

Groton Daily Independent

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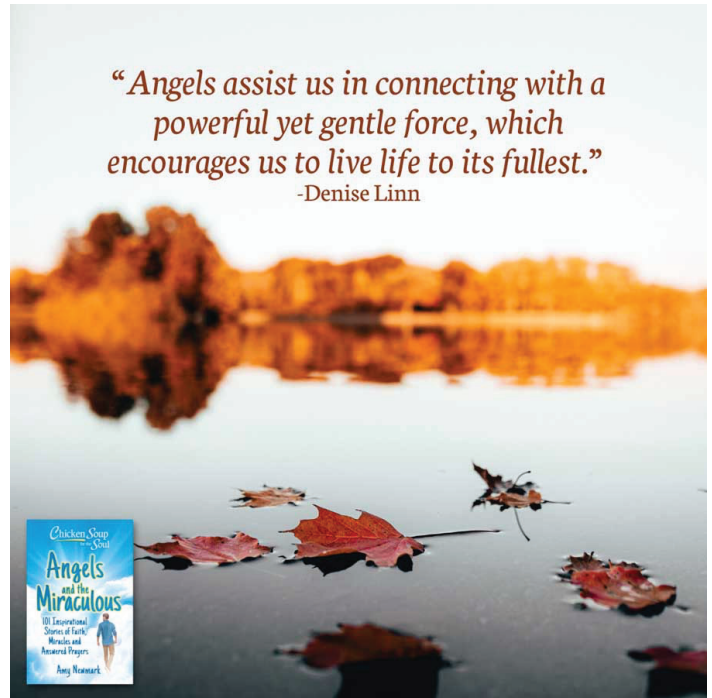
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Thursday, Oct. 5

Senior Menu: Roast beef, mashed potatoes and gravy, Italian blend, peaches, whole wheat bread.
School Breakfast: Breakfast pizza.
School Lunch: Sloppy joes, fries.
Emmanuel Lutheran: Nigeria Circle, 2 p.m. (elect officers)
Fall Picture Day
Northeast Conference cross country meet at Webster, 1 p.m.
Junior high football at Milbank, 4 p.m.
Volleyball hosts Milbank: 7th/C at 5 p.m.; 8th/JV at 6 p.m. with varsity to follow

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

The recycling trailer is located west of the city shop. It takes cardboard, papers and aluminum cans.



Friday, Oct. 6

Senior Menu: BBQ pork riblet on bun, potato salad, mixed vegetables, tropical fruit.
School Breakfast: Biscuits
School Lunch: Pizza, corn.

Saturday, Oct. 7

Thrift Store open, 10 a.m. to 1 pm.
State Soccer Semifinal at Groton

Sunday, Oct. 8

Emmanuel Lutheran: Worship, 9 a.m.; dedicate chapel area and youth room; No Sunday school; Potluck brunch, 10:30 a.m.; Choir, 7 p.m.
St. John's Lutheran: Worship 9 a.m.; worship at Zion, 11 a.m.
United Methodist: NO Sunday school; Conde worship, 8:30 a.m.; Coffee hour, 9:30 a.m.; Groton worship, 10:30 a.m.; Finance committee budget meeting, 11:30 a.m.
Groton CM&A: Sunday School at 9:15 a.m., Worship Service at 10:45 a.m.
Catholic: SEAS Confession, 7:45-8:15 a.m., SEAS Mass, 8:30 a.m.; Turton Confession, 10:30-10:45 a.m.; Turton Mass, 11 a.m.

OPEN: Recycling Trailer in Groton

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The Bulletin by Newsweek

World in Brief

water into the sea on Thursday, despite ongoing complaints from China and South Korea.

Nearly 200 people were injured after Typhoon Koinu brushed past southern Taiwan with strong winds and lashing rains. Schools and offices were closed. No deaths were reported.

The Biden administration announced they will waive 26 federal laws to fast-track the construction of the border wall in South Texas. Congressional funds allocated in 2019 by the Trump Administration will be used for the construction.

The Texas Rangers beat the Tampa Bay Rays 7-1 in the American League Wild Card Series in a two-game sweep. Texas will now head to the AL Division Series to play against the top-seeded Baltimore Orioles on Saturday.

Israel provided powerful weapons to Azerbaijan ahead of its operations last month to seize back control of Nagorno-Karabakh, a region largely populated by ethnic Armenians, the Associated Press reported.

At least 14 people have been killed and 102 are still missing after heavy rains caused Lhonak Lake in Sikkim state, northeast India, to burst its banks.

In the ongoing war in Ukraine, Russia is eyeing a new permanent naval base on the Black Sea coast of Abkhazia, a breakaway region of Georgia, after satellite images showed President Vladimir Putin's Black Sea fleet is fleeing occupied Crimea..

TALKING POINTS

"They are traitors. All eight of them should in fact be primaried. They should all be driven out of public life. What they did was to go to the other team to cause total chaos...We ought to be focusing on Biden, we ought to be focusing on the economy, we ought to be focusing on the border. Former House Speaker Newt Gingrich during an appearance on Fox News, slamming those who voted out Kevin McCarthy as speaker.

"Despite all attempts to deny, conceal, gloss over or relativize the issue, the signs of climate change are here and increasingly evident. No one can ignore the fact that in recent years, we have witnessed extreme weather phenomena, frequent periods of unusual heat, drought and other cries of protest on the part of the earth that are only a few palpable expressions of a silent disease that affects everyone," Pope Francis in a letter Wednesday expressing his concerns over the climate.

What to Watch in the Day Ahead

A memorial service for the late Sen. Dianne Feinstein will be held outside San Francisco City Hall. Speakers will include Vice President Kamala Harris, Sen. Nancy Pelosi and Senate Majority Leader Chuck Schumer. The service will no longer be open to the public due to security concerns.

The weekly report on August's initial jobless claims and trade deficit data will be released at 8:30 a.m. ET.

Several Federal Reserve officials are set to participate in various events, including Cleveland Fed President Loretta Mester, San Francisco Fed President Mary Daly and Fed Gov. Michael Barr, from 8:30 a.m. ET.

U.K. Prime Minister Rishi Sunak will urge leaders at a special summit of European leaders in Spain for more coordination to tackle the rising numbers of undocumented migrants arriving at Europe's borders.

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This sign was posted at the Groton Subway location

To Our Valued Customers

I am sad to inform our wonderful community that our subway location is temporary closed until further notice. I do apologize for the inconvenience and hope to have a resolution to get reopened.

Thank you for your understanding.

Management

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Groton and Frederick school boards achieve honor for board work

Members of the Groton Area School District Board and members of the Frederick Area School District School Board have been recognized by the Associated School Boards of South Dakota.

Groton Area earned 350 or more ALL (Act, Learn, Lead) points for the Silver Level Award and Frederick Area achieved 250 or more ALL points for the Bronze Level Award.

By participating in ASBSD activities, training opportunities and demonstrating leadership at the local, state and national level, school boards accumulated points throughout the previous school year.

ASBSD Executive Director Dr. Douglas R. Wermedal said that both the Groton Area and Frederick Area school boards "put in a tremendous effort during the 2022-23 school year to achieve the ALL award and we're thrilled to honor them for their dedication,"

"The board's efforts will undoubtedly benefit the district's students, staff and community."

Both boards received their plaques in September.

In the seventh year of the program, 90 public school boards – the second most in the history of the program – earned an ALL award.

"Congratulations to the school boards who earned this distinction and thank you for your commitment to enhancing public education locally and statewide," Wermedal said.

ASBSD is a private, non-profit association representing more than 850 South Dakota school board members, the 148 schools they govern and the students they serve.



Sheriff Mack to speak at City Lights in Aberdeen about Property Rights

Sheriff Richard Mack will speak on the Oath of Office, what it means to be a Constitutional Sheriff or Peace Officer, and how to protect your rights at the county level on Wednesday, Oct. 11, at the City Lights in Aberdeen at 7 p.m.

There is no admission charge.

Sheriff Mack is a nationally recognized speaker and is famous for winning a case before the U.S. Supreme Court on Constitutional Right. He founded the Constitutional Sheriffs and Peace Officers Association, CSPOA.org.

Groton Senior Citizens

September 11

Groton Seniors met with eleven members and President Sarge Likness opened with allegiance to the flag. Minutes and treasurer reports were read and accepted. There was no meeting so the meeting was adjourned. Cards were played. Winners of the games were Pinochle- Bruce Shilhank, Whist- Elda Stange, Canasta - Pat Larson. Door prizes went to Sarge Likness, Darlene Fischer and Tony Goldade. Lunch was served by Bruce and Julie Shilhank.

September 18

Groton Seniors met to play cards. Thirteen members were present. President led the flag pledge. Cards were played. The winners were Pinochle- Julie Shilhank, Whist- Tony Goldade, Canasta- Eunice McColister and Pat Larson. Door prizes went to Tony Goldade, Ruby Donovan, Marilyn Thorson. Pat Larson served lunch.

September 25

Seniors met for their potluck dinner with eleven members present. President led the flag pledge and table prayer. Bingo was played after dinner. Bev Sombke won black out. Door prizes: Easy money Dick Donovan, Bev Sombke, Bruce Shilhank. Sarge Likness' birthday was celebrated with ice cream and cake bake by Bev Sombke for lunch. The community senior boxes were handed out at the center. Will be picked up here from now on.

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Golfers place ninth at state

Groton Area's golf team placed ninth at the state event held Monday and Tuesday at Hart Ranch in Rapid City. Brevin Flihs was tied for 27th, Carter Simon tied for 36, Logan Pearson was tied for 56, Jace Johnson was tied for 62 and Jayden Schwan placed 90th.

| Tue, October 3 Hart Ranch Golf Course (ORANGE - Men) | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | |
|--|-----------|-----------|-----------|-----------|-----------|-----------|-----------|-----------|-----------|------------|-----------|-----------|-----------|-----------|-----------|-----------|-----------|-----------|-----------|------------|------------|
| | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 | 8 | 9 | Out | 10 | 11 | 12 | 13 | 14 | 15 | 16 | 17 | 18 | In | Gross |
| Carter Simon | 5 | 4 | 5 | 3 | 5 | 5 | 5 | 5 | 6 | 43 | 4 | 5 | 4 | 3 | 3 | 5 | 4 | 4 | 5 | 37 | 80 |
| Brevin Flihs | 5 | 5 | 7 | 4 | 4 | 4 | 3 | 6 | 5 | 43 | 4 | 6 | 4 | 3 | 5 | 5 | 4 | 5 | 5 | 41 | 84 |
| Jace Johnson | 5 | 6 | 6 | 4 | 4 | 5 | 4 | 4 | 6 | 44 | 4 | 4 | 4 | 4 | 7 | 6 | 5 | 5 | 6 | 45 | 89 |
| Logan Pearson | 4 | 7 | 5 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 5 | 6 | 5 | 44 | 5 | 5 | 6 | 5 | 5 | 7 | 3 | 5 | 6 | 47 | 91 |
| Not included in scoring | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| Jayden Schwan | 6 | 7 | 6 | 5 | 6 | 6 | 3 | 3 | 6 | 48 | 5 | 7 | 5 | 5 | 6 | 6 | 3 | 7 | 6 | 50 | 98 |
| Gross Score | 19 | 22 | 23 | 14 | 17 | 19 | 17 | 21 | 22 | 174 | 17 | 20 | 18 | 15 | 20 | 23 | 16 | 19 | 22 | 170 | 344 |
| To Par (gross) | 3 | 6 | 3 | 2 | 1 | 3 | 5 | 5 | 2 | 30 | 1 | 0 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 7 | 4 | 3 | 2 | 26 | 56 |
| Mon, October 2 Hart Ranch Golf Course (ORANGE - Men) | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 | 8 | 9 | Out | 10 | 11 | 12 | 13 | 14 | 15 | 16 | 17 | 18 | In | Gross |
| Brevin Flihs | 5 | 5 | 6 | 4 | 5 | 5 | 3 | 4 | 6 | 43 | 5 | 6 | 4 | 3 | 4 | 4 | 4 | 5 | 5 | 40 | 83 |
| Logan Pearson | 5 | 4 | 7 | 3 | 3 | 5 | 4 | 4 | 5 | 40 | 4 | 6 | 6 | 4 | 7 | 7 | 2 | 7 | 7 | 50 | 90 |
| Carter Simon | 4 | 4 | 6 | 3 | 4 | 6 | 3 | 7 | 6 | 43 | 5 | 5 | 5 | 4 | 4 | 6 | 6 | 7 | 6 | 48 | 91 |
| Jace Johnson | 6 | 7 | 6 | 5 | 4 | 6 | 4 | 5 | 8 | 51 | 5 | 8 | 4 | 3 | 6 | 5 | 3 | 4 | 6 | 44 | 95 |
| Not included in scoring | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| Jayden Schwan | 5 | 9 | 9 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 4 | 6 | 8 | 53 | 7 | 6 | 8 | 3 | 4 | 8 | 5 | 7 | 7 | 55 | 108 |
| Gross Score | 20 | 20 | 25 | 15 | 16 | 22 | 14 | 20 | 25 | 177 | 19 | 25 | 19 | 14 | 21 | 22 | 15 | 23 | 24 | 182 | 359 |
| To Par (gross) | 4 | 4 | 5 | 3 | 0 | 6 | 2 | 4 | 5 | 33 | 3 | 5 | 3 | 2 | 5 | 6 | 3 | 7 | 4 | 38 | 71 |

Starting Hole
 Eagle or Better
 Birdie
 Par
 Bogey
 Double Bogey or Worse

GDILIVE.COM

Thursday, Oct. 5, 2023
at Groton Area

GT

Milbank
Bulldogs

Groton Area
Tigers

5 pm: C: Fans of Jaedyn Penning
JV: Fans of Emerlee Jones



LADY TIGER
VOLLEYBALL

Varsity Sponsors: Bary Keith at Harr Motors, BK Custom Ts & More, Bierman Farm Service, Blocker Construction, Dacotah Bank, Full Circle Ag, Groton Ag Partners, Groton Chamber, Groton Ford, John Sieh Agency and Locke Electric

That's Life by Tony Bender: Requiem for an english teacher

I don't know. I honestly don't know if you'd be reading this without her.

Bernice Rollo. My high school English teacher.

I don't know if somehow I would have found my way to this keyboard if she hadn't inspired me. Are there a million paths to our destinies or does one flap of a butterfly's wings confound everything?

And if that's a mystery, so too, is the way she accomplished it. The best I can do is to call it subterfuge.

I suppose there was the occasional "well done" written on my compositions, but never a spoken word of encouragement. I don't know if it was happenstance that this seed sprouted on rocky soil or something she intended. She was impossible to read. Would have been a good poker player.

She died last week at 101, having survived COVID and us—some of the most rebellious students in Frederick, SD, history. We were incorrigible but most of us couldn't spell it. She was stoic through it all. Unflappable.

One day, I idly piled the candy wrappers I found in my desk and lit them afire. Don't ask me to explain. The fire quickly and alarmingly got out of hand. Smoke billowed. She looked up from the book she was reading aloud, and said evenly, "Tony, put out that fire." I did, noisily slapping at the flames. She resumed reading.

Smoke wafted down the hall. Moments later, the door swung open and Don Quimby, our disciplinarian principal entered, nostrils flaring. He stared at me, an obvious suspect. Mrs. Rollo continued to read. He looked at her, back at me, and I think he decided then the less he knew, the better. Didn't say a word. Just retreated.

I realized these past few days as I've thought about her that she, herself, was a mystery. Or perhaps I've remained as oblivious as I was then. She wasn't a dynamic presence in the classroom, yet she connected. She is revered by so many.

Here's how she reached me... She often read my compositions in class, a high honor because she wouldn't read anything even pedestrian. My normally rambunctious classmates honored me, too, with their silence—or laughter if it was humorous.

My first serious essay was about a childhood friend, Keith Glaesman, who'd died in a car wreck the previous summer. I think it was the first loss of anyone close to me I'd experienced. The first time I did what the best writers do. Bled onto the page. Revealed the feelings we're afraid to show. Over the years, I became certain of one thing: writers who refuse to bleed are not writers.

My friends knew I'd be a writer long before I did. They were certain of it. Mrs. Rollo may have known, too, but I can't be sure.

"Write about us," my friends said, and I have. I've written about Mrs. Rollo many times, too. It's become lore, instigated by me, that when I started writing newspaper columns in 1991, she'd mail corrected columns back to me with so much red ink it looked like a crime scene. Pure fiction, of course.

I had a mentor who told me once, "As a writer, you break a lot of rules, but at least you know what rules you're breaking." Well, by that time I'd figured out most of them.

I averaged C's in high school English. I was hopeless in grammar—not in the actual application of it, but in the identification of things like dangling participles, adverbs, adjectives, prepositions... I could manage a good sentence. I just couldn't explain why it worked. I survived because I read insatiably. I wrote well because I read well. If you can read, all other doors are open.

As a publisher, I was fortunate to hire an English teacher as an editor—Jane Haas—a dear friend, who helped get through my thick skull what Bernice Rollo couldn't. Of course, Jane had twice as many years to do so.

I won't make Mrs. Rollo's funeral. I'm taking antibiotics the size of baby carrots to beat back a nasty bug, but I suspect she will grant me absolution. I visited her several times a year and always brought her flowers while she was alive to smell them.

I always told her how important she was to me, that I loved her. Her hearing had degraded so she could pretend not to hear me, but I know she did. Stoic to the end. It's funny, though, I never told her that she was the reason I became a writer. But she knew.

And yeah, I'm sending flowers. One last time.



