating Democratic voters in battleground states so they would vote for Trump.

The indictment makes clear that even as much of the public concern about foreign interference in last year's election centered on Russian efforts to disparage Trump's challenger, Joe Biden, Iranian hackers were engaged in a wide-ranging influence campaign of their own.

U.S. intelligence officials said in a March assessment that Iran's efforts were aimed at harming Trump's reelection bid, and probably authorized by Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei, but that there was no evidence that Tehran or any other foreign actor had done anything to change the vote totals.

The indictment, filed in federal court in Manhattan and unsealed Thursday, accuses Iranian nationals Seyyed Mohammad Hosein Musa Kazemi and Sajjad Kashian of helping carry out the scheme. The Treasury Department also announced sanctions against the men, some of their colleagues and the company they worked for.

The defendants, described in the indictment as experienced hackers who worked as contractors for a cybersecurity firm, are not in custody and are believed to be in Iran still. But officials hope at minimum that the indictment and accompanying sanctions will restrict their ability to travel. Each faces a broad array of charges, including voter intimidation, transmission of interstate threats and computer crimes.

Asked Thursday whether the defendants' activities were endorsed by the Iranian government, a Justice Department official who briefed reporters on a conference call noted that the indictment alleges that the

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company the men worked for — formerly known as Eeeyanet Gostar — provided services to the government. But the indictment does not directly implicate the government because the Justice Department can rely only on unclassified, admissible evidence that it can bring to court, the official said.

Court documents allege vast efforts to spread disinformation about the presidential contest and to intimidate and pressure voters. Some of the activities persisted even after the election.

As part of the cyber campaign, officials say, the hackers attempted in the weeks before the election to compromise voter websites in 11 states, and successfully downloaded voter information related to more than 100,000 people in one state.

While the defendants did not use that information to attempt to change vote totals, officials say, they created the appearance that the election results could not be trusted by leaving the false impression that it was possible to submit fraudulent ballots.

They also sent Americans what officials describe as carefully curated messages, specifically tailored to appeal to — and divide — members of both major political parties.

That included messages that purported to be from a far-right group, the Proud Boys, that threatened Democratic voters with physical harm if they didn't change their party affiliation and vote for Trump.

"You will vote for Trump on Election Day or we will come after you," the email said, according to prosecutors.

Though the messages pressured voters to support Trump, they may have been designed to actually harm his campaign by aligning him in the minds of voters with the Proud Boys after he was criticized for failing to unequivocally denounce the group during the first presidential debate.

To Republican officials and people associated with the Trump campaign, meanwhile, the hackers crafted Facebook messages that falsely claimed that Democrats were planning to exploit security vulnerabilities in state voter registration websites and commit voter fraud, the indictment says.

Another tool was a fake video spread through social media platforms that purported to show an individual hacking into state voting websites and creating fraudulent absentee ballots, according to the indictment.

In September and October 2020, prosecutors say, the hackers gained unauthorized access to the computer network of an American media company — prosecutors would not say which one — that provided a content management system for dozens of publications. They tested the capability to modify and create content on the system, which the indictment says "would have provided them another vehicle for further disseminating false claims concerning the election."

On Nov. 4, 2020, the day after the election, hackers attempted to access the system through stolen credentials, but by that point, the company had fixed the issue and the hackers' log-in attempt failed, the indictment says.

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

Duchess of Sussex gets goofy on Ellen DeGeneres' talk show

By LEANNE ITALIE AP Entertainment Writer

NEW YORK (AP) — It was the Meghan hour Thursday on the talk show of her friend, Ellen DeGeneres, as the Duchess of Sussex helped welcome a special guest, hit the studio lot to prank vendors and said she'll be cooking Thanksgiving dinner herself.

"I love to cook. We'll be home and just sort of relax and settle in," Meghan said of her second Thanksgiving in California with Prince Harry and, now, their two kids.

Meghan and DeGeneres, who met at a pet store more than a decade ago, chatted about Halloween (Archie was a dinosaur and baby Lili a skunk), and more serious issues like Meghan's work to push for federal paid family leave. And she said Harry has taken nicely to the California lifestyle in Montecito, where Ellen is one of their neighbors.

"He loves it," Meghan said. "We're just happy."

Meghan got Ellen-style goofy when she donned an earpiece so Ellen could tell her what to say and do

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as she perused the wares of three vendors on the studio lot. Meghan mewed in cat ears, devoured hot sauce on crackers like a chipmunk and held a huge crystal to her face — all after a pretend assistant told the trio of sellers to treat her just like everybody else. They could barely keep from laughing.

"Let Mommy taste some. My boo loves hot sauce," Meghan told one seller with a table full of hot sauces. "Mommy wants some heat."

Later on "The Ellen DeGeneres Show," Ellen and Meghan welcomed Brittany Starks, a Tennessee mother and hairdresser who gave back after being helped herself through hard times by braiding the hair of schoolchildren for free. Since, she has started a charity, A Twist of Greatness.

The show and philanthropy partner TisBest donated \$20,000 to her cause. Meghan and Harry matched it with another \$20,000.

"We were so touched by your story," Meghan told Starks, giving her hug.

Oklahoma governor grants clemency, spares Julius Jones' life

By SEAN MURPHY Associated Press

OKLAHOMA CITY (AP) — Oklahoma's governor spared the life of Julius Jones on Thursday, just hours before his scheduled execution that had drawn widespread outcry and protests over doubts about his guilt in the slaying of a businessman more than 20 years ago.

Gov. Kevin Stitt commuted the 41-year-old Jones' death sentence to life imprisonment. He had been scheduled for execution at 4 p.m.

"After prayerful consideration and reviewing materials presented by all sides of this case, I have determined to commute Julius Jones' sentence to life imprisonment without the possibility of parole," Stitt said in a news release.

A crowd of Jones' supporters at the Oklahoma Capitol broke out into loud applause and cheers when the decision was announced shortly after noon Thursday, and more than 100 supporters who had gathered outside the prison in McAlester erupted in cheers.

"Today is a day of celebration. It's a day to recognize all the people who have come together to be able to fight for Julius," said Rev. Keith Jossell, Jones' spiritual adviser.

Jones' mother released a statement Thursday expressing her gratitude.

"For over twenty years, I have been haunted by the idea of watching my baby boy die in an execution chamber for a murder that occurred when he was home with his family," Madeline Davis-Jones said. "I still believe that every day Julius spends behind bars is an injustice, and I will never stop speaking out for him or fighting to free him. But today is a good day, and I am thankful to Governor Stitt for that."

Earlier Thursday, Jones' attorneys filed a last-minute emergency request seeking a temporary stop to his execution, saying Oklahoma's lethal injection procedures pose a "serious and substantial risk of severe suffering and pain to prisoners." The lawyers cited last month's execution in which John Marion Grant convulsed and vomited as he was put to death.

Oklahoma's methods for capital punishment have been a concern for years. Just Wednesday, in a separate death row case, the state's Pardon and Parole Board voted 3-2 to grant clemency, citing lethal injection protocols.

Earlier this month, that same board also recommended in a 3-1 vote that Stitt commute Jones' sentence to life in prison with the possibility of parole. Several panel members said they doubted the evidence that led to his conviction.

Amanda Bass, a lawyer representing Jones, said the team had hoped Stitt would grant Jones a chance at parole, but they were grateful that he wasn't being executed.

