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UpComing Events

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 Daily Independent
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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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#488 in a series Covid-19 Update: by Marie Miller

I'm checking in today primarily to deal with the change in FDA approval and CDC guidance for boosters, but we'll take care of what other news there is as long as we're talking.

First up: We're in trouble. The number of daily new cases went back up over 100,000 this week and stayed there. That's dragging our seven-day average up; it hit 94,606 today. This average has grown by one-third in the last two weeks, and I see no sign that's going to slow down anytime soon. Well over half of the states are in unchecked transmission territory, and 36 states are experiencing double-digit percentage growth in new cases.

Hospitalizations are a lagging indicator; it takes a while after diagnosis before folks typically show up in emergency rooms, so increases in those numbers are going to lag new cases. We've been seeing growth in new cases for long enough now that hospitalizations have stopped dropping; they're flat at 48,133 and poised to increase further following the case numbers. I expect that effect will be somewhat muted by the effects of the highly effective monoclonal antibody therapies available and, perhaps soon, a couple of other therapies on the horizon; those, expeditiously employed, will keep folks out of hospitals. We're seeing the same pattern with deaths numbers; these lag hospitalizations. Deaths are essentially flat too at a seven-day average of 1157 and also likely to start increasing in due time. This following effect will likely be somewhat mitigated by our growing knowledge about effectively managing patients, but it's worrisome that we bottomed out while still over 1000 deaths per day—haven't been consistently below that for three months.

We're starting from a higher jumping-off place than we have in any previous surge of this pandemic, and new treatments notwithstanding, there are surely some rough days ahead. Mind-boggling that we're in a spot like this 11 months after we gained access to safe and effective vaccines and at least seven months since the supply was sufficient for the population—hard to believe we were on our way back down just a few weeks ago. We've done this and done this, and still we don't get that you can't let up on precautions just because the future's looking better; you have to wait until that future actually arrives. What's more, we're doing this again and we haven't even hit the holidays yet. Buckle up: It's going to be a long winter.

To that point, on Wednesday the TSA announced they are looking at Thanksgiving travel at levels approaching those before the pandemic, some 20 million; there were around 26 million traveling for Thanksgiving in 2019. Given the transmission rates we're seeing, this has me concerned. I'm going to acknowledge air travel is one of the less risky things you can do given the mask mandates that are in place in airports and on airplanes, not to mention the excellent air handling systems on planes; however, we must still consider the possibility of carrying virus from high-transmission areas to low-transmission areas and the risk posed simply by being indoors with lots of other people for extended periods of time while vaccination rates are so low.

That said, I've done some traveling myself in recent months, so I'm not going to stand in judgement at this point. I do urge you to be cautious and conscious of the risks; we've discussed ways to minimize those. It really is time to give attention to transmission rates at point of origin and destination, strategies to avoid being the one who brings more virus into an area that's climbing out of a hole or worsening the situation in an area that's struggling—masking, distancing, staying out of crowds, avoiding unnecessary contacts, and all the rest. And yes, these are important strategies even if you're staying home for the holidays.

Nine more states had expanded access to boosters, joining California, Colorado, New Mexico, Arkansas,

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West Virginia, and New York; the new additions are Utah, Kansas, Minnesota, Kentucky, Maine, Vermont, Massachusetts, Connecticut, and Rhode Island. Kansas governor Laura Kelly said in a statement, "Expanding access to booster shots will help us put an end to this deadly pandemic." I think everyone hopes so; it will certainly protect those who receive them, and that's an accomplishment.

Moderna announced on Wednesday that they had made application to the FDA for an extension of their vaccine's emergency use authorization (EUA) to cover boosters for all adults at least six months past their initial vaccination series. This is the same request as the one from Pfizer/BioNTech the agency was going to consider this week although it is a half-dose booster in contrast to the other two vaccines on the market in the US whose boosters require a full dose. I don't know which factors weigh in these decisions, so I'm wondering whether the fact that so many people are having boosters anyway may have had some bearing on the decision which was made. We already know the boosters are safe and effective, so the only remaining question in the decision was whether it's good policy.

The FDA commissioner apparently thinks so because she did, as expected, sign off on this boosters-for-all strategy for both the Pfizer/BioNTech and Moderna vaccines earlier today. The CDC's Advisory Committee on Immunization Practices also met today to consider the guidelines that will apply to administration of these boosters. They heard safety data from the agency and from the vaccine manufacturers showing the boosters have not caused any new adverse events; the most common reactions are still mild and self-limiting, things like a sore arm, headache, and fatigue. The committee then voted late this afternoon, 11 – 0, to recommend the boosters for all adults six months after the initial series is completed. They also voted unanimously to strengthen the recommendation for anyone 50 and older. Dr. Rochelle Walensky, director of the CDC, signed off on both recommendations about an hour later; and it's official.

It has been noted by many experts that a broadened booster program probably will not have a significant impact on the trajectory of this pandemic in the US; they say what we most need is more people vaccinated. I would agree, but I'm not sure how we achieve that goal beyond the ongoing efforts to reach those with access problems and genuine questions that can be resolved by providing solid information. Seems to me the vaccination effort is bumping up against a fairly hardened wall of resistance which is largely fueled by bad actors who are lying to a credulous public. I think we'd be best off to funnel vaccine to those unvaccinated folks too, but that works only if they'll take it. They won't. Given that, our best bet is to reduce the risk those unvaccinated people represent to the rest of us—to protect as well as possible those who wish to be protected, and that means boosters. So be it.

The administration estimates around 1.7 million kids received a first dose of vaccine, about twice those vaccinated in the first week of eligibility. This week we'll be over 10 percent of newly eligible kids. We are approaching 80 percent of the population 12 and over with at least a first shot. We'll keep pecking away at the unvaccinated population, getting to folks who are willing to consider it, but we know there's a hard core of resistance that isn't going to go away. Dr. Anthony Fauci, director of the National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases, said "unvaccinated people were 13 times more likely than fully vaccinated people to become infected with the coronavirus during the month of September and 20 times more likely to die of Covid-19." In Indiana during the first week of October, of the 1447 people hospitalized with Covid-19, 10 were vaccinated and, of 219 who died, fewer than 15 were fully vaccinated.

We know that vaccination reduces your risk for infection with SARS-CoV-2 and your risk for developing symptoms, as well as your risk for severe disease and death. One question that lingers is whether vaccination reduces your risk for long Covid, that collection of symptoms that persists for weeks or months after the onset of acute infection. Last time we talked, we discussed a study that indicates as many as half or even more of Covid-19 patients develop long Covid, so that is an outcome of real interest to vaccinated

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people. I doubt anyone wants to contemplate long-term disability, but this is what we're seeing. I read a summary of a study from a team at King's College, London, that was published in the Lancet a few weeks ago and addresses just this question. Findings were that vaccinated people who had a breakthrough infection were less than half as likely to develop long Covid as unvaccinated people who were infected. In the vaccinated group, five percent of those with a positive RT-PCR test developed long Covid whereas, in the unvaccinated group, 11.5 percent did. When you add this effect to the fact that vaccinated people are far less likely to get infected in the first place, there is a substantial reduction in long Covid afforded by vaccination.

I know that my focus on the US gives short shrift to the worldwide crisis in this pandemic. I am retaining this focus because I just don't have the bandwidth to track the world. I try to give you periodic updates on what's happening, but I acknowledge these are not adequate to develop a picture of the rest of the world. That said, I think it's important to acknowledge that more than 4.1 billion people have received at least one dose of vaccine, which accounts for around 53.5 percent of the world's population. Rich countries like the US are way ahead of many places despite our abysmal vaccine uptake; and then we're behind every developed country. We're no longer in the top 100 countries for vaccination, and that's not a great thing.

Dr. Rochelle Walensky said on Wednesday that we are seeing an increasing number of people 65 and older in emergency rooms with Covid-19. This is a population 86 percent of whom have received full vaccination, but only 36.6 percent have received boosters. While she didn't talk about the reasons for this, given the relatively lower immune response of aging people to the initial vaccine series in the first place and the reduction in immunity seen with time after vaccination, it seems likely their vaccine-derived immunity is waning and needs beefing up, which is just what the booster is supposed to accomplish. It's going to be important going into winter to get these folks boosted, particularly those in long-term care where their risks for severe outcomes are much greater than those in those living in the community.

Today we received two new CDC reports on the risks of Covid-19 in pregnancy. One looks at deaths data from Mississippi from early March, 2020, to early October, 2021. It found there were 15 deaths among 1637 people infected while pregnant. Fourteen of those cases were in people with underlying conditions; none had been fully vaccinated. Fourteen required mechanical ventilation. Three died during pregnancy ("one spontaneous abortion at 9 weeks and two stillbirths at 22 and 23 weeks' gestation"), the others after giving birth, seven of those emergency cesarean sections. The effect of the Delta variant is seen when we consider deaths rose from 5 per 1000 infections before Delta became dominant to 25 deaths per 1000 after.

The other report deals with stillbirths. Covering pretty much the same time frame as the above report and looking at 1.2 million deliveries at 736 hospitals, it found that stillbirth was one and a half times more common in deliveries with Covid-19 than in deliveries without Covid-19 before Delta swept across the country. After Delta, stillbirth rose to become four times more common in deliveries with Covid-19. We've been talking about the risks of Covid-19 in pregnancy; this work puts numbers to that conversation, pointing up the importance of vaccination for pregnant people and those considering becoming pregnant,

I read a study from a Washington University School of Medicine researcher published Thursday in JAMA Network. It deals with what is called chronic olfactory dysfunction (COD)—loss or alteration of the sense of smell lasting more than six months—in those recovered from Covid-19. There are three ways this disorder manifests itself: (1) Some people simply lose their sense of smell entirely or it is greatly diminished. (2) Some find that things don't smell the way they used to: coffee that smells like gasoline or excrement. (3) Some smell things that aren't there: thinking you smell smoke when there is no source of smoke. Diminishment in this sense was generally seen before this pandemic in older people who gradually lose

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their ability to smell things; in younger people loss or alteration generally occurs only as a result of head trauma. The author tells us COD is associated with "decreased general quality of life, impaired food intake, inability to detect harmful gas and smoke, enhanced worries about personal hygiene, diminished social well-being, and the initiation of depressive symptoms. Most people may recover their sense of smell at some point, but some may never do so. There are no specific therapies available for COD right now. No one has studied this phenomenon beyond six months, so the outlook past that time is still fairly unknown.

This analysis worked with data from the COVID Tracking Project. Looking at acute incidence of olfactory dysfunction and rates of recovery, the author concluded that at least 700,000 and possibly as many as 1.6 million US residents are experiencing COD due to Covid-19 with the distinct possibility that the true number may be far higher. Prior to the pandemic we were estimated to have 13.3 million individuals with this condition, so Covid-19 has added substantially to those numbers and also skewed the age range of affected individuals toward a younger demographic. This is just one more sequela of this infection we may be dealing with for decades to come.

That wraps things up for tonight. Be well. I'll be back in a few days.

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Groton Area School District 2021 First Quarter Honor Roll

Seniors

4.0 GPA: Allyssa Locke, Pierce Kettering, Kansas Kroll, Alyssa Thaler, Madeline Fliehs, Trista Keith, Travis Townsend, Madisen Bjerke, Hannah Gustafson, Kennedy Anderson, Jordan Bjerke, Jackson Cogley, Seth Johnson

3.99-3.50: Megan Fliehs, Julianna Kosel, Landon Kokales, Lane Krueger, Jace Kroll, Kody Lehr, Andrea Davidson, Kaden Kurtz, Riley Leicht, Michal Tabke, Emilie Thurston, Brayden Hansen, Macine McGannon, Favian Sanchez-Gonzalez, Jayden Zak, Cassaundra Schultz, Christaina Zoellner, Ryder Daly

3.49-3.00: Brooklyn Imrie, Evin Nehls, Rease Jandel, Trinity Smith, Kelsie Frost, Trey Johnson, Marcos Garcia

Juniors

4.0 GPA: Ethan Clark, Jackson Dinger, Jacob Lewandowski, Caleb Hanten, Cole Simon, Elliana Weismantel, Andrew Marzahn, Brooke Gengerke, Kaleb Antonsen, Aspen Johnson

3.99-3.50: Cole Bisbee, Carter Barse, Gracie Traphagen, Tate Larson, Cadance Tullis, Cade Larson, Shalyn Foertsch, Shaylee Peterson

3.49-3.00: KayLynn Overacker, Porter Johnson, Sierra Ehresmann, Kaleb Hoover, Kamryn Fliehs, Tannor McGannon, Nathalia Garcia, Brenna Carda, Tyson Parrow

Sophomores

4.0 GPA: Emily Clark, Claire Heinrich, Camryn Kurtz, Jaycie Lier, Hannah Monson

3.99-3.50: Cadence Feist, Holden Sippel, Ashlyn Sperry, Dillion Abeln, Faith Fliehs, Lydia Meier, Kyleigh Englund, Jackson Garstecki, Sara Menzia, Abigail Jensen, Bradin Althoff, Anna Fjeldheim, Lexi Osterman, Shea Jandel, Anna Bisbee, Lane Tietz

3.49-3.00: Sydney Leicht, Logan Ringgenberg, Emma Schinkel, Karsyn Jangula, Colby Dunker, Ava Wienk

Freshmen

4.0 GPA: Gretchen Dinger, Elizabeth Fliehs, Payton Mitchell, Faith Traphagen, Axel Warrington

3.99-3.50: Blake Pauli, Corbin Weismantel, Emma Kutter, Laila Roberts, Kaden Kampa, Jeslyn Kosel, Brooklyn Hansen, Kellen Antonsen, Aiden Heathcote, Karrah-Jo Johnson, Kayla Lehr, Kennedy Hansen, Korbin Kucker, Easten Ekern, Emily Overacker, Rebecca Poor, Kianna Sander

3.49-3.00: Quintyn Bedford, Blake Dennert, Savannah Bible, Christian Ehresmann, Karlie McKane, Emma Bahr, Riley Carman, Carter Simon, Brevin Fliehs, Turner Thompson, Kyssa Manning, Logan Pearson, Ashley Johnson, Kayleigh McGannon

Eighth Graders

4.0 GPA: Carly Gilbert, Nathan Unzen

3.99-3.50: Mia Crank, Jerica Locke, Jaedyn Penning, Gage Sippel, Talli Wright, Benjamin Hoeft, Natalia Warrington, Ryder Johnson, De Eh Tha Say, Logan Warrington, Lucas Carda, London Bahr, Karsten Fliehs, Raelee Lilly, Olivia Stiegelmeier, Keegen Tracy, Karter Moody, Cali Tollifson, Rylee Dunker

3.49-3.00: Lincoln Krause, Hannah Sandness, Paisley Mitchell, Garrett Schultz, Cambria Bonn, Jayden Schwan, Breslyn Jeschke, Noah Theisen

Seventh Graders

4.0 GPA: Teagan Hanten, Carlee Johnson, Emerlee Jones, Brody Lord, Ashlynn Warrington

3.99-3.50: Kira Clocksene, Colt Williamson, Liby Althoff, Aiden Strom, Avery Crank, McKenna Tietz, Halee Harder, Blake Lord

3.49-3.00: Zander Harry, Hailey Pauli, Gavin Kroll, Dylan McGannon, Claire Schuelke, Addison Hoffman Wipf, Jackson Hopfinger, Taryn Traphagen, Kella Tracy, Walker Zoellner, Leah Jones, Hayden Zoellner, Maggie Cleveland, Dylan Alexander Lopez Marin

Sixth Graders

4.0 GPA: Makenna Krause, Thomas Schuster

3.99-3.50: Elizabeth Cole, Sydney Locke, Jace Johnson, Kyleigh Kroll, Chesney Weber, Easton Weber, Wyatt Wambach, Addison Hoeft, Layne Johnson, Ethan Kroll, Kason Oswald

3.49-3.00: John Bisbee, Rylene Gilbert, Taryn Thompson, Destin Pardick, Dee Eh June Say, Ryder Schelle, Aimee Heilman, Rylie Rose, Kamryn Bickel, Trinity Dallaire, Thomas Aalseth



Groton Area Middle School/ High School November Students of the Month

**From back left: Carlee Johnson (7th), Mya Feser (6th), Lydia Meier (10th), Emma Kutter (9th)
From front left: Nathan Unzen (8th), Travis Townsend (12th), Jacob Lewandowski (11th)**

Groton Area School works to ensure that all levels of academic instruction also include the necessary life skills teaching, practicing, and modeling that encourages essential personal life habits that are universally understood to facilitate helping our students become good human beings and citizens.

It is learning with our heads, hearts, and hands to be caring and civil, to make healthy decisions, to effectively problem solve, to be respectful and responsible, to be good citizens, and to be empathetic and ethical individuals.

Students are selected based on individual student growth in the areas of: positive behavior, citizenship, good attendance, a thirst for knowledge, and high academic standards.

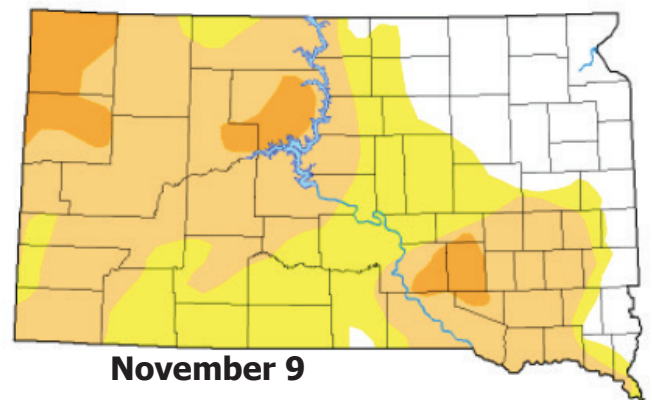
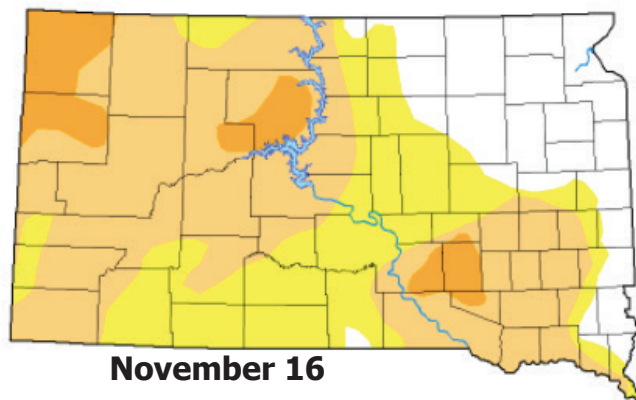
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Drought Classification



Weekly Drought Monitor



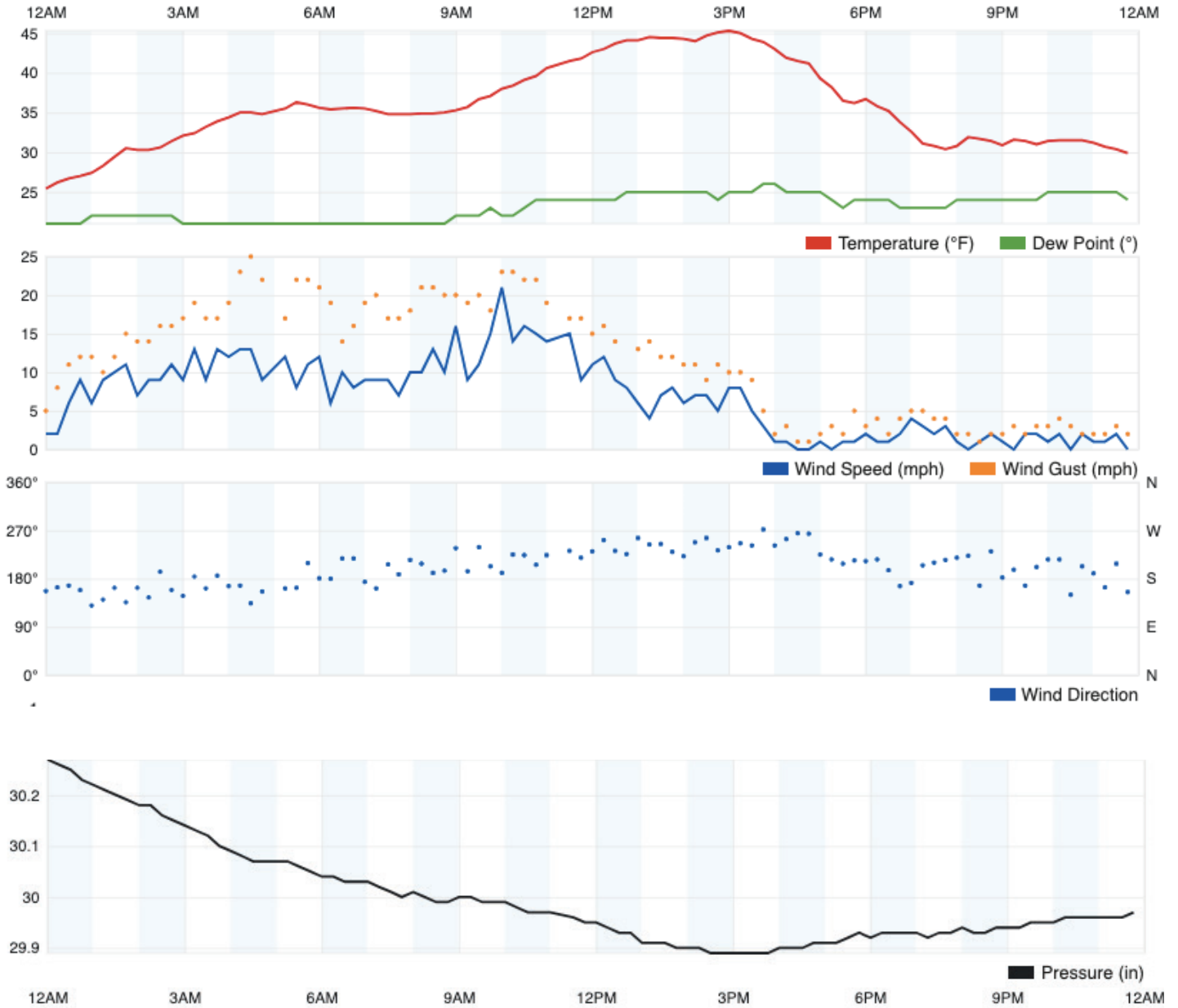
High Plains

The eastern edge of the High Plains region saw notable precipitation amounts this week, in particular the eastern parts of North Dakota and Kansas. Otherwise, largely dry weather ruled the week. Precipitation amounts were sufficient in northeast North Dakota to reduce long-term deficits enough to cause improvements in long-term drought. In eastern Colorado and western Kansas, drought worsened and expanded in some locations, as soil moisture continued to decrease and precipitation deficits on the short- and long-term continued to grow. Most of the High Plains saw a warmer than normal week, with the warmest temperature anomalies (4 to 10 degrees above normal) taking place in western Nebraska and Kansas, the western Dakotas, and eastern Colorado and Wyoming. Residual effects from the now mostly long-term drought continued in the Dakotas, where livestock producers had problems feeding herds due to alfalfa and hay shortages.