SOUTH DAKOTA SEARCHLIGHT

<https://southdakotasearchlight.com>

National Guard soldiers return from \$850,000 Texas border deployment

BY: JOSHUA HAIAR - OCTOBER 4, 2023 5:12 PM

Fifty South Dakota National Guard soldiers from a unit based in Watertown have returned home after a month-long, \$850,000 deployment to Eagle Pass, Texas.

Ian Fury, spokesman for Gov. Kristi Noem, released some details of the deployment Wednesday after previously declining to divulge information during the deployment "for operational security reasons."

The unit, Alpha Battery, 1st Battalion, 147th Field Artillery, was sent to assist Texas with its Mexican border security efforts.

The Governor's Office said the deployment helped with Texas Gov. Greg Abbott's "Operation Lone Star." Abbott's website says the operation aims to "secure the border; stop the smuggling of drugs, weapons, and people into Texas; and prevent, detect, and interdict transnational criminal activity between ports of entry."

Fury provided no further details on the Guard's specific activities during the deployment, saying "the best description of their mission" was on Abbott's website.

Scott Linquist, public affairs officer for the South Dakota Army National Guard, said the troops were deployed to "support Customs and Border Patrol agents," but referred South Dakota Searchlight to the Texas National Guard for further details. The Texas National Guard's press office did not immediately respond.

Noem welcomed the unit home earlier this week.

"Biden refuses to fix the warzone at the Southern border," Noem posted on X, the social media platform formerly known as Twitter. "When (Abbott) asked for help, we took action and sent (SD National Guard) troops to assist Operation Lone Star."

The \$850,000 came from the state's Emergency and Disaster Fund. Noem's budget proposal to the Legislature last winter did not include a National Guard border deployment, and her budget documents described the Emergency and Disaster Fund as being for emergencies and disasters "in South Dakota." Lawmakers put \$2.5 million into the fund at Noem's request.

Noem has sent National Guard troops to the nation's southern border before.

In 2021, she ignited controversy with her acceptance of a \$1 million donation from Tennessee billionaire Willis Johnson to pay most of the cost for deploying 48 troops. That deployment cost a total of \$1.45 million, according to records obtained by Citizens for Responsibility and Ethics in Washington, through a Freedom of Information Act lawsuit. The \$1 million donation was routed through the Emergency and Disaster Fund, and the fund itself covered the portion of the deployment's cost not covered by the donation.

Also in 2021, Noem approved the sending of additional National Guard soldiers to the border at the request of the federal government. She said at the time that those additional troops were on federal pay status.

Joshua Haiar is a reporter based in Sioux Falls. Born and raised in Mitchell, he joined the Navy as a public affairs specialist after high school and then earned a degree from the University of South Dakota. Prior to joining South Dakota Searchlight, Joshua worked for five years as a multimedia specialist and journalist with South Dakota Public Broadcasting.

\$86 million dairy proposed on land owned by governor's brothers

Project faces opposition from some local residents

BY: JOSHUA HAIAR - OCTOBER 4, 2023 3:00 PM

HAZEL — An \$86 million, 12,500-cow dairy project is proposed on 250 acres currently owned by Gov. Kristi Noem's brothers in northeastern South Dakota, and it faces opposition from some local residents.

The brothers plan to sell the land to the company proposing the dairy. One of Noem's two brothers, Rock Arnold, spoke at a public information meeting Tuesday evening at the Hazel firehouse. He said the dairy's demand for cattle feed would increase local grain prices, which would be good for farmers.

"They are a rural, farm-family owned and operated business," Arnold said of the project's backers. "They have small-town values. They want to be a member and partner in our community."

He added that small communities like Hazel — which has about 100 residents — have seen their populations decline and businesses close in recent decades, and the dairy would bring new jobs and more tax revenue.

But the project has critics. A petition is circulating against the project in Hazel. It has about 30 signatures so far, one opponent said.

One concern is about the higher grain prices that Rock Arnold touted. An attendee asked how his small cattle operation would benefit from higher feed costs and greater competition for feed. That comment garnered applause.

Concerns from the community also include new traffic and its impact on roads, the company's request to waive the county's mandatory 3-mile setback from the town, and the 160 million gallons of water required for the project, which would come from a new well or the local rural water supplier.

"How is this going to impact our environment?" asked Vanessa Namken. "And will there be an environmental impact study?"

Project details

The company behind the Brantford Dairy project, Riverview LLP, already operates five dairies in the state and one feedlot. The new project is proposed at a location two miles south of town.

Riverview's Cassidy Watzke spoke at the meeting. She said the state is not requiring an environmental impact study. She added that the company prioritizes being a good neighbor and takes environmental concerns seriously.

Watzke said the project would need the equivalent of over 10,000 acres' worth of local hay and grain for feed, and manure from the dairy would be available for fertilizer on local fields, making the project a win-win.

Watzke said the company will mitigate odor by covering the stored manure — rather than leaving it in an uncovered pit — and having fans moving air through the facility.

"It is a livestock facility, and odors are tied into livestock facilities," Watzke said. While pointing to a model of the odor the project would emit, she said, "As you can see, the odor is pretty much over the dairy itself."

Once operational, Watzke said the project would provide 45 jobs each making between \$50,000 and \$90,000 per year.

"We do actively recruit in the United States and Mexico," she said.

Win Noem, the mayor of Bryant and the uncle of First Gentleman Bryon Noem, also spoke in favor of the project. He said Bryant's tax revenue has doubled since the Riverview Dairy near Bryant was constructed.

'Never sell the land'

Gov. Noem has said publicly, "My dad always told me, 'Never sell the land, Kristi. God's not making any more of it.'" She was referencing her late father, Ron Arnold, who died in a 1994 farm accident.

Rock Arnold told South Dakota Searchlight that Ron Arnold also cared about ensuring local communities thrive and farmers receive a good price for their grain.

"She made that comment way before she knew about this proposed dairy," Arnold said. "If my dad were alive today — and a lot of people in this room knew him and knew that he was a forward thinker, knew that he wanted to do what's best for the community — I think he'd be 100% on board with this."

Gov. Noem's mother, Corrine Arnold, agreed. She told South Dakota Searchlight that she gave her blessing after "the boys talked to me first."

Rock Arnold said Gov. Noem does not have any ownership in the land targeted for the dairy.

The dairy will need permits from the state Department of Agriculture and Natural Resources and Hamlin County Board of Adjustment. The project is applying for a Governor's Office of Economic Development program that would refund up to \$4.5 million of the sales and use taxes spent to build the project.

Joshua Haiar is a reporter based in Sioux Falls. Born and raised in Mitchell, he joined the Navy as a public affairs specialist after high school and then earned a degree from the University of South Dakota. Prior to joining South Dakota Searchlight, Joshua worked for five years as a multimedia specialist and journalist with South Dakota Public Broadcasting.

How does a 'frozen' U.S. House function without a speaker?

Everyone's got an opinion.

BY: JACOB FISCHLER AND JENNIFER SHUTT - OCTOBER 4, 2023 5:03 PM

WASHINGTON — The stunning ouster of U.S. House Speaker Kevin McCarthy on Tuesday — the first time a speaker has been removed in Congress' 234-year history — created a leadership vacuum in the chamber and left multiple questions about how legislative business would proceed.

North Carolina Republican Patrick McHenry ascended to the role of speaker pro tempore following the vote to unseat McCarthy. McHenry's rise occurred under a House rule created in the aftermath of the Sept. 11, 2001, terrorist attacks that allowed McCarthy to secretly choose a temporary successor in advance, in the event the speaker's office was vacated.

The rule seems designed to keep the chamber running without an elected speaker, but in an institution governed largely by precedent, the unprecedented nature of the situation provoked a buzz of uncertainty, speculation and opinion in D.C. on the day after McCarthy's unwilling exit.

"The only thing I'm certain about is that anyone who says that they have any certainty on this is lying," said Josh Chafetz, a professor of law and politics at Georgetown Law. "There's absolutely no precedents on any of this because this hasn't happened before."

Members were exasperated. "The House of Representatives is effectively frozen," Rep. Garret Graves, a Louisiana Republican and McCarthy ally, told reporters Wednesday. "We're not able to actually advance legislation. We can't even refer bills to committee."

McHenry has called for House members to vote on the next speaker on Oct. 11. Until then, the House is unlikely to try to conduct business — even as a government funding deadline approaches Nov. 17. But there's also the possibility that the House won't — or is unable to — choose a speaker for even longer.

Here are some questions about how the chamber moves forward in the absence of an elected speaker, with answers from legal and congressional experts.

Why does the role of speaker pro tempore exist in the U.S. House of Representatives, and what powers does that person hold?

Molly E. Reynolds, senior fellow in Governance Studies at the Brookings Institution, said Wednesday during a panel discussion the role of speaker pro tempore was designed as a way to bolster continuity of government.

"The language of the rule itself isn't entirely clear on what powers the speaker pro tem has — whether it's all of the powers of the Office of the Speaker, or just authorities that allow him to effectuate a new election for speaker," Reynolds said.

There are two schools of thought about how much power a speaker pro tempore holds, Reynolds said.

"I would put myself in the camp that the speaker pro tem, McHenry, has the full powers of the speakership with the possible exception of sitting in the line of succession." Reynolds said.

"My logic there is that given how this rule was originally designed, which was to allow someone to act as speaker in the event of a real crisis, that you would not necessarily have wanted to develop a rule that

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would limit that person's power in an actual emergency," Reynolds said.

Other experts agreed with that view.

"The idea behind a pro tempore is: The person can act in the absence of a speaker," Jason Roberts, a political science professor at the University of North Carolina, told States Newsroom. "So I interpret that to mean the speaker pro tempore can do basically whatever they choose to do."

Nearly every move McHenry makes would become a precedent for future temporary speakers, Roberts said.

Tests to McHenry's power could end up being settled by a majority of the House, experts said.

"The way that precedents in the House work when things are unprecedented is when someone does something, that becomes a precedent," Roberts said. "If someone is unhappy with what they did, they can raise a point of order... And then the House would vote on that, and if they sustain the point of order then that would become the precedent."

How is McHenry approaching the job?

For the time being, McHenry is taking the more restrained approach to his authority as the temporary speaker of the House. He has not yet referred bills to committee or scheduled floor votes on any legislation, Reynolds said.

But that could change if Republicans cannot quickly elect another speaker.

"This is all pretty untested and it may well be the case that McHenry's choice to act in this more limited way is a political one," Reynolds said.

Because this has never happened before, anything McHenry does during the days or weeks to come could be used as precedent in the future if the House ever needs to lean on another speaker pro tempore, Reynolds said.

"In the kind of situation that this rule originally anticipated — a true catastrophic emergency — I think we would probably want the person acting as speaker pro tem to have more expansive powers than McHenry is at least planning at this moment to exercise," Reynolds said.

Steven S. Smith, a professor at Arizona State University, said that if a leadership vacuum persists past next week, McHenry may have to consider a more robust approach.

"If no new speaker manages to get elected that quickly and he remains the speaker pro tem, then I'm guessing that he'll have to start thinking about exercising the real powers of the speakership," Smith said.

Though a temporary speaker could — possibly — use many of the official powers of the office, McHenry lacks some of the power speakers typically enjoy as the leader of the House.

McHenry would lack the power to appoint Rules Committee members, for example, which is what allows a speaker to control the House floor and makes the position as powerful as it is, Smith said.

"If McHenry ends up being, say, a medium-term speaker pro tem, it's going to be somewhat awkward because none of the Rules Committee members owe their presence there to him," Smith said. "And he's not empowered to do anything about it under the conference rules."

McHenry would also lack the power to appoint members to the steering committee, which makes appointments to every committee in the House, Smith said.

What exactly does the rule say?

The official rules of the House detail what the chamber should do if the speaker becomes ill for a long period of time, or if the office is vacated.

Section 8(b)(3)(A) of Rule I states: "In the case of a vacancy in the Office of Speaker, the next Member on the list described in subdivision (B) shall act as Speaker pro tempore until the election of a Speaker or a Speaker pro tempore. Pending such election the Member acting as Speaker pro tempore may exercise such authorities of the Office of the Speaker as may be necessary and appropriate to that end."

What is "necessary and appropriate to that end" is the part that leads to some debate among experts.

What can the House do without a speaker?

The speaker pro tempore position was intended to allow the House to continue to function as normal, even without an elected speaker.

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In practice, though, at least in the short term, it's a major disruption to House business.

Graves blasted Rep. Matt Gaetz, the Florida Republican who led the challenge to McCarthy, saying he undermined conservative goals and stripped powers from the Republican office.

"You can't offer subpoenas, you can't go after Hunter Biden, you can't go after any of the controversies that this administration has carried out," Graves said.

Experts said it was unclear how subpoena power could be affected.

If McHenry becomes more assertive as an acting speaker during a prolonged period without an elected one, the House itself would ultimately decide the extent of that position's power.

"The most fundamental thing about the House is a majority of the House can do anything the majority wants to do," Roberts said.

Can House committees meet for hearings or to report bills to the floor?

Nothing but political considerations would prevent committees from meeting, Smith said.

Committees' authorities, organized under a rules package approved at the beginning of this Congress and in effect even after McCarthy's ouster, "don't change at all," Roberts said.

"I can't think of any reason why committees couldn't meet," Chafetz said. "Committees don't need the permission of the speaker to hold a meeting."

Can the House change the rules that allowed for McCarthy's ouster?

Yes. The House can change its rules at any time, through a majority vote on the floor, Smith said.

McCarthy agreed to a rule change allowing any single member to bring a motion to vacate, the procedure that Gaetz used to trigger the speaker's fall.

With that in mind, McCarthy's successor may seek to add a minimum number of members who must sign on to such a motion.

Though rules packages are usually only passed at the beginning of a two-year Congress, a majority can choose to change them at any time.

What about the line of succession?

The House speaker is second in the line of succession to the presidency, behind only the vice president.

With that office vacant, the president pro tempore of the U.S. Senate, currently Washington Democrat Patty Murray, would move up to second in line, Roberts said. Murray holds the position by virtue of being the most senior member of the Senate's majority party.

While McHenry could exercise most of the speaker's powers within the House, he is not technically the speaker for the purposes of succession.

"Officially, the speaker's office is vacant," Roberts said.

Does the vote to remove McCarthy as speaker increase the odds of a government shutdown or spending cuts?

Reynolds from Brookings said one of the challenges for the next GOP speaker will be when and how to make trade-offs with the hard-right members of the conference or the centrists, who are most at risk of losing reelection next year.

"If you try to pass an appropriations bill that is embraced by those on the right end of the conference, you're going to lose votes from the left end of the conference," Reynolds said.

"So it's a much different political struggle to manage those differences in the conference," Reynolds said. "And that's not going to go away for whoever is the next speaker of the House and in some ways the stakes of all of this are going to get higher the longer we go into the fiscal year."

A provision in the debt limit law that President Joe Biden and McCarthy brokered in May would institute a 1% across-the-board spending cut to defense and domestic discretionary programs next year if Congress cannot pass all 12 of the annual spending bills before the spring.

That provision wouldn't have any real-world effects until April 30, though if any of the bills aren't law before then, all of the departments and agencies would be forced to cut spending.

The "Sword of Damocles" provision, as Reynolds called it, will likely galvanize defense hawks in the House and Senate to broker agreement on all the bills before that deadline.

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"But one thing that we should take away from this episode, is that if we think what Kevin McCarthy did over the weekend was the right thing, that does not necessarily save him, or any future speaker, from punishment from a dissident faction of his own conference, even though ultimately it may be the right choice for the government and for the country," Reynolds said.

Matthew Green, professor of politics at Catholic University of America, said the next Republican speaker will likely have a brief time to broker bipartisan agreements without facing the same motion to vacate that McCarthy did.

"I think there is probably a small window for the next speaker to be able to get things through, even if that requires cooperating with the Democrats and the president — which it almost certainly will — that it won't necessarily end their speakership," Green said.

Another challenge for House Republicans is that dealing with the speakership race eats up precious time they need to pass spending bills, Smith said. A new speaker won't take office until Oct. 11 at the earliest.

"Taking out about 25% of the remaining days before the CR expires is going to put Republicans in a pinch," Smith said, referring to the continuing resolution that funds the government through Nov. 17.

How did the House Republican Conference get here, and what does it mean for the future?

Green, of Catholic University of America, said that changes in the GOP's goals over time have partially led to what happened this week when eight members were able to oust a speaker who was backed by more than 210 of his Republican colleagues.

The trend can be traced back to former Speaker Newt Gingrich, and leaders before him, who Green said began shifting the goals to having power, having a majority and communicating. The central goal, he said, wasn't always legislating.

"That objective and that way of viewing one's political career gets certain folks elected, who may have genuine views and beliefs and political preferences — but they also don't see Congress as a place to solve problems and legislate," Green said. "And that's in many ways why we are where we are today."

Philip Wallach, senior fellow at the American Enterprise Institute, said sometimes House Republicans "get distracted from the fact that they are members of a legislature that ultimately has to pass laws with majorities of two chambers and get the signature of the president."

How does kicking McCarthy out as speaker affect House Republicans' fundraising prospects heading into the 2024 elections?

Kevin R. Kosar, senior fellow at the American Enterprise Institute, said that the eight Republicans who voted to remove McCarthy might have created long-lasting problems for House GOP fundraising efforts.

"He was a tremendous fundraiser. He raised gobs and gobs of money for his party, just as Pelosi had done. That's one of the duties of the modern speaker, is to be this sort of a cash cow," Kosar said.

"The GOP dissidents just killed that cash cow," Kosar added. "And I wonder inside the GOP conference, how many members are seething about that because many of them are heavily reliant on the speaker to raise money for them."