"Governor Stitt took an important step today towards restoring public faith in the criminal justice system by ensuring that Oklahoma does not execute an innocent man," Bass said in a statement.

Jones' looming execution — and Stitt's silence on his decision — prompted high school students across Oklahoma City to walk out of their classes Wednesday, and protests had been planned Thursday in Los Angeles; Washington; Newark, New Jersey; and Saint Paul, Minnesota. Prayer vigils were held at the Oklahoma state Capitol, and barricades were erected outside the governor's mansion.

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Jossell said Jones sounded overwhelmed by the support when they talked earlier Thursday.

"Julius has always been so amazed by the fact that so many people God has brought together, Republicans and Democrats, Black, white, gay, straight, Native," Jossell said. "He is so grateful that all of these people have come together."

At the Capitol, Devona Willis, 45, an Oklahoma City woman, described the announcement as "a celebration."

"It's kind of like somebody gave you a million dollars. You're not just gonna say 'Yay!' and be done with it," she said.

Jones was convicted of first-degree murder and sentenced to die for the 1999 shooting death of Paul Howell, a businessman from the Oklahoma City suburb of Edmond, during a carjacking.

The profile of Jones' case grew significantly after it was featured in "The Last Defense," a three-episode documentary produced by Oscar-winning actress Viola Davis that aired on ABC in 2018. After that, reality television star Kim Kardashian West and other professional athletes with Oklahoma ties, including NBA stars Russell Westbrook, Blake Griffin and Trae Young, and NFL quarterback Baker Mayfield, urged Stitt to commute Jones' death sentence and spare his life.

Kardashian West said Thursday on Twitter that she spent much of Wednesday on the phone with Jones between his visits with lawyers and his family. She also thanked Stitt and the parole board.

"I'm so grateful to everyone who used their voice and helped to save Julius's life today," she said.

Jones alleges he was framed by the actual killer, a high school friend and co-defendant who was a key witness against him. He and his family maintain he was at home the night of Howell's murder, eating dinner and playing games with his siblings, and that the jury was never heard this information at trial.

But Oklahoma County District Attorney David Prater and the state's former attorney general, Mike Hunter, have said the evidence against Jones is overwhelming. Oklahoma's current attorney general, John O'Connor, said Thursday that he respected Stitt's decision to commute the sentence but that he remained convinced of Jones' guilt.

"We are greatly disappointed that after 22 years, four appeals, including the review of 13 appellate Judges, the work of the investigators, prosecutors, jurors, and the trial Judge have been set aside," O'Connor said.

Information from trial transcripts shows that witnesses identified Jones as the shooter and placed him with Howell's stolen vehicle. Investigators also found the murder weapon wrapped in a bandanna with Jones' DNA in an attic space above his bedroom. Jones claimed in his commutation filing that the gun and bandanna were planted there by the actual killer, who visited Jones' house after the killing.

Howell's sister, Megan Tobey, and two young daughters were in Howell's SUV when the carjacking happened in his parents' driveway. Tobey testified before the board that she saw Jones shoot her brother.

"We know Governor Stitt had a difficult decision to make," the Howell family said Thursday in a statement. "We take comfort that his decision affirmed the guilt of Julius Jones and that he shall not be eligible to apply for, or be considered for, a commutation, pardon or parole for the remainder of his life."

Last month, Oklahoma ended a six-year moratorium on executions brought on by concerns over its lethal injection methods. Grant, 60, convulsed and vomited as he was being put to death Oct. 28.

He was the first person in Oklahoma to be executed since a series of flawed lethal injections in 2014 and 2015. Richard Glossip was just hours away from being executed in September 2015 when prison officials realized they had the wrong lethal drug. It was later revealed that 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.

Associated Press writer Ken Miller contributed to this report.

MSNBC banned from Rittenhouse trial after bus incident

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KENOSHA, Wis. (AP) — The judge at Kyle Rittenhouse's murder trial banned MSNBC from the courthouse Thursday after police said they briefly detained a man who had followed the jury bus and may have tried to photograph jurors.

Judge Bruce Schroeder said the man had claimed to be working for MSNBC. The judge said he was stopped because he was following the bus from about a block behind and went through a red light.

NBC News said in a statement that he was a freelancer who received a citation for a traffic violation that took place near the jury vehicle, and he "never contacted or intended to contact the jurors during deliberations, and never photographed or intended to photograph them."

The network said it regretted the incident and would fully cooperate with an investigation.

The jurors, who began deliberating on Tuesday, are anonymous by order of the court. Schroeder said they were riding in a bus whose windows had been covered over to keep them from seeing any signs about the case.

Schroeder said the person who followed the jury bus had been told by his boss in New York to do so. Kenosha police tweeted that the person was briefly taken into custody and issued several traffic-related citations.

The judge called it an "extremely serious matter" and said it will be "referred to the proper authorities for further action."

Rittenhouse, 18, shot and killed two people and wounded a third during a protest against police brutality in Kenosha last year. He testified he fired in self-defense after the men attacked him.

The judge had barred anyone from photographing jurors at the outset of the politically charged trial.

Find the AP's full coverage of the Rittenhouse trial: <https://apnews.com/hub/kyle-rittenhouse>

Iraqi migrants caught in border crisis in Belarus fly home

By ZEINA KARAM, DARIA LITVINOVA and YURAS KARMANAU Associated Press

BAGHDAD (AP) — Hundreds of Iraqis returned home Thursday from Belarus after abandoning their hopes of reaching the European Union — a repatriation that came after tensions at Poland's eastern border, where thousands of migrants became stuck in a cold and soggy forest.

Many others still in Belarus have moved into a heated warehouse not far from the border, emptying out a makeshift camp, Belarusian state-run media reported. But the Polish Defense Ministry posted video showing a few hundred people and their tents still near an official crossing point.

It was not clear if the two countries were talking about two different sites on their border, but it was typical of the dueling narratives that have marked the crisis, in which both Belarus and Poland have sought to portray themselves in a positive light while depicting the other as unfeeling and irresponsible toward the migrants.

"We were hostages — victims stuck between Belarus and the European Union," said a young Iraqi returnee in a black hoodie after his flight arrived in Baghdad.

"Belarus police are the same like Daesh," he said, referring to the brutal militants from the Islamic State group that rampaged through Iraq several years ago. He then walked away.

Ali Kadhim, who is returning to his home in Basra, said he wanted to go to Europe because in Iraq there are "no jobs and the situation is very bad recently."

He said he had reached a deal with a smuggler to get him to the Belarus-Poland border zone, where a Belarusian border guard took his passport and cellphone and prevented him from leaving the forest. For three days, he had no food, water or internet service, he said.

"I was living on what I found on ground. I mean I had to live on three dates in a whole day," Kadhim said.

Of the 430 people who flew from Minsk, 390 got off at Irbil International Airport in Iraq's northern Kurdistan region before the flight continued to Baghdad, said Jihad al-Diwan, head of media relations for Iraq's civil aviation authority. About 30 others who were registered for the flight had problems with their documents and did not board, according to Iraqi officials, who organized the return.

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One woman arriving in Irbil carried a bassinet with a baby. Most still wore the heavy winter clothes from their time in Belarus despite the warm weather in Iraq. Another woman collapsed, apparently fainting.