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Yesterday's Groton Weather Graphs



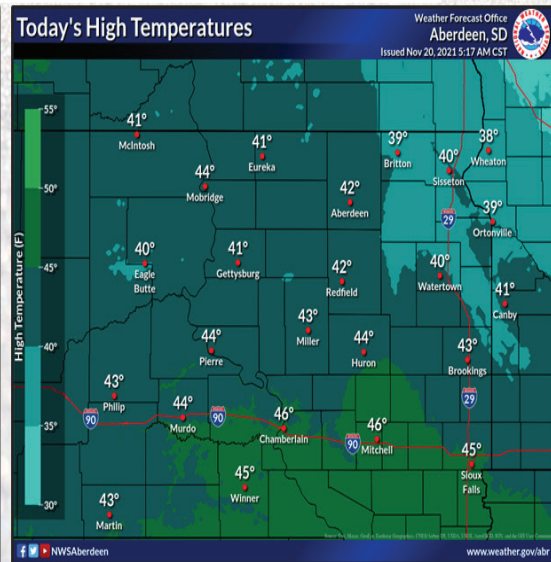
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Today	Tonight	Sunday	Sunday Night	Monday
				
Slight Chance Rain	Partly Cloudy	Sunny and Breezy	Partly Cloudy	Mostly Sunny
High: 43 °F	Low: 24 °F	High: 33 °F	Low: 16 °F	High: 40 °F

Patches of Light Rain and/or Snow Today

- Very minor system moving through – little to no precipitation accumulations expected
- Highs ranging from the upper 30s to mid 40s
- Turning colder and windy for Sunday



Visit www.weather.gov/abr for a detailed local forecast

Updated: 11/20/2021 5:32 AM CT

NATIONAL WEATHER SERVICE
OCEANIC AND ATMOSPHERIC ADMINISTRATION

A very weak system is moving through the region this morning and will bring patches of light rain or snow to portions of central South Dakota, and possibly into parts of the James River valley later today. Little to no snow accumulations are expected, and any rainfall amounts will be very light and may amount to only sprinkles or a brief shower adding up to a couple hundredths at best. Early this morning, radar showed light activity over north central South Dakota with movement to the east-southeast through the remainder of the morning hours. Late tonight into early Sunday morning, a potent cold front will move through the area and bring colder temperatures and windy conditions on Sunday.

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Today in Weather History

November 20, 1975: A storm center located in Oklahoma on Tuesday, November 18th, moved northeastward across Kansas into Iowa and Wisconsin on Wednesday the 19th and Thursday the 20th. Light rain began in the eastern half South Dakota on the morning of the 19th. The rain changed to snow during the afternoon and continued through the evening of the 20th. The winds increased, and blizzard conditions were reached by 6 pm CST on Wednesday the 19th. The snow was driven by sustained winds 40 to 50 miles per hour, gusting to 75 mph on some occasions, which reduced visibility to less than one-half mile. Heavy snow ranging from six to fifteen inches fell over an area southeast of a line from Todd to Aurora to Grant County. Traffic came to a standstill by Wednesday evening the 19th. The snow abruptly ended on the night of the 20th, but winds diminished rather slowly that night. Storm total snowfalls included 9 inches at Clear Lake and 7 inches at Watertown.

November 20, 1977: The second blizzard of the month began very early on Saturday, November 19th and continued through most of Sunday, November 20th. Wind speeds exceeding 50 mph caused much blowing and drifting snow. Visibility was reduced to near zero. Most of the roads in the northern and western parts of the state were blocked. Snowfall amounts north of Milbank and Pierre to Ardmore exceeded five inches. Most of the counties in the northwest and a significant portion of those in the north-central parts of the state reported snowfall amounts exceeding ten inches. Some drifts reached 4 to 5 feet. The highest reported snowfall was 20 inches in Eagle Butte. An eastbound train from Milbank had six freight cars derailed near Albee, in Grant County as a result of the storm. Snowfall totals from this blizzard included; 20 inches at Eagle Butte; 14 inches at Leola; 12 inches at Timber Lake and Britton; 11 inches 4NNE Victor and at Mobridge; 10 inches at 6SE McIntosh, 4W Mellette, Sand Lake, and Ipswich; 9.3 inches in Aberdeen; 9 inches 4NW Onida, at Sisseton, and 2N Onaka; 8 inches at Selby; 7 inches at McLaughlin and Waubay; 6 inches at Conde and Faulkton; 5 inches at Summit and Webster; 4 inches at Pierre, Wilmot and Highmore; and 3 inches at Watertown, Clear Lake, Miller, 3NE Raymond, Redfield, and Wheaton. The 9 inches at Sisseton helped to contribute to the snowiest November on record for Sisseton, which recorded 27.5 inches for November 1977.

1900: An unusual tornado outbreak in the Lower Mississippi Valley resulted in 73 deaths and extensive damage across Arkansas, Mississippi, and Tennessee.

1985: Kate intensified to a major Category 3 Hurricane and as she moved west of Key West, Florida with top winds of 115 mph and a minimum central pressure of 954 millibars or 28.17 inches of mercury. The next day Kate made landfall between Panama City and Apalachicola, Florida. Tides ran 8 to 10 feet above normal. Many power poles and lines were downed. Several roads were washed out.

2014: From the NWS Office in Buffalo, New York, "the epic November 17-19th 2014 lake effect event will be remembered as one of the most significant winter events in Buffalo's snowy history. Over 5 feet of snow fell over areas just east of Buffalo, with mere inches a few miles away to the north. There were 13 fatalities with this storm, hundreds of major roof collapses and structural failures, 1000s of stranded motorists, and scattered food and gas shortages due to impassable roads. Numerous trees also gave way due to the weight of the snow, causing isolated power outages. While this storm was impressive on its own, a second lake effect event on Nov-19-20 dropped another 1-4 foot of snow over nearly the same area and compounded rescue and recovery efforts. Storm totals from the two storms peaked at almost 7 feet, with many areas buried under 3-4 feet of dense snowpack by the end of the event."

2015: Season's first snow is Chicago's largest November snowfall in 120 years starting on November 20 and ending on the 21st. The season's first snowfall dropped as much as 17 inches across Chicago's northern suburbs, and the total of 11.2 inches at O'Hare International Airport made it the largest November snowfall in 120 years.

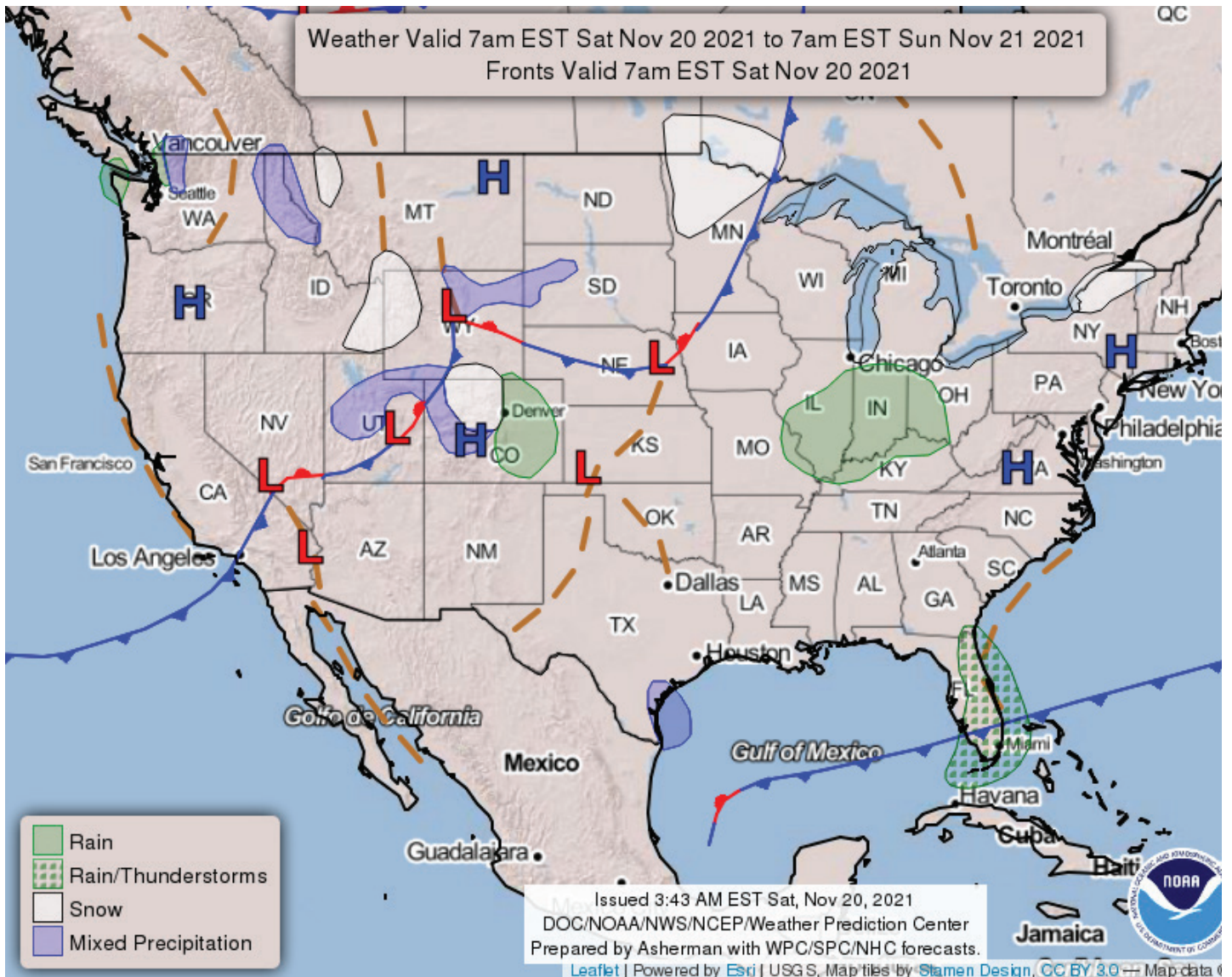
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Yesterday's Groton Weather Today's Info

High Temp: 45.3 °F at 3:00 PM
Low Temp: 25.4 °F at Midnight
Wind: 25 mph at 4:30 AM
Precip: 0.00

Record High: 69° in 1962
Record Low: -12° in 1985
Average High: 40°F
Average Low: 17°F
Average Precip in Nov.: 0.53
Precip to date in Nov.: 0.16
Average Precip to date: 21.00
Precip Year to Date: 19.88
Sunset Tonight: 4:59:10 PM
Sunrise Tomorrow: 7:38:23 AM



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REMEMBER ME!

"But I'm not that important to God. I have not accomplished anything with my life, and I'm too old now to do anything about it. I can't imagine that I will make any difference in God's scheme of things," he said. "How could any God love someone as worthless as me? I'm hopeless!"

It seems as though the writer of Psalm 106 felt the same way. "Remember me, O Lord, when You show favor to Your people, come to my aid when You save them." He felt alone, abandoned, forsaken - perhaps even worthless. He could not imagine God including him in His plan of redemption. "I'm excluded!" he cried. "No hope."

Another man made a similar statement. This one was a thief hanging on a cross dying for his crimes. How interesting it is to note that he was hanging next to some One who had never committed any crimes but was dying for the crimes he - the thief - had committed. He had no time to turn over a new leaf and lead a better life. He could not go to the people he had wronged and ask for forgiveness or attend a religious ceremony for cleansing. He could not perform any good works - his hands were nailed to a cross. All he could do was to call on the name of the Lord and ask Jesus to "Remember me!" And, we too, must remember that no one is beyond the grace of God.

Although he was a thief condemned to die for his crimes, our Lord loved him just as much as He loves us. "Today," Jesus assured him, "you will be with Me in paradise."

God has no favorites. His love includes everyone.

Prayer: Thank You, Father, for Your love that includes all of us no matter who we are or what we have done! Thank you that it is never too late because You are so loving. In Jesus' Name, Amen.

Scripture For Today: Remember me, O Lord, when You show favor to Your people, come to my aid when You save them. Psalm 106:4

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2021 Community Events

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

New Standing Rock ferrets should help control prairie dogs

By TRAVIS SVIHOVEC The Bismarck Tribune

BISMARCK, N.D. (AP) — The work of two wildlife management agencies has resulted in the release of 28 endangered black-footed ferrets on the South Dakota side of the Standing Rock Sioux Reservation, which straddles the Dakotas.

The push behind the effort by the Standing Rock Sioux Tribe Game and Fish Department and the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service is twofold: maintain control of black-tailed prairie dogs in an area of the reservation used primarily for grazing, and save from extinction the black-footed ferret, which is considered the most endangered mammal in the U.S.

They are yellowish-buff in color and weigh 1 ½ to 2 pounds. The forehead, muzzle and throat are white and the feet are black. They have a black mask around the eyes, which is well-defined in young ferrets.

The ferrets were released Oct. 20 in prairie dog towns between McIntosh and Bullhead, said Michael Gutzmer, ecologist with New Century Environmental, the Nebraska company that provides biological services to the tribe. The 16 males and 12 females had left the National Black-footed Ferret Conservation Center in Colorado that morning, The Bismarck Tribune reported.

Prairie dogs make up 90% of the black-footed ferrets' diet. The ferrets live in prairie dog burrows, and each eats a prairie dog about every three days, said Seth Gutzmer, biologist on the Standing Rock project and Michael Gutzmer's son. A loss of habitat, declines in prey, and diseases such as plague have reduced black-footed ferret numbers, according to Fish and Wildlife. About 2% of their original habitat -- some 100 million acres -- remains. The ferrets were considered extinct in the wild in 1987, but reintroduction efforts throughout North America brought them back.

The roots of the Standing Rock effort date to 2012, when a ferret was found on the reservation south of the Grand River near Mobridge. In a month's time the company and tribal officials came across three.

"That got a lot of people's attention," said Michael Gutzmer, who holds a doctorate in environmental sciences and wetland ecology.

Prairie dog towns are "the ideal place" for ferrets, he said. The recent effort placed ferrets at five areas of three prairie dog towns. They are spaced to allow one ferret an area of about 50 acres. Each is implanted with an identifying chip.

"If one is captured or run over we can document that it came from this release," Gutzmer said.

There are small pockets of ferrets on the reservation, according to Standing Rock Game and Fish Director Jeff Kelly. His crew and Fish and Wildlife mapped them all and found a suitable area for introduction.

"We're not trying to save the prairie dogs," Kelly said. "We're adding another tool to control them."

Known ferret populations exist only as a result of reintroduction efforts, and pockets on Standing Rock may have dispersed from introductions on the Cheyenne River Reservation south of Standing Rock, Michael Gutzmer said. The populations are small, fragmented and intensively managed, and only a few produce wild-born adults, according to New Century.

Ferrets mate in March and April and on average birth three or four kits in May or June. It could be three to five years before there is a noticeable increase in the Standing Rock population. Based on incidental sightings and road kills, Michael Gutzmer estimates the newly released ferrets represent about one-third to one-half of the Standing Rock population.

The Fish and Wildlife Service and tribal Game and Fish will conduct follow-up monitoring using cameras over bait, conducting nighttime surveys, and possibly luring the ferrets into camera range using calls that imitate the sound of a distressed prairie dog. Ferrets are reclusive, solitary and usually nocturnal. They don't truly hibernate in winter but will go into an extended deep sleep and venture out when they need food, Gutzmer said.

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SD Lottery

By The Associated Press undefined

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

Mega Millions

05-23-52-53-59, Mega Ball: 18, Megaplier: 5

(five, twenty-three, fifty-two, fifty-three, fifty-nine; Mega Ball: eighteen; Megaplier: five)

Estimated jackpot: \$74 million

Powerball

Estimated jackpot: \$205 million

Friday's Scores

The Associated Press undefined

PREP VOLLEYBALL=

SDHSAA State Tournament=

Consolation Semifinal=

Class A=

Elkton-Lake Benton def. Hamlin, 22-25, 21-25, 27-25, 26-24, 18-16

Hill City def. Parkston, 25-14, 15-25, 25-14, 25-12

Class AA=

Huron def. Pierre, 25-19, 14-25, 25-23, 25-21

Sioux Falls Lincoln def. Harrisburg, 25-20, 21-25, 26-28, 25-23, 16-14

Class B=

Aberdeen Christian def. Arlington, 28-26, 25-22, 26-24

Chester def. Burke, 25-18, 25-14, 25-15

Semifinal=

Class A=

Garretson def. Dakota Valley, 21-25, 25-19, 19-25, 25-17, 15-12

Sioux Falls Christian def. Wagner, 25-17, 25-5, 25-17

Class AA=

Sioux Falls O'Gorman def. Sioux Falls Roosevelt, 26-24, 24-26, 22-25, 25-13, 15-12

Sioux Falls Washington def. Brandon Valley, 25-19, 25-18, 25-21

Class B=

Colman-Egan def. Platte-Geddes, 27-29, 25-23, 25-22, 25-19

Warner def. Faulkton, 13-25, 25-14, 25-15, 25-10

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

Fuller scores 20 to lead South Dakota past Southern 71-68

VERMILLION, S.D. (AP) — Xavier Fuller had 20 points as South Dakota edged past Southern 71-68 on Friday night.

Fuller hit 9 of 11 from the free throw line.

Erik Oliver had 11 points for South Dakota (2-1). Tasos Kamateros added 10 points. Mason Archambault had seven rebounds.

Kruz Perrott-Hunt, who led the Coyotes in scoring heading into the matchup with 12.0 points per game, shot only 17% in the game (1 of 6).

Jayden Saddler had 19 points for the Jaguars (1-3). P.J. Byrd added 13 points. Brion Whitley had 10 points.

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

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SD Democratic Party pays fine for finance violations

By STEPHEN GROVES Associated Press

SIOUX FALLS, S.D. (AP) — The South Dakota Democratic Party said Friday it has paid a \$40,000 penalty and rid its accounts of \$2,500 in contributions for campaign finance violations during the 2016 presidential election.

The party said the payment would settle the Federal Election Commission's probe into bookkeeping related to the Hillary Victory Fund, a joint fundraising committee for former presidential candidate Hillary Clinton.

A federal audit showed the party didn't disclose \$2.5 million in disbursements that were quickly transferred to the Democratic National Committee. The party later amended its reports after the general election. It also received over \$67,000 in contributions from unregistered organizations.

The party has faced multiple financial issues in recent years, but its chairman Randy Seiler said the fines settled all violations with federal election regulators. The party has overhauled its leadership since 2019.

"With this agreement finalized and the work we have done to improve the financial position of the Party, we are optimistic about the financial outlook of the SDDP heading into 2022," he said.

The party reported having \$25,000 in its most recent campaign finance report. Democrats have faced shrinking registration numbers and seen their party's representatives in the Legislature dwindle to their lowest number in over 60 years.

Biden mulls reversing Trump rules on western grouse species

By MATTHEW BROWN Associated Press

BILLINGS, Mont. (AP) — The Biden administration on Friday said it will consider new measures to protect greater sage grouse, a bird species once found across much of the U.S. West that has suffered drastic declines in recent decades due to oil and gas drilling, grazing, wildfires and other pressures.

The announcement of a range-wide evaluation of habitat plans for greater sage grouse came after the Trump administration tried to scale back conservation efforts adopted when Biden was vice president in 2015.

A federal court blocked Trump's changes. But Biden administration officials said the attempt set back conservation efforts — even as the chicken-sized bird's habitat was further ravaged by wildfires, invasive plants and continued development.

Disagreement over the region's sage grouse is longstanding and often bitter, and any new restrictions the administration adopts against energy or agriculture is sure to further inflame tensions. Republican-run states and industries that profit off public lands have clashed with wildlife advocates over how much space the birds need to survive.

Many environmentalists insisted that the 2015 conservation plans didn't go far enough because of loopholes that allowed grazing and drilling on land that sage grouse need. Opponents said they hobbled economic progress.

Biologists say wide buffers from drilling and other activities are needed to protect sage grouse breeding areas where birds engage in elaborate annual mating rituals.

Bureau of Land Management Deputy Director Nada Culver said "everything's on the table" as the agency launches its evaluation of sage grouse habitat, with no set deadlines for action.

"From changes to the buffers, to how we manage energy development, to how we manage every other activity....we are evaluating it and we are looking for input on what are the most important things to look at," Culver said.

Officials also will look at how climate change is adding to pressures on sage grouse. Culver pointed to data showing wildfires burned almost 10,700 square miles (28,000 square kilometers) of the bird's habitat

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since 2016. The vast majority of the fires were on federal lands.

Greater sage grouse once numbered in the millions across all or portions of 11 Western states. Populations have dropped 65% since 1986, government scientists recently concluded.

In 2010, wildlife officials said drastic habitat losses meant protections for sage grouse had become warranted for under the Endangered Species Act. However, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service did not take any action at the time, saying other species took priority.