Ariana Figueroa contributed to this report.

Jacob covers federal policy as a senior reporter for States Newsroom. Based in Oregon, he focuses on Western issues. His coverage areas include climate, energy development, public lands and infrastructure.

Jennifer covers the nation's capital as a senior reporter for States Newsroom. Her coverage areas include congressional policy, politics and legal challenges with a focus on health care, unemployment, housing and aid to families.

White House provides another \$9 billion in student debt relief as pandemic pause ends

BY: ARIANA FIGUEROA - OCTOBER 4, 2023 11:33 AM

WASHINGTON — As federal student loan repayments restart, the Biden administration Wednesday announced an additional \$9 billion in student loan forgiveness for 125,000 borrowers.

"For years, millions of eligible borrowers were unable to access the student debt relief they qualified for, but that's all changed thanks to President Biden and this Administration's relentless efforts to fix the broken student loan system," U.S. Secretary of Education Miguel Cardona said in a statement.

The announcement comes days after federal student loan repayments restarted following a nearly three-year pause due to the pandemic. Borrowers with federal student loans have the option of an on-ramp program, where they can delay making payments for 12 months, but interest will still accrue.

The \$9 billion in new relief includes \$5.2 billion in forgiveness for 53,000 borrowers in the Public Service Loan Forgiveness program; \$2.8 billion in forgiveness for 51,000 borrowers from a one-time fix to income-driven repayment plans; and \$1.2 billion in forgiveness for 22,000 borrowers with permanent disabilities.

The PSLF program wipes away remaining student loan debt after qualifying public sector workers have made 10 years' worth of monthly payments. Since October 2021, the Biden administration has forgiven more than 715,000 borrowers with PSLF loans, totaling \$50.8 billion.

The one-time fix to the income-driven repayment program comes after long-time borrowers, including those who had been making payments for 20 years or more, were denied relief they were eligible for under the repayment plans. More than 800,000 federal student loan borrowers were granted relief after the adjustment was made, totaling \$39 billion.

With Wednesday's announcement, more than 854,870 federal student loan borrowers have had their student loan debt forgiven through the IDR adjustment, totaling nearly \$42 billion in relief, the administration said.

The Department of Education also implemented a new income driven repayment program known as Saving on A Valuable Education, or SAVE, and many borrowers have been automatically funneled into the program. It's a plan that, for some borrowers, could result in no monthly payments.

So far, the Biden administration has approved up to \$127 billion in student debt cancellation for about 3.6 million borrowers.

"Today's announcement builds on everything our administration has already done to protect students from unaffordable debt, make repayment more affordable, and ensure that investments in higher education pay off for students and working families," Cardona said.

The Department of Education is also trying to go through the formal rulemaking process of canceling federal student loan debt after the Supreme Court this summer struck down the Biden administration's one-time debt relief program that would have canceled up to \$20,000 in loans for some borrowers.

Republicans have long criticized the Biden administration's policy to provide debt relief. Louisiana Republican Sen. Bill Cassidy said the White House is shifting the debt relief onto taxpayers.

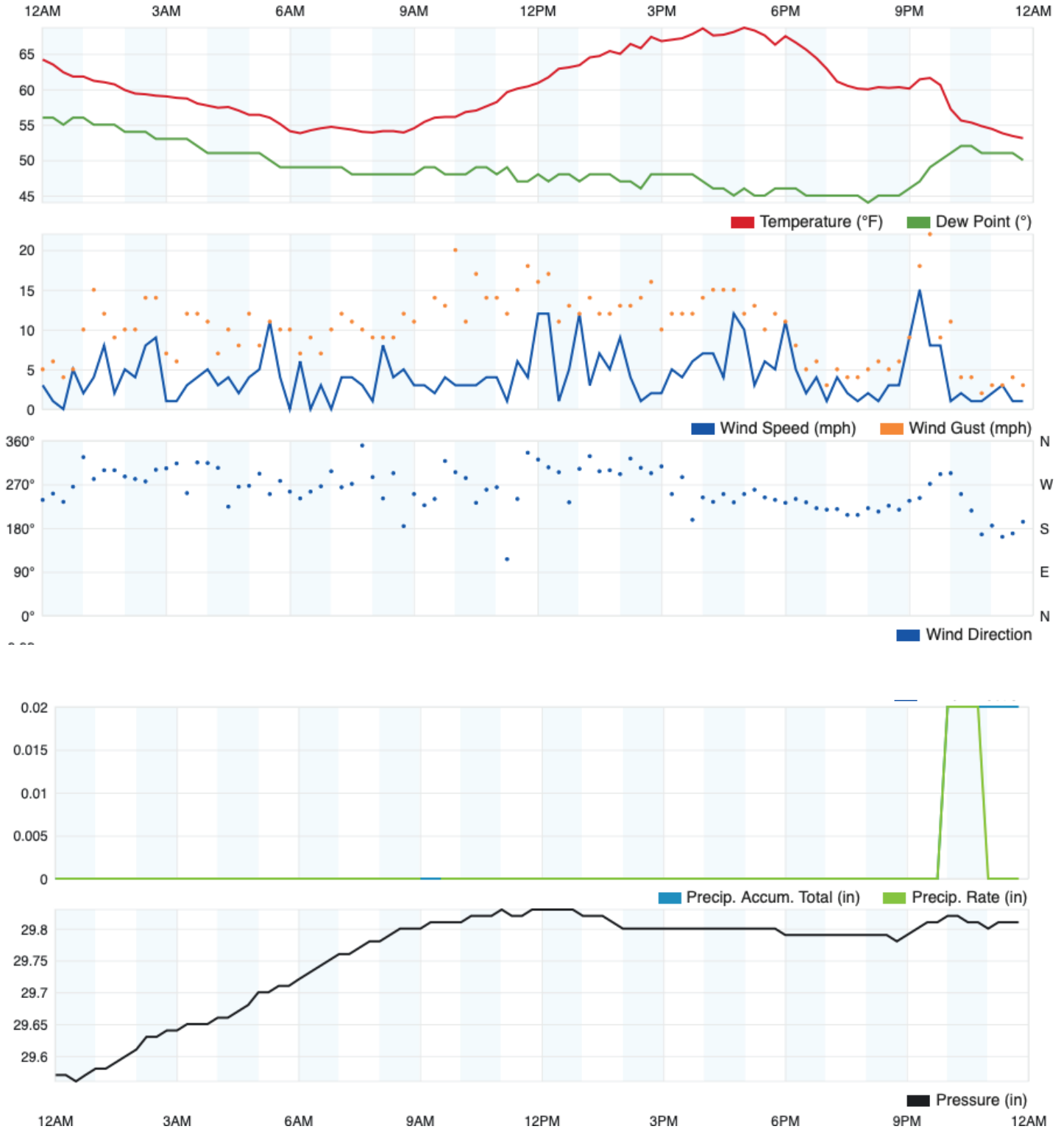
"The Department still refuses to share with Congress what statutory authority they are claiming to justify this expenditure of taxpayer dollars," Cassidy said in a statement. "This is part of a pattern of the Biden administration illegally acting without congressional approval, costing the American people hundreds of billions of dollars."

Ariana covers the nation's capital for States Newsroom. Her areas of coverage include politics and policy, lobbying, elections and campaign finance.

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Yesterday's Groton Weather Graphs




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| Thu Oct 5 | Fri Oct 6 | Sat Oct 7 | Sun Oct 8 | Mon Oct 9 | Tue Oct 10 | Wed Oct 11 |
|--------------|--------------|---------------|--------------|--------------|---------------|---------------|
| | | | | | | |
| 58°F 38°F | 50°F 30°F | 58°F 38°F | 63°F 38°F | 62°F 40°F | 67°F 45°F | 64°F 42°F |
| W 26 MPH | NW 26 MPH | WSW 10 MPH | NW 11 MPH | NE 9 MPH | SSE 11 MPH | ESE 13 MPH |



Frost/Freeze Friday
night into Saturday
morning




Gusts close to 40 mph
possible today,
especially west river



Today
Windy, chance of overnight
showers
Highs: 55 - 62°F

Friday
Windy, widespread freeze/frost overnight
Highs: 46 - 53°F

Saturday
Mostly sunny
Highs: 53 - 65°F



October 5, 2023 3:09 AM

Today is going to be windy. Gusts could get close to 40 mph at times, especially west river. Temperatures will be decreasing through the rest of the work week, but should recover in time for the weekend. Widespread frost/freeze is expected Friday night into Saturday morning. For more information on frost/freeze see: <https://www.weather.gov/abr/FallFrostFreezeDSSPage>

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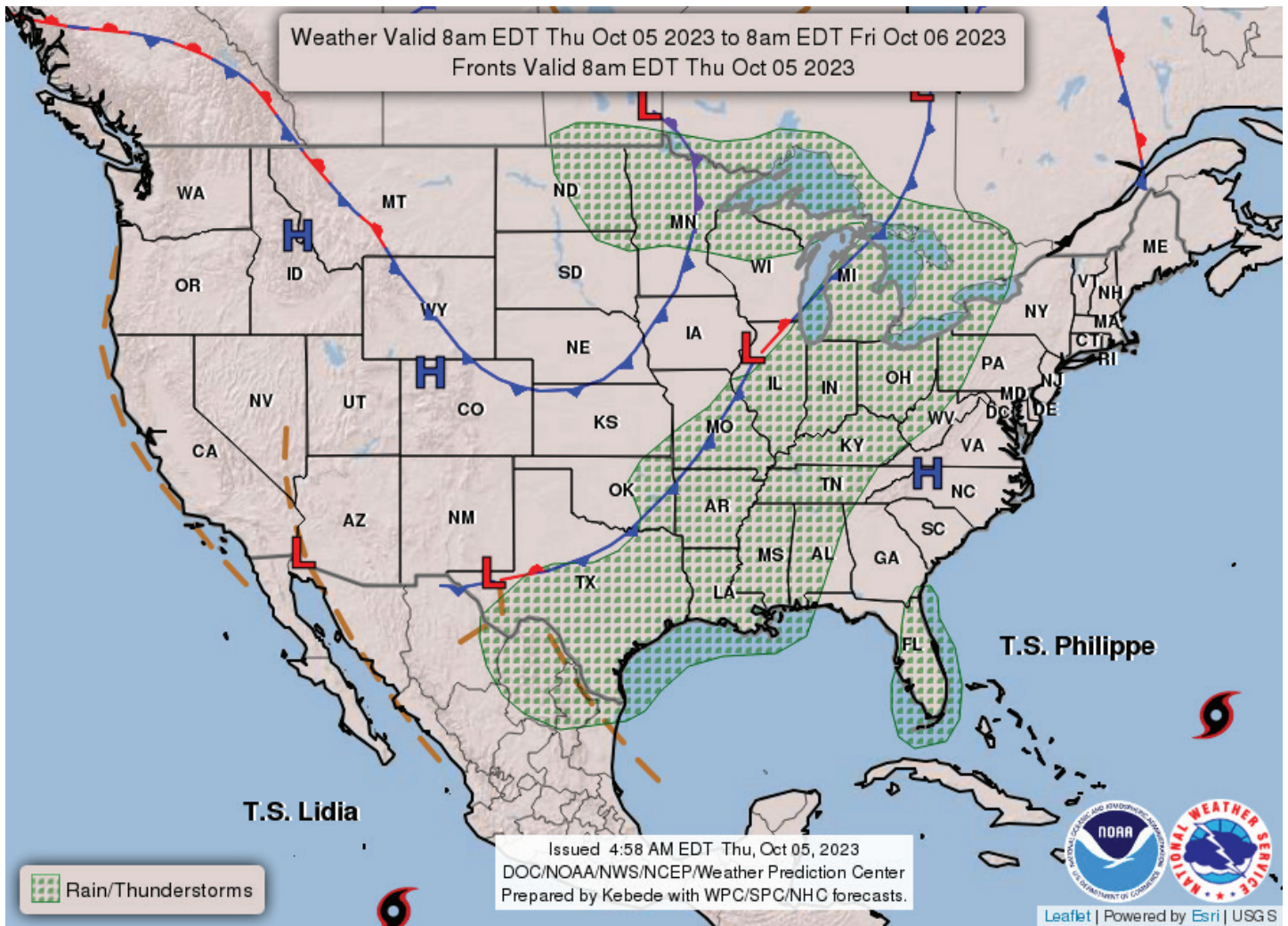
Yesterday's Groton Weather

High Temp: 69 °F at 3:54 PM
Low Temp: 53 °F at 11:25 PM
Wind: 22 mph at 9:22 PM
Precip: : 0.02

Day length: 11 hours, 33 minutes

Today's Info

Record High: 96 in 1963
Record Low: 19 in 1935
Average High: 66
Average Low: 39
Average Precip in Oct.: 0.39
Precip to date in Oct.: 0.03
Average Precip to date: 18.72
Precip Year to Date: 21.80
Sunset Tonight: 7:07:20 PM
Sunrise Tomorrow: 7:35:31 AM



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Today in Weather History

October 5, 1982: Strong thunderstorms developed across central South Dakota and raced into portions of southwest Minnesota. The storms were prolific lightning producers in South Dakota, setting several structures on fire. An electrical substation was damaged near Salem, an elementary school was set ablaze in Aberdeen, and several homes in Sioux Falls were struck. One house in Sioux Falls had a hole knocked in a wall by a lightning strike.

Numerous fires were also started in southern Minnesota by the same line of storms. Strong thunderstorm winds leveled several buildings, damaged a house, and moved a hog shed off its foundation on three separate farms near Worthington. The winds also turned over railroad cars near Pipestone. Worthington narrowly escaped damage as a small tornado touched down two miles southwest of town and moved southeast. Fortunately, the tornado's damage was confined to trees and crops.

October 5, 2013: A historic blizzard pounded western South Dakota with record-setting snowfall and high winds for almost 48 hours from October 3 through the afternoon of October 5. One to two feet of snow was reported over the plains of western South Dakota, with three to five feet of snow falling over the northern and central Black Hills. Wind gusts to 70 mph across the plains produced significant blowing and drifting snow, with visibilities near zero for much of the day on October 4. The heavy wet snow and strong winds downed trees and power lines, causing prolonged outages and impassable highways. The roofs of several businesses, a middle school, and a community center collapsed from the heavy snow. Thousands of livestock were killed from hypothermia, suffocation, or drowning. The South Dakota Animal Industry Board received over 21,000 cattle; over 1300 sheep; 400 horses; and 40 bison deaths from the storm. Tree and debris removal costs were several million dollars. An unyielding low-pressure area moving across the region brought an early fall blizzard to most of the counties west of Missouri River on October 4th and 5th. The snowfall and blizzard conditions occurred mainly along with the western parts of the counties. The snowfall amounts varied broadly from 1 to 2 inches to as much as 22 inches in far western Corson County. Very strong northwest winds of 30 to 50 mph with gusts to 60 mph brought blizzard conditions and significant travel problems. Interstate-90 was closed from Murdo to the Wyoming border from 7 pm on October 4th to October 8th. No travel was advised on all roads west of the Missouri River. Many cattle were also lost in western Corson County due to the storm. The heavy snow, along with strong winds, resulted in some power outages and some downed tree branches. The snowfall began in the late morning hours of the 4th and ended in the early afternoon hours of the 5th. Some snowfall amounts that occurred were 1 inch at Murdo; 2 inches at Timber Lake and 5 miles west of Hayes; 4 inches at McIntosh; 16 inches southeast of Morrystown; and 22 inches southwest of Keldron.

1638 - The journal of John Winthrop recorded that a mighty tempest struck eastern New England. This second severe hurricane in three years blew down many trees in mile long tracks. (David Ludlum)

1786: The famous "Pumpkin Flood" occurred on the Delaware and Susquehanna Rivers. Harrisburg, PA, reported a river stage of twenty-two feet.

1864: A tropical cyclone hit India near Calcutta, devastating the city and killing about 60,000 people.

1917 - The temperature at Sentinel, AZ, soared to 116 degrees to establish an October record for the nation. (The Weather Channel)

1972: Tropical Storm Joanne, earlier a hurricane, moved across the Baja California peninsula and came ashore in western Mexico south of Ajo. The storm brought heavy rain and flooding to much of Arizona. This storm is the first documented tropical storm to reach Arizona, with its cyclonic circulation intact. Over 5 inches of rain was reported on the Mogollon rim southeast of Flagstaff. Additional rainfall amounts included 4.44 at Flagstaff, 3.80 at Prescott, 2.21 at Yuma, 1.95 at Phoenix, 1.63 at Nogales, and 1.63 at Tucson.

2010: Large hail pounded Phoenix, Arizona, causing nearly \$3 billion in damage.

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Daily Devotionals

Seeds of Hope

FINDING SECURITY

"The fear of the Lord is the beginning..."

Eight words, strung together by God, that give man the building blocks of life.

Eight words that provide the foundation for wisdom.

Eight words that are essential to understanding the meaning of life.

Eight words that guarantee a joyous life.

Eight words that lead to fulfillment in life.

Eight words that point the direction for what we must do if we want to please God.

Eight words that prove the faithfulness of God.

Eight words that are the beginning of our obedience to the Lord.

Eight words that eliminate the folly of talk and teach us how to walk before God.

And once we completely and unreservedly "fear the Lord," we will have confidence and courage to face any obstacle in life because God is bigger than anything and everything else in the universe.

But those words do not end when our lives end. They are generational and, if the believer is faithful, will be passed from generation to generation.

Parents who want to provide safety and security and wellbeing for their children will do so because of their "fear of the Lord." Scripture provides all the evidence any parent needs to realize the benefits that will come to their children if they - the parents - "fear the Lord" and are obedient to Him - no matter the cost!