Tensions had flared at the Poland-Belarus border in recent days, with about 2,000 people trapped between the forces from the two countries. On Tuesday, some of the migrants had thrown stones at the Polish troops, who responded with tear gas and water cannons.

The U.N. refugee agency says about half the migrants at the border area were women and children.

At least 12 people have died in the area in recent weeks from the harsh conditions in the border zone, including a 1-year-old whose death was reported Thursday by a Polish humanitarian organization.

Muslims in Poland buried an unidentified migrant at a cemetery in Bohoniki, where a population of Tatars has lived for centuries. It was the second such funeral there for a migrant in a week.

Most of the migrants are fleeing conflict or hopelessness in the Middle East and aim to reach Germany or other western European countries. But Poland has taken a hard line about letting them in, and Belarus didn't want them returning to the capital of Minsk or otherwise settling in the country.

The West has accused Belarus President Alexander Lukashenko of using the migrants as pawns to destabilize the 27-nation bloc in retaliation for its sanctions on his authoritarian regime. Belarus denies engineering the crisis, which has seen migrants entering the country since summer and then trying to cross into Poland, Lithuania and Latvia.

Perhaps as many as 7,000 migrants remain in Belarus, according to authorities there. Many have moved to the temporary shelter of the warehouse since Tuesday, where they were given mattresses, water, hot meals and medical assistance.

Iraqi Kurds said the warehouse had filled quickly, with not enough food or places to sleep. A video obtained by The Associated Press showed men, women and children in sleeping bags or on blankets on the floor.

"At first, the situation was good, I mean on the first day. We were receiving three meals a day. But as more people came in from the forest, it has got more and more crowded. As a result, we got no dinner yesterday and no lunch today," one young Iraqi Kurdish man said.

"As you can see, it is getting very crowded here, and it is not easy to find a place to sit or to sleep," he added, speaking on condition of anonymity because he feared reprisals. "But it is much better than staying in the forest."

Everyone in the warehouse "has spent a lot of money to come here and they don't want to go back," he said.

Amid the border tensions, the war of words has drawn in the EU and Belarus ally Russia as well.

EU Union Commissioner for Home Affairs Ylva Johansson accused Belarus of engaging in "an act of state-sponsored migrant smuggling" and said sanctions and stopping flights to Minsk carrying migrants were "our most effective tools in this struggle."

Foreign ministers of the G-7 group of leading industrialized countries also condemned "the Belarus regime's orchestration of irregular migration across its borders."

Natalya Eismont, a spokeswoman for Lukashenko, said the fact that hundreds left Belarus shows the government is keeping its part of the bargain. The rest are "categorically refusing to fly, but we will work on it," she said.

Lukashenko had proposed to German Chancellor Angela Merkel that the EU could open a "humanitarian corridor" to allow 2,000 migrants to head to Germany, while Belarusian authorities try to get the other 5,000 to return home, Eismont said.

But German Interior Minister Horst Seehofer said in Warsaw that suggestions Germany would be ready to receive 2,000 migrants is "false information."

Following a call Tuesday between Merkel and Lukashenko, her office stressed the need for humanitarian assistance and for the migrants' safe return home.

Poland's tough stand against their illegal entry included reinforcing the border with riot police and troops and plans to build a steel barrier. That approach has largely been met with approval from other EU nations, who want to stop a surge of migration.

But Poland also has been criticized by human rights groups and others for pushing migrants back into

Belarus and not allowing them to apply for asylum.

Tuesday's border skirmishes injured 12 of the border forces. Warsaw accused Belarus of instigating the conflict, while the government in Minsk denounced Poland's "violent actions."

Lukashenko has rejected accusations of engineering the crisis and said his government has deported about 5,000 illegal migrants from Belarus this fall.

In May, however, he had railed against EU sanctions imposed for his harsh crackdown on internal dissent and said it would no longer stop migrants, telling the bloc: "Now you will catch them and eat them yourself."

On Thursday, Lukashenko's ally Russian President Vladimir Putin also slammed the EU.

"Western countries are using the migration crisis on the Belarusian-Polish border as a new reason for tension in the region that is close to us, for pressure on Minsk, and at the same time they forget their own obligations in the humanitarian sphere," he said.

Litvinova reported from Moscow and Karmanau reported from Kyiv, Ukraine. Associated Press journalists Vanessa Gera in Warsaw, Sabina Niksic in Sarajevo, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Frank Jordans in Berlin, Samuel Petrequin in Brussels, Rashid Yahya in Irbil, Iraq, and Jim Heintz in Moscow contributed.

Biden: US may not send top dignitaries to Beijing Olympics

WASHINGTON (AP) — President Joe Biden said Thursday that the United States was weighing a diplomatic boycott of next year's Winter Olympics in Beijing over China's human rights abuses, a move that would keep American dignitaries, but not athletes, from the games.

Speaking to reporters as he hosted Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau in the Oval Office, Biden said backing a boycott of the Olympics in February is "something we're considering."

The U.S. and other nations traditionally send high-level delegations to each Olympics. First lady Jill Biden led the American contingent to the Summer Olympics in Tokyo this year and second gentleman Doug Emhoff led a delegation to the Paralympic Games.

International advocacy groups and some members of Congress have called for a symbolic U.S. boycott of the games in Beijing over China's treatment of Uyghurs and its crackdown on freedoms in Hong Kong. The participation of American athletes would be unaffected by the boycott.

White House press secretary Jen Psaki said there was no timeline for a decision by the president on whether to go through with a possible boycott.

The White House has said the Olympics did not come up on Monday when Biden met virtually with Chinese leader Xi Jinping.

Germany approves new measures amid warnings of virus spike

By FRANK JORDANS Associated Press

BERLIN (AP) — Germany approved new measures Thursday to rein in record coronavirus infections as Chancellor Angela Merkel called the pandemic situation in the country "very serious" and said it was "high time" to contain the spread of the virus.

"The situation is highly dramatic and it will be very important now that action is taken quickly, that action is taken consistently, that better control is taken," Merkel told reporters Thursday night in Berlin. She had earlier held a videoconference with Vice Chancellor Olaf Scholz and Germany's 16 state governors to coordinate the country's response to a surge in coronavirus cases.

Merkel said participants in the meeting had agreed that tightening of measures against the virus would in the future be linked to the number of hospital admissions of COVID-19 patients per 100,000 people over a seven-day period. The states are also considering mandatory vaccinations for some professional groups such as medical staff and nursing home employees.

Earlier on Thursday, lawmakers in the Bundestag passed legislation to rein in the virus with votes from the center-left Social Democrats, the environmentalist Greens and the pro-business Free Democrats. The

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three parties are currently negotiating to form a new government.

The new measures include requirements for employees to prove they are vaccinated, recently recovered from COVID-19 or have tested negative for the virus in order to access communal workplaces; a similar rule will apply to public transport. The measures need to be approved by Germany's upper house of parliament, the Bundesrat, which could happen Friday.

Outgoing Chancellor Merkel's center-right Christian Democrats had wanted to extend existing rules that expire this month and which have served as the basis for numerous national and state-wide restrictions since March 2020. In the future, Germany's 16 states will only be able to impose restrictions on cultural and sports events if their regional assemblies approve the measure.

Merkel's party criticized the new rules, saying they would weaken the instruments at authorities' disposal at a time when infections are soaring again.