In 2015, the wildlife service determined protections were no longer needed after other federal and states officials adopted sweeping land management plans meant to halt or reverse the species' decline.

The plans were billed as a compromise, but some components unraveled after Trump took office in 2017 and states sought changes to the documents that critics said would hurt grouse.

The quirky birds with long tail feathers are known for elaborate courtship displays in which males puff up air sacs in their chests to make an odd popping sound.

Montana Democratic Sen. Jon Tester said he believed land bureau director Tracy Stone-Manning — a former aide to the lawmaker — would pursue a collaborative, balanced approach that will keep sage grouse from becoming an endangered species.

But Western Republicans — including Montana's Gov. Greg Gianforte and Sen. Steve Daines and Wyoming's Gov. Mark Gordon and Sen. Cynthia Lummis — criticized the Biden administration action. They said states should be given deference to manage wildlife and federal lands kept open for energy exploration and grazing.

"Wyoming knows how to manage the greater sage grouse, and I'm very concerned that greater federal control will do nothing for the birds, but be devastating for ranchers and energy producers," said Lummis.

Gordon noted that Wyoming has more sage grouse than any other state and said "no changes are necessary."

Daines said state and local conservation efforts needs to be protected from "federal overreach," while Brooke Stroyke, a spokesperson for Gianforte, said Montana already has a plan that balances conservation and rural economies.

In May, federal officials in response to a court order said that they would consider bans on new mining to help the birds.

A ban proposed under former President Barack Obama was dropped by the Trump administration. The affected lands totaled 10 million acres (4 million hectares) in Idaho, Nevada, Montana, Oregon, Utah and Wyoming.

The land bureau has resumed that process. It will consider the original proposal and additional options, spokesperson Alyse Sharpe said.

The order to take a new look at mining came in a lawsuit from environmentalists. The judge faulted the Trump administration for ignoring prior science on the issue.

Erik Molvar with plaintiff Western Watersheds Project said falling back on the Obama-era plans would not work, because they allowed too much disturbance of sage brush habitat, he said.

"The Obama administration did their best to please all the different ends of the political spectrum. But in the end they didn't please anybody and they didn't give the sage grouse the habitat they needed," Molvar said.

Kathleen Sgamma with the Western Energy Alliance, a group representing oil and gas companies, said Friday's move by the administration came as no surprise.

"Sage grouse has been a political football for decades," she said. "The back and forth continues."

Follow Matthew Brown on Twitter: @MatthewBrownAP

South Dakota Gov. Kristi Noem names fifth chief of staff

By STEPHEN GROVES Associated Press

SIOUX FALLS, S.D. (AP) — South Dakota Gov. Kristi Noem's chief of staff is leaving, the fourth person

to exit the position in three years, the governor's office said Friday.

Noem's chief of staff Aaron Scheibe will move back to a role as an outside consultant advising on federal funds for coronavirus relief, according to an email obtained by The Associated Press. He worked as the Republican governor's chief of staff for just under seven months.

"The ARPA funds are going to be a major discussion point during the legislative session, and the Governor wants as much expertise as possible supporting each of you," Noem's interim chief of staff, Mark Miller, wrote in the email to top state officials.

Noem's spokesman Ian Fury confirmed the email, but did not comment further.

Miller previously worked as Noem's general counsel, specializing in legislation and litigation to restrict abortions. He is the fifth person to take on the role of chief of staff. Noem, who has positioned herself for a White House bid in 2024, has seen regular turnover of top staff since she became governor in 2019.

Her office previously described each of those departures as amicable.

Noem's longest-serving chief of staff, Tony Venhuizen, left the role in April after working in her office for just over a year. Another top aide, Joshua Shields, held the role for three months, while her first chief of staff, Herb Jones, worked in the office for nine months.

Last month, her head of finance, Liza Clark, also announced she would leave the governor's office. She had played a central role in administering an unprecedented influx of federal funding during the pandemic. Jeff Partridge, a former state lawmaker and financial advisor in Rapid City, will take over Liza's role on an interim basis.

Ex-Colorado House speaker appointed regional EPA head

DENVER (AP) — President Joe Biden has appointed former Colorado House Speaker KC Becker as regional director of the Environmental Protection Agency.

The Colorado Sun reports that Becker's appointment was announced Thursday by the White House.

Becker, an environmental attorney, served four terms in the Colorado Legislature and was House speaker for two terms, from 2019 to January 2021. She was a leading proponent of a 2019 bill, now law, that overhauled Colorado's oil and gas regulations to promote environmental and public safety concerns.

Becker also practiced administrative and natural resources law for the U.S. Interior Department.

As administrator of the EPA's Region 8, Becker will oversee the agency's work in Colorado, Montana, North Dakota, South Dakota, Utah, Wyoming and 28 Tribal Nations. She will be based in Denver.

"The aggressive and critical agenda that President Biden and (EPA) Administrator (Michael) Regan have announced to address climate change, repair aging water infrastructure, and drive down methane emissions requires an 'all hands on deck' approach," Becker said in the statement. "I am ready to use my experience to help states, Tribal governments, businesses, and communities in Region 8 implement these important pieces of the Biden agenda."

Charges filed in Sioux Falls crash that killed 2, injured 4

SIoux FALLS, S.D. (AP) — Criminal charges have been filed in a high-speed crash that killed two young men in Sioux Falls more than six months ago.

Tayten Stebbins, 23, was booked into the Minnehaha County Jail Thursday evening on a long list of charges, including first-degree manslaughter and vehicular homicide.

Investigators said Stebbins was going 115 mph on Arrowhead Parkway on the city's east side May 8 when he ran a red light at an intersection and crashed into a car, killing 17-year-old Javier Velasquez, of Brandon, and a passenger, 20-year-old Pascal Niyonkuru, of Sioux Falls. Two other passengers were injured, as was Stebbins and his passenger.

Velasquez and Niyonkuru, who worked together at Buffalo Wild Wings, were pronounced dead at the scene.

According to court documents, witnesses told police they saw Stebbins at Eastway Bowling drinking

alcohol before the crash.

Police subpoenaed Stebbins' medical records from Sanford Hospital that showed he had a blood alcohol percentage of 0.22 about an hour after the crash, or nearly three times above the legal limit to drive, prosecutors said.

His urine sample tested positive for drugs, including cocaine and marijuana, according to court documents. Stebbins is also charged with vehicular battery for injuring the three others involved in the crash.

Heavy rains in southern Indian state kill 17, dozens missing

By OMER FAROOQ Associated Press

HYDERABAD, India (AP) — At least 17 people have died and dozens are reported missing in the southern Indian state of Andhra Pradesh after days of heavy rains, authorities said Saturday.

The state has been hit by intense torrents since Thursday, sparking massive floods in at least five districts.

The death toll rose to 17 late Friday night after three people were killed when a building collapsed, police said. Ten people trapped under the debris were rescued but two are still missing.

Earlier on Friday, at least a dozen people died as heavy floods washed away the bus they were on. Search and rescue efforts for missing passengers continued on Saturday.

Deaths from various districts have been reported over the past few days, with officials warning that the numbers could rise as rescue operations carry on. Teams of the National Disaster Relief Force have been deployed to worst-hit and vulnerable districts, and local authorities have rescued and evacuated hundreds of families to shelter homes.

In Kadapa district, one of the worst-hit, incessant rains and floods forced officials to close down the local airport until Thursday. Officials said breaches in dams and tanks have caused further flooding, leaving hundreds of villages marooned and many residents stuck in their homes.

Rains in southern India at this time are not unusual, although the country has seen a prolonged monsoon this year with experts warning that climate change has exacerbated the problem by making downpours more intense and frequent.

Last week, neighboring Tamil Nadu state was struck by floods while at least 28 people in southern Kerala state died as heavy rains triggered landslides last month.

Tennis players take on Communist Party: Where is Peng Shuai?

By STEPHEN WADE AP Sports Writer

Some of the world's most famous tennis players, distraught by the disappearance of colleague Peng Shuai, are challenging China's Communist Party to get answers.

So far it's a standoff with little visible impact as tennis players like Naomi Osaka, Serena Williams and Novak Djokovic — joined by tennis governing bodies, human rights groups, retired players, and several athletes' lobbies — try to turn their profiles into power.

Peng disappeared after making allegations of sexual assault over two weeks ago against former vice premier Zhang Gaoli, who was a member of the all-powerful Politburo Standing Committee and a lieutenant of General Secretary Xi Jinping.

Athletes may sense a pressure point.

China is just 2 1/2 months from hosting the Beijing Winter Olympics, which is facing a diplomatic boycott over allegations of crimes against humanity involving at least 1 million Uyghur Muslims and other ethnic minorities. NBA player Enes Kanter has been the most outspoken in defense of the Uyghurs, calling Xi a "brutal dictator."

Peng's case is unique. She is a star athlete and has a platform and credibility that few other women in China share. The effort to silence Peng reflects the Communist Party's determination to squelch criticism of its leaders and to prevent any organized public response.

Athletes are especially sensitive politically because they are well-known and admired. The ruling party publicizes their victories, especially those of a three-time Olympian such as Peng, as evidence it is making

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China strong again.

China's Foreign Ministry has repeatedly disavowed any knowledge of the case. Ministry spokesperson Zhao Lijian told media on Friday the issue is "not a diplomatic question and I'm not aware of the situation."

Peng wrote a lengthy social media post on Nov. 2 in which she said she was forced to have sex three years ago with Zhang. The post was quickly deleted from Peng's verified account on Weibo, a leading Chinese social media platform. But screenshots of the explosive accusations were shared on the internet.

Athletes have been weighing in ever since.

"Censorship is never OK at any cost," Osaka wrote on social media, adding the hashtag #WhereIsPengShuai.

Williams added: "This must be investigated, and we must not stay silent."

"This is horrifying. I mean, a person is missing," Djokovic said at the ATP Finals in Turin, Italy. "The whole community, tennis community needs to back her up and her family, make sure that she's safe and sound because if you would have tournaments on Chinese soil without resolving this situation, it would be a little bit strange."

Players have been emboldened by the unequivocal support of the Women's Tennis Association and its chairman and CEO Steve Simon, who has threatened to pull the WTA's events out of China. That means almost a dozen next year, including the WTA final.

"There's too many times in our world today when you get into issues like this that we let business, politics, money dictate what's right and what's wrong," Simon said in an interview on CNN.

"And we're definitely willing to pull our business and deal with all the complications that come with it because ... this is bigger than the business."

The Professional Tennis Players Association has called for player solidarity to defend Peng, who is known as a fearless competitor.

"We must unite and be willing to take action unless corroborated evidence is provided to the world about Peng Shuai's well-being," the association said.

U.S. Deputy Secretary of State Wendy Sherman tweeted: "We are deeply concerned by reports that tennis player Peng Shuai appears to be missing, and we join the calls for the PRC to provide independent, verifiable proof of her whereabouts. Women everywhere deserve to have reports of sexual assault taken seriously and investigated."

Liz Throssell, a spokeswoman for the U.N. human rights office in Geneva, said Friday it was calling for "an investigation with full transparency into her allegation of sexual assault."

Global Athlete, an advocacy group, has asked the Switzerland-based International Olympic Committee to suspend the Chinese Olympic Committee until Peng's safety is guaranteed.

"The IOC must use its substantial leverage to ensure that the international community is provided proof of Peng's whereabouts, that Peng is immediately given safe passage out of China, and that a full and transparent investigation is conducted into her allegations of sexual assault," Global Athlete head Rob Koehler said in a statement.

Despite Peng being a former Olympian, the IOC has remained quiet. A sports business, it derives 91% of its income from selling broadcast rights and sponsorships. But it prefers to cast itself as a non-government organization whose role it to defend high-minded ideas like "promoting a peaceful society concerned with the preservation of human dignity," which appears in its Olympic Charter.

Emma Terho, the newly elected head of an IOC's Athletes' Commission that is supposed to represent the interests of Olympic athletes, has not commented. The IOC always says athletes are its first priority, but there is growing pressure from some athletes to get a larger slice of the IOC's billion-dollar pie.

"Experience shows that quiet diplomacy offers the best opportunity to find a solution for questions of such nature," the IOC said in a statement. "This explains why the IOC will not comment any further at this stage."

It also said it has received assurances that Peng is "safe."

"It's astonishing that the IOC would accept the government's assurances, particularly as the expense of

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a female Olympian making grave allegations," Human Rights Watch said.

The World Olympians Association declined to issue a statement. It claims to represent 100,000 living Olympians. It was founded by Juan Antonio Samaranch Jr., who heads the IOC preparations for the Beijing Olympics which begin Feb. 4. IOC President Thomas Bach is the honorary president.

"The IOC has more leverage than any other organization with the pending Winter Olympic Games," Koehler of Global Athletes wrote to AP. "They need to use that now. Athletes going to these Games are watching how the IOC will protect athletes."

AP reporter Joe McDonald in Beijing contributed to this report.

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

More AP Winter Olympics: <https://apnews.com/hub/winter-olympics> and https://twitter.com/AP_Sports

'Orgy of violence': Dutch police open fire on rioters

By MIKE CORDER Associated Press

THE HAGUE, Netherlands (AP) — Police opened fire on protesters and seven people were injured in rioting that erupted in downtown Rotterdam around a demonstration against COVID-19 restrictions. The Dutch city's mayor called it "an orgy of violence."

Mayor Ahmed Aboutaleb told reporters in the early hours of Saturday morning that "on a number of occasions the police felt it necessary to draw their weapons to defend themselves" as rioters ran rampage through the port city's central shopping district, setting fires and throwing rocks and fireworks at officers.

"They shot at protesters, people were injured," Aboutaleb said. He did not have details on the injuries. Police also fired warning shots.

A number of police officers also were injured in the violence and officers arrested dozens of people and expect to arrest more after studying video footage from security cameras, Aboutaleb said.

Photos from the scene showed at least one police car in flames and another with a bicycle slammed through its windshield.

Riot police and a water cannon restored calm after midnight.

It was one of the worst outbreaks of violence in the Netherlands since coronavirus restrictions were first imposed last year. In January, rioters also attacked police and set fires on the streets of Rotterdam after a curfew came into force.

Justice Minister Ferd Grapperhaus condemned the events.

"The riots and extreme violence against police officers, riot police and firefighters last night in Rotterdam are disgusting to see," he said in a statement.

"Protesting is a great right in our society, but what we saw last night is simply criminal behavior. It has nothing to do with demonstrating," he added.

Police units from around the country raced to Rotterdam to help bring Friday night's situation under control. Local media reported that gangs of soccer hooligans were involved in the rioting.

Video from social media shown on Dutch broadcaster NOS appeared to show one person being shot in Rotterdam, but there was no immediate word on what happened.

Police said in a tweet that it was "still unclear how and by whom" that person was apparently shot.

An independent investigation into the shootings by police was opened, as is the case whenever Dutch police use their weapons.

The government has said it wants to introduce a law that would allow businesses to restrict the country's coronavirus pass system to only people who are fully vaccinated or have recovered from COVID-19 — that would exclude people who test negative.

The country has seen record numbers of infections in recent days and a new partial lockdown came into force a week ago.

Local political party Leefbaar Rotterdam condemned the violence in a tweet.

"The center of our beautiful city has this evening transformed into a war zone," it said. "Rotterdam is a city where you can disagree with things that happen but violence is never, never, the solution."

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

Thailand's festival honoring rivers also pollutes them

By TASSANEE VEJPONGSA Associated Press

BANGKOK (AP) — Thais flocked to rivers and lakes on Friday evening to release small floats adorned with flowers and candles in an annual festival honoring the goddess of water, with thousands of the tiny boats ending up clogging and polluting the country's waterways.

Within hours, workers began trawling the rivers to fish out the offerings, as paying tribute to the divinity is increasingly proving to be ecologically hazardous.

The Loy Krathong festival allows believers to symbolically float their misfortunes away on "krathongs" and start another year of life with a clean slate. The festival is celebrated on the night of the full moon of the 12th lunar month, which traditionally marks the end of the rainy season.

Thon Thamrongnawasawat, a leading Thai marine biologist, said getting people to stop using harmful materials such as polystyrene foam — Styrofoam — for their floats remains the priority because they cause the most damage to the water and aquatic life. The number of endangered sea creatures found dead ashore, which he believes stems from the problem of ocean trash in Thailand, doubled from 2017 to 2020.

Activists have noted a change in people's behavior over decades, pointing to rising awareness of the damage krathongs cause. The total number of krathongs collected in Bangkok has fallen from over 900,000 in 2012 to just over 490,000 last year, and there has been an even sharper reduction in the number of floats made of Styrofoam, from 131,000 to under 18,000 over the same period.

Even so, some conservationists advocate a more radical solution.

"We need to revolutionize the practice, allowing the ecosystem of the waterways to be restored," said Tara Buakamsri, Thailand country director for the environmental group Greenpeace. "We should not release any floats, because even if they are made from natural materials, the amount of them exceeds what rivers can naturally deal with."

"We depend on clean water for our livelihood and the aim of Loy Krathong should be to protect and rejuvenate our rivers without putting anything in them."

Sales of materials for krathongs have been slow this year due to the pandemic, said Nopparat Tangtonwong, a vendor at Pak Klong market, famous for selling flowers.

"COVID-19 causes the economy to be sluggish, so people prefer saving their money and floating online instead," she said.

At the same time, children are uninterested in banana-leaf floats, the main natural alternative to Styrofoam, she said. "They prefer fancy floats made of ice-cream cones and bread because they can feed the fish at the same time."

Such an approach is not helpful, said Wijarn Simachaya, president of Thailand Environment Institute. "If you float somewhere with no fish, those floats will cause pollution in the water. It is difficult to collect them, too, as the bread absorbs the water and sinks into the river."

"In addition, the sellers usually put chemical colors in those floats, which is harmful to the water," he said.

Banana leaves are the best krathong material because they do not decompose too quickly, and once collected, can be used for making fertilizer, Wijarn said.

"Doing a virtual Loy Krathong celebration is another good solution to avoid environmental damage, especially during the COVID-19 outbreak, but I don't think it can satisfy people's lifestyle, as they still want to enjoy the festival," he said.

Late Friday night after people floated their cares away, municipal workers come out to scoop up a sea of floats that drifted along canals and down the Chao Phraya River before they decomposed and con-

taminated the water.

Dozens of small boats traveled along the river, each carrying about half a dozen people with hand-held nets. The boats then took their catch to a moored mothership, where it was dumped into a large shredding machine, compacted and hauled away by garbage trucks for landfill in a waste dump.

"We hope that this year the numbers of krathongs made with Styrofoam will continue to decrease and will be less than last year. And we will finish our cleanup operation before 5 o'clock in the morning," said Chatree Wattanakhajorn, a top Bangkok official.

Vietnamese workers at Chinese factory in Serbia cry for help

By DUSAN STOJANOVIC Associated Press

ZRENJANIN, Serbia (AP) — They are shivering in barracks without heat, going hungry and have no money. They say their passports have been taken by their Chinese employer and that they are now stuck in a grim plainland in Serbia with no help from local authorities.

These are the Vietnamese workers who are helping build the first Chinese car tire factory in Europe. The Associated Press visited the construction site in northern Serbia where some 500 of the workers are living in harsh conditions as China's Shandong Linglong Tire Co. sets up the huge facility.

The project, which Serbian and Chinese officials tout as a display of the "strategic partnership" between the two countries, has already faced scrutiny from environmentalists over potentially dangerous pollution from tire production.

Now, it has caught the attention of human rights groups in Serbia, which have warned that the workers could be victims of human trafficking or even slavery.

"We are witnessing a breach of human rights because the Vietnamese (workers) are working in terrible conditions," Serbian activist Miso Zivanov of the Zrenjaninska Akcija (Zrenjanin Action) nongovernmental organization told The Associated Press at the drab one-story warehouses where the workers are living.

"Their passports and identification documents have been taken by their Chinese employers," he said. "They have been here since May, and they received only one salary. They are trying to get back to Vietnam but first need to get back their documents."

Workers sleep on bunk beds without mattresses in barracks with no heating or warm water. They told the AP that they have received no medical care even when they developed COVID-19-like symptoms, being told by their managers simply to remain in their rooms.

Nguyen Van Tri, one of the workers, said nothing has been fulfilled from the job contract he signed in Vietnam before embarking on the long journey to Serbia.

"Since we arrived here, nothing is good," he said. "Everything is different from documents we signed in Vietnam. Life is bad, food, medicine, water ... everything is bad."

Wearing sandals and shivering in the cold, he said about 100 of his fellow workers who live in the same barracks have gone on strike to protest their plight and that some of them have been fired because of that.

Linglong did not respond to an AP call seeking comment but denied to Serbian media that the company is responsible for the workers, blaming their situation on subcontractors and job agencies in Vietnam. It said the company did not employ the Vietnamese workers in the first place. It promised to return the documents it said were taken to stamp work and residency permits.

The company denied that the Vietnamese workers are living in poor conditions and said their monthly salaries were paid in accordance with the number of working hours.

Populist-run Serbia is a key spot for China's expansion and investment policies in Europe, and Chinese companies have kept a tight lid on their projects amid reports they run afoul of the Balkan nation's anti-pollution laws and labor regulations.

Chinese banks have granted billions of dollars in loans to Serbia to finance Chinese companies that build highways, railways and factories and employ their own construction workers. This is not the first time rights groups have pointed out possible breaches of workers' rights, including those of Chinese miners at a copper mine in eastern Serbia.

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After days of silence, Serbian officials spoke against "inhumane" conditions at the construction site but were quick to downplay Chinese responsibility for the workers' plight.

Serbian Prime Minister Ana Brnabic said she "would not rule out that the attack against the Linglong factory" is organized "by those against Chinese investments" in Serbia — referring to frequent criticism from the West that Chinese projects there are not transparent, are ecologically questionable and are designed by Beijing to spread its political influence in Europe.

"At the beginning, it was the environment. Now they forgot that and they focused on workers there. After tomorrow there will be something else," she said.

Serbian President Aleksandar Vucic said Friday that a Serbian labor inspector has been sent to the Linglong construction site but was blunt on the expected outcome of the eventual findings.