Not parents? Pass the message on. It's lifesaving!

Prayer: Lord, may we take to heart the significance and importance of those eight words, "the fear of the Lord" is where life begins. May we recognize Your power and our limits. Amen.

Scripture For Today: Whoever fears the LORD has a secure fortress, and for their children it will be a refuge. Proverbs 14:26



We all need the encouragement, comfort, and peace that comes through God's grace. Our daily devotionals, known as Seeds of Hope, have been a means through which thousands of people have experienced this grace. Each devotional comes from God's Word and we pray this good "seed" finds good soil in your heart. Our aim is that the Seeds of Hope will be a great source of daily encouragement to you and that God will use them to draw you near to Him

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2023 Community Events

- 01/29/2023 Groton Robotics Pancake Feed, 10am-1pm, Community Center
- 01/29/2023 85th Carnival of Silver Skates 2pm & 6:30pm (Last Sunday of January)
- 01/31/2023-02/03/2023 Lion's Club Prom & Formal Dress Consignment Drop Off 6-9pm, Community Center
- 02/04/2023-02/05/2023 Lion's Club Prom & Formal Dress Consignment Sale 1-5pm, Community Center
- 02/25/2023 Littles and Me, Art Making 10-11:30am, Wage Memorial Library
- 03/25/2023 Spring Vendor Fair, 10am-3pm, Community Center
- 04/01/2023 Dueling Duo Baseball/Softball Fundraiser at the Legion Post #39 6-11:30pm
- 04/06/2023 Groton Career Development Event
- 04/08/2023 Lion's Club Easter Egg Hunt 10am Sharp at the City Park (Saturday a week before Easter)
- 04/22/2023 Firemen's Spring Social at the Fire Station 7pm-12:30am (Same Saturday as GHS Prom)
- 04/23/2023 Princess Prom 4:30-8pm (Sunday after GHS Prom)
- 05/06/2023 Lion's Club Spring Citywide Rummage Sale 8am-3pm (1st Saturday in May)
- 05/29/2023 Legion Post #39 Memorial Day Services (Memorial Day)
- 06/16/2023 SDSU Alumni and Friends Golf Tournament
- 06/17/2023 Groton Triathlon
- 07/04/2023 Couples Firecracker Golf Tournament
- 07/09/2023 Lion's Club Summer Fest/Car Show at the City Park 9am-4pm (Sunday Mid-July)
- 07/26/2023 GGA Burger Fundraiser Lunch at Olive Grove Golf Course
- 08/04/2023 Wine on Nine 6pm
- 08/10/2023 Family Fun Fest, 5:30 p.m. to 7:30 p.m.
- 08/11/2023 GHS Basketball Golf Tournament
- 09/08/2023 Family Fun Fest 3:30-5:30pm
- 09/09/2023 Lion's Club Fall Citywide Rummage Sale 8am-3pm
- 09/09-10/2023 Groton Airport Fly-In/Drive-In, Groton Municipal Airport
- 09/10/2023 Couples Sunflower Tourney at Olive Grove Golf Course 10am
- 09/10/2023 Emmanuel Lutheran Church Sunday School Rally 9:00am
- 09/10/2023 7th Annual Doggie Day at the Swimming Pool 4-6pm
- 09/15/2023 Homecoming Parade
- 10/13/2023 Lake Region Marching Band Festival 10am
- 10/14/2023 Pumpkin Fest at the City Park 10am-3pm
- 10/31/2023 Downtown Trick or Treat 4-6pm
- 10/31/2023 United Methodist Church Trunk or Treat 5:30-7pm
- 11/23/2023 Community Thanksgiving at the Community Center 11:30am-1pm
- 12/02/2023 Tour of Homes, Live & Silent Auctions at Olive Grove Golf Course 4pm-close
- 12/09/2023 Santa Claus Day at Professional Management Services 9-11am

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WINNING NUMBERS

MEGA MILLIONS

WINNING NUMBERS:
10.03.23

3 19 32 39 59 24

MegaPlier: 3x

NEXT ESTIMATED JACKPOT:
\$350,000,000

NEXT 1 Days 15 Hrs 50
DRAW: Mins 36 Secs

[PREVIOUS RESULTS](#)

LOTTO AMERICA

WINNING NUMBERS:
10.04.23

4 5 8 26 42 8

All Star Bonus: 3x

NEXT ESTIMATED JACKPOT:
\$2,550,000

NEXT 2 Days 15 Hrs 5
DRAW: Mins 36 Secs

[PREVIOUS RESULTS](#)

LUCKY FOR LIFE

WINNING NUMBERS:
10.04.23

11 25 28 43 45 10

TOP PRIZE:
\$7,000/week

NEXT 15 Hrs 20 Mins
DRAW: 36 Secs

[PREVIOUS RESULTS](#)

DAKOTA CASH

WINNING NUMBERS:
10.04.23

9 17 18 19 35

NEXT ESTIMATED JACKPOT:
\$20,000

NEXT 2 Days 15 Hrs 20
DRAW: Mins 36 Secs

[PREVIOUS RESULTS](#)

POWERBALL

DOUBLE PLAY

WINNING NUMBERS:
10.04.23

12 30 39 64 67 22

TOP PRIZE:
\$10,000,000

NEXT 2 Days 15 Hrs 49
DRAW: Mins 37 Secs

[PREVIOUS RESULTS](#)

POWERBALL

WINNING NUMBERS:
10.04.23

9 35 54 63 64 1

Power Play: 2x

NEXT ESTIMATED JACKPOT:
\$1,400,000,000

NEXT 2 Days 15 Hrs 49
DRAW: Mins 37 Secs

[PREVIOUS RESULTS](#)

News from the Associated Press

Rare US bison roundup rustles up hundreds to maintain health of the species

By SUMMER BALLENTINE Associated Press

South Dakota cowboys and cowgirls rounded up a herd of more than 1,500 bison Friday as part of an annual effort to maintain the health of the species, which has rebounded from near-extinction.

Visitors from across the world cheered from behind wire fencing as whooping horseback riders chased the thundering, wooly giants across hills and grasslands in Custer State Park. Bison and their calves stopped occasionally to graze on blond grass and roll on the ground, their sharp hooves stirring up dust clouds.

"How many times can you get this close to a buffalo herd?" said South Dakota Game, Fish and Parks Secretary Kevin Robling, who was among 50 riders herding the animals. "You hear the grunts and the moans and (see) the calves coming and running alongside mamas."

Each year Custer State Park holds one of the nation's few bison roundups to check the health of the bison and vaccinate calves, park Superintendent Matt Snyder said.

As many as 60 million bison, sometimes called buffalo in the U.S., once roamed North America, moving in vast herds that were central to the culture and survival of numerous Native American groups.

They were driven to the brink of extinction more than a century ago when hunters, U.S. troops and tourists shot them by the thousands to feed a growing commercial market that used bison parts in machinery, fertilizer and clothing. Because bison were essential to Native Americans, the U.S. government also encouraged hunters to kill the animals as a way to force tribes to leave their homelands and move to reservations. By 1889, only a few hundred remained.

"Now, after more than a century of conservation efforts, there are more than 500,000 bison in the United States," said South Dakota Gov. Kristi Noem, a horseback rider who took part in the roundup. "The Custer State Park bison herd has contributed greatly to those efforts."

The park's herd began with 36 animals bought in 1914. A state ecologist estimated the park can currently sustain about 1,000 bison based on how snow and rain conditions affected the grasslands this past year, according to Snyder.

The other 500 or so will be auctioned off, and over the next week, officials will decide which bison will remain and which will go. About 400 calves are born in the park each year.

"Each year we sell some of these bison to intersperse their genetics with those of other herds to improve the health of the species' population across the nation," Noem said.

This story was first published on Sept. 29, 2023. It was updated on Oct. 4, 2023, to correct that The Associated Press, quoting a state official, erroneously reported the event is the nation's only roundup of bison. Other organizations also hold bison roundups.

Norwegian author Jon Fosse wins the Nobel Prize in literature

By DAVID KEYTON and MIKE CORDER Associated Press

STOCKHOLM (AP) — The Nobel Prize in literature has been awarded to Norwegian author Jon Fosse for "his innovative plays and prose, which give voice to the unsayable," according to the Swedish Academy.

Mats Malm, permanent secretary of the academy, announced the prize Thursday in Stockholm.

The Nobel Prizes carry a cash award of 11 million Swedish kronor (\$1 million) from a bequest left by their creator, Swedish inventor Alfred Nobel. Winners also receive an 18-carat gold medal and diploma at the award ceremonies in December.

THIS IS A BREAKING NEWS UPDATE. AP's earlier story follows below.

STOCKHOLM (AP) — The Nobel Prize in literature will be announced Thursday, with the new laureate, or

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laureates, joining an illustrious list of past winners that ranges from Toni Morrison to Ernest Hemingway and Jean-Paul Sartre — who turned down the prize in 1964.

This year's winner or winners will be known at 1 p.m. (1100 GMT), assuming there is no slip-up similar to Wednesday, when a press release divulging the names of the three chemistry laureates was sent to Swedish media hours before the official press event to unveil the winners.

Last year, French author Annie Ernaux won the prize for what the prize-giving Swedish Academy called "the courage and clinical acuity" of books rooted in her small-town background in the Normandy region of northwest France.

Ernaux was just the 17th woman among the 119 Nobel literature laureates. The literature prize has long faced criticism that it is too focused on European and North American writers, as well as too male-dominated.

In 2018, the award was postponed after sex abuse allegations rocked the Swedish Academy, which names the Nobel literature committee, and sparked an exodus of members. The academy revamped itself but faced more criticism for giving the 2019 award to Austria's Peter Handke, who has been called an apologist for Serbian war crimes.

On Wednesday, the chemistry prize was awarded to Mounqi Bawendi of MIT, Louis Brus of Columbia University, and Alexei Ekimov of Nanocrystals Technology Inc. They were honored for their work with tiny particles called quantum dots — tiny particles that can release very bright colored light and whose applications in everyday life include electronics and medical imaging.

Earlier this week, Hungarian-American Katalin Karikó and American Drew Weissman won the Nobel Prize in medicine on Monday for discoveries that enabled the creation of mRNA vaccines against COVID-19.

On Tuesday, the physics prize went to French-Swedish physicist Anne L'Huillier, French scientist Pierre Agostini and Hungarian-born Ferenc Krausz for producing the first split-second glimpse into the super-fast world of spinning electrons.

The Nobel Peace Prize is awarded Friday and the Nobel Memorial Prize in Economic Sciences ends the awards season on Monday.

The Nobel Prizes carry a cash award of 11 million Swedish kronor (\$1 million) from a bequest left by the prize's creator, Swedish inventor Alfred Nobel. Winners also receive an 18-carat gold medal and diploma when they collect their Nobel Prizes at the award ceremonies in December.

Bedbugs are making France anxious ahead of the 2024 Summer Olympics

By ELAINE GANLEY Associated Press

PARIS (AP) — They creep, they crawl, they feast on your blood as you sleep. They may travel in your clothes or backpacks to find another person worth dining on — on the subway, or at the cinema. Bedbugs go where you go, and they have become a nightmare haunting France for weeks.

The government has been forced to step in to calm an increasingly anxious nation that will host the Olympic Games in just over nine months — a prime venue for infestations of the crowd-loving insects.

Prime Minister Elisabeth Borne called a meeting of ministers for Friday to tackle the bedbug crisis. The country's transport minister, Clement Beaune, met this week with transportation companies to draw up a plan for monitoring and disinfecting — and to try to ease what some have called a national psychosis inflamed by the media.

"There is no resurgence of cases," Beaune said, telling reporters that 37 cases reported in the bus and Metro system and a dozen others on trains proved unfounded — as did viral videos on social media of tiny creatures supposedly burrowing in the seat of a fast train.

Still, bedbugs have plagued France and other countries for decades. The insects the size of an apple seed that neither jump nor fly get around as easily as people travel from city to city and nation to nation, and they have become increasingly resistant to insecticides. If that's not enough to make you itchy: Bedbugs can stay alive for a year without a meal.

Without any blood, "they can slow their metabolism and just wait for us," said Jean-Michel Berenger, an

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entomologist who raises bedbugs in his lab in the infectious diseases section of the Mediterranean University Hospital in Marseille. The carbon dioxide that all humans give off "will reactivate them ... and they'll come back to bite you."

For now, Berenger said, this much is certain: "Bedbugs have infested the media."

Yet bad dreams are most often fed by a touch of reality.

More than one household in 10 in France was infested with bedbugs between 2017 and 2022, according to a report by the National Agency for Health and Food Safety. The agency relied on a poll by Ipsos to query people on a topic that many prefer to avoid discussing because they fear going public with a bedbug problem will stigmatize them.

But silence is a mistake, experts say. No social category is immune to finding bedbugs in their clothing, blankets or mattresses.

"It's not at all a hygiene problem. The only thing that interests (bedbugs) is your blood," said Berenger, the entomologist. "Whether you live in a dump or a palace, it's the same thing to them."

Business is booming for companies that eradicate the little brown insects, a process that often starts with detection by dogs trained to sniff out the special odor that bedbugs give off. If an infestation is confirmed, technicians move in to zap the area with super hot steam. Heat and cold are enemies of bedbugs. One French government recommendation for victims is to put well-wrapped clothes in the freezer.

Kevin Le Mestre, director of Lutte Antinuisible, said his company is getting "dozens and dozens" of calls. In the past, he said, people often didn't react, even to bites.

"Now, as soon as they spot a bite, they don't ask themselves whether it really comes from bedbugs or not. They call us straight away," said a pest control technician for the company, Lucas Pradalier, as he disinfected a Paris apartment. A sniffer dog detected bedbugs in a baseboard and between floorboards.

The French public began moving into panic mode about a month ago after reports of bedbugs at a Paris movie theater. Videos began popping up on social networks, showing little insects on trains and buses.

Now, both Socialists and centrists of President Emmanuel Macron's party want to propose bills to fight bedbugs. Far-left lawmaker Mathilde Panot recently brought a vial of bedbugs to the Parliament to chastise the government for, in her view, letting the creatures run rampant.

Bedbugs, an age-old curse on humans, seemingly disappeared with treatment by harsh, now-banned insecticides. They made a reappearance in the 1950s, especially in densely populated cities like New York. And they travel the world thanks to commerce and tourism.

That adds up to a bedbug challenge for the Paris Olympics starting in July.

"All human population movements are profitable for bedbugs because they go with us, to hotels, in transport," said Berenger.

Baune, the transport minister, is hopeful that steps can be taken to ease the public's fear. But, he conceded, "It's hell, these bedbugs."

Russia launches more drone attacks as Ukrainian President Zelenskyy travels to a European forum

By SUSIE BLANN Associated Press

KYIV, Ukraine (AP) — Russia targeted Ukraine with drones in another massive attack early Thursday as President Volodymyr Zelenskyy traveled to Spain to rally support from Western allies at a summit of some 50 European leaders.

Ukraine's air force said that the country's air defenses intercepted 24 out of 29 Iranian-made drones that Russia launched at the southern Odesa, Mykolaiv and Kirovohrad regions.

Andriy Raykovich, the head of the Kirovohrad regional administration, said that an infrastructure facility in the region was struck and emergency services were deployed to put out a fire. He said there were no casualties.

The attack came as Zelenskyy arrived in Granada in southern Spain to attend a summit of the European Political Community, which was formed in the wake of Russia's February 2022 invasion of Ukraine.

"The key for us, especially before winter, is to strengthen air defense, and there is already a basis for new agreements with partners," he said in a statement posted on his Telegram channel.

Last winter, Russia targeted Ukraine's energy system and other vital infrastructure in a steady barrage of missile and drone attacks, triggering continuous power outages across the country. Ukraine's power system has shown a high degree of resilience and flexibility, helping alleviate the damage, but there have been concerns that Russia will again ramp up its strikes on power facilities as winter draws nearer.

Zelenskyy noted the Granada summit will also focus on "joint work for global food security and protection of freedom of navigation" in the Black Sea, where the Russian military has targeted Ukrainian ports after Moscow's withdrawal from a United Nations-sponsored grain deal designed to ensure safe grain exports from the invaded country's ports.

The U.K. Foreign office cited intelligence suggesting that Russia may lay sea mines in the approach to Ukrainian ports to target civilian shipping and blame it on Ukraine. "Russia almost certainly wants to avoid openly sinking civilian ships, instead falsely laying blame on Ukraine for any attacks against civilian vessels in the Black Sea," it said, adding that the U.K. was working with Ukraine to help improve the safety of shipping.

In other Russian attacks on Ukraine in the past day, two civilians were killed in the shelling of Kherson and another one died after a Russian strike on the city of Krasnohorivka in the eastern Donetsk region. At least eight people were wounded by the Russian shelling, according to Ukraine's presidential office.

Ukraine, in its turn, has struck back at Russia with regular drone attacks across the border.

Roman Starovoi, the governor of Russia's Kursk region that borders Ukraine, said Ukrainian drones attacked infrastructure facilities in several areas, resulting in power cuts.

Starovoi also said that Ukrainian forces fired artillery at the border town of Rylsk, injuring a local resident and damaging several houses.

Israeli arms quietly helped Azerbaijan retake Nagorno-Karabakh, to the dismay of region's Armenians

By ISABEL DEBRE Associated Press

TEL AVIV, Israel (AP) — Israel has quietly helped fuel Azerbaijan's campaign to recapture Nagorno-Karabakh, supplying powerful weapons to Azerbaijan ahead of its lightning offensive last month that brought the ethnic Armenian enclave back under its control, officials and experts say.