Germany's disease control agency, the Robert Koch Institute, reported 65,371 new daily infections, shattering the previous 24-hour record and continuing an upward trend that experts have warned about for weeks. Total deaths are nearing 100,000, with 264 reported on Wednesday alone.

"We are currently heading toward a serious emergency," institute director Lothar Wieler said during an online debate late Wednesday. "We are going to have a really terrible Christmas if we don't take counter-measures now."

Wieler said Germany needs to increase its COVID-19 vaccination rate, which now stands at 67.7%, to significantly above 75%.

The eastern state of Saxony, which at 57.6% has the country's lowest immunization rate, is poised to impose a limited lockdown in response to soaring infection numbers.

Governor Michael Kretschmer said the state government would decide on a "hard and clear wave breaker" Friday lasting two to three weeks.

Official figures show Saxony had more than 761 newly confirmed cases per 100,000 inhabitants in the past week, the highest rate in Germany.

Germany's independent vaccine advisory panel said Thursday that it recommends booster shots for all people over 18. Merkel said everything would be done to make available booster shots against the virus as quickly as possible. She said that about 27 million people needed to get a booster shot soon.

Wieler, the head of the disease control agency, warned that hospitals across Germany are struggling to find beds for COVID-19 patients and those with other illnesses.

Hospitals in the southeastern district of Rottal-Inn appealed this week for nurses and doctors to get in touch, saying it could use the help of "every hand (to) cope with this difficult situation."

Neighboring Austria recorded 15,145 newly confirmed COVID-19 cases in the past 24 hours, authorities said Thursday.

The country imposed a lockdown on unvaccinated people this week. But two states — Salzburg and Upper Austria — are poised to extend the measure to vaccinated people as well.

In the capital Vienna, officials sent unsolicited vaccination appointments to some 340,000 residents who haven't yet received a shot.

Kirsten Grieshaber contributed reporting.

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

New laws steer some teachers away from race-related topics

By TRAVIS LOLLER and ACACIA CORONADO Associated Press

NASHVILLE, Tenn. (AP) — New measures that restrict how race is addressed in classrooms have spread confusion and anxiety among many educators, who in some cases have begun pulling books and canceling lessons for fear of being penalized.

Education officials have nixed a contemporary issues class in a Tennessee district, removed Frederick

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Douglass' autobiography from reading lists in an Oklahoma school system and, in one Texas case, advised teachers to present "opposing" views of the Holocaust.

At least a dozen states have passed measures this year restricting how schools teach about racism, sexism and other topics. While educators are still waiting to see how they will be enforced, the vagueness of some of the measures, coupled with stiff penalties including potential loss of teaching licenses, already are chilling conversations on race in schools and, in some cases, having consequences that likely go well beyond the intent of those approving the measures.

Matt Hawn, a high school social studies teacher in Tennessee, said he has heard from teachers concerned about how they will teach controversial topics since he was fired himself this spring as state lawmakers were finalizing new teaching restrictions.

"It's certainly giving them caution, like, 'What's going to happen if I teach this?' — because the penalty is so steep," Hawn said.

Hawn was dismissed after school officials said he used materials with offensive language and failed to provide a conservative viewpoint during discussions of white privilege in his contemporary issues class, which has since been eliminated.

Teaching around race and diversity has been on the rise alongside a broader acknowledgment that racial injustice didn't end in America with the passage of the 1964 Civil Rights Act. Those efforts have spurred a backlash, particularly among Republican voters.

In Virginia, Republican Glenn Youngkin won the governor's race this month promising to ban critical race theory, a term has become a stand-in for concepts like systemic racism and implicit bias. His Democratic opponent faced criticism for saying parents shouldn't tell schools what to teach.

Some sections of the new laws would seem unobjectionable. Tennessee's law bars the teaching that one race or sex is inherently superior to another race or sex. But other sections are more murky, barring teaching that promotes division or causes children to feel psychological distress because of their race or sex.

Those vague prohibitions have left teachers worried that any instruction on difficult topics like slavery or contemporary racism could be construed by parents as violating the law, said Alice O'Brien, general counsel for the National Education Association.

"These measures are problematic because it is unclear what they mean and very much in the eye of the beholder," O'Brien said. "I think it is worth understanding that every state already has pretty comprehensive rules in place for K-12 about what teachers have to teach. And they're required to teach the whole history of the United States ... not just the parts that we can feel celebratory about."

Some have cited the new laws in pushing to eliminate instructional material.

In Tennessee, a conservative group of mothers in the Nashville suburb of Williamson County, Moms for Liberty, has challenged how schools teach the civil rights movement to second graders.

In a letter to the Department of Education, Robin Steenman complained that the texts and accompanying teachers manual imply that "people of color continue to be oppressed by an oppressive 'angry, vicious, scary, mean, loud, violent, (rude), and (hateful)' white population." The books Steenman cited include "Ruby Bridges Goes to School" and "Martin Luther King Jr. and the March on Washington."

In Oklahoma, teachers in the Edmond Public Schools said books by authors of color were struck from a list of anchor texts, around which English teachers build their curriculum. A lawsuit filed by teachers, students and parents said the district also removed commonly taught texts by Black authors from the curriculum, including the autobiography of Frederick Douglass.

A spokesperson for the school system, Susan Parks-Schlepp, said some reading assignments were made optional as part of an annual review to ensure they align with state guidelines.

In Texas, one Republican lawmaker directed a committee he chairs to seek information on the use of at least 850 books on topics ranging from racism to abortion.

State Rep. Matt Krause, who is running for state attorney general, said five Texas school districts had removed books "after receiving objections from students, parents, and taxpayers." Two of the districts confirmed that they had received copies of the letter and were looking into the matter, but they did not

comment further.

Clay Robinson, a spokesperson for the Texas State Teachers Association, said the letter only adds to the confusion teachers have dealt with since the state passed a bill requiring educators to teach “both sides” of topics.

“Teachers are already feeling like Big Brother is looking over their shoulders,” Robinson said.

The racial divide in support for these measures was obvious at an Alabama School Board meeting in August where the two Black members voted against a resolution denouncing “instruction intended to indoctrinate students” in ideologies promoting a particular race or sex, while the seven white members voted in favor.

Speaking against the measure, school board member Tonya Chestnut said all children deserve to be in an environment where they feel safe and can appreciate their heritage, but the resolution could “put teachers in a position where they feel uncomfortable, even fearful, to teach the truth.”

James Copland, director of legal policy at the conservative Manhattan Institute, said that chilling effects are real, but that appropriately tailored new laws are needed to show schools what is and isn’t appropriate.

He pointed to some episodes including a Cupertino, California, teacher who directed elementary school students to “deconstruct” their racial identities and a Philadelphia elementary school that had students appear on an auditorium stage with signs that read “Jail Trump” and “Black Power Matters.”

“We don’t want to chill genuine discussion and clear-minded study of history,” Copland said. But he said students should not be forced to subscribe to a set of beliefs around racism and sexism.

Derek W. Black, a professor of law at the University of South Carolina and the author of “Schoolhouse Burning: Public Education and the Assault on American Democracy,” said these measures are unnecessary. Federal civil rights law already makes it illegal to discriminate in the classroom, he said.

He does not doubt that some teachers do a poor job of teaching about racism and sexism or that some parents have legitimate grievances, but said they should “get in line with the 1,001 other legitimate grievances.”

“Why is this the No. 1? Politics. That’s right. Politics.”