"What do they want? Do they want us to destroy a 900 million-dollar investment?" Vucic asked.

US defense chief vows to counter Iran in visit to Bahrain

By JON GAMBRELL Associated Press

DUBAI, United Arab Emirates (AP) — America's top defense official vowed Saturday to prevent Iran from obtaining a nuclear weapon and to counter its "dangerous use" of suicide drones in the wider Mideast, a pledge coming as negotiations remain stalled over Tehran's tattered atomic deal with world powers.

Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin's comments in Bahrain at the annual Manama Dialogue appeared aimed at reassuring America's Gulf Arab allies as the Biden administration tries to revive the nuclear deal, which limited Iran's enrichment of uranium in exchange for the lifting of economic sanctions.

His remarks also come after Gulf sheikhdoms saw the U.S.' chaotic withdrawal from Afghanistan, raising concerns about America's commitment to the region as defense officials say they want to pivot forces to counter perceived challenges from China and Russia.

"The United States remains committed to preventing Iran from gaining a nuclear weapon. And we remain committed to a diplomatic outcome of the nuclear issue," Austin told an event put on by the International Institute for Strategic Studies. "But if Iran isn't willing to engage seriously, then we will look at all of the options necessary to keep the United States secure."

Iran long has maintained its nuclear program is peaceful, though U.S. intelligence agencies and the International Atomic Energy Agency say Tehran had an organized weapons program until 2003. Iran's mission to the United Nations did not immediately respond to a request for comment Saturday.

Since then-President Donald Trump unilaterally withdrew America from the Iran nuclear deal in 2018, a series of escalating incidents have struck the wider Mideast. That includes drone and mine attacks targeting vessels at sea, as well as assaults blamed on Iran and its proxies in Iraq and Syria. The U.S. also killed a top Iranian general in Baghdad in early 2020, which saw Iran target American troops in Iraq with ballistic missiles.

Under Biden, U.S. military officials are looking at a wider reshuffling of forces from the Mideast to other areas, though it still maintains a large presence at bases across the region. Austin hinted at that in his remarks, saying: "Our potential punch includes what our friends can contribute and what we have prepositioned and what we can rapidly flow in."

"Our friends and foes both know that the United States can deploy overwhelming force at the time and place of our choosing," Austin said.

Austin's comments also touched on the ongoing war in Yemen, for which the Biden administration halted its offensive support shortly after he came into office.

Saudi Arabia has led a military campaign since 2015 against the Iranian-backed Houthi rebels who hold Yemen's capital, Sanaa. The Houthis have launched drone and ballistic missile attacks on the kingdom to retaliate for a punishing aerial bombing campaign that also has killed civilians.

But while the kingdom constantly refers to every drone and missile fired by the Houthis as successfully intercepted by its defenses, Austin put the rate instead at "nearly 90%." The U.S. also withdrew its THAAD air defenses and Patriot missile batteries from Prince Sultan Air Base several months ago.

"We'll work with them until it's 100%," he said.

The Manama Dialogue takes place each year in Bahrain, a small island kingdom off the coast of Saudi Arabia that's home to the U.S. Navy's 5th Fleet. Bahrain also has engaged in a yearslong campaign crushing dissent. Activists wrote to Austin before his trip, urging him to raise the detention of prisoners on the island and Bahrain's involvement in the Yemen war.

Follow Jon Gambrell on Twitter at www.twitter.com/jongambrellAP.

Europe's COVID crisis pits vaccinated against unvaccinated

By RAF CASERT and KAREL JANICEK Associated Press

BRUSSELS (AP) — This was supposed to be the Christmas in Europe where family and friends could once again embrace holiday festivities and one another. Instead, the continent is the global epicenter of the COVID-19 pandemic as cases soar to record levels in many countries.

With infections spiking again despite nearly two years of restrictions, the health crisis increasingly is pitting citizen against citizen — the vaccinated against the unvaccinated.

Governments desperate to shield overburdened healthcare systems are imposing rules that limit choices for the unvaccinated in the hope that doing so will drive up rates of vaccinations.

Austria on Friday went a step further, making vaccinations mandatory as of Feb. 1.

"For a long time, maybe too long, I and others thought that it must be possible to convince people in Austria, to convince them to get vaccinated voluntarily," Austrian Chancellor Alexander Schallenberg said.

He called the move "our only way to break out of this vicious cycle of viral waves and lockdown discussions for good."

While Austria so far stands alone in the European Union in making vaccinations mandatory, more and more governments are clamping down.

Starting Monday, Slovakia is banning people who haven't been vaccinated from all nonessential stores and shopping malls. They also will not be allowed to attend any public event or gathering and will be required to test twice a week just to go to work.

"A merry Christmas does not mean a Christmas without COVID-19," warned Prime Minister Eduard Heger. "For that to happen, Slovakia would need to have a completely different vaccination rate."

He called the measures "a lockdown for the unvaccinated."

Slovakia, where just 45.3% of the 5.5 million population is fully vaccinated, reported a record 8,342 new virus cases on Tuesday.

It is not only nations of central and eastern Europe that are suffering anew. Wealthy nations in the west also are being hit hard and imposing restrictions on their populations once again.

"It is really, absolutely, time to take action," German Chancellor Angela Merkel said on Thursday. With a vaccination rate of 67.5%, her nation is now considering mandatory vaccinations for many health professionals.

Greece, too, is targeting the unvaccinated. Prime Minister Kyriakos Mitsotakis announced a battery of new restrictions late Thursday for the unvaccinated, keeping them out of venues including bars, restaurants, cinemas, theaters, museums and gyms, even if they have tested negative.

"It is an immediate act of protection and, of course, an indirect urge to be vaccinated," Mitsotakis said.

The restrictions enrage Clare Daly, an Irish EU legislator who is a member of the European parliament's civil liberties and justice committee. She argues that nations are trampling individual rights.

"In a whole number of cases, member states are excluding people from their ability to go to work," Daly said, calling Austria's restrictions on the unvaccinated that preceded its decision Friday to impose a full lockdown "a frightening scenario."

Even in Ireland, where 75.9 % of the population are fully vaccinated, she feels a backlash against holdouts.

"There's almost a sort of hate speech being whipped up against the unvaccinated," she said.

The world has had a history of mandatory vaccines in many nations for diseases such as smallpox and

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polio. Yet despite a global COVID-19 death toll exceeding 5 million, despite overwhelming medical evidence that vaccines highly protect against death or serious illness from COVID-19 and slow the pandemic's spread, opposition to vaccinations remains stubbornly strong among parts of the population.

Some 10,000 people, chanting "freedom, freedom," gathered in Prague this week to protest Czech government restrictions imposed on the unvaccinated.

"No single individual freedom is absolute," countered Professor Paul De Grauwe of the London School of Economics. "The freedom not to be vaccinated needs to be limited to guarantee the freedom of others to enjoy good health," he wrote for the liberal think tank Liberales.

That principle is now turning friends away from each other and splitting families across European nations.

Birgitte Schoenmakers, a general practitioner and professor at Leuven University, sees it on an almost daily basis.

"It has turned into a battle between the people," she said.

She sees political conflicts whipped up by people willfully spreading conspiracy theories, but also intensely human stories. One of her patients has been locked out of the home of her parents because she dreads being vaccinated.

Schoenmakers said that while authorities had long balked at the idea of mandatory vaccinations, the highly infectious delta variant is changing minds.

"To make a U-turn on this is incredibly difficult," she said.

Spiking infections and measures to rein them in are combining to usher in a second straight grim holiday season in Europe.

Leuven has already canceled its Christmas market, while in nearby Brussels a 60-foot Christmas tree was placed in the center of the city's stunning Grand Place on Thursday but a decision on whether the Belgian capital's festive market can go ahead will depend on the development of the virus surge.

Paul Vierendeels, who donated the tree, hopes for a return to a semblance of a traditional Christmas.

"We are glad to see they are making the effort to put up the tree, decorate it. It is a start," he said. "After almost two difficult years, I think it is a good thing that some things, more normal in life, are taking place again."

As Biden's big bill advances, so does Pelosi's big legacy

By LISA MASCARO AP Congressional Correspondent

WASHINGTON (AP) — Deep into the grueling negotiations over President Joe Biden's big domestic policy package, when it seemed that bickering among Democrats would never stop, Speaker Nancy Pelosi let everyone in on a little secret.

"This," she confided quite publicly to reporters some time ago, "is the fun part."

The grind of legislating, treacherous for some, a sport for others, and often unsuccessful in the slow-moving Congress, is where Pelosi resides, exerting relentless drive to advance Biden's roughly \$2 trillion package Friday through the House, sending it now to the Senate.

The House vote, with just one Democrat opposed, boosts momentum for Biden's signature legislation after months of start-stop negotiations and provides a down payment on the party's campaign promise to deliver competency in government and put it to work for Americans.

And for Pelosi, who breezed into the House chamber early Friday to gavel the vote closed after a nearly all-night session, the outcome serves as a career milestone and further cements her legacy as not only the nation's first female speaker, but among its most powerful — one who is working to secure massive federal investments that Biden and others have compared to Franklin Roosevelt's New Deal or Lyndon Johnson's Great Society.

"Congratulations," Biden told her in a phone call she took in the Gold Room off the House floor as the final tally rolled in.

Friday's vote was never a sure thing. The final action in some ways snuck up on lawmakers after frenzied weeks of negotiations, several false starts and high-profile setbacks that delayed, and threatened to

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derail, the entire enterprise.

First, there was the difficult process of compiling the 2,135-page "Build Back Better Act," with its far-reaching proposals to expand government support to help families afford health care and child care and lower the price of prescription drugs, alongside new efforts to tackle climate change.

Then, facing a solid wall of Republican opposition, the Democrats had to decide if they could actually approve the bill on their own, engaging in multiple rounds of private meetings and public handwringing between centrist and progressive flanks.

Any step along the way could sideline a congressional leader, especially one without the political fortitude to push and pull lawmakers to fall in line. Her immediate predecessors, Paul Ryan and John Boehner, struggled to lead Republicans, and both retired and gave up the gavel.

Pelosi, who has represented San Francisco in Congress for more than 30 years, not only has the stomach for such gut-wrenching talks, she has turned the perils of legislating into political opportunities, showcasing the party's factions. "Diversity is our strength" is among her maxims.

And when she's heard and seen enough, she stiffens the spine and pushes ahead, relying on the other Pelosi maxim — "Unity is our power" — to reach resolution. Meeting privately with House leaders Monday evening, she signaled that it was time to move.

Pelosi told them there had been "a little too much drama for my taste," according a Democratic aide familiar with the private meeting who was granted anonymity to discuss it.

The House had already approved the related \$1 trillion infrastructure package, a roads-bridges-and-broadband measure favored by centrist lawmakers after poor election showings in Virginia and New Jersey served as a wake-up call to Democrats. Now, according to Pelosi's strategy, it was time to make good on the commitment for Biden's broader vision preferred by the progressives.

"It was a long road because, you know, the sheer amount of impact we're trying to have is enormous," Rep. Andy Kim, D-N.J., said Friday.

"It's always complicated, I mean, when you've got people representing every corner of this country, there's always going to be complexity, but that's the art of governing," Kim said.

Pelosi has been here before. A decade ago, she led House Democrats to passage of the Affordable Care Act, a year-long effort that consumed the Congress at the start of Barack Obama's first term and contributed to the party's electoral wipeout in the 2010 midterm election.

Pelosi lost the speaker's gavel after Republicans regained control of the House in 2011, and today's Republicans are expecting a repeat in 2022 as they heap criticisms on Biden's bill as big government overreach.

Republican Leader Kevin McCarthy, who is in line to become speaker if Democrats lose power next year, set the tone in an overnight speech full of vitriol and grievance against Biden, the Democrats and Pelosi in particular, as he chided her leadership and wished for her retirement.

If he sounded "angry," McCarthy said, it's because he was. His more than eight-hour speech set a new record, besting one set just a few years back by Pelosi. But his protest did not stop the vote.

Pelosi responded with one of the most politically biting strategies in her arsenal — she ignored him.

Early Friday morning, Pelosi paid almost no attention to McCarthy's record-setting rant and delivered a sunny speech in stark contrast to his dark mood.

"Under this dome, for centuries, members of Congress have stood exactly where we stand to pass legislation of extraordinary consequence in our nation's history and for our nation's future," Pelosi said.

The Capitol's setting reminds lawmakers, Pelosi said, that "we are part of history, that our words and actions will face the judgment of history and that we are part of the long and honorable heritage of our democracy."

Democrats cheered passage on the House floor, chanting "Nancy, Nancy, Nancy!" as sullen Republicans at one point belted out, "Hey, hey, goodbye," some mock-waving across the aisle.

One newcomer to Congress, Rep. Carolyn Bourdeaux, D-Ga., said the bill's programs for free prekindergarten for all 3- and 4-year-olds, alongside affordable health care options, are priorities policymakers have been trying to achieve for decades.

"We're addressing needs that have been around for a long, long time," Bourdeaux said after the vote.

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"People need to realize every other developed country in the world has a lot of these benefits, and it's time for us to have that, too."

She added, "We have really accomplished something amazing." ____

Associated Press writer Farnoush Amiri contributed to this report.

Tatum scores 37, Celtics beat Lakers in James' return

KEN POWTAK Associated Press

BOSTON (AP) — Jayson Tatum grew up idolizing Kobe Bryant, so he knew all about the Celtics-Lakers rivalry even before becoming part of it.

On Friday night, he put on an offensive show in front of Celtics Hall of Famers Bill Russell and Paul Pierce in the latest chapter.

"It's a surreal moment, obviously, Bill Russell and the impact he had on the Celtics and the NBA," Tatum said. "Having someone like Paul come to the game and someone I have a relationship with.

"I remember watching him play," Tatum said, breaking into a smile. "Now he's watching me play, that's crazy."

Tatum scored 37 points and the Celtics won 130-108 in LeBron James' return to the Lakers' lineup.

Marcus Smart had 22 points and Dennis Schroder 21 for Boston (8-8), which climbed back to .500. Tatum had 11 rebounds and Al Horford added 18 points.

Anthony Davis led Los Angeles with 31 points and James finished with 23 in 32 minutes. They each had six rebounds and two assists.

"I felt OK," James said. "Obviously being out 2 1/2 weeks, I felt kind of like a rookie again, just being away from the game. Excited. Felt good enough that I could trust my body."

James had missed eight games with an abdominal strain, and the Lakers went 3-5 while he was sidelined. They've lost their last four road games.

"It's never 65 games left (in the season)," James said. "We need to play better."

Davis agreed, noting the Lakers are deep enough to win even without James.

"We still have enough with our without to win basketball games," he said.

Tatum started 1 for 5 from the floor before getting his offense flowing, driving hard for a handful of baskets.

"We stress making quick decisions," Boston coach Ime Udoka said. "When he holds it, the crowds get to him. He was extremely aggressive."

The teams who have accounted for nearly half of the NBA's championships with 17 apiece renewed their rivalry in front of a raucous TD Garden crowd that made it seem like a playoff atmosphere from the opening tip.

Russell — introduced as a "true Celtics legend" when he was welcomed back by the PA announcer and shown on the Jumbotron midway into the opening quarter — was seated courtside wearing a hat with the initials "KB" encircled in a yellow heart on the front for Kobe Bryant.

Pierce, who went into the Naismith Memorial Basketball Hall of Fame this year, was also courtside.

The Celtics led by 11 points entering the final quarter and opened a 109-94 lead on Tatum's three-point play with 6:59 remaining. His 3-pointer from the left corner increased it to 116-99 with 5:02 to go.

The Lakers made nine of their initial 12 shots en route to a 38-30 lead after one quarter.

James' first basket came on a thundering dunk off a drive down the lane 2 1/2 minutes into the game.

Boston erased a 14-point deficit in the second quarter and took the lead before James' fast-break layup gave the Lakers a 61-60 halftime edge.

The Celtics were without two starters but rallied.

"It shows we're not perfect, but the fight is in us," Smart said.

The Celtics opened the second half with a 14-4 surge and led 93-82 entering the fourth.

TIP-INS

Lakers: Davis had been listed as probable with a right thigh injury. ... Asked before the game what the

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Lakers missed without James, coach Frank Vogel said: "Just quarterbacking it, and leading and running the team." ... It was their second of a five-game road trip.

Celtics: Udoka said F Jaylen Brown is "close" to returning and "really wanted to play" on Friday. The team's leading scorer at 26.5 points per game missed his seventh straight with a right hamstring injury. ... C Robert Williams III missed his second straight with a left knee injury. ... Patriots owner Robert Kraft and a few Pats players were also seated courtside.

LISTEN UP

Udoka said that his boss, Brad Stevens, the former Celtics coach before becoming the team's president after last season, explained what the first-year coach was about to experience running his first game against the Lakers.

"He said: 'Buckle up,'" Udoka said. "The city is clamoring for this matchup all the time."

FROM THE OTHER SIDE

Vogel, in his third season with LA, has already been involved in the rivalry. He didn't hesitate when talking about the matchup before the game.

"It's the best in all of sports in my opinion," he said.

Vogel was also an assistant with the Celtics from 2001-04.

UP NEXT

Lakers: At Detroit on Sunday.

Celtics: Host Oklahoma City on Saturday night.

More AP NBA: <https://apnews.com/hub/NBA> and https://twitter.com/AP_Sport

Wildfires torched up to a fifth of all giant sequoia trees

By BRIAN MELLEY Associated Press

LOS ANGELES (AP) — Lightning-sparked wildfires killed thousands of giant sequoias this year, leading to a staggering two-year death toll that accounts for up to nearly a fifth of Earth's largest trees, officials said Friday.

Fires in Sequoia National Park and surrounding Sequoia National Forest tore through more than a third of groves in California and torched an estimated 2,261 to 3,637 sequoias, which are the largest trees by volume.

Nearby wildfires last year killed an unprecedented 7,500 to 10,400 giant sequoias that are only native in about 70 groves scattered along the western side of the Sierra Nevada range. Losses now account for 13% to 19% of the 75,000 sequoias greater than 4 feet (1.2 meters) in diameter.

Blazes so intense to burn hot enough and high enough to kill so many giant sequoias — trees once considered nearly fire-proof — puts an exclamation point on climate change's impact. A warming planet that has created hotter droughts combined with a century of fire suppression that choked forests with thick undergrowth have fueled flames that have sounded the death knell for trees dating to ancient civilizations.

"The sobering reality is that we have seen another huge loss within a finite population of these iconic trees that are irreplaceable in many lifetimes," said Clay Jordan, superintendent of Sequoia and Kings Canyon National Parks. "As spectacular as these trees are we really can't take them for granted. To ensure that they're around for our kids and grandkids and great grandkids, some action is necessary."

California has seen its largest fires in the past five years. Last year set a record for most acreage burned and this year, so far, is running second.

Tree deaths this year might have been worse if heavy rain and snow Oct. 25 hadn't dampened the fire. Fires burned from August last year into January.

After last year's Castle and SQF Complex fires took officials by surprise — and drove some tree lovers to tears — extraordinary measures were taken to save the largest and oldest trees this year.

The General Sherman tree — the largest living thing on earth — and other ancients that are the backdrop for photos that rarely capture the grandeur and scale of the giant sequoias were wrapped in foil blankets.

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A fire-retardant gel, similar to absorbent used in baby's diapers, was dropped on canopies that can sit above 200 feet (60 meters) tall. Sprinklers watered trunks and flammable matter was raked away from trees.

The measures helped spare the Giant Forest, the premiere grove of massive trees in the park, but the measures couldn't be deployed everywhere.

The bulk of the Suwanee grove in the park burned in extreme fire in the Marble Fork of the Kaweah River drainage. The Starvation Complex of groves in Sequoia National Forest was largely destroyed.

The greatest amount of damage was done in Redwood Mountain Grove in Kings Canyon National Park. The inferno became so intense it created a fire cloud that whipped up 60 mph (97 kph) winds.

A fire ecologist accurately predicted the areas that would burn hottest, but nothing could be done in such erratic conditions to save trees in the second-largest grove, said Christy Brigham, chief of resource management and science for the parks.

"That's even more heartbreaking to me that we knew it and we couldn't take action to protect it," Brigham said.

Groves with the worst damage stand like timber graveyards with blackened trunks soaring high in the sky. Canopies have faded from vibrant green to a rusty shade. Many damaged trees are expected to perish in three to five years.

Save the Redwoods League, which lost the Waterfall tree — one of the world's largest — in 2020, suffered losses this year in its Red Hill Grove.

"We need to call this situation in the giant sequoia what it is: an emergency," said league President Sam Hodder. "Just a few years ago, it was considered unprecedented to lose a handful of giant sequoia to wildfire in a season, but now we're losing thousands."

In 2013, the park had done climate modeling that predicted extreme fires wouldn't jeopardize sequoias for another 50 years, Brigham said. But that was at the start of what became a punishing five-year drought that essentially broke the model.

Amid the drought in 2015, the park saw giant sequoias torched for the first time. Two fires in 2017 killed more giant sequoias. Just over 200 giant sequoias were killed in the fires that served as a warning for what was to come.

"Then the Castle Fire happened and it was like, 'Oh, my God,'" Brigham said. "We went from the warning sign to hair on fire. To lose 7,000 trees in one fire is crazy."

An accurate mortality count from last year is not available because crews were confirming how many trees died when lightning struck Sept. 9, igniting the Windy Fire in Sequoia National Forest and two fires that merged to become the SQF Complex in the park, Brigham said.

Not all the news in the park's report on the fires was bleak.

While flames burned into 27 groves and large numbers of trees were incinerated, a lot of low-intensity fire that sequoias need to thrive will clear out vegetation and the heat from flames will open cones so they can spread their seeds.

There was also less damage in many of the groves where the park has routinely used prescribed fire to clear out accumulated vegetation under cooler and more humid conditions. Those successes emphasized the need to expand that work and, where that's too risky, begin thinning forests, Jordan said.