Just weeks before Azerbaijan launched its 24-hour assault on Sept. 19, Azerbaijani military cargo planes repeatedly flew between a southern Israeli airbase and an airfield near Nagorno-Karabakh, according to flight tracking data and Armenian diplomats, even as Western governments were urging peace talks.

The flights rattled Armenian officials in Yerevan, long wary of the strategic alliance between Israel and Azerbaijan, and shined a light on Israel's national interests in the restive region south of the Caucasus Mountains.

"For us, it is a major concern that Israeli weapons have been firing at our people," Arman Akopian, Armenia's ambassador to Israel, told The Associated Press. In a flurry of diplomatic exchanges, Akopian said he expressed alarm to Israeli politicians and lawmakers in recent weeks over Israeli weapons shipments.

"I don't see why Israel should not be in the position to express at least some concern about the fate of people being expelled from their homeland," he told AP.

Azerbaijan's September blitz involving heavy artillery, rocket launchers and drones — largely supplied by Israel and Turkey, according to experts — forced Armenian separatist authorities to lay down their weapons and sit down for talks on the future of the separatist region.

The Azerbaijani offensive killed over 200 Armenians in the enclave, the vast majority of them fighters, and some 200 Azerbaijani troops, according to officials.

There are ramifications beyond the volatile enclave of 4,400 square kilometers (1,700 square miles). The fighting prompted over 100,000 people — more than 80% of the enclave's ethnic Armenian residents — to flee in the last two weeks. Azerbaijan has pledged to respect the rights of ethnic Armenians.

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Armenian Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan has termed the exodus "a direct act of an ethnic cleansing." Azerbaijan's Foreign Ministry strongly rejected the accusation, saying the departures are a "personal and individual decision and (have) nothing to do with forced relocation."

Israel's foreign and defense ministries declined to comment on the use of Israeli weapons in Nagorno-Karabakh or on Armenian concerns about its military partnership with Azerbaijan. In July, Israeli Defense Minister Yoav Gallant visited Baku, the Azerbaijan capital, where he praised the countries' military cooperation and joint "fight against terrorism."

Israel has a big stake in Azerbaijan, which serves as a critical source of oil and is a staunch ally against Israel's archenemy Iran. It is also a lucrative customer of sophisticated arms.

"There's no doubt about our position in support of Azerbaijan's defense," said Arkady Mil-man, Israel's former ambassador to Azerbaijan and current senior researcher at the Institute for National Security Studies in Tel Aviv. "We have a strategic partnership to contain Iran."

Although once resource-poor Israel now has plenty of natural gas off its Mediterranean coast, Azerbaijan still supplies at least 40% of Israel's oil needs, keeping cars and trucks on its roads. Israel turned to Baku's offshore deposits in the late 1990s, creating an oil pipeline through the Turkish transport hub of Ceyhan that isolated Iran, which at the time capitalized on oil flowing through its pipelines from Kazakhstan to world markets.

Azerbaijan has long been suspicious of Iran, its fellow Shiite Muslim neighbor on the Caspian Sea, and chafed at its support for Armenia, which is Christian. Iran has accused Azerbaijan of hosting a base for Israeli intelligence operations against it — a claim that Azerbaijan and Israel deny.

"It's clear to us that Israel has an interest in keeping a military presence in Azerbaijan, using its territory to observe Iran," Armenian diplomat Tigran Balayan said.

Few have benefited more from the two countries' close relations than Israeli military contractors. Experts estimate Israel supplied Azerbaijan with nearly 70% of its arsenal between 2016 and 2020 — giving Azerbaijan an edge against Armenia and boosting Israel's large defense industry.

"Israeli arms have played a very significant role in allowing the Azerbaijani army to reach its objectives," said Pieter Wezeman, senior researcher at the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute, which tracks arms sales.

Israeli long-range missiles and exploding drones known as loitering munitions have made up for Azerbaijan's small air force, Wezeman said, even at times striking deep within Armenia itself. Meanwhile, Israeli Barak-8 surface-to-air missiles have protected Azerbaijan's airspace in shooting down missiles and drones, he added.

Just ahead of last month's offensive, the Azerbaijani defense ministry announced the army conducted a missile test of Barak-8. Its developer, Israel Aerospace Industries, declined to comment on Azerbaijan's use of its air defense system and combat drones.

But Azerbaijan has raved about the success of Israeli drones in slicing through the Armenian defenses and tipping the balance in the bloody six-week war in 2020.

Its defense minister in 2016 called a combat drone manufactured by Israel's Aeronautics Group "a nightmare for the Armenian army," which backed the region's separatists during Azerbaijan's conflict with Nagorno-Karabakh that year.

President Ilham Aliyev in 2021 — a year of deadly Azerbaijan-Armenian border clashes — was captured on camera smiling as he stroked the small Israeli suicide drone "Harop" during an arms showcase.

Israel has deployed similar suicide drones during deadly army raids against Palestinian militants in the occupied West Bank.

"We're glad for this cooperation, it was quite supportive and quite beneficial for defense," Azerbaijani's ambassador to Israel, Mukhtar Mammadov told the AP, speaking generally about Israel's support for the Azerbaijani military. "We're not hiding it."

At a crucial moment in early September — as diplomats scrambled to avert an escalation — flight tracking data shows that Azerbaijani cargo planes began to stream into Ovda, a military base in southern Israel

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with a 3,000-meter-long airstrip, known as the only airport in Israel that handles the export of explosives.

The AP identified at least six flights operated by Azerbaijan's Silk Way Airlines landing at Ovda airport between Sept. 1 and Sept. 17 from Baku, according to aviation-tracking website FlightRadar24.com. Azerbaijan launched its offensive two days later.

During those six days, the Russian-made Ilyushin Il-76 military transport lingered on Ovda's tarmac for several hours before departing for either Baku or Ganja, the country's second-largest city, just north of Nagorno-Karabakh.

In March, an investigation by the Haaretz newspaper said it had counted 92 Azerbaijani military cargo flights to Ovda airport from 2016-2020. Sudden surges of flights coincided with upticks of fighting in Nagorno-Karabakh, it found.

"During the 2020 war, we saw flights every other day and now, again, we see this intensity of flights leading up to the current conflict," said Akopian, the Armenian ambassador. "It is clear to us what's happening."

Israel's defense ministry declined to comment on the flights. The Azerbaijani ambassador, Mammadov, said he was aware of the reports but declined to comment.

The decision to support an autocratic government against an ethnic and religious minority has fueled a debate in Israel about the country's permissive arms export policies. Of the top 10 arms manufacturers globally, only Israel and Russia lack legal restrictions on weapons exports based on human rights concerns.

"If anyone can identify with (Nagorno-Karabakh) Armenians' continuing fear of ethnic cleansing it is the Jewish people," said Avidan Freedman, founder of the Israeli advocacy group Yanshoof, which seeks to stop Israeli arm sales to human rights violators. "We're not interested in becoming accomplices."

Flash floods kill at least 14 in northeastern India and leave more than 100 missing

By ASHOK SHARMA Associated Press

NEW DELHI (AP) — Rescue workers were searching for more than 100 people on Thursday after flash floods triggered by a sudden heavy rainfall swamped several towns in northeastern India, killing at least 14 people, officials said.

More than 2,000 people were rescued after Wednesday's floods, the Sikkim State Disaster Management Authority said in a statement, adding that state authorities set up 26 relief camps for more than 22,000 people impacted by the floods.

The Press Trust of India news agency reported that 102 people were missing and cited state government officials saying 14 people died in the floods.

Among the missing were 22 army soldiers, officials said. One soldier who had been reported missing on Wednesday was later rescued by authorities, local media reported. Some army camps and vehicles were submerged under mud following the floods.

Eleven bridges were washed away by the floodwaters, which also hit pipelines and damaged or destroyed more than 270 houses in four districts, officials said.

The flooding occurred along the Teesta River in the Lachen Valley in Sikkim state and was worsened when parts of a dam were washed away.

Several towns, including Dikchu and Rangpo in the Teesta basin, were flooded, and schools in four districts were ordered shut until Sunday, the state's education department said.

Parts of a highway that links Sikkim, the state capital, with the rest of the country were washed away.

Prime Minister Narendra Modi's office said in a statement that the government would support state authorities in the aftermath of the flooding.

The flooding was caused by cloudbursts — sudden, very heavy rains — which are defined as when more than 10 centimeters (3.9 inches) of rainfall occurs within 10 square kilometers (3.8 square miles) within an hour. Cloudbursts can cause intense flooding and landslides affecting thousands of people.

The mountainous Himalayan region where Sikkim is located has seen heavy monsoon rains this season. Nearly 50 people died in flash floods and landslides in August in nearby Himachal Pradesh state. Record

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rains in July killed more than 100 people over two weeks in northern India, as roads were waterlogged and homes collapsed.

Disasters caused by landslides and floods are common in India's Himalayan region during the June-September monsoon season. Scientists say they are becoming more frequent as global warming contributes to the melting of glaciers there.

"This is, incredibly sadly, another classic case of a cascading hazard chain that amplifies as you go downstream," said Jakob Steiner, a climate scientist with the International Center for Integrated Mountain Development, commenting on Wednesday's flash flooding.

Earlier this year, Steiner's organization published a report saying that Himalayan glaciers could lose 80% of their volume if global warming isn't controlled.

In February 2021, flash floods killed nearly 200 people and washed away houses in Uttarakhand state in northern India.

Nearly every Alaskan gets a \$1,312 oil check this fall. The unique benefit is a blessing and a curse

By BECKY BOHRER Associated Press

JUNEAU, Alaska (AP) — Nearly every Alaskan will receive a \$1,312 check starting this week, their annual share from the earnings of the state's nest-egg oil fund. Some use the money for extras like tropical vacations but others — particularly in high-cost rural Alaska where jobs and housing are limited — rely on it for home heating fuel or snow machines that are critical for transportation.

But the unique-to-Alaska benefit has become a blessing and a curse in a state that for decades has ridden the boom-bust cycle of oil, and it now competes for funding with services like public education, health care programs and public safety as lawmakers tap into the earnings to help fund the state budget. Squabbling over the oil checks' size has resulted in legislative paralysis, and a Senate proposal aimed at resolving the dividend debate this year fizzled with no agreement.

As Alaska struggles to attract workers and stem a years-long trend of people moving away, some residents are wondering how the dividend fits into the future of a state with no income tax or statewide sales tax.

"You cannot grow anything without investing in it ... and we're not investing money in education, our university system, childcare. We're not investing in the very core services that are going to help grow our state," said Caroline Storm, who heads an education advocacy group and said her stepchildren left Alaska after high school because they didn't see opportunities for themselves.

This year, the state Legislature approved a one-time, \$175 million funding boost for schools in response to pleas from administrators who said they were being forced to cut programs or increase class sizes. But Republican Gov. Mike Dunleavy cut the funding in half.

Senate Majority Leader Cathy Giessel, a Republican who is pushing for a new pension program as a way to retain state workers, said she is conflicted about the dividend.

"I do understand that there are families that have come to rely on this, and that reliance increased as the size of the dividend increased. This is a tough adjustment in those scenarios," she said. "At the same time, if we had a more robust economy and job opportunities with livable wages and ... a pension for public employees, folks wouldn't have to be so reliant on a dividend."

Residents have received the check known as the Permanent Fund Dividend since 1982, roughly six years after voters in the early days of oil development in Alaska created the nest-egg Permanent Fund to preserve some of the oil wealth for future generations.

The fund is enshrined in the state constitution, which stipulates that at least 25% of mineral lease rentals, royalties and other income related to oil and mineral development go into the fund. The fund's principal is constitutionally protected but its earnings are spendable. The dividend is not in the constitution.

Retailers such as furniture chain La-Z-Boy and Alaska Airlines run sales to coincide with the cash distribution, which begins this week with direct deposits. The average check over the program's 42-year history is about \$1,200.

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Cynthia Erickson, who lives in the interior village of Tanana, about 130 miles (209 kilometers) west of Fairbanks, said this year's \$1,312 won't stretch far in the community of about 220 people where goods must be brought in by plane or barge. Gas is \$7.79 a gallon and the collapse of salmon fisheries and a poor moose hunting season has meant that locals' freezers aren't full heading into winter.

But the check is "better than nothing," said Erickson, who runs the town general store and a bed and breakfast. For many in the region, the money helps pay bills, like fuel or electricity, or buy groceries, she said.

As lawmakers weigh the dividend's future, Erickson favors "something that's reasonable, not too small and not too big. We don't want too big to wipe it out. We want to make it consistent to where it'll last longer, and a fair amount. Anything we're happy for, anything helps."

The battle over the dividend has been years in the making.

For years, until 2015, the amount of investment earnings allocated to dividends was based on a rolling average of the fund's performance, and the announcement of the yearly amount often was aired on live TV. That year, the dividend was \$2,072, the highest to that point.

But it dropped by roughly half the following year when then-Gov. Bill Walker, an independent, slashed the amount available for dividends amid persistently low oil prices and large budget deficits. The state Supreme Court upheld his action, saying the dividend program must compete for funds like any other state program.

Lawmakers then began dipping into the oil fund's earnings to help pay for government services when they couldn't agree on new taxes and were blowing through savings. They capped the amount that could be withdrawn but failed to agree on a new formula for dividing it between dividend checks and government services. The result today is a dividend amount that gets decided from year to year by lawmakers with competing interests, all based on what can garner enough votes to get a budget passed.

Last year, an election year, Alaskans each received a dividend and special energy relief check totaling \$3,284 — more than \$13,000 for a family of four. The total cost of \$2 billion was more than the \$1.3 billion in K-12 support to school districts as Russia's invasion of Ukraine sent oil prices soaring, reducing pressure on lawmakers to come up with a fiscal plan.

Moderating oil prices and lower revenue projections led to lower dividends this fall — but lawmakers promised a bonus check of up to \$500 next year if oil prices exceed forecasts.

The Senate-advanced proposal this year called for designating 75% of oil fund earnings' draws to government and 25% to dividend checks, and bumping that to a 50/50 split if Alaska generated an additional \$1.3 billion in new recurring revenue and hit a savings target. Tax options include a sales tax, an income tax or increasing taxes on industries like oil, the state's bread-and-butter resource.

Laura Norton-Cruz, a social worker and mother of two in Anchorage, said lawmakers should consider options other than cutting the dividend, such as a progressive income tax. The state needs revenue to function, and the lack of a fiscal plan has been frustrating, she said.

"We need to take better care of Alaskans. That requires government services," such as education and health care, she said.

Republican House Speaker Cathy Tilton said adequately funding education is important but so is ensuring that money is being used most effectively in classrooms. She said she thought the governor's veto reflected that.

Resolving the yearly fight over the dividend is critical as the state weighs greater funding for education and other needs but that's easier said than done when so many rely on the annual cash.

"It's an emotionally charged subject," Tilton said. "I don't know that you can take the emotion out of this question."

Vice President Harris among scheduled speakers at memorial for Dianne Feinstein in San Francisco

By JANIE HAR Associated Press

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SAN FRANCISCO (AP) — Vice President Kamala Harris and Senate Majority Leader Chuck Schumer will be among those delivering remarks at Thursday's memorial for the late U.S. Sen. Dianne Feinstein on the steps of San Francisco City Hall, where she served as the city's first female mayor.

The service will mark the end of two days of events in the city that launched Feinstein's political career. On Wednesday, mourners streamed into City Hall to pay their respects, honoring Feinstein as fearless, smart and the glue who kept the city together after two shocking political assassinations.

"She wasn't afraid to do a man's job. She wasn't afraid to be a senator. She wasn't afraid to go after what she wanted," said Lawanda Carter, 48, of San Francisco. "And that's encouragement for us women now to have courage."

Carter was among the scores of everyday San Franciscans and political leaders alike who brought flowers, bowed their heads or clasped their hands in prayer as they stood before Feinstein's casket, which was draped in an American flag and on display behind velvet ropes. Many said they had never met Feinstein, but wanted to honor an indefatigable public servant who fought to level the playing field for women, members of the LGBTQ community and racial minorities.

Former U.S. House Speaker Nancy Pelosi, also of San Francisco, and Mayor London Breed were among the officials who paid their respects.

Feinstein died early Friday in her Washington, D.C., home of natural causes, said Adam Russell, a spokesperson for her office. She was 90.

A recorded message from President Joe Biden will be played at Thursday's memorial, where Pelosi and Feinstein's granddaughter, Eileen Mariano, are also scheduled to speak. Gov. Gavin Newsom, himself a former San Francisco mayor, and former California Gov. Jerry Brown are also expected to be in attendance. A livestream is planned of the service, which will be closed to the public.

Feinstein was one of California's first two women U.S. senators, a job she first won alongside Barbara Boxer in 1992, dubbed the "Year of the Woman."

Feinstein spent much of her career in the U.S. Senate but will be known as the forever mayor of San Francisco, a role she inherited in tragedy. She was president of the Board of Supervisors in November 1978 when a former supervisor assassinated Mayor George Moscone and Supervisor Harvey Milk, the city's first openly gay supervisor, at City Hall.

Feinstein, who found Milk's body, became acting mayor and won election twice to serve as mayor until 1988.

Georgia Otterson, 76, a health care administrator, said Feinstein wasn't as politically liberal as she would have liked, but the late mayor earned her respect with how she kept the heartbroken city together.

"We were all mourning together, holding candles. If memory serves me, Joan Baez sang," Otterson said of an impromptu march that night from the historically gay Castro District to City Hall. "And she held us up."

As a centrist Democrat, Feinstein was criticized by people on the left, including for her support for the death penalty, and in her later years, for working with Republicans. But the straight, white woman largely earned the gratitude of a city that celebrates its racial and sexual diversity.