Coronado, who reported from Austin, Texas, is a corps member for the Associated Press/Report for America Statehouse News Initiative. Report for America is a nonprofit national service program that places journalists in local newsrooms to report on undercovered issues.

Rittenhouse trial arguments worry mental health advocates

By SARA BURNETT Associated Press

The first man Kyle Rittenhouse fatally shot on the streets of Kenosha, Wisconsin, was “irrational and crazy,” Rittenhouse’s attorney told jurors at his murder trial.

Joseph Rosenbaum had been on medication for bipolar disorder and depression, and he was trying to take Rittenhouse’s rifle, attorney Mark Richards said, suggesting there could have been more bloodshed if Rittenhouse hadn’t acted.

“I’m glad he shot him because if Joseph Rosenbaum got that gun I don’t for a minute believe he wouldn’t have used it against somebody else,” Richards said during closing arguments in the 18-year-old Illinois man’s trial for killing Rosenbaum and another man and wounding a third during a chaotic night of protests in August 2020.

To some legal experts and other observers, Richards’ remarks were a smart courtroom strategy and an accurate depiction of the threat faced by Rittenhouse, who says he shot the men in self-defense. But mental health advocates heard something different: a dangerous assumption that people living with mental illness are homicidal and need to be killed, and terminology such as “crazy” that they say is pejorative and adds to the stigma surrounding mental health issues.

Studies have shown that people with bipolar disorder and depression are more likely to hurt themselves than hurt others, said Sue Abderholden, executive director of the National Alliance on Mental Illness

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Minnesota. That's why NAMI's work includes training police officers to use de-escalation strategies when dealing with people who have a mental illness.

"You just don't have someone shot down, particularly someone who is unarmed," she said.

Jason Lackowski, a former Marine who said he went armed to the Kenosha protests to protect property, testified during the trial that Rosenbaum acted "belligerently" that night and seemed to want "to entice someone to do something," but did not appear to pose a serious threat to anyone. Lackowski said he turned his back on Rosenbaum and ignored him.

Ryan Balch, a former Army infantryman who patrolled the streets with Rosenbaum, testified that Rosenbaum was "hyperaggressive and acting out in a violent manner," including trying to set fires and throwing rocks. Balch said at one point, he got between Rosenbaum and another man while Rosenbaum was trying to start a fire and that Rosenbaum got angry, shouting, "If I catch any of you guys alone tonight, I'm going to f--- kill you!" Balch said Rittenhouse was within earshot when the threat was made.

Rittenhouse didn't know Rosenbaum or his background when they crossed paths at the protest that followed the shooting of Jacob Blake, a Black man, by a white police officer. And the jury wasn't supposed to know much about him either.

During pretrial hearings, defense attorneys said they wanted to present evidence of Rosenbaum's past, including an Arizona conviction for sexually abusing a minor in 2002. They planned to argue that Rosenbaum, 36, was trying to take the then-17-year-old Rittenhouse's weapon during their encounter because Rosenbaum wasn't legally allowed to have a gun due to his criminal past. Prosecutors argued that the defense was trying to signal to the jury that Rosenbaum was a bad guy who deserved to die.

Judge Bruce Schroeder blocked defense lawyers from revealing the sex crime conviction at the trial. Jurors also were not supposed to hear about Rosenbaum's mental health history, which Schroeder said wasn't relevant because Rittenhouse didn't know it when he shot him.

But the information came out in court after prosecutors asked Rosenbaum's fiancée, Kariann Swart, whether Rosenbaum — whom she said had just been released from a hospital — had taken medication earlier on the day he was shot. Schroeder later ruled that by asking that question, prosecutors opened the door for the defense to ask Swart what the medication was for. Under cross-examination, she told jurors it was for bipolar disorder and depression.

Swart also testified that Rosenbaum had returned from a Milwaukee hospital on the day of the shooting. The jury did not hear that Rosenbaum had been in a mental health ward following a suicide attempt.

Phil Turner, a former federal prosecutor who is now in private practice and who isn't involved in the Rittenhouse case, believes the testimony about Rosenbaum's mental illness was "very important to the self-defense argument" and therefore fair game.

People, including the jury, might agree that mental illness on its own does not cause someone to be violent, Turner said. But that information along with Rosenbaum's actions that night — from getting in the face of men armed with rifles to at one point chasing after Rittenhouse — likely was a "nodding their head kind of moment" for jurors.

"It fortifies the defense argument that this is the truth, this is the reality," Turner said.

Kim Motley, an attorney representing Rosenbaum's estate, said she understands Richards' efforts to "vigorously defend" his client. But she called his comments about being glad Rittenhouse shot Rosenbaum — among the final words jurors heard before they started deliberating Tuesday following a roughly two-week trial — "disgusting" and offensive to people who struggle with mental illness.

"This trial isn't about the type of person Joseph Rosenbaum was," Motley said "This trial is about his client, Kyle Rittenhouse."

Find the AP's full coverage of the Rittenhouse trial: <https://apnews.com/hub/kyle-rittenhouse>

The AP Interview: Meng Hongwei's wife slams 'monster' China

By JOHN LEICESTER Associated Press

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LYON, France (AP) — In China, she enjoyed the privileges that flowed from being married to a senior member of the governing elite. Her husband was a top police official in the security apparatus that keeps the Communist Party in power, so trusted that China sent him to France to take up a prestigious role at Interpol.

But Meng Hongwei, the former Interpol president, has now vanished into China's sprawling penal system, purged in a stunning fall from grace. And his wife is alone with their twin boys in France, a political refugee under round-the-clock French police protection following what she suspects was an attempt by Chinese agents to kidnap and deliver them to an uncertain fate.

From being an insider, Grace Meng has become an outsider looking in — and says she is horrified by what she sees.

So much so that she is now shedding her anonymity, potentially putting herself and her family at additional risk, to speak out against China's authoritarian government that her husband — a vice minister of public security — served before disappearing in 2018. He was later tried and imprisoned.

"The monster" is how Grace Meng now speaks of the government her husband worked for. "Because they eat their children."

In an exclusive interview with The Associated Press, Meng chose for the first time to show her face, agreeing to be filmed and photographed without the dark lighting and from-the-back camera angles that she previously insisted on, so she could speak openly and in unprecedented detail about her husband, herself and the cataclysm that tore them apart.

"I have the responsibility to show my face, to tell the world what happened," she told The AP. "During the past three years, I learned — just like we know how to live with the COVID — I know how to live with the monster, the authority."

Among the global critics of China — many of them now mobilizing against the 2022 Winter Olympics in Beijing — Meng brings the unique perspective of a former insider who has walked through the looking glass and emerged with her views transformed. So profound is the change that she has largely stopped using her Chinese name, Gao Ge. She says she now feels more herself as Grace, her chosen name, with her husband's surname, Meng.

"I have died and been reborn," she says.

About Meng, his whereabouts and health as an imprisoned soon-to-be 68-year-old, she is entirely in the dark. Their last communication was two text messages he sent on Sept. 25, 2018, on a work trip to Beijing. The first said, "wait for my call." That was followed four minutes later by an emoji of a kitchen knife, apparently signaling danger. She thinks he likely sent them from his office at the Ministry of Public Security.

Since then, she says she has had no contact with him and that multiple letters sent by her lawyers to Chinese authorities have gone unanswered. She is not even sure he is alive.