However, areas where fire burned so hot that seeds were killed and trees can't regenerate may need additional help. For the first time, the park is considering planting seedlings to preserve the species.

"I'm not ready to give up on giant sequoias," Brigham said. "This is a call to action to better protect the remaining old growth and make our Sierra Nevada forests wildfire resilient, because the fire's coming."

If seedlings are planted, though, it will take hundreds of years to replace the trees that were lost.

Wildfires torched up to a fifth of all giant sequoia trees

By BRIAN MELLEY Associated Press

LOS ANGELES (AP) — Lightning-sparked wildfires killed thousands of giant sequoias this year, leading to a staggering two-year death toll that accounts for up to nearly a fifth of Earth's largest trees, officials

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The greatest amount of damage was done in Redwood Mountain Grove in Kings Canyon National Park. The inferno became so intense it created a fire cloud that whipped up 60 mph (97 kph) winds.

A fire ecologist accurately predicted the areas that would burn hottest, but nothing could be done in such erratic conditions to save trees in the second-largest grove, said Christy Brigham, chief of resource management and science for the parks.

"That's even more heartbreaking to me that we knew it and we couldn't take action to protect it," Brigham said.

Groves with the worst damage stand like timber graveyards with blackened trunks soaring high in the sky. Canopies have faded from vibrant green to a rusty shade. Many damaged trees are expected to perish in three to five years.

Save the Redwoods League, which lost the Waterfall tree — one of the world's largest — in 2020, suffered losses this year in its Red Hill Grove.

"We need to call this situation in the giant sequoia what it is: an emergency," said league President Sam Hodder. "Just a few years ago, it was considered unprecedented to lose a handful of giant sequoia to wildfire in a season, but now we're losing thousands."

In 2013, the park had done climate modeling that predicted extreme fires wouldn't jeopardize sequoias for another 50 years, Brigham said. But that was at the start of what became a punishing five-year drought that essentially broke the model.

Amid the drought in 2015, the park saw giant sequoias torched for the first time. Two fires in 2017 killed more giant sequoias. Just over 200 giant sequoias were killed in the fires that served as a warning for what was to come.

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"Then the Castle Fire happened and it was like, 'Oh, my God,'" Brigham said. "We went from the warning sign to hair on fire. To lose 7,000 trees in one fire is crazy."

An accurate mortality count from last year is not available because crews were confirming how many trees died when lightning struck Sept. 9, igniting the Windy Fire in Sequoia National Forest and two fires that merged to become the SQF Complex in the park, Brigham said.

Not all the news in the park's report on the fires was bleak.

While flames burned into 27 groves and large numbers of trees were incinerated, a lot of low-intensity fire that sequoias need to thrive will clear out vegetation and the heat from flames will open cones so they can spread their seeds.

There was also less damage in many of the groves where the park has routinely used prescribed fire to clear out accumulated vegetation under cooler and more humid conditions. Those successes emphasized the need to expand that work and, where that's too risky, begin thinning forests, Jordan said.

However, areas where fire burned so hot that seeds were killed and trees can't regenerate may need additional help. For the first time, the park is considering planting seedlings to preserve the species.

"I'm not ready to give up on giant sequoias," Brigham said. "This is a call to action to better protect the remaining old growth and make our Sierra Nevada forests wildfire resilient, because the fire's coming."

If seedlings are planted, though, it will take hundreds of years to replace the trees that were lost.

Rioting erupts in Rotterdam over coronavirus restrictions

By MIKE CORDER Associated Press

THE HAGUE, Netherlands (AP) — Police fired warning shots, injuring an unknown number of people, as riots broke out Friday night in downtown Rotterdam at a demonstration against plans by the government to restrict access for unvaccinated people to some venues.

Police said in a tweet that "there are injuries in connection with the shots" during the violent unrest. Riot police used a water cannon in an attempt to drive hundreds of rioters from a central street in the port city.

Video from social media shown on Dutch broadcaster NOS appeared to show a person being shot in Rotterdam, but there was no immediate word on what happened.

Police said in a tweet that it was "still unclear how and by whom" the person was apparently shot.

Late Friday night, police said downtown Rotterdam remained restive and there was still a heavy police presence on the streets.

Police said they arrested dozens of rioters and expected to detain more. They said about seven people were injured, including police officers. They did not give further details.

Photos in Dutch media showed at least one police car ablaze and another with a bicycle smashed through the windshield.

Local political party Leefbaar Rotterdam condemned the violence in a tweet.

"The center of our beautiful city has this evening transformed into a war zone," it said. "Rotterdam is a city where you can disagree with things that happen but violence is never, never, the solution."

Police said in a tweet that rioters started fires and threw fireworks during the rioting and authorities closed the city's main railway station.

Local media say gangs of soccer hooligans were involved in the rioting.

The government has said it wants to introduce a law that would allow businesses to restrict the country's coronavirus pass system to only people who are fully vaccinated or have recovered from COVID-19 — that would exclude people who test negative.

The country has seen record numbers of infections in recent days and a new partial lockdown came into force a week ago.

In January, rioting broke out in Rotterdam and other Dutch cities after the government announced a curfew in an attempt to rein in soaring coronavirus infections.

Earlier Friday, the government banned fireworks on Dec. 31 for the second straight year. The ban is intended "to prevent, as much as possible, extra strain on health care, law enforcement and first respond-

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ers," the government said Friday.

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

Sources: Brazil withheld deforestation data 'til COP26's end

By DÉBORA ÁLVARES Associated Press

BRASILIA, Brazil (AP) — Brazil's President Jair Bolsonaro and Environment Minister Joaquim Leite both knew the Amazon region's annual deforestation rate had surged before the U.N. climate talks in Glasgow, but kept results quiet to avoid hampering negotiations, according to three Cabinet ministers who spoke to The Associated Press on condition of anonymity.

Data from the National Institute for Space Research's Prodes monitoring system released Thursday showed the Amazon lost 13,235 square kilometers (5,110 square miles) of rainforest in the 12-month reference period from August 2020 to July 2021. That's up 22% from the prior 12-month period and the worst in 15 years.

The three ministers as well as a coordinator at the space institute that compiles the data, all of whom spoke with the AP on condition of anonymity due to concern about reprisals, said the annual deforestation report was available on the government's information system before talks in Glasgow began on Oct 31.

Six days before that, at a meeting in the presidential palace, Bolsonaro and several ministers discussed the 2020-2021 deforestation results and determined they wouldn't be released until after the climate conference, said the three ministers, two of whom were present.

Later that same day, the government launched a program to promote green development. Official speeches resembled a dress rehearsal for efforts to project responsible environmental stewardship at Glasgow after two years of historically elevated deforestation.

One of the two ministers who participated in the earlier meeting said the decision to withhold data was part of a strategy to recover environmental credibility abroad. This wasn't an intent to lie, the person said, but rather a means to highlight positive developments, particularly year-on-year declines seen in preliminary deforestation data for July and August from the so-called Deter monitoring system.

Bolsonaro highlighted that same data when speaking at the U.N. General assembly in September. The Deter system in the two months since, however, has shown significant year-on-year increases.

Deter data is released monthly and considered a leading indicator for complete calculations from the more accurate Prodes system, which is based on clearer images and released once yearly. Prodes generally tracks with the Deter data.

Following release of the Prodes data on Thursday, Leite told reporters that the data doesn't reflect the government's heightened engagement in recent months. He also denied having seen the report's data before going to the U.N. climate summit, where he led the Brazilian delegation.

Bolsonaro, who has long championed development of the Amazon including the mining of Indigenous territories, skipped Glasgow altogether after attending the Group of 20 meeting in Rome.

The press offices of the environment ministry and presidency didn't respond to AP emails asking when Leite and Bolsonaro were made aware of the 2020-2021 deforestation data, nor why its publication was delayed.

In Glasgow, Leite announced Brazil's commitment to zero illegal deforestation by 2028, up two years from the prior goal, and to reduce greenhouse gas emissions 50% by 2030 as compared to 2005 levels. U.S. climate envoy John Kerry welcomed the announcements.

"This adds crucial momentum to the global movement to combat the #ClimateCrisis," Kerry posted on Twitter. "Looking forward to working together!"

The latter goal has generated criticism that a recent change made to the nation's 2005 baseline means the supposed stepped-up commitment is roughly equal to a previous pledge.

Leite also met with dozens of negotiators from other nations during the summit, seeking financing to expand Brazil's environmental protection capabilities. He repeatedly said developed countries need to

contribute significantly more funds to poorer nations to aid their effective transition to greener economies. The summit ran until Nov. 12.

Following release of the Prodes data on Thursday, the report's Oct. 27 date instantly drew the attention of environmental watchdogs who had accused the government of greenwashing during COP26.

"There should be sanctions. Brazil assumed a posture of lying during COP, trying to sell itself as a sustainable country, but deforestation is out of control," Cristiane Mazzetti, forest campaigner for Greenpeace Brazil, said by phone. "We had already sounded the alert before that leaders shouldn't buy the empty promises of a government that has acted proactively to weaken environmental protection."

The episode also underscores a lack of transparency and the dismantling of environmental governance, according to Izabella Teixeira, a former environment minister under the Workers' Party that opposes Bolsonaro.

"The environment minister went to a climate meeting to offer Brazil's new commitment that was immediately contradicted by the results of government policy," Teixeira said.

Bolsonaro spoke about deforestation during a live broadcast on Facebook on Friday evening, conceding that illegal deforestation occurs, but on a far smaller scale than reported by media.

"We combat that. Some say 'Ah, but you have to combat more.' Do you know the size of the Amazon? How can you take care of all that?" the president said. He also said the solution is "simple": other nations not buying illegally felled timber from Brazil.

Native American confirmed as head of National Park Service

By ANDREW SELSKY Associated Press

SALEM, Ore. (AP) — The U.S. Senate has unanimously approved the nomination of Charles "Chuck" Sams III as National Park Service director, which will make him the first Native American to lead the agency.

Some conservationists hailed Sams' confirmation Thursday night as a commitment to equitable partnership with tribes, the original stewards of the land.

"I am deeply honored," Sams told the Confederated Umatilla Journal on Friday. "I am also very deeply appreciative of the support, guidance and counsel of my tribal elders and friends throughout my professional career."

The National Park Service oversees more than 131,000 square miles (339,000 square kilometers) of parks, monuments, battlefields and other landmarks. It employs about 20,000 people in permanent, temporary and seasonal jobs, according to its website.

Sams is the agency's first Senate-confirmed parks director in nearly five years. It was led by acting heads for years under the Trump administration, and for the first 10 months of Biden's presidency. Jonathan Jarvis, who was confirmed as park service director in 2009, left the agency in January 2017.

During confirmation hearings, Sam noted his experience with nonprofit work that included facilitating land transfers and working with volunteers on conservation and invasive species management, according to Indian Country Today.

He also said he would work to ensure the Indigenous history of National Park Service lands is broadly reflected, in addition to incorporating Indigenous views and knowledge in decision-making. He said it is important to work with Native Americans on traditional ecological knowledge "based on 10,000-plus years of management of those spaces to ensure that they'll be here for future generations to enjoy."

U.S. Interior Secretary Deb Haaland, the first Native American Cabinet secretary, said in August, when President Joe Biden nominated Sams, that he brings diverse experience. The National Park Service is part of the Interior Department.

Sams is Cayuse and Walla Walla and lives on the Confederated Tribes of the Umatilla Indian Reservation in Oregon. There, he gained a reputation for being unflappable. He has worked in state and tribal governments and the nonprofit natural resource and conservation management fields for over 25 years.

"He is known for being steady at the helm and taking challenges in stride," said Bobbie Conner, director of the Tamastlikt Cultural Institute on the 270-square-mile (700-square-kilometer) reservation.

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Kat Brigham, chair of the board of trustees of the Confederated Tribes, recalled Sams fishing for salmon in the Columbia River as a young man, standing on a scaffold and using a net, according to tradition.

"I'm very proud, and I think it's very exciting that we have a tribal member who's first in history to be in charge of our National Park Service," Brigham said. "He knows how important our land is. He knows that we need to protect our land, not only for today, but for our children's children."

Oregon Sen. Ron Wyden, who had asked the Senate to pass the nomination by unanimous consent, described Sams as a "role model in the stewardship of American land and waters, wildlife and history."

Sams' confirmation means Congress and parkgoers will have a steady, experienced leader to rely on in the years ahead, the Democrat said.

Joel Dunn, president and CEO of the Maryland-based Chesapeake Conservancy, celebrated the news. His organization works to conserve natural and cultural resources at North America's largest estuary, Chesapeake Bay, where the National Park Service manages some sites.

"This has been a historic year for the U.S. Department of the Interior, with the confirmation of Secretary Deb Haaland as the first Native American Cabinet secretary of the United States, and now the confirmation of Chuck Sams as the first Native American to serve as director of the National Park Service," Dunn said. Haaland on Friday formally declared "squaw" a derogatory term and said she is taking steps to remove it from federal government use and to replace other derogatory place names.

Dunn pointed to the forced migration of Indigenous peoples that led to the creation of America's public lands, including national parks.

"As our country works to address those past tragedies, it is appropriate that the leadership of the National Park Service and the Department of the Interior reflect a new direction and a commitment to equitable partnership with the Indigenous peoples of the United States," Dunn said.

Sams is a member of the Northwest Power and Conservation Council, appointed by Oregon Gov. Kate Brown. Previously, he held several positions with the Confederated Tribes of the Umatilla Indian Reservation, including executive and deputy executive director. He has also led the Indian Country Conservancy, among other organizations.

He earned a bachelor's degree in business administration from Concordia University-Portland and a master of legal studies in Indigenous Peoples Law from the University of Oklahoma. Sams is a U.S. Navy veteran. He has also been an adjunct professor at Georgetown University and Whitman College.

Associated Press writer Matthew Daly in Washington contributed to this report.

Police: 3 students shot in Denver-area school parking lot

AURORA, Colo. (AP) — Three students were shot Friday during a fight in the parking lot of a high school in the Denver suburb of Aurora, the police chief said, only days after six teenagers from a nearby campus were shot and injured at a park.

Those injured in the lunch-hour shooting outside Hinkley High School are expected to survive, Chief Vanessa Williams said. There were no immediate arrests, and police were trying to determine if any of the injured were among "multiple shooters" in the parking lot, she said.

Friday's shooting followed another Monday in which six students from Aurora Central High School were the victims of bullets fired from at least one car driving by. Police were working to determine if the two shootings were related, Wilson said.

Police have not arrested anyone yet in Monday's shootings. The two schools are 3 miles (4.8 kilometers) apart.

Friday's gunfire erupted during a fight in the Hinkley High parking lot shortly before 12:30 p.m. A school resource officer fired a shot during the fracas and also applied a tourniquet to one of those wounded, Wilson said. No weapons were immediately recovered, she said.

Two of those shot were taken to a hospital, and the third managed to get to a hospital on their own, police said. Two are students at Hinkley and the third is from APS Avenues School, which serves students

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grades 7-12, Wilson said.

The victims in Monday's shooting, boys and girls ranging in age from 14 to 18, were all expected to survive. Wilson said Tuesday that two of them had "significant" injuries and faced long recoveries.

Numerous shell casings fired from different guns were found at the scene of Monday's shooting, and it is possible some rounds were fired by someone on foot, police said. Police have said they have located one of two cars involved in that shooting.

Wilson said police had ramped up their presence at Aurora schools after Monday's shooting. She also said that she was going to a community peace march inspired by that shooting when she heard about the gunfire at Hinkley High.

As she did on Monday, Wilson expressed frustration that too many guns are in the hands of too many students, and she pleaded with parents to help a police department under pressure to stem the wave of violence among young people.

"People know what happened here. This cannot continue. These kids have guns and they got them from somewhere," the chief said. "I need the parents' help on this."

Wilson said all Aurora public schools would be closed through the Thanksgiving week holiday.

KCNC-TV obtained cellphone video that the TV station said was taken from a car inside the parking lot as shots were being fired. A youth in the vehicle is heard saying, "Oh, no. No, no, no," and seen crouching as the shots continue ringing out.

Gov. Jared Polis said he was thinking about the injured people in the hospital — and added that the back-to-back shootings are a message that action is needed to curb violence among young people.

"We as a state have to redouble our efforts on public safety," said Polis, a Democrat.

Yellow crime tape surrounded the parking lot and anxious parents waited outside the campus to be reunited with their children.

As students were allowed out of the building, television images showed them walking calmly and hugging parents.

"Our community rightly is demanding an end to this violence, and we will stand with them in using every tool we have to prosecute aggressively anyone connected to these attacks on students," said 18th Judicial District Attorney John Kellner.

Biden says pardoned turkeys will get 'boosted,' not 'basted'

By ALEXANDRA JAFFE Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — President Joe Biden on Friday pardoned two Thanksgiving turkeys, saying that the white male birds were selected based on their "temperament, appearance and, I suspect, vaccination status."

"Instead of getting basted, these two turkeys are getting boosted today," Biden joked.

Biden was in a jovial mood when he appeared before White House staffers and their families in the Rose Garden to pardon the Indiana turkeys, who gobbled merrily throughout the event. And while they were given a reprieve from the fate met by millions of turkeys on Thanksgiving Day, Biden said their names — Peanut Butter and Jelly — reminded him of the sandwich he often enjoys for lunch.

The pardoning comes as Biden's agenda has seen fresh signs of life, with the president signing his \$1 trillion infrastructure bill on Monday and the House passing an even bigger companion bill — the \$2 trillion social services and climate change bill — on Friday. That bill will have to make it through the 50-50 Senate before landing on Biden's desk.

On Friday, Biden poked fun at his recent speeches on the infrastructure bill, declaring that "turkey is infrastructure" and that "Peanut Butter and Jelly are going to help build back the butterball as we move along," a reference to his administration's "Build Back Better" catchphrase.

"I've said before, every American wants the same thing: You want to be able to look the turkey in the eye and tell them, it's gonna be okay," he joked.

And he said that the two birds were now "Indiana's power couple" — with apologies to Transportation

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Secretary Pete Buttigieg and his husband, Chasten, who are from Indiana.

This year's turkeys spent a busy few days in Washington, appearing before the media alongside members of Indiana's congressional delegation before retiring to a suite at the luxurious Willard Hotel.

They'll have a comfortable new home, too. Duly pardoned, the turkeys are now heading to Purdue University's Animal Science Research and Education Center, where they'll spend the rest of their days in an enclosed setting with access to a shaded grassy area, according to Purdue.

The turkey pardon is traditionally an opportunity for presidents to crack jokes — often at their own expense — and usher in the holiday season.

In 2019, President Donald Trump joked about his impeachment inquiry, telling attendees that the turkeys "have already received subpoenas to appear in Adam Schiff's basement," a reference to the congressman leading the investigation. And President Barack Obama rified in 2014 about taking action "fully within my legal authority" to pardon the turkeys, a knock at Republicans who had criticized him for signing a raft of executive orders.

Presidents have pardoned turkeys since Abraham Lincoln, but President George H. W. Bush made the pardon the American tradition it is today by sparing a 50-pound bird in 1989.

Mistrial declared in case of man charged in 18 Texas deaths

By JAKE BLEIBERG Associated Press

DALLAS (AP) — A Texas judge declared a mistrial Friday in the first murder case against a man charged with killing 18 older women in the Dallas area over a two-year span, but prosecutors vowed to continue to pursue convictions.

Judge Raquel Jones issued the ruling when a jury deadlocked after deliberating since Thursday afternoon in the capital murder case charging Billy Chemirmir with killing 81-year-old Lu Thi Harris.

Dallas County District Attorney John Creuzot said he was committed to retrying the case and bringing another one against the 48-year-old. "Our commitment was to get two convictions and that does not change," Creuzot told The Dallas Morning News.

In a series of notes to the court Friday, the 12 jurors said they were "hopelessly deadlocked 11 to one" over the case. It was not clear what verdict the majority of jurors supported. Jones initially resisted declaring a mistrial, repeatedly ordering the jury to continue deliberation.

After the decision, family of the women Chemirmir is accused of killing spoke outside the courtroom, which they'd been prohibited from entering during the trial as a COVID-19 precaution. They expressed frustration with the mistrial, anger with the juror they saw as a hold out against conviction and determination to get a different outcome the next time around.

"We are devastated at the outcome of this trial," said Loren Adair-Smith, the daughter of Phyllis Payne. "We are sickened that we have to come back and hear the same evidence again."

Chemirmir's attorneys rested their case without calling any witnesses or presenting evidence, and he didn't testify. They dismissed the evidence against their client as "quantity over quality" and asserted that prosecutors had not proved Chemirmir's guilt beyond a reasonable doubt.

Following the mistrial, defense attorney Kobby Warren said his client maintains his innocence and disputed the idea of the trial being derailed by a "rogue juror."

"It was all circumstantial," he said of the case against Chemirmir.

Chemirmir was arrested in March 2018 after 91-year-old Mary Annis Bartel said a man forced his way into her apartment at an independent living community for seniors in the Dallas suburb of Plano.

When police tracked Chemirmir to his nearby apartment following the attack on Bartel, he was holding jewelry and cash. Documents in a large red jewelry box police say he had just thrown away led them to a Dallas home, where Harris was dead in her bedroom, lipstick smeared on her pillow.

After his arrest, authorities announced they'd begin reviewing hundreds of deaths, signaling the possibility that a serial killer had been stalking older people. Over the following years, the number of people Chemirmir was accused of killing grew.

For the families of most of the women he's been charged with killing, they learned months or years after

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their loved one's death that authorities believed they'd been killed. Those families had puzzled over the suddenness of their older but otherwise healthy and active loved ones' deaths, and in many cases, filed police reports when jewelry was found missing after their deaths.

Bartel died in 2020 but jurors heard from her during the trial through a taped deposition. She said she did not remember details of the appearance of the man who attacked her but said she knew she was in mortal danger the minute she opened her door.

"My eyes were just fixated on these green rubber gloves that I saw. ... I knew instantly when I saw those two green rubber gloves, number one, I should not have opened the door, number two, my life was in grave danger," Bartel said on the video.