She steered San Francisco through the HIV and AIDS crisis, bringing attention to an epidemic ignored by President Ronald Reagan. She also secured federal and private funding to save the city's iconic cable cars from death by deterioration.

Feinstein led the city as it played host to the Democratic National Convention in 1984. Another San Francisco tradition — "Fleet Week" — was started by Feinstein in 1981, and this year's annual celebration of air shows, naval ships and military bands is dedicated to her.

While Feinstein's career sent her to Washington, she remained deeply involved in the affairs of San Francisco, the city where she was born and raised. She often called her successors — including Newsom — to complain about potholes or trash and to offer advice and encouragement.

Breed recalled looking up to Feinstein when she was a Black kid growing up in public housing and playing the French horn in a middle school band that performed regularly at mayoral events.

"She was so proud of us and she said so, and she took the time to talk to us, express how amazing we

were and to remind us that we were her band," Breed said at a news conference the day after Feinstein's death.

Mourners Wednesday expressed their pride in Feinstein.

"She kept moving on up. I was proud of her, very proud of her," said Dorothy Hudson, 81, a retired federal government employee. "She was very kind, very smart. She opened doors up to let people know, 'You can do it.'"

San Francisco native Cari Donovan placed a bouquet of red and pink lilies and daisies on the floor before the casket. She lingered, crying quietly over a woman she never knew but who was so important to her life.

"She championed and fought for the rights of so many people," Donovan said. "I'm so grateful. And I really just wanted her family to know how much she meant to me."

The social worker said she talked to her 28-year-old daughter about the battles Feinstein fought so that younger generations of women could dream bigger. "She was a lioness."

An atheist in northern Nigeria was arrested. Then the attacks against the others worsened

By CHINEDU ASADU Associated Press

When the megaphone called out for the daily Islamic prayers, the nonbeliever grabbed his prayer beads and ambled through the streets to join others at the mosque in Kano, northern Nigeria's largest city. Formerly a Muslim, he now identifies as an atheist but remains closeted, performing religious obligations only as a cover.

"To survive as an atheist, you cannot act like one," said the man, who spoke to The Associated Press on condition of anonymity over fears for his safety. He said he narrowly escaped being killed by a mob in 2015 after some people found out he had forsaken Islam.

"If I ever come out in northern Nigeria to say I am an atheist, it will be an automatic death sentence," said the man, a business owner in his 30s.

In parts of the world, the religiously unaffiliated are on the rise, and can safely and publicly be a "none" — someone who identifies as an atheist, agnostic or nothing in particular. In countries like Nigeria, the situation is starkly different.

Nonbelievers in Nigeria said they perennially have been treated as second-class citizens in the deeply religious country whose 210 million population is almost evenly divided between Christians dominant in the south and Muslims who are the majority in the north. While the south is relatively safe for nonbelievers, some say threats and attacks have worsened in the north since the leader of the Humanist Association of Nigeria, Mubarak Bala, was arrested and later jailed for blasphemy.

The Associated Press spoke to seven nonbelievers to document their experiences. Most spoke anonymously and in secret locations over concerns for their safety.

"Bala's imprisonment rolled our movement underground," Leo Igwe, a founder of the humanist association, said of the group's leader, who in 2022 was jailed for 24 years. A court convicted him on an 18-count charge of blaspheming Islam and breach of public peace through his posts on Facebook.

Since Bala was prosecuted by the Kano state government, the humanist association — which has several hundred members — has gone underground, struggling with unprecedented threats to members who no longer hold meetings, Leo said.

Nigeria's constitution provides for freedom of religion and expression, but activists say threats to religious freedom are common, especially in the north.

Almost half of the countries in Africa, including Nigeria, have statutes outlawing blasphemy. In most secular courts in Nigeria, the stiffest penalty for a blasphemy charge is two years in prison, while it carries a death penalty in the country's Islamic courts, active in the majority Muslim north.

There are no records of any such executions in recent years. The most recent instance of a death sentence, issued in December against an Islamic cleric, Abduljabbar Nasiru Kabara, has not been carried out.

The Shariah law that operates in Islamic courts defines blasphemous acts as those committed by anyone

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who "intentionally abuses, insults, derogates, humiliates or seeks to incite contempt of the holy Prophet Muhammad."

But what exactly constitutes actions that insult Islam is often open to interpretation by accusers, Igwe said. As a result, some alleged offenders have been attacked and killed before any trial.

At least three people have been killed for alleged blasphemy in northern Nigeria in the past year. The latest victim, killed in June, was a Muslim stoned to death after being accused of making comments that blasphemed Islam.

Authorities in Nigeria have failed to act to prevent such attacks, and prosecutions have been rare, said Isa Sanusi, director of Amnesty International in Nigeria.

"The alarming uptick in blasphemy killings and accusations underscores the urgency with which the authorities must wake up to Nigeria's international legal obligations to respect and protect human rights," Sanusi said.

Threats against the nonreligious in Nigeria are common on social media. On Facebook, a group named Anti-Atheist, users frequently posted messages that trolled or threatened atheists.

The atheist in Kano, in a dimly lit room, spoke with a mix of grit and fear about his experiences as a nonbeliever in a nation where about 98% of the population are Christians or Muslims, according to the Pew Research Center. A Facebook post from Bala in 2015, critiquing some Islamic teachings, influenced the man's shift to atheism.

Once a Muslim, Bala was seen as an influential member of the humanist community; most of the non-believers who spoke to the AP credited him as a source of inspiration.

Life as a nonbeliever in Nigeria is also difficult for women, who already are severely underrepresented in government and other key sectors.

"Your achievements are reduced to nothing if you are irreligious," said Abosuahi Nimatu, who dropped out of university in Katsina state in 2020 to escape being killed after her peers learned she was no longer a Muslim.

Nimatu was so close to Bala that his prolonged detention depressed her for a year, she said. She used her Facebook account to campaign for his release, prompting threats that reached her cellphone and email inbox. Her home address was shared among people threatening to attack her and her family.

Even at home, she is often reminded that no man would marry her.

"You are seen as a rebel and as a wayward person," she said.

In 2020, Nigeria became the first secular democracy designated by the U.S. State Department as a "Country of Particular Concern" for engaging in or tolerating "systematic, ongoing, egregious violations of religious freedom." It later was dropped from that list of countries, prompting criticism from the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom, which says Nigeria should be re-added. It is a different reality for the openly faithless in southern Nigeria; they even hold public meetings occasionally. The two atheists who spoke to AP in the commercial hub of Lagos said they had never been attacked or threatened.

Busayo Cole, a former Christian, said his family is indifferent about his religious status. Beyond his family, the worst consequences he faces are occasional snide remarks.

"People are more liberal about things like that down here," said Cole.

At the Kuje prison in Abuja, Bala continues to serve his jail term, receiving visitors from time to time including his wife Amina Ahmed, also a humanist. She went to see him most recently with their 3-year-old son.

He is in good spirits, Ahmed said of her husband. But it has been difficult for her.

"I am trying to be strong (but) my strength sometimes fails me," she said.

Fearing ostracism or worse, many nonbelievers hide their views in the Middle East and North Africa

By MARIAM FAM Associated Press

There's the Tunisian woman who fasts during the Islamic holy month of Ramadan, though not for God. The Iraqi woman who, until recently, wore a hijab. And a man whose Egyptian identity card still identifies him as "Muslim."

Such are the ways that some of the religiously unaffiliated, or "nones" — people who are agnostics, atheists or nothing in particular — negotiate their existence in the Middle East and North Africa, or MENA, where religion is often ingrained in life's very fabric.

Aware that rejecting religion can have repercussions, many conceal that part of themselves. Declaring disbelief may spur social stigma, ostracism by loved ones or even unleash the wrath of authorities, especially if going public is coupled with real or perceived attacks on religion or God.

"I have a double life all the time," said the 27-year-old Tunisian woman. "It's better than having conflict every day."

Many nonbelievers seek community, ideas or pockets of digital defiance on the internet even though online spaces can come with risks.

Most of those interviewed by The Associated Press spoke on condition of anonymity for fear of repercussions and because some of their families don't know how they religiously identify.

"The Middle East is the birthplace of the three heavenly religions and there's no doubt that the region's culture has long been intertwined with religion," said Mustapha Kamel al-Sayyid, a political science professor at Cairo University. "Religion has also been a source of legitimacy for rulers, a source for knowledge and behavioral norms."

Many in Arab countries, he said, associate lack of religion with immorality. "To them, you cannot talk about the rights of someone who is a danger to society."

Bans on blasphemy appear in different parts of the world. But, according to a Pew Research Center analysis, they have been most common in the MENA region as of 2019.

The Tunisian woman said she fasts to avoid being found out by her family. She pretends to sleep to skip gatherings, where relatives may take aim at her suspected disbelief.

From an early age, she rejected how Islam was practiced in her home. She said her father would sometimes force her to pray. Resisting traditional interpretations of such things as gender roles, she turned to progressive Muslim readings.

She now sees herself as nothing in particular and open to different spiritual paths.

"You're socially perceived like you are public enemy," she said. "People hate you without knowing you."

Hany Elmihiy hoped conditions could change. The 57-year-old Egyptian agnostic and some other nonbelievers saw a window for visibility following the "Arab Spring" uprisings.

Elmihiy said he founded a Facebook group for Egyptians without religion in 2011, while similar ones formed in other Arab countries. Mass protests demanding political change had just unseated an Egyptian president then, highlighting the power of social media for dissent.

"It's not the revolution that turned some into atheists or irreligious; the revolution gave them the freedom and courage to speak up," Elmihiy said.

Elmihiy said he was insulted, threatened, and attacked by unknown assailants.

Seeking recognition, he tried to change the "Muslim" designation listed on his identity card to state he adheres to no religion. He failed.

After the post-revolt euphoria fizzled out, he left Egypt in 2015 and now lives in Norway.

"Society scared me the most," Elmihiy said. "I felt isolated."

He views his earlier advocacy with mixed feelings, but says "it was important to let the society know that the religiously unaffiliated exist."

Some took note.

Ishak Ibrahim, a researcher with the Egyptian Initiative for Personal Rights, said Egypt's youth ministry

announced plans in 2014 to combat atheism in collaboration with religious bodies.

Local press also reported on anti-atheism efforts by some Islamic and Christian institutions.

"We believe that those who don't belong to religion are committing a sin but it's not our responsibility to hold them accountable," said Abbas Shouman, an official with Al-Azhar, the Cairo-based seat of Sunni Muslim learning. The role of religious authorities, he said "is only to explain, clarify, spread the right education and respond to suspicions."

Shouman rejects attacks on religion, saying nonbelievers "have the right to defend their beliefs as they wish but not to go after others' beliefs and affiliations."

Atheism is not criminalized in Egypt, Ibrahim said. Last year, Ibrahim's EIPR said an Egyptian court upheld a three-year-prison sentence and a fine against a blogger charged with contempt of religion and misusing social media. The organization, whose lawyer appealed the earlier verdict, has said the man was accused of managing a Facebook page for Egyptian atheists that allegedly criticizes religions.

In May, Iran hanged two men convicted of blasphemy, carrying out rare death sentences for the crime. The men were accused of involvement in a Telegram channel called "Critique of Superstition and Religion," according to the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom. The Mizan news agency of Iran's judiciary described the two as having insulted Prophet Muhammad and promoted atheism.

In Saudi Arabia, a court has sentenced a man to 10 years in prison and 2,000 lashes on accusations of expressing atheism online; a media report said in 2016 that religious police found tweets denying the existence of God and ridiculing Quranic verses.

For some, like Ahmad, religious disbelief hasn't caused tensions. But the 33-year-old Lebanese, who comes from a Shiite Muslim family and now lives in Qatar, wanted his last name withheld because of the sensitivity of the subject.

"We have an unspoken agreement: I don't criticize religion and you don't criticize my lack of religion," he said. He's religiously unaffiliated, and says he cannot believe "in something that I cannot touch or cannot see."

The role of sectarian divisions in fueling conflicts in Lebanon is one reason Talar Demirdjian distanced herself from religion.

"People either go very into their religion or their sects, or the other side." A Lebanese Armenian of Christian heritage, Demirdjian said about religion, "I don't even think about it enough to tick a label."

For one Iraqi woman, questions started when a childhood dream to one day become an imam like her grandfather was quashed because she is a girl. Iraq's turmoil fueled her disbelief.

The 24-year-old's generation witnessed the U.S.-led invasion, militancy, sectarian violence, the brutal reign of the Islamic State and increasing clout of militias.

She's worn the Islamic headscarf before and, for a while, after she became agnostic. When militants proliferated where she lived, she donned it to stay out of danger; at other times, it was to socially fit in. She removed it around 2020.

"I don't tell people that I am agnostic," she said. "It'd be an act of stupidity to do so in such a society."

In the pope's homeland, more Argentines are seeking spiritual answers beyond the church

By LUIS ANDRES HENAO and NATACHA PISARENKO Associated Press

CAPILLA DEL MONTE, Argentina (AP) — In the pope's homeland, there's a woman who believes in angels and calls them aliens. Another who proudly identifies as a witch.

And a spiritual guru so turned off by the Vatican's opulence that he left the church to help others connect spiritually outside organized religion.

All three are former Catholics who have joined many other Argentines in the growing ranks of the religiously unaffiliated. Known as the "nones," they identify as atheists, agnostics, spiritual but not religious, or simply, nothing in particular.

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Pablo Robles says a better label for him would be "all," since he has a rich spiritual life outside religion. Robles grew up Catholic but became disenchanted while visiting the Vatican in 2000. At a papal Mass, he listened to a sermon on humility — and found himself questioning how the church's vast wealth conflicted with that message.

"I was next to a gold column larger than my apartment," Robles said. "It just unsettled me so much that I said: 'This is not the truth.'"

Back in Argentina, he began searching for answers in astrology, Buddhism and Sufism, the mystical side of Islam. He now uses music, yoga and reiki to help others connect spiritually.

Most Latin Americans are Christian, and Catholicism remains the dominant religion; about two-thirds of Argentina's 45 million people identify as Catholic. But the influence of the church has waned. There's discontent following clergy sex abuse scandals and opposition to the church's stances against abortion and LGBTQ rights.

More Argentines are seeking spiritual answers beyond the church.

"The growth of those without a religion of belonging in the pope's country is very striking," said Hugo Rabbia, a political psychology professor at the National University of Cordoba.

He said the percentage of people who don't identify with a religion in Argentina doubled within the last 15 years. That growth is in line with other parts of the world.

"It coincides with a series of public debates on sexual and reproductive rights that have strongly influenced the position of some people regarding traditional religions."

Monsignor Sergio Buenanueva, a bishop in Argentina's Cordoba province, said the church must be less judgmental to reach out to the nones, especially young people.

"We must be there where the young are ... where the people are suffering," he said. "Not approaching them with an attitude of judges who come to judge the moral behavior ... but valuing what Jesus valued in people."

Disenchantment with the Catholic Church has led some to join a movement to formally quit the faith. Among them is Lin Pao Rafetta, who is part of the Argentine Coalition for a Secular State, which has led the apostasy movement.

"I started to have a series of reasons to abandon the institution," said Rafetta, who was fired from a Jesuit university after renouncing the faith.

Even as increasing numbers of Argentines say "none" when asked about their religion, Rabbia said many still hold to some of the beliefs without being part of the church.

"There's an increasingly significant group of people linked to new spiritualities," he added.

Nowhere is that more evident than in Argentina's spiritual hub of Capilla del Monte. Located in Cordoba province, about 500 miles (800 kilometers) northwest of Buenos Aires, the town is known for attracting powerful energy, and some say, even extraterrestrial activity.

On a recent day, a group gathered at a plateau overlooking Uritorco hill, where some believe an alien city is buried.

"Seven years ago, I started this spiritual journey when I came to Capilla searching for UFOs," said Fabian Kloss, who attended a Catholic school but left the religion to pursue a spiritual path. "I've felt so much peace, love and goodness here, and I realized that I wasn't searching for UFOs, but for meaning in life."

Ana Ottobre, 27, grew up singing in a Catholic choir on Saturdays and attending Mass on Sundays. But she felt constricted: "I wanted to get a tattoo and my grandma would say: 'That's from the devil. Your body is sacred. God wouldn't approve.'"

At 18, she declined to prepare for confirmation. She became a tattoo artist, and now proudly identifies as a none and a witch.

"This whole holistic world is made up of beautiful people who are looking for their personal evolution," she said. "There's this thing about wanting to improve and help other people on their spiritual path."

Argentina shares many historical and cultural similarities with its neighbor, Uruguay. Their capitals, Buenos Aires and Montevideo, are on the shores of the River Plate where the tango was born in the 19th century.

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Both nations cherish gaucho or cowboy culture, and some people worship soccer as a quasi-religion. But religiosity is markedly different across the river.

In Uruguay, a nation of some 3.3 million people, more than half identify as atheist, agnostic or religiously unaffiliated — the highest portion in Latin America.

"It's incredible for anyone who sees it from outside, but for us, it's a given," said Valentina Pereira, a professor at Uruguay's Catholic University.

"Religion doesn't visibly hold an important place in Uruguayan society."

Uruguay has a long history of secularization. In the early 20th century, the country banned any mention of God in oaths of office and removed crucifixes from public hospitals, Pereira said. Then holidays were secularized. While Holy Week is the most sacred time of the year for millions worldwide, in Uruguay, it's known as Tourism Week. Christmas? It's Family Day.

Juan Castelli, a 22-year-old software engineer from Montevideo, recalled reading the Bible and praying at nighttime until age 15 when he stopped believing in God.