"This has already saddened me beyond the point where I can be saddened further," she said. "Of course, it's equally cruel to my children."

"I don't want the children to have no father," she added, starting to cry. "Whenever the children hear someone knocking on the door, they always go to look. I know that they're hoping that the person coming inside will be their father. But each time, when they realize that it isn't, they silently lower their heads. They are extremely brave."

Official word about Meng's fate came out in dribs and drabs. A statement in October 2018, just moments after Grace Meng had first met reporters in Lyon, France, to sound the alarm about his disappearance, announced that he was being investigated for unspecified legal violations. That signaled that he was the latest high-ranking Chinese official to fall victim to a party purge.

Interpol announced that Meng had resigned as president, effective immediately. That still infuriates his wife, who says the Lyon-based police body "was of no help at all." She argues that by not taking a firmer stand, the global organization that works on shared law enforcement issues has only encouraged authoritarian behavior from Beijing.

"Can someone who has been forcibly disappeared write a resignation letter of their own free will?" she

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asked. "Can a police organization turn a blind eye to a typical criminal offense like this?"

In 2019, China announced that Meng had been stripped of his Communist Party membership. It said he abused his power to satisfy his family's "extravagant lifestyle" and allowed his wife to use his authority for personal benefit. In January 2020, a court announced he'd been sentenced to 13 years and six months in prison on charges of accepting more than \$2 million in bribes. The court said he confessed guilt and expressed regret.

His wife has long maintained that the accusations were trumped up and that her husband was purged because he'd been using his high-profile position to push for change.

"It's a fake case. It's an example of a political disagreement being turned into a criminal affair," she said. "The extent of corruption in China today is extremely serious. It's everywhere. But there are two different opinions about how to solve corruption. One is the method used now. The other is to move toward constitutional democracy, to solve the problem at its roots."

Grace Meng also has political connections through her own family. Her mother served on an advisory body to the Chinese legislature. And the family has previous experience of political trauma. After the Communist takeover in 1949, Grace Meng's grandfather was stripped of his business assets and later imprisoned in a labor camp, she said.

History, she says, is repeating itself.

"Of course, this is a great tragedy in our family, a source of great suffering," she told the AP. "But I also know that very many families in China today are facing a similar fate to mine."

Gabon is last bastion of endangered African forest elephants

By FARAI MUTSAKA Associated Press

PONGARA NATIONAL PARK, Gabon (AP) — Loss of habitat and poaching have made African forest elephants a critically endangered species. Yet the dense forests of sparsely populated Gabon in the Congo River Basin remain a "last stronghold" of the magnificent creatures, according to new research that concluded the population is much higher than previous estimates.

Counting forest elephants is a far bigger challenge than surveying plains-dwelling savanna elephants from the air. It takes difficult and dirty scientific work that doesn't involve laying eyes on the elusive animals that flee at the slightest whiff of human scent.

Instead, researchers have been trekking for years through dense undergrowth collecting dung from Gabon's forest elephants and analyzing the DNA from thousands of samples to determine the number of individual elephants in each plot of land examined.

Now the survey by the New York-based Wildlife Conservation Society and the National Parks of Gabon, released Thursday, has concluded that the central African country of about 2.3 million people harbors about 95,000 forest elephants.

Previous estimates put the population at 50,000 to 60,000 — or about 60% of the world's remaining African forest elephants.

Herds have nearly been decimated elsewhere in the region Gabon shares with conflict-ridden countries such as Cameroon, Congo and Central African Republic, according to researchers.

Central Africa has the largest number of forest elephants in the world, although figures have fallen by more than 86% over a 31-year period, according to the International Union for Conservation of Nature, which cites increasing threats of poaching and habitat loss.

The latest new survey in Gabon is the "first nationwide DNA-based assessment of a free-ranging large mammal in Africa," according to the researchers. The technology is also being used to count elephants and tigers in India.

"Gabon is quite unique, certainly for forest elephants. But actually across Africa where elephants occur, it's very unique in that ... what we call potential elephant habitat pretty much covers the entire country," said Emma Stokes, the WCS Africa regional director.

"We found elephants were distributed across almost 90% of the total surface area of the country," she

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said. "And you know, Gabon has forest cover of up to 88% of the country. That's very unusual."

In Gabon, tourists may still see some elephants on the beaches and coastal forests of the Atlantic coast. But, unlike their bigger savanna cousins that roam the plains of southern Africa in abundance, most forest elephants live in dense forests so counting them is painstaking work.

The solution: Trail their dung for genetic material. For three years, research teams would spend a month in the bush, walking 12 kilometers (about 7 miles) a day seeking elephant fecal samples, breaking only for a week at a time.

The team trudged through patches of savanna, thickets, densely wooded wetlands and rivers following elephant tracks marked by broken tree branches, old dung piles and footprints, looking for fresh dung.

"We got some dung here," Fabrice Menzeme, a ranger, shouted after walking for about three kilometers (1.8 miles) in Pongara National Park on the Atlantic coast during fieldwork in 2020. Animated team members rushed in. Upon closer inspection, disappointment followed. The dung was more than a day old.

Researchers want the dung "steaming fresh," Stokes said. "So, it's warm, it's fresh, it has a sheen to it. And the idea is to take the outer surface of that dung pile; a very small amount is needed in purpose-built tubes that are taken out by the field teams."

The fecal swabs were put into small test tubes and taken to a government wildlife genetic analysis laboratory in the capital, Libreville, where scientists extracted DNA from about 2,500 samples collected countrywide.

Extracting DNA from dung samples is "a bit like a cooking recipe, following several steps" to remove vegetation and seeds arising from elephants' diet or bacteria or organisms that develop on the dung, said Stéphanie Bourgeois, a research scientist with the parks agency and co-author of the research paper. "That's why you have to clean them and try to purify your DNA before you do your analysis."

"DNA is unique for every individual, the same for humans as it is for elephants. So DNA is just a tool to help us identify individuals and the number of times we sample each of these individuals," Bourgeois said at the laboratory. "We use a complex statistical model and from this we estimate the number of elephants that are in the area we sampled."

This is Gabon's first nationwide elephant census in 30 years. Only 14% of the elephant habitat in the country had been surveyed in the last decade, according to researchers. Previous surveys relied on dung counts, which can be more expensive, more difficult and less reliable than DNA sampling on large-scale surveys, they said.

"This is an exciting paper because it substantially raises the population estimates of forest elephants in Gabon and establishes a new, rigorous country-level monitoring methodology," said John Poulsen, associate professor of tropical ecology at Duke University's Nicholas School of the Environment, who was not involved in the research.

"At the same time," Poulsen said, "the government of Gabon now has an enormous responsibility for conserving forest elephants in the face of poaching, and especially human-elephant conflict and crop-raiding."

About 65% to 70% percent of all African forest elephants surviving today live in Gabon, according to Lee White, Gabon's minister of water and forests.

"That's an indication of the fact that Gabon has resisted the slaughter and the tragedy that has played out in the countries around Gabon," said White.

Conservation efforts include massive public awareness campaigns and efforts to deter cross-border poachers.

"You see it around Africa. Countries that have lost their elephants, have lost control of their natural resources, have often actually lost control of their countries," White said. "The countries that have almost no elephants have been through civil wars and are much less stable than the countries that have preserved their elephants."

Still, the minister said, Gabon is facing elephant problems of its own in addition to cross-border poaching for ivory, which he says has declined since China banned ivory imports.