She said that she tried to push the door shut but was overpowered. "He said: 'Don't fight me, lie on the bed,'" Bartel said.

Bartel described a pillow being smashed into her face and her attacker "using all his weight to keep me from breathing." Chemirmir was charged with attempted capital murder in the attack on Bartel.

Jurors saw surveillance video from a Walmart showing that Harris and Chemirmir were at the store at the same time, just hours before she was found dead.

Most of the victims were killed at independent living communities for older people, where Chemirmir allegedly forced his way into apartments or posed as a handyman.

Harris' son-in-law, Richard Rinehart, testified that the jewelry and jewelry box found in the trash when Chemirmir was arrested belonged to his mother-in-law.

Evidence presented showed that Chemirmir also had numerous \$2 bills at the time. Rinehart testified that his mother-in-law loved giving them as gifts. Police also said Chemirmir was arrested with a set of keys that opened the front doors of Harris' home.

Jurors also heard about the killing of 87-year-old Mary Brooks, who was found dead in her Richardson home in January 2018. Hers was one of the 18 Chemirmir has been charged with.

Prosecutor Glen Fitzmartin said that Brooks' death had originally been called a natural death, but after an investigation following the arrest of Chemirmir, the medical examiner changed the cause of death to homicide.

Fitzmartin said that Chemirmir also followed Brooks home from the same Walmart Harris was at before her death. Her daughter, Ann Brooks, testified that after her mother's death, her mother's safe was missing, as was most of her jewelry, including wedding rings and a coral necklace she always wore.

Chemirmir, who immigrated to the U.S. from Kenya, became a permanent U.S. resident in 2007.

Associated Press writer Jamie Stengle contributed to this report.

Elizabeth Holmes takes the stand in her criminal fraud trial

By MICHAEL LIEDTKE and BARBARA ORTUTAY AP Technology Writers

SAN JOSE, Calif. (AP) — Fallen Silicon Valley star Elizabeth Holmes, accused of bamboozling investors and patients about her startup Theranos and its medical device that she said would reshape health care, took the witness stand late Friday in her trial for criminal fraud.

The surprise decision to have Holmes testify so early in her defense came as a bombshell and carries considerable risk. Federal prosecutors, who rested their months-long case earlier on Friday, have made it clear that they're eager to grill Holmes under oath.

Prosecutors aren't likely to get that chance until after the Thanksgiving holiday weekend. Holmes attorney Kevin Downey told U.S. District Judge Edward Davila that he expects to continue steering her through her story when she returns to the stand Monday and again Tuesday in a San Jose, California, courtroom before the trial breaks until Nov. 29.

Prosecutors called 29 witnesses to support their contention that Holmes endangered patients' lives while also duping investors and customers about Theranos' technology. Among them was Gen. James Mattis, a former U.S. defense secretary and former Theranos board member, who explained how he was first impressed and ultimately disillusioned by Holmes.

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They also presented internal documents and sometimes salacious texts between Holmes and her former lover, Sunny Bulwani, who also served as Theranos' chief operating officer. In court documents, Holmes' attorneys have asserted she was manipulated by Balwani through "intimate partner abuse" — an issue that is expected to come up during her ongoing testimony next week.

Until she took the stand Friday, Holmes had sat bolt upright in her chair to the far right of the jury through the trial, impassive even when one-time supporters testified to their misgivings about Theranos.

That combination of compelling testimony and documentary evidence apparently proved effective at convincing Holmes to tell her side of the story to the jury of 10 men and four women (including two alternates) who will ultimately decide her fate. If convicted, Holmes -- now 37 and mother to a recently born son -- could be sentenced to up to 20 years in prison.

Shortly after 3 p.m., Holmes walked slowly to the stand before a rapt courtroom filled with spectators and jurors, all wearing masks.

Maskless behind a transparent barrier, Holmes recounted her early years as a student at Stanford University and her interest in disease detection. That culminated in her decision to drop out of school in 2003 at the age of 19 to found the startup that eventually became Theranos. Holmes said the name was derived from the words "therapy" and "diagnosis".

Holmes said she convinced her parents to let her use her college savings to finance her ambitions to shake up the health care industry. "I started working all the time ... trying to meet people who could help me could build this," Holmes said in a husky voice that became one of her trademarks during Theranos' rise.

As the company took shape, so did its vision. Ultimately Theranos developed a device it called the Edison that could allegedly scan for hundreds of health problems with a few drops of blood. Current tests generally each require a vial of blood, making it both slow and impractical to run more than a handful of patient tests at a time.

Had it worked as promised, the Edison could have revolutionized health care by making it easier and cheaper to scan for early signs of disease and other health issues. Instead, jurors heard recordings of Holmes boasting to investors about purported breakthroughs that later proved to be untrue.

Witness testimony and other evidence presented in the trial strongly suggested that Holmes misrepresented purported deals with major pharmaceutical firms such as Pfizer and the U.S. military while also concealing recurring problems with the Edison.

But the Edison problems didn't become public knowledge until The Wall Street Journal published the first in a series of explosive articles in October 2015. An audit by the Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services confirmed those problems the following year.

By then, Holmes and Balwani had raised hundreds of millions of dollars from billionaire investors such as media mogul Rupert Murdoch and the Walton family of Walmart and struck deals with Walgreens and Safeway to conduct blood tests in their pharmacies. Those investments at one point valued Theranos at \$9 billion, giving Holmes a \$4.5 billion fortune — on paper — in 2014.

Evidence presented at trial also revealed that Holmes had distributed financial projections calling for privately held Theranos to generate \$140 million in revenue in 2014 and \$990 million in revenue in 2015 while also turning a profit. A copy of Theranos' 2015 tax return presented as part of the trial evidence showed the company had revenues of less than \$500,000 that year while reporting accumulated losses of \$585 million.

Ellen Kreitzberg, a Santa Clara University law professor who has been attending the trial, said she thought the government had made a strong case.

"There's nothing sort of fancy or sexy about this testimony," she said. "The witnesses were very careful in their testimony. None of the witnesses seemed to harbor anger or a grudge against her. And so because of that, they were very powerful witnesses."

Other witnesses called by the government included two former Theranos lab directors who repeatedly warned Holmes that the blood-testing technology was wildly unreliable. Prosecutors also questioned two part-time lab directors, including Balwani's dermatologist, who spent only a few hours scrutinizing Ther-

anos' blood-testing technology during late 2014 and most of 2015. Holmes' lawyers noted that part-time lab directors were allowed under government regulations.

Other key witnesses included former employees of Pfizer, former Safeway CEO Steve Burd and a litany of Theranos investors, including a representative for the family investment firm of former education secretary Betsy DeVos. The DeVos family wound up investing \$100 million.

Attorney accuses Arbery advocates of 'lynching' defendants

By RUSS BYNUM Associated Press

BRUNSWICK, Ga. (AP) — The defense attorney who caused an outcry by saying Black pastors should be barred from the murder trial over Ahmaud Arbery's death declared in court Friday that a courthouse rally and other actions supporting the slain Black man's family were comparable to a "public lynching" of the three white defendants.

"This case has been infected by things that have nothing to do with the guilt or innocence of these defendants," attorney Kevin Gough told the judge, arguing that civil rights activists are trying to influence the disproportionately white jury.

Gough renewed a request for a mistrial the day after the Rev. Al Sharpton, the Rev. Jesse Jackson and Martin Luther King III joined hundreds of pastors, most of them Black, praying and rallying at the steps of the Glynn County courthouse. The event was organized after Gough last week objected to Sharpton sitting in the back row of the courtroom with Arbery's parents.

"Third parties are influencing this case," Gough said. "They've been doing it from the gallery in this courtroom. They've been doing it outside. This is what a public lynching looks like in the 21st century."

He told the judge his client's right to a fair trial was being violated by a "left woke mob."

Superior Court Judge Timothy Walmsley dismissed the mistrial motion with little discussion.

"I don't recall any disruption in the courtroom itself," the judge said of Thursday's rally, which coincided with defense testimony.

Gough is the lead attorney for William "Roddie" Bryan, who joined father and son Greg and Travis McMichael in pursuing Arbery in pickup trucks after spotting the 25-year-old man running in their coastal Georgia neighborhood on Feb. 23, 2020. Bryan took cellphone video of Travis McMichael shooting Arbery as he threw punches and grabbed for the shotgun.

Arbery's killing later became part of the broader reckoning on racial injustice in the criminal legal system after a string of fatal encounters between Black people and police.

Gough has repeatedly raised concerns about outside activists seeking to influence the case. He made the lynching remark after prosecutor Linda Dunikoski accused Gough of intentionally provoking outrage among Black pastors and civil rights activists.

"They are responding to what he strategically, knowingly, intelligently did so that there would be a response so that he could then complain of it," Dunikoski said. "That is good lawyering right there. Because now he's motioned for a mistrial based on something that he caused."

Arbery's mother, Wanda Cooper-Jones, called Gough's latest comments "ridiculous."

"He's done things repeatedly that just surprise me that he would say," she told reporters outside the courthouse. "Very surprising, but not unexpected I would say."

With closing arguments set for Monday, prosecutors and defense attorneys spent Friday debating nuances of the legal instructions the judge plans to give to the jury before deliberations.

Much of the debate dealt with how the judge will describe the limitations on making a citizen's arrest. Defense attorneys say Georgia law authorized the McMichaels and Bryan to detain Arbery for police because they had valid reason to suspect he was a burglar. Prosecutors say there's no evidence that Arbery had committed any crimes in the neighborhood.

Defense attorneys objected when the judge said he would instruct the jury that "a private citizen's warrantless arrest must occur immediately after the perpetration of the offense, or in the case of a felony during escape."

Robert Rubin, an attorney for Travis McMichael, said the proposed language would make it virtually impossible for a jury to find the defendants had probable cause to detain Arbery based on suspicion he'd committed prior burglaries in same home under construction he was seen running from before his death.

"We have built this whole case around the probable cause ... that Travis McMichael and Greg McMichael had on Feb. 23 for events that happened previously," Rubin said. "And you are gutting all of it."

Travis McMichael testified this week that he had seen security camera videos of Arbery inside the unfinished home and that he spotted Arbery "creeping" outside of it 12 days before the shooting. None of the five videos of Arbery inside the home showed him stealing. The owner said he installed cameras after items were taken from a boat he kept in an open garage.

Walmsley said he would consider changes if attorneys could support them citing other cases.

— This version updates with fuller "lynching" quote and clarifies that Gough's comment was about the pastors' rally as well as other actions.

Tennis trailblazer: Peng known for her grit on the court

By ANDREW DAMPF AP Sports Writer

Struggling to stay upright as suffocating heat and humidity drained her energy in the U.S. Open semi-finals, Peng Shuai refused to give up.

She paused between points to clutch at her left thigh and put her weight on her racket as if it were a cane. She leaned against a wall and wiped away tears.

Helped off the court and diagnosed with heat stroke, doctors told her to quit. But Peng still came back for more. Six more points until she eventually collapsed to the ground and Caroline Wozniacki, her opponent in that 2014 match, came around the net to check on her.

Only then, with her body pushed to the absolute limit — maybe even beyond the limit — did Peng retire from the match that marked the pinnacle of her singles career.

Ultimately, she was taken away in a wheelchair.

For a player who overcame heart surgery at the age of 12, quitting doesn't come lightly to the trailblazing tennis standout, who has disappeared after accusing a former top Chinese official of sexually assaulting her.

Her hard-earned grit carried her to 23 tour-level doubles titles, including at Wimbledon in 2013 and the French Open in 2014.

"Very determined," was the way German player Laura Siegemund, one of Peng's former doubles partners, described her in a phone interview with The Associated Press. "She has also a great sense for the game. Off court she's just a sweet person — more introverted, more quiet — but a super nice and humble person. ... I can't believe that this is happening in the 21st century. But I think the more people come together and speak up, that's really important. I hope she is fine."

China's Foreign Ministry on Friday stuck to its line that it wasn't aware of the controversy surrounding Peng, while White House press secretary Jen Psaki said that Chinese authorities should "provide independent and verifiable proof of her whereabouts and that she is safe."

A social media campaign with the hashtag #WhereIsPengShuai has been trending on Twitter as players like Naomi Osaka and Serena Williams have spoken out.

"I'm very worried to hear this news. You don't know what is true, what is not true," Siegemund said. "In the end, all this needs to be investigated further. But in the very first place, it just needs to be made sure that she's OK. It's just concerning that she kind of really disappeared. That's very disturbing to me."

Siegemund also noted that China usually hosts several WTA tournaments each year.

"Let's hope for the best. It's good that a lot of people are talking about this. It's a very dangerous situation for everybody — even speaking up," Siegemund said.

Introduced to tennis at the age of 8 by an uncle, the 35-year-old Peng is an admirer of John McEnroe and has a lucky cow on her tennis bag to honor her birth in a year of the ox.

When she reached the No. 1 ranking in doubles in February 2014, Peng became the first Chinese player — male or female — to reach the top spot in either singles or doubles.

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Peng has an unusual playing style featuring two-handed grips on both forehands and backhands. "Very unique, very different style. But she had a great career and she had amazing results in her career," Siegemund said. "She has a really good eye, really good strokes — a different, but great, player."

Besides her two Grand Slam titles in doubles — both achieved with Taiwanese partner Hsieh Su-wei — Peng also reached the Australian Open final in 2017 with Andrea Hlavackova. Peng won her only tournament with Siegemund in Guangzhou, China, in September 2019. "We had an intense week there," Siegemund said. "We had the fans behind us and it was really nice to play with a Chinese player in China."

Siegemund said that while there was a bit of a language barrier between them, Peng "was always in a good mood. She was always up to hit. "I always wanted to play more with her. But it didn't happen for several reasons," added Siegemund, who is currently recovering from right knee surgery.

In singles, besides her U.S. Open semifinal appearance, Peng also won two titles — at Tianjin in 2016 and Nanchang in 2017 — and finished runner-up in seven tournaments. Attempting to follow in the footsteps of Li Na, a fellow Chinese player and the first Grand Slam singles champion from Asia, Peng also reached the fourth round at Wimbledon three times in singles, the fourth round at the Australian Open twice and the third round at the French Open twice.

Her top ranking in singles was No. 14 in August 2011. Peng played for China when her country hosted the 2008 Beijing Olympics, as well as at the 2012 London Games and the 2016 Rio de Janeiro Games. She also won three medals when China hosted the Asian Games in Guangzhou in 2010 — gold in singles and the team event and bronze in doubles. While not officially retired, she played her last match in Qatar in February 2020. "She's definitely at the back end of her career," Siegemund said. "When we played in 2019 she was going more into doubles and wasn't really communicating clearly what her priorities are, because I think she didn't know herself."

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

Andrew Dampf on Twitter: www.twitter.com/AndrewDampf

House OKs \$2T social, climate bill in Biden win; Senate next

By ALAN FRAM Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — A fractious House handed President Joe Biden a marquee victory Friday by approving a roughly \$2 trillion social and environment bill, as Democrats cast aside disputes that for months had stalled the measure and hampered efforts to sell their priorities to voters.

Lawmakers approved the legislation 220-213 as every Democrat but one backed it, overcoming unanimous Republican opposition. The measure now heads to the Senate, where changes are certain and disputes between cost-conscious Democratic moderates and progressives who seek bold policy changes will flare anew.

For the moment, Democrats were happy to shake off a dispiriting period of off-year election setbacks, tumbling Biden poll numbers and public disgruntlement over inflation, stalled supply chains and the pandemic. All that and the party's nasty internal bickering have left voters with little idea of how the legislation might help them, polls have shown.

"Above all, it puts us on the path to build our economy back better than before by rebuilding the backbone of America: working people and the middle class," Biden said in a statement.

He told reporters at the White House he expected the legislation to "take awhile" to move through the Senate but declared, "I will sign it. Period."

The legislation, among the most expensive in years, is remarkable for its reach. It rewrites tax, health

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care, environment, education, housing and other policies, shoring up low- and middle-income families, helping the elderly and combating climate change.

Most of it would be paid for with tax boosts on the country's highest earners, biggest corporations and companies doing business abroad. That includes new surtaxes on people earning over \$10 million annually and a corporate minimum tax.

Because of its size, scope and status as a symbol of what Democrats stand for, each party thinks the package will help in next year's midterm elections, when Republicans have a solid chance at capturing House and Senate control.

"Hey, hey, goodbye," GOP lawmakers sang, taunting Democrats during the vote. Republicans call the measure a waste of money that will worsen budget deficits, overheat an inflation-battered economy and show voters that Democrats can't resist ever-larger government.

Democrats see the 2,100-page legislation as overdue and long-lasting help for a vast swath of the nation.

The bill "will be the pillar of health and financial security in America," said House Speaker Nancy Pelosi, D-Calif. "If you are a parent, a senior, a child, a worker, if you are an American, this bill is for you."

"Build Back Better," chanted Democrats, embracing and jumping with glee at the front of the chamber as the roll call wound down. That's the name Biden has given the bill — a companion piece to his other domestic priority, the bipartisan \$1 trillion package of broadband, road and other infrastructure projects he signed into law this week.

In Congress' latest dose of partisan bitterness, House Minority Leader Kevin McCarthy, R-Calif., had delayed the latest bill's expected approval on Thursday when he unleashed an eight hour 32 minute diatribe against the legislation, the president and Democrats.

McCarthy glared as Democrats booed and groaned during what became the longest speech in House history, remarks that included personal insults aimed at Pelosi. As minority leader in 2018, she held the previous record, speaking for eight hours and seven minutes about immigration.

"I don't know if it's a farewell tour," McCarthy said of recent trips to Europe by Pelosi, who some think may be serving her last term in Congress. "If it is, I want a T-shirt."

Most of the bill's costs come from mountains of new spending, though there are also hundreds of billions in tax credits for encouraging certain goals.

It has over \$500 billion for clean energy projects plus tax incentives for utilities turning to less polluting fuels and people buying electric vehicles. There's money for child care, job training, housing, free pre-school for 3- and 4-year-olds, in-home care for seniors and new hearing benefits for Medicare recipients.

People, and the government, too, would save money from new curbs on prescription drug prices, though the provisions are modest compared to tougher requirements most Democrats preferred. There would be extended tax credits for families with children, for some low-earning workers and for people purchasing private health coverage.

In language that helped win support from lawmakers from high-cost coastal states, the bill would increase federal deductions people can take for state and local taxes. The provision, which would largely benefit affluent earners, would cost above \$220 billion over the next five years, making it one of the legislation's costliest programs.

The measure would also finance a new requirement for four weeks of paid family leave and create temporary work permits so millions of immigrants could remain in the U.S. up to a decade. Both face an uncertain fate in the Senate.

That chamber's 50-50 split plus solid GOP opposition gives every Democrat veto power. Sen. Joe Manchin, D-W.Va., who helped slash the bill's 10-year cost from its earlier \$3.5 trillion, has opposed the family leave provision. And the Senate parliamentarian enforces rules that make it hard to include policy-heavy provisions like major immigration law changes.

The bill would worsen projected budget deficits, already huge, by \$160 billion over the coming decade, the nonpartisan Congressional Budget Office estimated. That would be higher except for \$207 billion in projected extra tax collections by bolstering IRS spending for audits, largely of the rich.

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.

Rep. Jared Golden of Maine, one of Congress' more conservative Democrats, was the only no vote from his party.

The Committee for a Responsible Federal Budget, a nonpartisan organization favoring fiscal constraint, estimated the bill would cost nearly \$5 trillion if Democrats hadn't made some provisions temporary to be more affordable. For instance, tax credits for children are extended for just one year, even though Democrats would make them permanent if they could.

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

Embattled Time's Up, post-Cuomo, announces a 'major reset'

By JOCELYN NOVECK AP National Writer

LOS ANGELES (AP) — Confusion over purpose and mission. Lack of focus on long-term goals. Ineffective communication internally and externally. Lack of accountability for top officials, especially the CEO. Too politically partisan, and too aligned with Hollywood.

These are just some of the issues raised in a report commissioned by Time's Up and released Friday — in the name of transparency — as the advocacy group pledged a "major reset" including the termination of most of the staff. It comes three months after a damaging scandal forced the departure of chief executive Tina Tchen over revelations that the group's leaders advised former New York Gov. Andrew Cuomo's administration after he was first accused of sexual harassment last year.

"We're going down to the studs," said Ashley Judd, one of the group's most visible members and a key early voice in the broader #MeToo movement, in an interview.

"We're going to rebuild and reset and come back in a way that honors our mandate, incorporates the voices of our critics, learns from our findings ... and holds ourselves accountable but also lives up to our potential."

Judd and Monifa Bandele, the interim leader since September, spoke to The Associated Press ahead of the report's release, which coincides with a major staff upheaval. Most of the staff of 25 people were informed Friday they were being laid off at the end of the year, with a skeleton crew of three remaining. Four board members will stay on, including Judd, as the organization decides its next steps and chooses leadership. Bandele is stepping down.

Both women insisted that Time's Up remains crucially important as an advocacy group for women. Bandele, who says she made the decision herself not to seek — for now — the permanent CEO role she had wanted, noted that "Even the people who are the toughest, toughest critics said, 'We still need Time's Up. Time's Up is going to play a critical role in our movement. I didn't see any 'Burn it all down.'"

And Judd offered an emotional defense of the organization, saying she feels "as energized and committed today" as she did when Time's Up launched in the wake of allegations against Hollywood mogul Harvey Weinstein, whom she herself had accused of sexual harassment. "The need for fair, safe, dignified workplaces for women of all kinds is still urgent."

In explaining the group's relevance, Judd told the anecdote of how a visiting producer on a movie she was doing came up to her and referred to a film they'd worked on years earlier. "I should have had you when I had the chance," he declared, she said, in front of the entire crew and his wife. Judd did not identify the producer.

Judd said she knew she'd been harassed, and looked to the home page of SAG, the Screen Actors Guild, for help. "There was no help for me. And today, because of Time's Up, on my union membership card there's a sexual harassment hotline."