"I don't know anyone who goes to church," said Castelli, a former Catholic who identifies as atheist. He acknowledged that some churches help those struggling with poverty and addiction. But religions, he said, can be harmful, especially when mixed with politics.

"I believe in reason, in science," he said.

A half hour's drive from Montevideo lives Uruguay's best-known atheist: former President Jose Mujica. Now, 88, Mujica gained respect globally and across the political spectrum for his simple ways. The former guerrilla leader, who was nominated for the Nobel Peace Prize, donated most of his salary to charity and declined to live in the presidential palace.

Interviewed at his flower farm, he reflected on the global rise of the religiously unaffiliated.

"I see all religions as very arrogant because the universe's magnitude is so brutal, and yet they try to place humans as the epicenter." Mujica said. "Since we don't want to die, we need to build something that creates the illusion that not everything ends here ... I believe we come from nothing. Heaven, and also hell, is right here."

Nearly 80% of Italians say they are Catholic. But few regularly go to church

By GIOVANNA DELL'ORTO Associated Press

ISOLA DEL GRAN SASSO, Italy (AP) — Two children scribbled petitions to St. Gabriele dell'Addolorata in the sanctuary where the young saint is venerated in this central Italian mountain village. Andrea, 6, asked for blessings for his family and pets, while Sofia, 9, offered thanksgiving for winning a dance competition.

Their parents bring them here often, and consider themselves better Catholics than many — but they rarely if ever go to Mass and don't receive Communion because they are not married, thus shunning two sacraments the Catholic Church considers foundational.

"I practice where I want," said the mother, Carmela Forino. "One has to believe in something, right? You do what you feel in your heart. You can't require me to go to Mass on Sundays."

That's the paradox in this country long considered the cradle of the Catholic faith. Elsewhere in deeply secular Western Europe, the "nones" — those rejecting organized religion — are growing fast.

In Italy, however, most retain a nominal affiliation, steeped in tradition but with little adherence to doctrine or practice. According to the latest Pew Research Center survey, 78% of Italians profess themselves to be Catholic — but only 19% attend services at least once a week while 31% never do, per data by the Italian statistics agency, ISTAT.

The COVID-19 pandemic pruned even more tepid Catholics, accelerating a loss in faith that started at least a generation ago, said Franco Garelli, a University of Turin sociology professor.

"I don't have time, I don't feel like it' — there isn't a real reason. That's what's scary," said the Rev. Giovanni Mandozzi, parish priest in the sanctuary's village, Isola. "I tell them, 'I do Mass in under 40 minutes, you can leave your pasta sauce on the stove, and it won't even stick to the bottom of the pot.'"

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On an early summer Saturday evening, he celebrated Mass with fewer than two dozen elderly parishioners in a former butcher shop, because Isola's church was damaged by earthquakes that have devastated the region of Abruzzo since 2009.

Nearby, several close friends in their 20s were enjoying drinks and appetizers outside a bar.

They described growing up attending Mass and catechism, only to stop after receiving the sacrament of confirmation — or “getting rid of it,” as one put it — in their early teens.

“It would have become just a routine,” said Agostino Tatulli, 24, a college and music conservatory student who sometimes still goes to church with his mother. “I’d say I’m spiritual. I don’t know if God exists.”

From his childhood serving as an altar boy, he misses “the sense of community that formed on Sunday mornings.” Tatulli still finds some of that in his gigs with a marching band for the popular feasts of patron saints — whose celebrations are crucial to fellow band member Federico Ferri.

“I’m a Catholic believer in the saints, not in the church,” Ferri added. He goes only occasionally to Mass, but often to the sanctuary.

Thousands of teens continue to flock each spring to San Gabriele sanctuary for the “blessing of the pens” with which high school seniors will take final exams — a tradition that felt lovely but “more superstitious than religious” to former pilgrim Michela Vignola.

“Now I don’t even think about it,” she said, referring to the faith she abandoned in her teens. “It’s taken for granted that you’re a believer, but you don’t participate.”

A hairdresser, Vignola coifs a lot of bridal parties, most still headed to church — the choice of about 60% of Italians getting married for the first time, making the sacrament just a bit less popular than a church funeral, favored by 70% of Italians, according to Garelli’s research.

In a nearby village, fifth-generation funeral home director Antonio Ruggieri has added wake rooms for followers of non-Christian religions and is building a “neutral” one with no religious symbols. But almost all his funerals are in a church.

“It’s a sort of redemption, even if you barely believe in it,” he said.

For many priests, that attitude means that a social point of no return might have been reached. How to respond is a major challenge for clergy already struggling with a significant drop in vocations that leaves many with barely the time to celebrate Masses in multiple villages under their care.

Those who participate actively do so now out of a deliberate choice and not because the church, and its social and cultural programs for youth, are the only game in town as they used to be.

Such believers should be focused on as if they were the last of the species on Noah’s Ark, joked the Rev. Bernardino Giordano, the vicar general of the pontifical delegation to Loreto, an even more popular sanctuary less than 100 miles (160 km) away.

In a previous assignment in northern Italy, he dealt with the other extreme — the few who asked his diocese to be “sbattezzati,” or de-baptized, which really meant expunged from the parish baptism record since a sacrament like baptism can’t be undone.

But the majority remain in a grey area — drawn not by sacraments but by the church’s social justice work.

“It’s very reductionist to have as the only measure those who practice (the faith). The Holy Spirit is at work everywhere, it doesn’t belong only to Catholics,” said Archbishop Erio Castellucci, the vice president of the Italian bishops’ conference.

That might appeal to Federica Nobile, 33, who defines herself as “Catholic but not too much.” Raised in a very observant family, she felt she needed to exorcise “the absurd fear of hell” she grew up with.

“I tried to get above the concept of good vs. evil. Looking for nuances allows me to live a lot better,” said the branding strategist and fiction author.

In the provincial capital of Teramo, when Marco Palareti asked the middle-school students in his optional religion class to rank values, family and freedom came first — and faith dead last.

“Kids’ attitude has changed, because in earlier times almost all of them had a life in the parish, while today many don’t go or go only for the sacraments” of First Communion and confirmation, added Palareti, who has taught religion for 36 years.

It’s an attitude that Pietro di Bartolomeo remembers well. When he was a teen bullied because of his

family's strong faith, he "saw God as a loser." Now a 45-year-old father of five, he runs a Bible group for teens in Teramo.

He believes the Church needs to evangelize more — or it's doomed to irrelevance.

"The old ladies sooner or later will go to the Creator, and that's where the cycle stops," he said.

America's nonreligious are a growing, diverse phenomenon. They really don't like organized religion

By PETER SMITH Associated Press

Mike Dulak grew up Catholic in Southern California, but by his teen years, he began skipping Mass and driving straight to the shore to play guitar, watch the waves and enjoy "the beauty of the morning on the beach," he recalled. "And it felt more spiritual than any time I set foot in a church."

Nothing has changed that view in the ensuing decades.

"Most religions are there to control people and get money from them," said Dulak, now 76, of Rocheport, Missouri. He also cited sex abuse scandals, harming "innocent human beings," in Catholic and Southern Baptist churches. "I can't buy into that," he said.

As Dulak rejects being part of a religious flock, he has plenty of company. He is a "none" — no, not that kind of nun. The kind that checks "none" when pollsters ask "What's your religion?"

The decades-long rise of the nones — a diverse, hard-to-summarize group — is one of the most talked about phenomena in U.S. religion. The nones are reshaping America's religious landscape as we know it.

In U.S. religion today, "the most important story without a shadow of a doubt is the unbelievable rise in the share of Americans who are nonreligious," said Ryan Burge, a political science professor at Eastern Illinois University and author of "The Nones," a book on the phenomenon.

The nones account for a large portion of Americans, as shown by the 30% of U.S. adults who claim no religious affiliation in a survey by The Associated Press-NORC Center for Public Affairs Research.

Other major surveys say the nones have been steadily increasing for as long as three decades.

So who are they?

They're the atheists, the agnostics, the "nothing in particular." Many are "spiritual but not religious," and some are neither or both. They span class, gender, age, race and ethnicity.

While the nones' diversity splinters them into myriad subgroups, most of them have this in common:

They. Really. Don't. Like. Organized. Religion.

Nor its leaders. Nor its politics and social stances. That's according to a large majority of nones in the AP-NORC survey.

But they're not just a statistic. They're real people with unique relationships to belief and nonbelief, and the meaning of life.

They're secular homeschoolers in the Ozark Mountains of Arkansas, Pittsburghers working to overcome addiction. They're a mandolin maker in a small Missouri River town, a former evangelical disillusioned with that particular strain of American Christianity. They're college students who found their childhood churches unpersuasive or unwelcoming.

Church "was not very good for me," said Emma Komoroski, a University of Missouri freshman who left her childhood Catholic religion in her mid-teens. "I'm a lesbian. So that was kind of like, oh, I didn't really fit, and people don't like me."

The nones also are people like Alric Jones, who cite bad experiences with organized religion that ranged from the intolerant churches of his hometown to the ministry that kept soliciting money from his devout late wife — even after Jones lost his job and income after an injury.

"If it was such a Christian organization, and she was unable to send money, they should have come to us and said, 'Is there something we can do to help you?'" said Jones, 71, of central Michigan. "They kept sending us letters saying, 'Why aren't you sending us money?'"

Jones does believe in God and in treating others equally. "That's my spirituality if you want to call it that."

About 1 in 6 U.S. adults, including Jones and Dulak, is a "nothing in particular." There are as many of

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them as atheists and agnostics combined (7% each).

Many embrace a range of spiritual beliefs — from God, prayer and heaven to karma, reincarnation, astrology or energy in crystals.

"They are definitely not as turned off to religion as atheists and agnostics are," Burge said. "They practice their own type of spirituality, many of them."

Dulak still draws inspiration from nature, and from making mandolins in the workshop next to his home.

"It feels spiritually good," Dulak said. "It's not a religion."

Burge said the nones are rising as the Christian population declines, particularly the "mainline" or moderate to liberal Protestants.

The statistics show the nones are well-represented in every age group, but especially among young adults. About four in 10 of those under 30 are nones — nearly as many as say they're Christians.

The trend was evident in interviews on the University of Missouri campus. Several students said they didn't identify with a religion.

Mia Vogel said she likes "the foundations of a lot of religions — just love everybody, accept everybody." But she considers herself more spiritual.

"I'm pretty into astrology. I've got my crystals charging up in my window right now," she said. "Honestly, I'll bet half of it is a total placebo. But I just like the idea that things in life can be explained by greater forces."

One movement that exemplifies the "spiritual but not religious" ethos is the Twelve Step sobriety program, pioneered by Alcoholics Anonymous and adopted by other recovery groups. Participants turn to a "power greater than ourselves" — the God of each person's own understanding — but they don't share any creed.

"If you look at the religions, they have been wracked by scandals, it doesn't matter the denomination," said the Rev. Jay Geisler, an Episcopal priest who is spiritual advisor at the Pittsburgh Recovery Center, an addiction treatment site.

In contrast, "there's actually a spiritual revival in the basement of many of the churches," where recovery groups often meet, he said.

"Nobody's fighting in those rooms, they're not saying, 'You're wrong about God,'" Geisler said. The focus is on "how your life is changed."

Scholars worry that, as people pull away from congregations and other social groups, they are losing sources of communal support.

But nones said in interviews they were happy to leave religion behind, particularly in toxic situations, and find community elsewhere.

Marjorie Logman, 75, of Aurora, Illinois, now finds community among other residents in her multigenerational apartment complex, and in her advocacy for nursing home residents. She doesn't miss the evangelical circles she was long active in.

"The farther away I get, the freer I feel," she said.

In secular Japan, what draws so many to temples and shrines? Stamp collecting and tradition

By MARI YAMAGUCHI Associated Press

TOKYO (AP) — Almost weekly Momo Nomura makes time to visit Shinto shrines. She performs the prescribed rituals — cleansing her hands, ringing a bell, bowing and clapping. But her main purpose is getting a Goshuin, a stamp with elegant calligraphy that shrines provide for a fee to certify the visit.

She loves the stamps, which she began collecting during the pandemic. One with blue hydrangeas got her started.

"Because of the Goshuin, shrines have become closer to me, but I don't consider this a religious activity," Nomura said after getting her stamp and taking selfies at Sakura Jingu, a western Tokyo shrine established in 1882 as a minority Shinto sect focused on traditional values.

Nomura, who posts about her hobby on social media as Goshuin Girl, says she enjoys the stamp de-

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signs, and shrine visits allow a moment of reflection and a change of pace from her busy life as a graphic designer and entrepreneur. Differences of religious sects are not an issue, she says.

"It's a mindfulness kind of thing for me," Nomura said. "I don't consider myself religious."

About 70% of people in Japan have similar nonreligious feelings, according to surveys. Their responses reflect a long history of pragmatism about traditional religions, which often serve more as connections to family and community than as theological guides, as in the West.

Nomura, who graduated from a Christian university in Tokyo, says her parents also are not religious. Still, she vaguely remembers going to shrines with her family as a girl for Shichi-Go-San ceremonies, where parents pray for health and prosperity for their children. She also visited a shrine dedicated to the god of education before college exams.

On a recent weekend at Onoterusaki Jinja, a 9th century Tokyo shrine that is part of a broader Shinto history, people came and went, some praying or just sitting on benches. Masami Takeda brought her 6-year-old grandson, and they picked up a stamp with autumn leaves. "I never think I visit religious sites," Takeda says. "But I now pray for my grandson's health."

Japan's unique relationship to faith is on full display during the final week of the year: People celebrate Christmas with an exchange of presents, ring Buddhist temple bells on New Year's Eve, and hours later go to Shinto shrines to celebrate the New Year. During other seasons, Japanese flock to Buddhist Bon dances and Shinto-related festivals involving "mikoshi," or portable shrines.

"In Japan, faith is not considered an important element of religion, unlike Christianity or Islam, in which understanding of the Bible or the Quran is necessary and the theology serves as a guidepost for daily life," says Ryosuke Okamoto, a religion professor at Hokkaido University.

Historically, Buddhism arrived in Japan in the 6th century and took root. From around 1640, as part of a push to ban Christianity, temples kept family registries of people in the neighborhood, creating a tradition of ancestor worship still observed today. A majority of Japanese return to their hometowns during August's Bon holiday week to spend time with relatives and visit ancestors' graves. Most funerals in Japan are held in a Buddhist style.

Japan's Indigenous religion of Shinto is largely rooted in animism, which believes there are thousands of "kami," or spirits, inhabiting nature. It's closely linked to the country's imperial family: Around 1870, Japan made Shinto the state religion and used imperial worship to fan ultra-nationalism and support for World War II, which was fought in the name of the emperor. Japan's U.S.-drafted postwar constitution ensures freedom of religion and the separation of religion and state, though the conservative government today still places great importance on imperial worshipping.

"Younger people tend to have an even more pragmatic view and less interest in principles linked to religion," Okamoto said.

According to Cultural Affairs Agency statistics for 2022, the number of Japanese with links to Shinto, Buddhism, Christianity or other religions totaled 180 million, which exceeds Japan's population of 126 million. This suggests that most people follow both Shinto and Buddhism. Christians account for about 1% of that total.

Many Japanese are especially cautious about new religions, an impact of the 1995 deadly sarin attack led by the Aum Shinrikyo cult that shocked the nation and ruined the image of new religious sects.

Allegations of fraudulent business practices by the Unification Church and its decades-long political ties with the Japanese governing party surfaced in the investigations of former Prime Minister Shinzo Abe's assassination last year, adding to the public's weariness about nontraditional religion. The alleged assassin told police he killed Abe because of the politician's links to the Unification Church — which the murder suspect hated because his mother's large donations to the group bankrupted his family.

According to a survey of Japanese by the Niwano Peace Foundation in 2019, most respondents said they haven't participated in any religious activities in recent years, and more than 70% said they don't have any faith. However, positive feelings about shrines and temples increased over the past 20 years, presumably because of a growing interest in spiritual tours and stamp collections, the survey shows.

The popularity of Goshuin stamps and visits to spiritual spots like shrines and temples is not a show

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of faith, experts say, but instead suggests people feel an affinity for the traditions without a need to be deeply involved. Some compare the stamp collecting to a blessed version of baseball cards.

Onoterusaki priest Karin Kodashima says the stamps are increasingly popular, allowing visitors to "tie a connection with gods." The stamps can also be an introduction to Shinto, she says during her break from preparation for an upcoming autumn festival which features rituals, lectures and court music.

For many people, shrines offer a chance for reflection, even if it's not a religious experience. Kodashima says, "I believe shrines will continue to be part of people's daily lives and serve as a place of tranquility and peace."

Some Buddhist temples, including Tsukiji Hongwanji and Komyoji in Tokyo, are seeking to reach younger people and have opened cafes, yoga and meditation classes, as well as talk sessions and concerts.

A Komyoji monk, Yuken Kihara, serves his homemade desserts, tea and coffee every Wednesday at Open Terrace café on a temple balcony, available to anyone with reservations.

"I hope to provide a space for people to drop by and relax," Kihara said. "Japanese people are seen as secular, but I think it's a value that you cannot answer just by yes or no."

As Japan's population increasingly ages, with family values becoming more diverse and younger generations moving to cities, small shrines and temples in rural Japan struggle to survive, with many on the verge of closing.

In an attempt to connect the struggling shrines and temples with potential visitors interested in history, architecture or the stamps, a young entrepreneur established an online information site. There are about 160,000 temples and shrines in Japan, according to government statistics.

"Hotokami," a word combining Hotoke (Buddha) and Kami (God), was launched by Ryo Yoshida in 2016 after he organized tours to historic sites for three years.