One big problem, he said in an interview at the recent climate conference in Glasgow, is human-elephant conflicts that kill about 10 people a year. "When I go into rural Gabon, I get a lot of angry people who

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are screaming at me because the elephants have eaten their crops and, tragically, even occasionally have killed their relatives.”

One reason elephants are raiding village crops, White said, may be that global warming has dramatically reduced the abundance of forest fruit over the past 40 years. “So, it looks like climate change is starting to impact the forest,” he said. “And that means the elephants are hungry.”

Associated Press reporter Allen G. Breed contributed from Raleigh, North Carolina and AP reporter David Keyton contributed from Glasgow, Scotland.

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US warns pilots of weapon fire as war nears Ethiopia capital

By CARA ANNA Associated Press

NAIROBI, Kenya (AP) — The United States is warning pilots that planes operating at one of Africa’s busiest airports could be “directly or indirectly exposed to ground weapons fire and/or surface-to-air fire” as Ethiopia’s war nears the capital, Addis Ababa.

The Federal Aviation Administration advisory issued Wednesday cites the “ongoing clashes” between Ethiopian forces and fighters from the northern Tigray region, which have killed thousands of people in a year of war. The U.S. this week urged its citizens in Ethiopia to “leave now,” saying there should be no expectation of an Afghanistan-style evacuation.

Diplomatic efforts to stop the fighting have met resistance, but Kenya’s president told visiting U.S. Secretary of State Antony Blinken on Wednesday that Ethiopia’s prime minister in a meeting on Sunday gave the impression he was ready to consider several proposals to ease tensions and reduce violence, a senior State Department official said.

Those include opening humanitarian access to Tigray and restoring government services to the region. Such steps, combined with a ceasefire agreement, could set the stage for more comprehensive peace talks, the U.S. official said.

Diplomatic efforts by an African Union envoy, former Nigerian president Olesegun Obasanjo, and U.S. envoy Jeffrey Feltman continue. Ethiopia’s Foreign Ministry spokesman, Dina Mufti, told reporters that both are in Ethiopia but didn’t give details.

The Addis Ababa international airport is the hub for the state-owned Ethiopian Airlines, a symbol of Ethiopia’s former status as one of the world’s most rapidly growing economies before the war. The airline in recent years became Africa’s largest and best-managed carrier, turning Addis Ababa into the gateway to the continent. Addis Ababa is also the continent’s diplomatic capital as home of the AU.

The FAA advisory notes no reports of disruptions at Bole International Airport and “no indication of an intent to threaten civil aviation,” but it says the risk to approaching and departing planes could increase if the Tigray fighters encircle the capital.

The Tigray fighters “likely possess a variety of anti-aircraft capable weapons, including rocket-propelled grenades, anti-tank weapons, low-caliber anti-aircraft artillery, and man-portable air-defense systems,” or MANPADS, which could reach up to 25,000 feet above ground level, the FAA advisory says.

In an acknowledgment of Bole airport’s importance for onward travel for the African continent and beyond, the U.K. Minister for Africa Vicky Ford last week told reporters that Britain now advises against all travel to Ethiopia apart from the airport for departures and transfers.

The Tigray forces who had long dominated the national government before current Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed took office in 2018 have approached Addis Ababa in recent weeks and joined up with another armed group, the Oromo Liberation Army, with the aim of pressing Abiy to step aside.

The Tigray forces also say they are pressuring Ethiopia’s government to lift a months-long blockade on the Tigray region, which includes an Ethiopian government restriction on flights over Tigray. No food,

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medicine or other humanitarian aid has entered Tigray, a region of some 6 million people, for more than a month since Ethiopia's military resumed airstrikes there for the first time since June.

Ethiopian Airlines seized the world's attention in 2019 when the crash of a Boeing 737 Max shortly after takeoff from Addis Ababa killed 157 people. That and the earlier crash of another brand-new 737 Max off the coast of Indonesia had far-reaching consequences for the aeronautics industry as it brought about the grounding of Boeing 737 Max jets until late last year.

Associated Press diplomatic writer Matt Lee contributed.

U.S. jobless claims drop seventh straight week to 268,000

By PAUL WISEMAN AP Economics Writer

WASHINGTON (AP) — The number of Americans applying for unemployment benefits fell for the seventh straight week to a pandemic low of 268,000.

U.S. jobless claims dipped by 1,000 last week from the week before, the Labor Department reported Thursday.

The applications for unemployment aid are a proxy for layoffs, and their steady decline this year — after topping 900,000 one week in early January — reflects the labor market's strong recovery from last year's brief but intense coronavirus recession. The four-week average of claims, which smooths week-to-week volatility, also fell to a pandemic low just below 273,000.

Jobless claims have been edging lower, toward their prepandemic level of around 220,000 a week.

Overall, 2.1 million Americans were collecting traditional unemployment checks the week that ended Nov. 6, down by 129,000 from the week before.

Until Sept. 6, the federal government had supplemented state unemployment insurance programs by paying an extra payment of \$300 a week and extending benefits to gig workers and to those who were out of work for six months or more. Including the federal programs, the number of Americans receiving some form of jobless aid peaked at more than 33 million in June last year.

The coronavirus slammed the U.S. economy early last year, forcing many businesses to close or reduce hours of operation and keeping many Americans shut in at home as a health precaution. In March and April 2020, employers slashed more than 22 million jobs.

But the economy began to recover last summer. Consumers, pocketing government relief checks and gaining confidence as COVID-19 cases fell, resumed spending. With the rollout of vaccines this year, they began to return to shops, restaurants and bars.

Suddenly, many employers were struggling to keep up with an unexpected surge in demand. They are scrambling to fill job openings — a near-record 10.4 million in September. Workers, finding themselves with bargaining clout for the first time in decades, are becoming choosy about jobs; a record 4.4 million quit in September, a sign they have confidence in their ability to find something better.

Unemployment claims "have been declining on a sustained basis and are moving closer to pre-pandemic levels," said Rubeela Farooqi, chief U.S. economist at High Frequency Economics. "Layoffs are falling, reflective of companies holding on to workers amid a labor shortage."

Since April 2020, employers have hired more than 18 million people, including 531,000 in October. But the U.S. economy is still more than 4 million jobs short of where it was in February last year.

Why can't some COVID-19 vaccinated people travel to the US?

By VICTORIA MILKO AP Science Writer

Why can't some COVID-19 vaccinated people travel to the U.S.?

Because they might not be vaccinated with shots recognized by the U.S. Food and Drug Administration or the World Health Organization.

When lifting overseas travel restrictions in November, the U.S. required adults coming to the country

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to be fully vaccinated with shots approved or authorized by the FDA or allowed by WHO.

Among the most widely used vaccines that don't meet that criteria are Russia's Sputnik V vaccine and China's CanSino vaccine. Sputnik V is authorized for use in more than 70 countries while CanSino is allowed in at least nine countries. WHO still is awaiting more data about both vaccines before making a decision.

Vaccines recognized by the FDA and WHO undergo rigorous testing and review to determine they're safe and effective. And among the vaccines used internationally, experts say some likely won't be recognized by the agencies.

"They will not all be evaluated in clinical trials with the necessary rigor," said Dr. William Moss, executive director of the Johns Hopkins International Vaccine Access Center.