"All of our norms have changed," Judd added. "No more meetings in hotel rooms. No more meetings before and after standard work hours. Intimacy coordinators on set, and you can take a buddy with you

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to auditions for safety. Those are tremendous strides in our industry.”

Time’s Up was formed close to four years ago by a group of high-profile Hollywood women — producers, agents, movie stars — eager to build on the momentum from the Weinstein scandal and fight sexual harassment in their own industry and beyond.

The group pledged to be a voice for women from all walks of life, but it has been plagued by criticism — from outside, and also from within — that it was too aligned with Hollywood and less attentive to the needs of others. When Bandele took over interim leadership, she pledged the group would ask itself: “What are our conflicts of interests, what are our guardrails?”

The release of the report, written by independent consultant Leilani M. Brown and first reported by The Washington Post, forms the first phase of the group’s reset; the next phase, Bandele said, is strategic planning, and a final phase will be implementation. The report was compiled over a period of two months; Some 200 people, including current and former staffers and stakeholders, were contacted and 85 agreed to interviews.

“This is a needed reset, not a retreat,” said board chair Gabrielle Sulzberger, in a statement. “It is incumbent on us to learn from these findings, and focus on building an organization that powerfully serves women of all kinds and ends the impunity of sexual harassment and assault in the workplace.”

Already, Bandele said, the report “has been successful in that we have really demonstrated transparency and openness in a way that’s vulnerable. And so it feels good. At the same time, it’s bittersweet.”

Among the findings:

—There was internal confusion about purpose and mission, which was “largely undefined for some time.” Partly this was because the organization developed too fast, the report said, ramping up “like a jet plane to a rocket ship” overnight.

—Leaders were seen as often chasing short-term goals rather than a longer-term strategic vision.

—Communication was “inconsistent and fragmented.” Some members were frustrated to hear of the allegations involving the Cuomo case from the media and not from Time’s Up itself. (Tchen’s Aug. 26 resignation followed the earlier departure of the organization’s chair, Roberta Kaplan. Both women had angered Time’s Up supporters with the idea they’d offered any help to Cuomo, and that Tchen initially discouraged other Time’s Up leaders from commenting publicly on allegations by one of his accusers, Lindsey Boylan. Cuomo resigned on Aug. 10 amid a barrage of harassment allegations.)

—The group appeared politically partisan. The report cited members who felt Time’s Up was damaged by leaders’ ties to the Democratic Party (Tchen was once Michelle Obama’s chief of staff). The organization was accused by some of not supporting Tara Reade, who accused now-President Joe Biden of assaulting her in the 1990s — an allegation he has vehemently denied. And the Cuomo ties led to criticism that the group’s dealings with the governor smacked of political favoritism.

Bandele said in the interview that the Cuomo episode might have landed differently if the group’s structure were more sound. “The Cuomo crisis was key in where we are now,” Bandele said. “But if the inside structure ... was stronger, if the communications and the transparency in the processes were stronger, something like what happened with Cuomo would be (less) likely to happen. Even if it did, “it wouldn’t have the same detrimental effect on how people view the organization because we’d have much greater trust within the community.”

The question now is how the group will rebuild that trust.

“All organizations make mistakes,” Bandele argued. “So we’ll make mistakes, too. But it’s not a nail in the coffin ... this is not the end of us. The thing is that we have to build back stronger.”

The group did not provide a timeline for its next steps. Judd said it would be worth the wait.

“What we are going to manifest is an organization that has singleness of purpose and will be inclusive, and amplify the voices of women of all kinds,” she said. “We’re very excited to be able to share it with the world.”

As for herself, she said, “I’m still here because I know the urgency of how much society needs Time’s Up. The mandate is bigger and more important than the mistakes we made. And we will persevere and

be of service.”

Yazidi family abandons EU dream, reluctantly returns to Iraq

By SAMYA KULLAB Associated Press

DOHUK, Iraq (AP) — Khari Hasan Kalo peered out of the window of the repatriation flight as it touched down in northern Iraq. It's a place he and his family had hoped never to see again after they left for Belarus two months ago, driven by dreams of a new life in Europe.

Kalo, 35, had begged for loans and spent his savings on the ill-fated journey to the Belarusian capital of Minsk, the first stop on a journey to the West.

His wife, 30-year-old Zena, had sold her few belongings on the gamble that left the family of six stranded for days in a cold forest on the border of Belarus and Poland. In the end, they returned home, fearing they were endangering the life of Kalo's ailing 80-year-old mother.

Yet they say they would do it all again to escape their hopeless life, spent in a camp for displaced persons for the past seven years. The Kalos are Yazidis, a religious minority that was brutalized by Islamic State militants when they overran northern Iraq in 2014.

At the time, IS extremists rampaged through the Yazidi town of Sinjar and surrounding villages and destroyed religious sites. They kidnapped and enslaved thousands of women and children. Years after their lives were torn apart, Yazidis are still unable to return home or locate hundreds of women and children who had been snatched by the extremists. The Kalos' home lies in ruins.

“If it wasn't for my children and my mother, I would never have returned, I would have stayed in that forest at all costs rather than return to this tent,” Kalo said Friday, speaking to The Associated Press from the Karbato camp in Dohuk province in the autonomous Iraqi Kurdish region. His mother, looking frail, slept throughout the interview.

The Kalos, including three children ages 5, 7, and 9, had returned from Belarus a day earlier.

“It's not even our tent; it's his sister's,” his wife interjected. “It's no place to raise children, have a life.”

The region is considered the most stable part of conflict-scarred Iraq, yet Iraqi Kurds made up a large group among thousands of migrants from the Middle East who had flown to Belarus since the summer. Even in Iraq's more prosperous north, growing unemployment and corruption is fueling migration, and the Yazidi community has endured particular hardship.

On Thursday, hundreds of Iraqis returned home from Belarus after abandoning their hopes of reaching the European Union. The repatriation came after thousands of migrants became stuck at the Poland-Belarus border amid rising tensions between the two countries.

Kalo's family was among 430 people who flew from Minsk back to Iraq, where 390 got off at Irbil International Airport before the flight continued to Baghdad.

The West has accused Belarus President Alexander Lukashenko of using the migrants as pawns to destabilize the EU in retaliation for its sanctions imposed on his authoritarian regime following a harsh crackdown on internal dissent. Belarus denies engineering the crisis, which has seen migrants entering the country since summer, lured by easy tourist visas, and then trying to cross into Poland, Lithuania and Latvia, all EU members.

Kalo didn't mind if a geopolitical game was being played at his expense if it got his family out of Iraq.

“So what if I was a pawn in someone's hands if it gets me to Germany?” he said.

Since being displaced, the family had gotten increasingly desperate. Their tent burned down in an accidental fire in June that ravaged the Sharia camp, also in Dohuk. They tried to return to their original home in Sinjar but found their house uninhabitable.

Tensions also were simmering in the area between a patchwork of rival militia groups, Iraqi forces, and members of the Kurdistan Worker's Party, or PKK, an insurgent group outlawed by Turkey. Turkish jets still targeted PKK members in northern Iraq.

Then he heard from friends about Kurds finding their way to Germany after Belarus eased visa requirements last spring. He begged his brother in Australia to wire him \$9,000 to pay the smugglers' asking price

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for his wife, three young children and mother.

He also had saved money from his time as a policeman — cash that was hard-won because he endured discrimination as a Yazidi. Colleagues refused to eat or share a room with him, he said. He asked for a reassignment, but his superior said this would only be possible if he gave him half his income.

“What good is a job if its still not enough to feed your family?” he said of his decision to quit.

The Kalos took the land route to Istanbul in September, and boarded flights to Minsk the following month. There, they headed straight to the Polish border. With two other Iraqi families, the Kalos dug under the border fence, reaching the other side in darkness.

They walked for four days in search of a GPS point where they were promised a car would meet them and take them straight to Germany.

But that never happened..

Instead, on the fourth day, Kalo’s family ran out of food as temperatures dropped in the dense and soggy forest.

Polish authorities found them and sent them back across the border. They were greeted by an encampment of hundreds of migrants. Belarusian authorities were handing out wire cutters and pushing the migrants back through the razor wire.

Polish authorities used water cannons to repel them. But this did not deter Belarusian authorities, who beat and threatened them, Kalo said. He said they shouted: “Go (to) Poland!”

Still, husband and wife fought to stay, agreeing that anything was better than their life in a tent.

But with his mother struggling to survive as conditions grew increasingly squalid, Kalo sought the pity of the Belarusian authorities. They allowed them to return to Minsk to seek medical help.

Kalo heard the Iraqi government had agreed to repatriate citizens free of charge. He turned to his wife and they considered their choices: Return to their desperate lives in Iraq, or bear the responsibility if his mother died.

Reluctantly, they put their names on the list.

But their hope is not lost, Kalo said, as his 5-year old daughter, Katarin, dug her face into his chest at the Karbato camp.

“I have two priorities now,” he said. “The first (is) to get a tent of our own. The second, to get back on my feet and leave this country. I will make it this time.”

He added: “If it was my last day on this Earth, I will spend it trying to leave.”

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Facing surge, Austria will mandate COVID-19 shots, lock down

By EMILY SCHULTHEIS and KIRSTEN GRIESHABER Associated Press

VIENNA (AP) — Austria announced a national lockdown and a plan to mandate vaccinations as coronavirus infections hit a record high Friday, forcing the government to walk back promises that strict shutdowns were a thing of the past.

While the scope of the proposed mandate was unclear, a blanket requirement would be a first for a Western country. Chancellor Alexander Schallenberg said those who didn’t comply would likely be fined but gave no other details.

The moves come as vaccinations in Austria have plateaued at one of the lowest rates in Western Europe, and as hospitals in heavily hit states have warned that their intensive care units are reaching capacity. Average daily deaths have tripled in recent weeks — though the number of fatalities reported over the past week remains well below the high of last winter and 13 U.S. states are already seeing more deaths per 100,000 people.

Earlier this month, Schallenberg indicated a full lockdown would not be needed and instead imposed the restrictions only on those not vaccinated.

The lockdown will start Monday and initially will last for 10 days, when it will be reevaluated, Schallenberg

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said. Starting Feb. 1, the country will also make vaccinations mandatory — though the chancellor gave few details about what that meant or how it would work.

“Increasing the vaccination rate — and I think we’re all in agreement on this — is our only way to break out of this vicious cycle of viral waves and lockdown discussions for good,” Schallenberg said. “We don’t want a fifth wave, we don’t want a sixth and seventh wave.”

Austria is among several Western European countries where infections are rising rapidly and where there are concerns that vaccination rates, while relatively high, are insufficient to hold off a winter surge at hospitals.

Thanks largely to inoculation, hospitals in the region are not under the same pressure they were earlier in the pandemic, but many are still straining to handle rising numbers of COVID-19 patients while also attempting to clear backlogs with exhausted or sick staff.

Not quite 66% of Austria’s 8.9 million are fully vaccinated, according to government figures. It has tried various measures to boost that further. Like many European countries, it introduced a “green pass” — which shows proof of vaccination, recovery from COVID-19 or a negative test result and was required to enter restaurants and attend cultural events.

“There are too many political forces in this country, which vehemently, massively and publicly oppose (vaccination). ... This is actually an attack on our health system,” Schallenberg said. “The results are overcrowded intensive care units and enormous human suffering.”

A wide vaccine mandate would make Austria’s one of the most stringent requirements in the world — but many countries have imposed targeted mandates or restrictions on what unvaccinated people can do.

The U.S. government is moving forward with a requirement for mandatory vaccines or regular testing for every worker in the country at businesses with more than 100 employees — though opponents have challenged it in court. In addition, numerous corporations and governments across the country have imposed their own vaccine requirements.

France required health care workers to get the vaccine, and Britain recently announced a similar rule for health staff who work with the public. Slovakia, meanwhile, announced it will ban those who have not been vaccinated from all non-essential stores and shopping malls.

Austria’s new lockdown is its fourth since the pandemic began and comes as the country has struggled without success to stop spiraling case numbers. On Friday, the country reported 15,809 new infections, an all-time high.

When it takes effect early Monday, restaurants, Christmas markets and most stores will close, and cultural events will be canceled. People will be able to leave their homes only for certain reasons, including buying groceries, going to the doctor or exercising.

Wolfgang Mueckstein, the country’s health minister, said that kindergartens and schools would remain open for those who needed them, but all parents were asked to keep their children at home if possible.

On Friday afternoon, Vienna’s Mariahilfer Strasse in one of the city’s main shopping areas was packed with people — but many welcomed the news about the lockdown, with some even saying they wish the government had acted sooner.

“To be honest, in my opinion this is coming too late,” said Luca Eder, 21.

Austria’s intensive care doctors also welcomed the government’s decision, warning that it was only a matter of time before their wards are swamped.

“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.

The situation is especially dire in the regions of Salzburg and Upper Austria, which have been particularly hard hit by the rising case numbers. In Salzburg, for example, the seven-day rate of new infections is nearly twice the national average.

Hospitals in both states have warned that their ICUs are reaching capacity, and in Salzburg they have

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begun discussing potentially only taking the worst cases.

Mueckstein, the health minister, said many factors contributed to the current situation, including Austria's lower-than-expected vaccination rate and the seasonal impact of the virus. But he also apologized for state and federal leaders' initial reluctance to implement stronger measures.

"Unfortunately, even we as the federal government have fallen short of our standards in some areas," he said. "I want to apologize for that."

After 10 days, the lockdown's effects will be assessed. If virus cases have not gone down sufficiently, it can be extended to a maximum of 20 days. In addition, booster shots are now available to all vaccinated people starting four months after their second dose.

Government officials had long promised that vaccinated people would no longer face lockdown restrictions: Over the summer, then-Chancellor Sebastian Kurz declared the pandemic "over" for those who had received the vaccine. But as virus cases continued to skyrocket, the government said it had no choice but to extend it to everyone.

Alexander Dinobl, who works as a tour guide and was sitting on a bench in central Vienna on Friday, said the nearly two years since the pandemic started have been difficult on his industry. But he said the current situation has shown there are no easy answers when it comes to defeating the virus.

"There is no wonder weapon against COVID right now," he said.

Grieshaber reported from Berlin; Philipp Jenne contributed from Vienna.

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NOT REAL NEWS: A look at what didn't happen this week

By The Associated Press undefined

A roundup of some of the most popular but completely untrue stories and visuals of the week. None of these are legit, even though they were shared widely on social media. The Associated Press checked them out. Here are the facts:

Myocarditis is often mild, contrary to online claims

CLAIM: Myocarditis causes irreversible damage to the heart. Within five years of diagnosis, the death rate from myocarditis is 50%.

THE FACTS: Myocarditis, inflammation of the heart muscle, is a mild, temporary condition in the vast majority of cases, according to experts. Some social media users have been falsely claiming otherwise in recent weeks by misrepresenting the scientific literature on the condition. "Myocarditis is irreversible. Once the heart muscle is damaged, it cannot be repaired by the body," states one widely shared Facebook post. "Myocarditis has a 20% fatality rate after 2 years and a 50% fatality rate after 5 years," it continues. The Facebook post shows a screenshot of a blog post written by Edward Hendrie that included false claims about risks associated with COVID-19 vaccines. Hendrie told The Associated Press his statistics around myocarditis came from an academic article co-authored by Dr. Michael Kang, health sciences assistant clinical professor at University of California Riverside School of Medicine. Kang, contacted by the AP, said Hendrie was misrepresenting the figures used in his article, which was published in October 2017, well before the COVID-19 pandemic. It was written "as a general review of viral myocarditis and does not pertain to vaccine induced myocarditis," Kang said. With regards to the myocarditis death rate, Kang said his article was referencing the most severe forms of myocarditis. Those numbers pertain to smaller, older studies, in which patients had extreme forms of the disease, "not what we are seeing with the covid19 vaccine," Kang said in an email. A majority of individuals with myocarditis — about 70% — have no symptoms or mild symptoms that resolve completely, said Dr. Eric Adler, professor at the University of California San Diego School of Medicine who specializes in advanced heart failure. "The majority of myocarditis is mild and indeed reversible," Adler said. Dr. Leslie Cooper, chair of the Mayo Clinic Department of Cardiovascular

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Medicine in Florida, agreed. "Myocarditis by definition is inflammation, which is usually reversible," Cooper said. "Myocarditis can lead to 'irreversible' scarring but only in a minority of overall cases," Cooper added. But Adler said there are treatment options that can help recover heart tissue even in severe cases. Very rarely, teens and young adults given the Pfizer or Moderna vaccines have experienced myocarditis. The condition has mostly affected young men and teen boys, and they tend to recover quickly. After intense scrutiny, U.S. health authorities concluded the vaccine's benefits outweigh that small risk, the AP reported. "The facts are clear: this is an extremely rare side effect, and only an exceedingly small number of people will experience it after vaccination. Importantly, for the young people who do, most cases are mild, and individuals recover often on their own or with minimal treatment," read a statement issued last June by top U.S. government health officials, medical organizations, laboratory and hospital associations.

— Associated Press writer Terrence Fraser in New York contributed this report.

Social media posts misrepresent reason for blurred presidential seal

CLAIM: Vice President Kamala Harris' Twitter account blurred the presidential seal on President Joe Biden's desk in a recent video because Biden isn't really the president.

THE FACTS: This video of Biden signing the \$1 trillion "Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act" was first posted by the Democratic National Committee, which intentionally blurred the seal to avoid conflicting with a federal statute that limits how individuals can use the seal, according to DNC Deputy Communications Director Daniel Wessel. Harris' personal Twitter account re-shared the video on Tuesday. The video fueled a flurry of conspiracy theories on social media, with numerous Twitter users falsely claiming the blurred seal must mean Biden is not the legitimate U.S. president. The federal statute, U.S. Code 713, says the presidential seal can only be used for official government business. Though legal experts disagree on the boundaries of appropriate use in accordance with the law, it's become common practice for candidates and political parties to blur the presidential seal in campaign-related posts and on campaign accounts, according to Jordan Libowitz, communications director for the nonpartisan watchdog group Citizens for Ethics and Responsibility in Washington. The DNC has blurred the presidential seal in other recent Twitter posts, including in a video on Nov. 6 that Biden's personal Twitter account re-shared. Former President Donald Trump also has shared videos with the seal blurred when using the posts for campaign purposes. The Trump Organization faced criticism in 2018 when replicas of the seal were displayed at one of its golf courses, violating federal law. The club removed the replicas and explained they had been gifts from members. Some social media users sharing Harris' post also pointed to a woman seen clapping behind Biden in the video. Hundreds of Twitter users falsely claimed the woman's rapidly moving hands appeared to go "through" Biden's face. The Associated Press closely reviewed multiple versions of the video and found no such glitch or oddity. While Harris' clapping hands in the video cast a shadow on the front of Biden's face, the woman behind him remained behind him for the entire clip.

— Associated Press writer Ali Swenson in New York contributed this report.

Pfizer CEO's wife did not die or experience 'vaccine complications'

CLAIM: Myriam Bourla, the wife of Pfizer CEO Albert Bourla, has died from complications of the Pfizer COVID-19 vaccine.

THE FACTS: A conservative blog known for publishing inaccurate articles posted a story Nov. 10 falsely claiming that Albert Bourla's wife had died and her cause of death was listed as "complications from the Pfizer vaccine." There is no truth to these assertions. Pfizer spokesperson Amy Rose told The Associated Press that Myriam Bourla is "alive and well." Rose called the incorrect claims "lies" meant to undermine public confidence in the company's COVID-19 vaccine, and also accused the author of the article of "deliberately and maliciously attempting to cause emotional distress to the Bourla family." The blog, The Conservative Beaver, did not provide any evidence for its claims and attributed some information to an unnamed doctor. The article also incorrectly stated that Myriam Bourla had "expressed skepticism with her husband's experimental injection" and initially refused to take it. That claim is also false. The article took a months-old quote from Myriam Bourla out of context to support the inaccurate statement. In a Feb. 4 interview with the local news outlet Scarsdale 10583, Bourla, then 48, said she was "very proud"

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of her husband's work in developing the vaccine, but that she had not received it yet because it was not her turn. Her stance was in accordance with vaccination guidance at the time, which prioritized essential workers, older adults and those at highest risk of experiencing severe complications from the virus. The Conservative Beaver did not immediately respond to a request for comment. In a separate blog post this month, the same site also falsely alleged that Albert Bourla had been arrested by the FBI and charged with fraud. Pfizer refuted the claim, and the FBI said it had no knowledge of such a case.

— Associated Press writer Sophia Tulp in Atlanta contributed this report.

Woman was removed from hockey game for her actions, not her shirt

CLAIM: A video shows that a spectator was removed from a Wichita Thunder hockey game because she was wearing a sweatshirt emblazoned with the text "Let's Go Brandon."

THE FACTS: The woman was escorted out of the arena because she continued to use inappropriate language and gestures after multiple warnings, not because of the message on her clothing, the Wichita Thunder hockey team said in a Nov. 8 statement. In a video clip that circulated online, the woman is dressed in a gray sweatshirt featuring the message "Let's Go Brandon," a coded phrase that has become a rallying cry for some critics of President Joe Biden. The video shows the woman talking with security officials at Wichita's InTrust Bank Arena before they escort her from her seat and toward the arena's exit during a home game Nov. 5. "Woman getting kicked for wearing 'let's go Brandon' shirt," reads text overlaid on the video. However, this caption misrepresents what actually happened. "This individual was removed by arena security after multiple warnings, because she was using extremely profane language and gestures toward our staff and those around her," the Wichita Thunder's statement said. "She clearly was not kicked out because of her sweatshirt as the rest of her party, also wearing the same sweatshirts, were not removed and remained at the game until its conclusion." The team's statement added that it aims to create a "family-friendly environment" and removes individuals who do not follow the guidelines of the arena and the ECHL, the AA level professional league to which the team belongs.

— Ali Swenson

Dutch event did not block unvaccinated from seeing Santa

CLAIM: Authorities in the city of Zwolle, Netherlands, erected a high fence so that unvaccinated parents and their children could not see the arrival of Santa Claus at a Christmas event.