An exception to the U.S. rule is people who received a full series of the Novavax vaccine in a late-stage study. The U.S. is accepting the participants who received the vaccine, not a placebo, because it was a rigorous study with oversight from an independent monitoring board.

The U.S. also allows entry to people who got two doses of any "mix-and-match" combination of vaccines on the FDA and WHO lists.

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

Can at-home COVID-19 tests make holiday gatherings safer?

Are COVID-19 boosters the same as the original vaccines?

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

New Delhi's air still 'very poor' despite emergency measures

NEW DELHI (AP) — Air pollution remained extremely high in the Indian capital on Thursday, a day after authorities closed schools indefinitely and shut some power stations to reduce smog that has blanketed the city for much of the month.

New Delhi's air quality remained "very poor," according to SAFAR, India's main environmental monitoring agency. The concentration of tiny airborne particles less than 2.5 microns in diameter — known as PM 2.5 — neared 300 micrograms per cubic meter in some parts of the city, it said.

The World Health Organization designates the maximum safe level as 25. The tiny particles can lodge in the lungs and other organs, causing long-term health damage.

New Delhi, a city of 20 million, is one of the world's most polluted cities. Air quality often hits hazardous levels during the winter, when the burning of crop residue in neighboring states coincides with lower temperatures that trap smoke. The smoke travels to New Delhi, obscuring the sky.

Emergency measures went into effect on Wednesday in an attempt to stem the health crisis.

Schools were closed indefinitely and employees were asked to allow half of their staff to work from home for a week. Some coal-based power stations outside New Delhi were ordered to shut down and construction activities were halted.

The measures, however, are expected to have very little effect.

Meanwhile, the New Delhi state government is weighing whether to lock down the capital after India's Supreme Court last week sought an "imminent and emergency" action plan to tackle the crisis.

The PM 2.5 concentration has soared to nearly 15 times above the WHO's safe level on many days in November and forecasters warn the pollution is likely to get worse in the coming days.

New Delhi's pollution woes are due to various causes.

Auto emissions contribute nearly 25% of the city's pollution in the winter, according to the federal government. Other sources of air pollution include emissions from industries, smoke from firecrackers linked to festivals, construction dust and agricultural burning.

Several studies have estimated that more than a million Indians die each year from air pollution-related diseases.

In 2020, 13 of the world's 15 cities with the most polluted air were in India, according to the Swiss air

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quality monitoring company IQAir.

Today in History

By The Associated Press undefined

Today in History

Today is Friday, Nov. 19, the 323rd day of 2021. There are 42 days left in the year.

Today's Highlight in History:

On Nov. 19, 1969, Apollo 12 astronauts Charles Conrad and Alan Bean made the second manned landing on the moon.

On this date:

In 1794, the United States and Britain signed Jay's Treaty, which resolved some issues left over from the Revolutionary War.

In 1863, President Abraham Lincoln dedicated a national cemetery at the site of the Civil War battlefield of Gettysburg in Pennsylvania.

In 1919, the Senate rejected the Treaty of Versailles (vehr-SY') by a vote of 55 in favor, 39 against, short of the two-thirds majority needed for ratification.

In 1942, during World War II, Russian forces launched their winter offensive against the Germans along the Don front.

In 1959, Ford Motor Co. announced it was halting production of the unpopular Edsel.

In 1977, Egyptian President Anwar Sadat became the first Arab leader to visit Israel.

In 1985, President Ronald Reagan and Soviet leader Mikhail S. Gorbachev met for the first time as they began their summit in Geneva.

In 1995, Polish President Lech Walesa (vah-WEN'-sah) was defeated in his bid for re-election.

In 1997, Iowa seamstress Bobbi McCaughey (mihk-KOY') gave birth to the world's first set of surviving septuplets, four boys and three girls.

In 2004, in one of the worst brawls in U.S. sports history, Ron Artest and Stephen Jackson of the Indiana Pacers charged into the stands and fought with Detroit Pistons fans, forcing officials to end the Pacers' 97-82 win with 45.9 seconds left.

In 2010, President Barack Obama, attending a NATO summit in Lisbon, Portugal, won an agreement to build a missile shield over Europe, a victory that risked further aggravating Russia.

In 2017, Charles Manson, the hippie cult leader behind the gruesome murders of actor Sharon Tate and six others in Los Angeles in 1969, died in a California hospital at the age of 83 after nearly a half-century in prison.

Ten years ago: Moammar Gadhafi's son and former heir apparent Seif al-Islam was captured by revolutionary fighters in the southern desert just over a month after Gadhafi was killed, setting off joyous celebrations across Libya. (He was released from detention in 2017 and has announced his candidacy for Libya's presidential election in December 2021.)

Five years ago: President-elect Donald Trump met with 2012 Republican nominee Mitt Romney in Bedminster, New Jersey; both were positive about their sit-down, a marked shift in tone after a year in which Romney attacked Trump as a "con man" and Trump labeled Romney a "loser." The International Space Station gained three new residents, including NASA astronaut Peggy Whitson, who at 56 was the oldest and most experienced woman to orbit the world.

One year ago: Georgia's top elections official released results of a hand tally of ballots that affirmed Democrat Joe Biden's narrow lead over President Donald Trump in the state. The Wisconsin Elections Commission issued an order to recount more than 800,000 ballots cast in two heavily liberal counties; the order was required by law after Trump paid \$3 million for the recount. (The recount added slightly to Biden's 20,600-vote margin in Wisconsin.) California imposed a nighttime curfew as its coronavirus figures soared; sheriffs in some counties said they wouldn't enforce it. With the coronavirus surging out of control, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention pleaded with Americans not to travel for Thanksgiving and not

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to spend the holiday with people from outside their household. Secretary of State Mike Pompeo became the first top American diplomat to visit an Israeli settlement in the occupied West Bank.

Today's Birthdays: Talk show host Dick Cavett is 85. Broadcasting and sports mogul Ted Turner is 83. Former Sen. Tom Harkin, D-Iowa, is 82. Former Health and Human Services Secretary Tommy G. Thompson is 80. Fashion designer Calvin Klein is 79. Sportscaster Ahmad Rashad is 72. Actor Robert Beltran is 68. Actor Kathleen Quinlan is 67. Actor Glynnis O'Connor is 66. Broadcast journalist Ann Curry is 65. Former NASA astronaut Eileen Collins is 65. Actor Allison Janney is 62. Rock musician Matt Sorum (Guns N' Roses, Velvet Revolver) is 61. Actor Meg Ryan is 60. Actor-director Jodie Foster is 59. Actor Terry Farrell is 58. TV chef Rocco DiSpirito is 55. Actor Jason Scott Lee is 55. Olympic gold medal runner Gail Devers is 55. Actor Erika Alexander is 52. Rock musician Travis McNabb is 52. Singer Tony Rich is 50. Actor Sandrine Holt is 49. Country singer Billy Currington is 48. Dancer-choreographer Savion Glover is 48. R&B singer Tamika Scott (Xscape) is 46. R&B singer Lil' Mo is 44. Olympic gold medal gymnast Kerri Strug is 44. Actor Reid Scott is 44. Movie director Barry Jenkins (Film: "Moonlight") is 42. Actor Katherine Kelly is 42. Actor Adam Driver is 38. Country singer Cam is 37. Actor Samantha Futerman is 34. NHL forward Patrick Kane is 33. Rapper Tyga is 32.