THE FACTS: The Christmas event was open to anyone regardless of vaccination status and the fence was erected for security reasons, according to Zwolle city officials. Social media users shared a video that shows parents shouting as officials erect a fence. Several widely shared tweets falsely claimed the clip showed that officials were stopping children whose parents hadn't been vaccinated against COVID-19 from seeing the arrival of Sinterklaas, the Dutch name for Santa Claus. Another post showed a photo of a child looking through the fence, claiming she was not allowed inside the Zwolle event because "her parents are unvaccinated." However, the event was not closed to the unvaccinated, just to those without tickets, officials told The Associated Press. At the yearly celebration organized by Stichting Evenementen Zwolle, a nonprofit that hosts festivals in the city, Santa arrives by boat in a canal followed by a reception on the town square. This year's event was blocked off by a fence, but had space for 5,000 people who could reserve a ticket showing they were either vaccinated or had a negative COVID test result, said Sam Rademaker, Zwolle municipality spokesperson. "For security reasons we (the municipality) had agreed to erect blinded fences around the square and canal, as a part of crowd management and to make sure the visitors weren't gathering next to a nearby busy road," Rademaker said in an email. The commotion caught on the video took place as parents gathered to watch Santa's arrival along an unfenced section of the canal, and officials then came and erected the barrier. "In short: no, the fences weren't placed to keep unvaccinated individuals apart from the festivities," Rademaker said. Zwolle Mayor Peter Snijders addressed the controversy on Facebook, reiterating that everybody, unvaccinated or vaccinated, was allowed to attend. "The fences were intended to guide visitors and to prevent crowds of viewers forming,"

he said. "Not to block (unvaccinated) parents and children. We are sorry if that impression was created."
— Associated Press writers Beatrice Dupuy in New York and Mike Corder in The Hague, Netherlands, contributed this report.

Post falsely claims that Kyle Rittenhouse's mother drove him to Kenosha

CLAIM: Kyle Rittenhouse's mother, Wendy Rittenhouse, drove him across state lines and dropped him off at the protest in Kenosha, Wisconsin, with a rifle on the night he shot three people in August 2020.

THE FACTS: According to unchallenged testimony in Rittenhouse's murder trial, he drove himself to Kenosha the day before the shootings and spent the night at a friend's house. As Rittenhouse's trial reached a conclusion Monday, a social media post circulated that incorrectly stated: "Why are we just glazing over the fact that Kyle Rittenhouse's mother put her minor child in a vehicle, drove him across state lines and dropped him off in the middle of a riot armed with an assault rifle? Why is she not behind bars?" But Rittenhouse testified in Kenosha County Circuit Court on Nov. 10 that he drove himself to Kenosha on Aug. 24, 2020, the day before the shooting, to work at his job at the RecPlex in nearby Pleasant Prairie, according to footage of the court proceedings reviewed by The Associated Press. After work, he drove his car to his friend Dominick Black's house in Kenosha, where he spent the night. Rittenhouse was charged for using an AR-style semi-automatic rifle to kill two men and wound a third during a night of protests that erupted in Kenosha over the wounding of Jacob Blake, a Black man, by a white Kenosha police officer. Under questioning by Thomas Binger, a Kenosha County prosecutor, Rittenhouse said that he had driven to Kenosha from Antioch despite not having his driver's license. Rittenhouse testified that the next day, Aug. 25, 2020, he rode with Black to downtown Kenosha. When Black testified in court on Nov. 2, he gave a similar account. In an interview with the Chicago Tribune in November 2020, Wendy Rittenhouse said she didn't know what her son was doing on the night of the shootings. On Friday, the jury reached a verdict in Kyle Rittenhouse's trial, finding him not guilty on all charges. Attorneys representing Kyle Rittenhouse did not respond to the AP's requests for comment on the false claim about how he got to Kenosha.

— Associated Press writer Josh Kelety in Phoenix contributed this report.

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Research links COVID-19 in pregnancy with stillbirths

By LINDSEY TANNER AP Medical Writer

Pregnant women with COVID-19 face increased chances for stillbirths compared with uninfected women, and that risk spiked to four times higher after the delta variant emerged, new government data show.

The federal Centers for Disease Control and Prevention released a report Friday that examined 1.2 million deliveries in 736 hospitals nationwide from March 2020 through September 2021.

Stillbirths were rare overall, totaling 8,154 among all deliveries. But the researchers found that for women with COVID-19, about 1 in 80 deliveries resulted in stillbirth. Among the uninfected, it was 1 in 155.

Among those with COVID-19, stillbirths were more common in people with chronic high blood pressure and other complications, including those in intensive care or on breathing machines.

"These findings underscore the importance of COVID-19 prevention strategies, including vaccination before or during pregnancy," CDC researcher Carla DeSisto and co-authors said.

There's no information on how many had received COVID-19 shots, although the authors noted that the U.S. vaccination rate among pregnant people after delta emerged this past summer was 30%.

Pregnant people with COVID-19 are more likely than others to develop severe, even fatal, illness and they face increased risks for preterm birth and other complications. Previous studies on stillbirths and COVID-19 had mixed findings, but the report bolsters concerns among obstetricians and anecdotal data.

While the absolute risk for stillbirth is low, anyone who is pregnant shouldn't underestimate the dangers

of COVID-19, said Dr. Mark Turrentine, a professor at Baylor College of Medicine in Houston. He helped write the American College of Obstetricians and Gynecologists' recommendations for COVID-19 vaccination in pregnancy.

"What's really sad is we have 10 months of a vaccine that's been highly effective and we just can't convince people to take advantage of this," Turrentine said.

Some experts have speculated that the virus may cause inflammation in the placenta or other abnormalities that could harm the fetus.

Dr. Joseph Biggio, a specialist in high-risk pregnancies at Ochsner Health in New Orleans, said the study doesn't prove that COVID-19 caused stillbirths. He said it's possible some women were so critically ill that physicians trying to keep them alive "couldn't intervene on behalf of a fetus that they knew was in trouble."

The researchers relied on medical records, and they noted that they were unable to determine if the COVID-19 diagnoses listed at the time of delivery represented current or past infections.

Generally, stillbirths are more common among Black people, those who become pregnant over age 35 or those who smoke tobacco during pregnancy.

The study didn't include pregnancy outcomes by race, an area the authors said they plan to investigate in future research "because COVID-19 has disproportionately affected many racial and ethnic minority groups, putting them more at risk of getting sick and dying."

Follow AP Medical Writer Lindsey Tanner at @LindseyTanner.

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

Inmate who was key to juvenile life debate is up for parole

REBECCA SANTANA Associated Press

NEW ORLEANS (AP) — In recent years, hundreds of people once destined to spend the rest of their lives in prison after being convicted of crimes as juveniles have gone free after Supreme Court decisions ruling that young people are capable of change and should be given a second chance.

But so far the man whose case has been central to this change — 75-year-old Henry Montgomery — is still behind bars nearly six decades after his 1963 arrest. That may change Wednesday when a Louisiana parole board votes for the third time whether to grant Montgomery parole.

"The state has gotten about fifty-eight years of Henry Montgomery's life. He doesn't have much left. What's the value in making him spend a couple more years there? I, for one, cannot see it," said Andrew Hundley who runs the Louisiana Parole Project that will provide a home and support for Montgomery should he be released.

Montgomery was arrested after fatally shooting Charles Hurt, an East Baton Rouge sheriff's deputy, who caught him skipping school. Montgomery was 17 at the time. He was initially sentenced to death but the state's Supreme Court threw out his conviction in 1966, saying he didn't get a fair trial. The case was retried, Montgomery convicted again but this time sentenced to life in prison.

When Montgomery went to prison, and for decades afterward, the "lock-'em-up-and-throw-away-the-key" attitude dominated law enforcement and society — especially in Louisiana where the incarceration rate has consistently been the highest in the country. Juvenile offenders, often portrayed as irredeemable "super-predators," were no exception.

But recent Supreme Court rulings have begun to chip away at these lifetime juvenile sentences as the country has begun to rethink "tough-on-crime" approaches.

In 2012, in *Miller v. Alabama*, the court ruled that mandatory sentencing of life without parole for juvenile offenders was "cruel and unusual" punishment. The court's decision was based on the idea that children's minds and impulse controls are still developing, and they often act recklessly. The court found that juveniles are capable of growth and change and, except in the most severe cases, should be given

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the opportunity to get out of prison.

In 2016, the Supreme Court took up Montgomery's case and made their earlier decision retroactive, giving hundreds of juvenile lifers a shot at freedom.

Since the court's Montgomery decision, about 800 people who had been sentenced to life without parole as juveniles have been released, according to the Campaign for the Fair Sentencing of Youth. About 656 people are serving life without parole for crimes they committed as children — down from 2,800 about five years ago — the organization said.

Advocates also point to the sweeping changes that have happened in the near-decade since Miller was decided. Twenty-five states and the District of Columbia have completely banned the use of life without parole for juveniles offenders — compared to five states in 2012. In another six states, the sentence still exists but no juveniles are serving life without parole.

In Louisiana, about 96 out of roughly 300 former juvenile lifers incarcerated at the time of the Montgomery decision have been freed, according to data compiled by the Parole Project and the Louisiana Center for Children's Rights, which represents kids going through the justice system. But Louisiana has not done away with the life without parole sentence for juveniles, and advocates at the LCCR say just as many children are being sentenced to life without parole in the years after the Supreme Court's pivotal 2012 ruling as after it — usually children of color.

When Montgomery started serving his time at Angola it was a violent place, where attacks on inmates and guards were commonplace. There was little in the way of rehabilitative programs, especially not for prisoners who were never expected to experience freedom again.

Some of the programs like the boxing club were ones that Montgomery himself helped start, say supporters. He's worked for years at the prison's silk screen shop where one of his lawyers during the last parole board hearing said he'd been named employee of the month more times that she could count.

During the last year the coronavirus has limited Montgomery's contact with the outside world, his lawyer Keith Nordyke said. The elderly Montgomery is extremely hard of hearing, making Zoom calls difficult, Nordyke said. In previous parole hearings Montgomery has struggled to understand what is being said.

Hurt, the sheriff's deputy who Montgomery killed, was married and had three children. Two of his daughters have met with Montgomery in prison and forgiven him, but family members have opposed his release. Hurt's grandson J.P. deGravelles, who is also in law enforcement, said the family is not acting out of vindictiveness and if Montgomery is granted parole, deGravelles wishes him well. But his grandfather will never get such an opportunity at life again.

"This is not a witch hunt for us. We just we think he was given a sentence, and he was given a just sentence and he should carry it out," deGravelles said. "The killing of a police officer is a direct assault on the very fabric of society."

Should Montgomery be granted parole, he'll become a client of the Louisiana Parole Project. The organization — started in 2016 by Hundley who is a former juvenile lifer himself — helps offenders who've served long sentences reenter society. They'd provide Montgomery with a place to stay and help him with important steps to reentering society such as getting an ID card, signing up for health insurance, learning how to use a cellphone or computer and making sure he has his medications.

Hundley worries if Montgomery doesn't get paroled this time, he could die in prison. In 2019, the three member board voted 2-1 in favor of letting him out, but the decision had to be unanimous. This time, a simple majority would suffice. Hundley has asked Montgomery what he would like to do if he is released.

"He wants to be able to look at sunrise without looking at it through razor wire. That is what he is looking forward to. That's what he thinks about," Hundley said.

This story was originally published November 16, 2021. It has been corrected to show that 25 — not 24 states — and the District of Columbia have now banned the use of life without parole sentences for juvenile offenders.

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 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 past infection with parasitic diseases.

On Friday, researchers working in Uganda said they found COVID-19 patients with high rates of exposure to malaria were less likely to suffer severe disease or death than people with little history of the disease.

"We went into this project thinking we would see a higher rate of negative outcomes in people with a history of malaria infections because that's what was seen in patients co-infected with malaria and Ebola," said Jane Achan, a senior research advisor at the Malaria Consortium and a co-author of the study. "We were actually quite surprised to see the opposite — that malaria may have a protective effect."

Achan said this may suggest that past infection with malaria could "blunt" the tendency of people's immune systems to go into overdrive when they are infected with COVID-19. The research was presented Friday at a meeting of the American Society of Tropical Medicine and Hygiene.

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.

On Friday, Nigerian authorities began a campaign to significantly expand the West African nation's coronavirus immunization. Officials are aiming to inoculate half the population before February, a target they think will help them achieve herd immunity.

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 beyond Africa 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.

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

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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.

The sanctions make it very difficult for Maduro's government to access overseas assets and earnings, including those from Citgo. Maduro has blamed them for a wide range of issues afflicting Venezuelans. But the sanctions do not prohibit transactions involving food and medicines "intended to be used to relieve human suffering," according to the U.S. Department of Treasury.

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.

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.

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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."

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

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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.

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.

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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.

"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 Gladly 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,

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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.

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>

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 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

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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.

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.

The disappeared also include large numbers of Uyghurs and members of other predominately Muslim minority groups who have been targeted in what the government calls a campaign against extremism, separatism and terrorism.

Following attacks on government and civilian targets, more than 1 million men and women were forced into prison-like political re-education camps officially described as de-radicalization bases and job training centers.

This story corrects when Ma reappeared in a video.

Bowing to protests, India's Modi agrees to repeal farm laws

By SHEIKH SAALIQ Associated Press

NEW DELHI (AP) — In a major reversal, Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi announced Friday that he would repeal the controversial agriculture laws that sparked yearlong protests from tens of thousands of farmers and posed a significant challenge to his administration.

Farmers, who form one of India's most influential voting blocs, have camped out on the outskirts of the capital since November of last year to demand the withdrawal of the laws, which they feared would dramatically reduce their incomes.

Modi's surprise decision, in a televised national address, came ahead of elections early next year in key states like Uttar Pradesh and Punjab that are significant agricultural producers and where his Bharatiya Janata Party is eager to shore up its support. Experts said it was too early to say if it would work.

The prime minister urged the protesters to return home, but the farmers have said they will stay put until the laws are gone — a process that will begin in December when Parliament sits for its winter session.

"While apologizing to the nation, I want to say with a sincere and pure heart that maybe something was lacking in our efforts that we could not explain the truth to some of our farmer brothers," Modi said during the address. He added: "Let us make a fresh start."

The move represented a rare climbdown for the 71-year-old leader, who has stood firm in the face of

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fierce criticism over other steps his government took, such as abruptly banning high-denomination currency notes and revoking Muslim majority Kashmir's semiautonomous powers.

He also backed a citizenship law that excludes Muslim immigrants, even in the face of sometimes violent protests.

But farmers are a particularly influential voting bloc in India — both for their sheer numbers but also because and they are often romanticized as the heart and soul of the nation. They are especially important to Modi's base and make up substantial portions of the population in some states his party rules.

"Modi projects himself as a bold, determined leader who doesn't back down. And yet he's done just that, to a farmer's movement that his government had maligned for months," said Michael Kugelman of the Asia Program at the Washington-based Wilson Center.

Modi had long defended the laws, which were passed in September last year, as necessary to modernize India's agricultural sector. But farmers feared they would end a system under which the government guaranteed prices for certain essential crops — first introduced in the 1960s to help shore up food reserves and prevent shortages.

While the government said it was willing to pledge the guaranteed prices would continue, the farmers wanted legislation saying such prices were their legal right. They contended that without guarantees, they would be at the mercy of the markets and that would spell disaster, especially for the more than two-thirds of them who own less than 1 hectare (2 1/2 acres) of land.

Modi's party was also criticized for refusing to extend debate on the legislation — renewing accusations that it has too often used its majority to ram through laws without enough consultation.

Protests against the laws escalated in November last year, when farmers hunkered down on the outskirts of New Delhi, where they have camped out since, 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 stormed the historic Red Fort in the capital's center — a deeply symbolic act that revealed the scale of their challenge to Modi's government. Clashes with police left one protester dead and hundreds injured.

Dozens of farmers also died by suicide or because of bad weather or COVID-19 during the demonstrations that have drawn international support from rights campaigners and celebrities, including climate activist Greta Thunberg and superstar Rihanna.

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

At Ghazipur, one of the demonstration sites on the outskirts of New Delhi, celebrations were subdued, but some farmers distributed sweets and danced to songs.

Samyukt Kisan Morcha, the group of farm unions organizing the protests, said it welcomed the government's announcement but that the protests would continue until the government recommits to the system of guaranteed prices. The protesters had long rejected a government offer to suspend the laws for 18 months.

Modi's party hailed the move as a decision that prioritized farmers.

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

But Gilles Verniers, a professor of political science at New Delhi's Ashoka University, said that while the announcement was very significant, the government will find it hard to convince the farmers that the repeal is more than mere political expediency.

"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," said Verniers.

The announcement came on the day of the Guru Purab festival, when Sikhs, who made up most of the protesters, celebrate their founder Guru Nanak's birthday. The laws have particularly alienated the Sikh community, which makes up the majority of the population in Punjab, one of the states with upcoming elections.

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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.

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!"

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

Today in History

By The Associated Press undefined

Today in History

Today is Saturday, Nov. 20, the 324th day of 2021. There are 41 days left in the year.

Today's Highlight in History:

On Nov. 20, 1945, 22 former Nazi officials went on trial before an international war crimes tribunal in Nuremberg, Germany. (Almost a year later, the International Military Tribunal sentenced 12 of the defendants to death; seven received prison sentences ranging from 10 years to life; three were acquitted.)

On this date:

In 1789, New Jersey became the first state to ratify the Bill of Rights.

In 1947, Britain's future queen, Princess Elizabeth, married Prince Philip, Duke of Edinburgh, at Westminster Abbey.

In 1952, President-elect Dwight D. Eisenhower announced his selection of John Foster Dulles to be his secretary of state.

In 1962, President John F. Kennedy held a news conference in which he announced the end of the naval quarantine of Cuba imposed during the missile crisis, and the signing of an executive order prohibiting discrimination in federal housing facilities.

In 1967, the U.S. Census Bureau's Population Clock at the Commerce Department ticked past 200 million.

In 1976, the boxing drama "Rocky," starring Sylvester Stallone, premiered in New York.

In 1984, pop star Michael Jackson was inducted into the Hollywood Walk of Fame with the unveiling of his star in front of a horde of screaming fans.

In 1985, the first version of Microsoft's Windows operating system, Windows 1.0, was officially released.

In 2000, lawyers for Al Gore and George W. Bush battled before the Florida Supreme Court over whether the presidential election recount should be allowed to continue.

In 2003, Michael Jackson was booked on suspicion of child molestation in Santa Barbara, California. (Jackson was later acquitted at trial.) Record producer Phil Spector was charged with murder in the shooting death of an actor, Lana Clarkson, at his home in Alhambra (al-HAM'-bruh), California. (Spector's first trial ended with a hung jury in 2007; he was convicted of second-degree murder in 2009 and sentenced to 19 years to life in prison. He died in January 2021.)

In 2012, former boxing champion Hector "Macho" Camacho was shot while sitting in a car in his hometown of Bayamon, Puerto Rico. (Camacho died four days later after doctors removed him from life support.)

In 2015, Jonathan Pollard, a former U.S. Navy intelligence analyst, was released from prison after 30 years behind bars for spying for Israel. (After five years of parole, Pollard moved to Israel in December 2020.)

Ten years ago: Spain's opposition conservatives were swept into power as voters dumped the Socialists — the third time in as many weeks Europe's debt crisis had claimed a government.

Five years ago: President Barack Obama, concluding his final official world tour in Peru, told a news conference in Lima he didn't intend to become his successor's constant critic — but reserved the right to speak out if President-elect Donald Trump or his policies breached certain "values or ideals." At the

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American Music Awards in Los Angeles, Ariana Grande was named artist of the year; Zayn was named new artist of the year.

One year ago: Georgia's Republican governor and its top elections official certified results showing Democrat Joe Biden won the state's presidential vote over President Donald Trump; the margin was less than 0.5%, allowing the Trump campaign to ask for a recount. A recount of the presidential election in Wisconsin's two most heavily Democratic counties began with the Trump campaign seeking unsuccessfully to discard tens of thousands of absentee ballots. The daily number of coronavirus deaths in the United States was at a six-month high of 1,335, amid a record number of new infections. The development of a vaccine took another step forward when Pfizer asked U.S. regulators to allow emergency use of its COVID-19 vaccine. Kyle Rittenhouse, a 17-year-old from Illinois who was charged with killing two people during a demonstration that followed a police shooting in Kenosha, Wisconsin, posted \$2 million bail and was released from custody.

Today's Birthdays: Actor Estelle Parsons is 94. Comedian Dick Smothers is 83. President Joe Biden is 79. Singer Norman Greenbaum is 79. Actor Veronica Hamel is 78. Broadcast journalist Judy Woodruff is 75. Singer Joe Walsh is 74. Actor Richard Masur is 73. Opera singer Barbara Hendricks is 73. Former national security adviser John Bolton is 73. Actor Bo Derek is 65. Former NFL player Mark Gastineau is 65. Reggae musician Jimmy Brown (UB40) is 64. Actor Sean Young is 62. Pianist Jim Brickman is 60. Actor Ming-Na is 58. Actor Ned Vaughn is 57. Rapper Mike D (The Beastie Boys) is 56. Rapper Sen Dog (Cypress Hill) is 56. Actor Callie Thorne is 52. Actor Sabrina Lloyd is 51. Actor Joel McHale is 50. Actor Marisa Ryan is 47. Country singer Dierks (duhkr) Bentley is 46. Actor Joshua Gomez is 46. Actor Laura Harris is 45. Olympic gold medal gymnast Dominique Dawes is 45. Country singer Josh Turner is 44. Actor Nadine Velazquez (veh-LAHZ'-kehzh) is 43. Actor Jacob Pitts is 42. Actor Andrea Riseborough is 40. Actor Jeremy Jordan is 37. Actor Dan Byrd is 36. Actor Ashley Fink is 35. Rock musician Jared Followill (Kings of Leon) is 35. Actor Jaina Lee Ortiz is 35. Actor Cody Linley is 32. Pop musician Michael Clifford (5 Seconds to Summer) is 26.