The online service now has 1.2 million monthly users, and has collaborated with train operators, including those in Yokohama and Osaka, as well as shrines in the area, to organize trips to collect stamps.

Yoshida says he personally feels a connection to both Buddhism and Shintoism. Every morning for 10 minutes he listens to a YouTube program by a monk based at a temple in Kamakura. As far as his family's religion, he notes a Buddhist temple next to his grandfather's home in Shiga prefecture.

Yoshida says, "I like both Shinto's appreciation of nature and ancestors, and Buddhist values of how to live a better life." But he adds, "If you ask me whether I have faith, I'm not sure."

Nonreligious struggle to find their voice and place in Indian society and politics

By DEEPA BHARATH Associated Press

CHENNAI, India (AP) — Despite India's millennia-old history of nonreligious movements, most atheists and rationalists choose to keep quiet about their skepticism of faith — it's easier and far less risky than going public in one of the world's most religious countries.

The space that does exist for debating religious authority and belief is shrinking, said Avinash Patil, a religious skeptic who was born Hindu and is now a leader of an anti-superstition group working in one of the country's western states. He blames the growth of nationwide religious and communal tensions over the last decade as well as rising Hindu nationalism under Prime Minister Narendra Modi's leadership.

"When you are open about it and engage in activism, it can get challenging, and even dangerous," said Patil, chairperson of Maharashtra Anhashradha Nirmulan Samiti.

In fact, Patil and his organization are still seeking justice for its founder and renowned rationalist, Narendra Dabholkar, who was gunned down during a morning walk in Pune 10 years ago. Patil helped organize vigils and rallies Aug. 19-20 for Dabholkar in Mumbai and Pune. The murder trial is ongoing.

Indians not affiliated with any religion — known as the "nones" — are a very small minority among the nation's 1.4 billion people, according to government statistics and independent surveys. They include atheists, agnostics, the culturally religious but not observant, rationalists and the spiritual but not religious.

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It is possible that nones in India are underrepresented in such surveys due to societal taboos and short-cuts taken by interviewers, said Stephanie Kramer, a senior researcher at Pew Research Center who led a 2020 survey about the nation's religious makeup.

Only 13 out of the 30,000 Indians surveyed by Pew said they were unaffiliated with any religion, while many more responded that there was no such thing as having no religion, Kramer said.

"Such a tiny percentage of people with no religion is unusual," Kramer said.

Hindus are the largest religious group in India by far. They comprise about 80% of the population while Muslims account for 14%, the largest of the minority religions. The country also is home to Buddhists, Christians, Jains, Sikhs and numerous Indigenous faith traditions.

Renouncing one's religion is allowed in India, and the Special Marriage Act of 1954 permits people with no religious beliefs to marry, as well as nonreligious and non-ritualistic weddings. But the country doesn't officially recognize atheism or the nonreligious. To avoid a hassle, some feel forced to list a religion on government forms such as birth certificates, or on school admissions paperwork.

"There are delays with documents when you don't state your religion," said Jaswant Mohali, a coordinator for the rationalist group Tarksheel Society Punjab. "Sometimes we take this issue to court, but most of the time we just state our religion at birth to avoid problems with official documents."

Mohali's and Patil's organizations are among those pushing for the government to add a "no religion" checkbox to the country's new census form. But irreligious activists don't just advocate for their specific causes; they have long pushed for other social justice issues like caste and gender equality.

Although small in numbers, atheists in India have been able to exert influence and advance their agenda "with a human approach and empathy," said K. Veeramani, president of the Chennai-based Dravidar Kazhagam, a social justice organization advocating for equality. It was launched in the 1940s by E.V. Ramaswamy Naicker, popularly known as Periyar, in the southern state of Tamil Nadu.

"It's not about a show of hands," Veeramani said. "It's about clarity of thinking. The rationalist way of life is about equality and equity."

The group, along with its coalition of political parties, has resisted Modi's central government policies. Their biting rhetoric has sometimes proved controversial.

On Sept. 2, speaking at an event in Chennai, Udayanidhi Stalin, Tamil Nadu's sports minister and son of Chief Minister M.K. Stalin, called to eradicate Hinduism, comparing it to coronavirus, malaria and dengue. After a firestorm of criticism from opponents, allies and Hindus both within India and in the diaspora who called his statements anti-Hindu, Stalin, who identifies as atheist, doubled down on his comments, clarifying that his fight is against a system that perpetrated caste discrimination.

Sharp rhetoric about Hinduism often stems from deep-seated hurt and the trauma of caste, and not from hatred of Hindus or upper-caste Brahmins, said Annamalai Arulmozhi, a Chennai-based lawyer born to parents who were followers of Periyar and raised their children as atheists. Arulmozhi, who is still an atheist and a feminist, says feminism and fighting inequities perpetrated by the caste system have been central to Periyar's movement, which continues today.

Fighting for justice means facing opposition from religion, culture, caste and everything else the system throws at you, Arulmozhi said.

"Atheism has given me the strength to stand against all of this," she said. "To get justice, you have to oppose all these structures, branches and corollary institutions. You need to reject all that and only view your path and your goal as a humanist. That feeling, to me, is atheism."

Arulmozhi said her family would not have had the opportunity to get an education without the push for equality that Periyar led. She has found living as an atheist "freeing."

The nones in India come from an array of belief backgrounds, including Hindu, Muslim and Sikh. Atheism is still largely invisible and ignored in India, said Mohali, who was born into a Sikh family. Rational thought, he said, is without a platform.

"There are a lot of television channels for religion, but not for science or rational thought," he said.

Sultan Shahin, founder of a progressive Muslim website called New Age Islam, said he is seeing more

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Muslims in India questioning their religion and some even calling themselves “ex-Muslims.” Shahin shuns such labels but said most would view him as a “cultural Muslim.”

“I question how the Quran is compiled and I ask these questions openly,” he said. “We need to have room for these discussions without fearing for our safety.”

Historically, doubt has been an integral part of India’s spiritual DNA. The gurus or spiritual masters, including the Buddha, encouraged followers to ask questions. Ancient Indian scriptures, such as verses in the Rig Veda, address skepticism around the fundamental question of a creator god, and the creation of the universe, said Signe Cohen, associate professor of religion at the University of Missouri who focuses on Hinduism and Buddhism.

“Buddhism is a functionally atheist religion because there is no belief in a god who is the creator of the universe or a savior of humans,” Cohen said.

Other religions that took root in India pose similar questions, she said. Jain texts raise the question most atheists ask: If there is a creator god who is the ruler of the universe, why is there so much suffering?

Materialist schools of thought dating back to the fifth and sixth centuries include declarations that human beings are nothing more than their physical bodies, and denied the existence of god, the soul and life after death. Others that denied the existence of gods still believed in rebirth and the soul.

India has also seen several movements in the last century that emphasize spirituality over religion and ritual, like the one started by philosopher Jiddu Krishnamurti. His foundation is headquartered in Chennai and emphasizes living in the present.

“He (the philosopher) said we don’t need to go the previous or next life because how we live now dictates the quality of the next moment or the next day,” said Harshad Parekh, a longtime follower and educator in Krishnamurti schools who was born Hindu and now is agnostic.

Krishnamurti died in 1986, but his view on the search for truth lives on in followers like Parekh.

“Man cannot come to it through any organization, through any creed, through any dogma, priest or ritual, not through any philosophical knowledge or psychological technique,” according to the late philosopher.

Krishnamurti also repeatedly stated that he held no nationality or belief and belonged to no particular group or culture. Parekh strongly aligns with that belief.

He does, however, support the Modi government.

“I’m not for or against any religion or faith group,” he said. “But I do like what this government has done for the economy.”

Israel is perennially swept up in religious conflict. Yet many of its citizens are secular

By ILAN BEN ZION Associated Press

MEVASSERET ZION, Israel (AP) — Israel is a nation perennially swept up in religious fervor and conflict. And yet, strikingly, a large portion of its population is secular, and even its insular ultra-Orthodox community loses a steady stream of members who tire of its strict religious rules.

The country is home to about 7 million Jews, almost half of the global Jewish population. But Jewish identity is a complex blend of religious and ethnonational identity; most Israeli Jews are not diligent observers of Judaism.

An Israeli Central Bureau of Statistics survey published in 2021 found that among Israeli Jews over the age of 20, about 45% identified as secular or not religious, while 33% said they practiced “traditional” religious worship. Ultra-Orthodox Jews, known as Haredim in Hebrew, made up 10%.

For Naor Narkis and many other secular Israelis, their Jewish identity is cultural — defined by the Hebrew tongue and historical experience — rather than governed by traditional religious worship.

Narkis, a Tel Aviv native, founded Enlightened Israel after last year’s parliamentary elections when ultra-Orthodox and religious ultranationalists helped bring Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu back into office. Narkis says the organization aims to champion liberal values and educate ultra-Orthodox Israelis about them, and advocates for a clear separation of religion and state, including allowing public transit on the

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Sabbath.

"I don't think there's a big difference between a secular Jew living in Tel Aviv and a person living in New York whose parents are Christian but isn't religious," Narkis said. "What defines us is our language, and our heritage, but doesn't involve faith in a god."

He cited Ahad Ha'Am, a pioneer of modern Hebrew literature in the late 19th century, who depicted Jewish identity as a cultural heritage rather than religion.

Narkis' group gives out free smartphones to Haredim who want them — since January, it's distributed 3,000 smartphones.

The ultra-Orthodox adhere to a strict interpretation of Jewish law and a code of conduct that governs everything from what to eat to which socks to wear. The community often eschews smartphones and the internet, which they see as a gateway to inappropriate ideas.

Yet each year, around 4,000 people in Israel — one of every seven students graduating from the Haredi education system — leave the ultra-Orthodox community, according to Out for Change, an organization that helps former Haredi Israelis integrate into society and the workforce. That figure is growing each year, even as the ultra-Orthodox birthrate is 6.5 children per woman.

Among those who chose to leave is Tamar Shabtai.

For the first two decades of her life, she followed the rules. She kept the Sabbath, ate kosher food and dressed strictly modest, as her ultra-Orthodox community in Jerusalem expected.

But in the past eight years, Shabtai, 29, has left that behind.

Although she only lives three miles from her ultra-Orthodox neighborhood in Jerusalem, she likened the experience of leaving the community to "immigrating to another country."

"Community life is really the most important element there," Shabtai said of the ultra-Orthodox world. "Anyone who doesn't fit this framework won't do well really. Either one feels all the time that they don't belong and has to fight for their place. Or one chooses to leave — and then there are other prices for leaving the familiar community and starting all over again."

Those who exit the ultra-Orthodox community face major challenges. Families and communities often shun those who chart a different course. Many Haredi schools don't teach subjects such as English or mathematics, making joining the modern workforce a challenge. Haredi men and women who qualified for government subsidized training programs for tech jobs suddenly find themselves ineligible once they leave the community.

Jerusalem is about a third ultra-Orthodox. Dotted around downtown are several groups that offer social networking events for ex-Haredim. Out for Change provides that, as well as resources, classes, workshops and counseling to help people navigate their brave new world.

"Until now the state looked at them from the Haredi narrative — dropouts, weaklings — and that even if we try to help them, it's through the welfare prism," said Nadav Rosenblatt, Out for Change's director. "They could have stayed Haredim but chose to leave. They come with motivation, they have aspirations to integrate in the workforce and higher education."

Shabtai's departure was a gradual process. It began when she started post-secondary education outside the ultra-Orthodox community, where she encountered Israelis of many varieties.

She is the sixth of eight siblings; two others are no longer ultra-Orthodox. Shabtai said she lost childhood friendships when she chose to leave, and that decision has strained relations with her parents.

Visiting her parents' home in pants, rather than a long skirt as is customary among Orthodox women, does not bother them, she said, "but Shabbat is something that is painful to them."

"If I come it's only once in a while, and then I go home with a car — I park it outside the neighborhood," she said. "It hurts, both for them and for me."

Some ex-Haredim maintain religious lifestyles outside the strictures of the community, some preserve some traditional practices common among many Israeli Jews, while others adopt a secular outlook.

Among the handfuls of former Haredi Jews, most still maintain some kind of religious lifestyle, according to an Out for Change poll. Only 21% of those surveyed identified as secular; 45% said they are still

religiously observant — just not ultra-Orthodox.

“The reasons for leaving, contrary to what many people think, are in most cases social and not theological,” said Gilad Malach, a researcher focusing on the ultra-Orthodox community at the Israel Democracy Institute. Many of those giving up Haredi life cite social pressure that doesn’t allow individual expression, he said.

On the inside of Shabtai’s right wrist she has a small tattoo with the Hebrew words for “I don’t know.” Not only are tattoos taboo according to Jewish custom, but the uncertainty contained in that phrase would be discouraged as well.

“What isn’t there to know?” she said. “There is God, there are rules, there’s nothing not to know.”

Fearing ostracism or worse, many nonbelievers hide their views in the Middle East and North Africa

By MARIAM FAM Associated Press

There’s the Tunisian woman who fasts during the Islamic holy month of Ramadan, though not for God. The Iraqi woman who, until recently, wore a hijab. And a man whose Egyptian identity card identifies him as “Muslim,” despite his efforts to change it.

Such are the ways that some of the religiously unaffiliated, or “nones” — people who are agnostics, atheists or nothing in particular — negotiate their existence in the Middle East and North Africa where religion is often ingrained in life’s very fabric.

The hallmarks of religion go beyond the walls of houses of worship. In Muslim-majority countries, they’re in the minarets defining skylines, the headscarves donned by many women, the omnipresent call to prayer that beckons the faithful five times a day, and the references peppering casual greetings.

Aware that rejecting religion can come with repercussions, many vigilantly conceal that part of themselves. Declaring disbelief may spur social stigma, ostracism by loved ones or even unleash threats or the wrath of authorities, especially if going public is coupled with real or perceived attacks on religion or God.

“I have a double life all the time,” said the 27-year-old Tunisian woman. “It’s better than having conflict every day.”

Many nonbelievers seek community, ideas or pockets of digital defiance on the internet even though online spaces still carry risks. Some confide in small circles of friends or leave, when they can, in search of more freedoms abroad.

Most of those interviewed by The Associated Press spoke on condition of anonymity for fear of repercussions and because some of their families don’t know how they religiously identify. Given such secrecy, there are no reliable estimates of the number of nones in the largely religious region.

“The Middle East is the birthplace of the three heavenly religions and there’s no doubt that the region’s culture has for long been intertwined with religion,” said Mustapha Kamel al-Sayyid, a political science professor at Cairo University. “Religion has also been a source of legitimacy for rulers, a source for knowledge and behavioral norms.”

Many in Arab countries, he said, associate lack of religion with immorality and see it as a threat. “To them, you cannot talk about the rights of someone who is a danger to society.”

Laws or policies banning blasphemy — speech or actions considered to be contemptuous of God and other sacred entities — appear in different parts of the world. But according to a Pew Research Center analysis, they were most common in the Middle East and North Africa, or MENA, region as of 2019. Critics of such laws say they can be vaguely worded and infringe on freedom of expression.

The Tunisian woman said she fasts to avoid being found out by her Muslim family. During religious holidays, she pretends to sleep to skip gatherings, where relatives may take aim at her suspected disbelief.

From childhood, she rejected how Islam was practiced in her home. She said her father would sometimes force her to pray, pulling at her clothes while yelling at her.

Resisting traditional interpretations of such things as gender roles, she sought refuge in progressive Muslim communities and readings.

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At one point, she became agnostic, and later started following some secular Buddhist practices. She now sees herself as “nothing in particular” and open to different spiritual paths.

While she believes her journey has given her self-trust, she feels estranged, with no place in her culture. Hany Elmihi, a 57-year-old agnostic from Egypt, once had hope that conditions would change. He saw a window after the Arab Spring uprisings swept the region more than a decade ago.

Elmihi, who grew up in a Cairo apartment building with a mosque, questioned religion from an early age. He said he founded a Facebook group for Egyptians without religion in 2011; similar ones formed in other Arab countries. Mass protests had just unseated a longtime autocrat in Egypt, highlighting social media’s power as a tool for dissent and emboldening many to break taboos.

“It’s not the revolution that turned some into atheists or irreligious; the revolution gave them the freedom and courage to speak up,” said Elmihi. He was threatened and attacked in the ensuing period.

Undeterred, he tried to change the “Muslim” designation on his identity card to state he adheres to no religion. He failed, and his hope for new freedoms fizzled. Eventually, he moved to Norway.

When Elmihi stopped praying in his teens, his father, a practicing Muslim, was disappointed but didn’t impose his views. Elmihi feared others would be less tolerant.

“Society scared me the most,” he said. “I felt isolated.”

Elmihi is ambivalent about his past advocacy, but thinks it was important “to let the society know that the religiously unaffiliated exist.”

Some have taken note with disapproval.

Ishak Ibrahim, a researcher with the Egyptian Initiative for Personal Rights, said Egypt’s youth ministry announced plans in 2014 to combat atheism in collaboration with religious bodies.

Local media also reported on anti-atheism efforts by some Islamic and Christian institutions.

There have been incidents when TV hosts interviewed atheists only to disparage them or kick them out, Ibrahim said.

Atheism is particularly abhorred by many; some view it as part of an agenda to weaken Arab societies. Others say it’s hard for them to support nonbelievers’ rights when some nonbelievers attack religious beliefs.

“We believe that those who don’t belong to religion are committing a sin, but it’s not our responsibility to hold them accountable,” said Abbas Shouman, an official with Al-Azhar, the Cairo-based seat of Sunni Muslim learning. The role of religious authorities, he said “is only to explain, clarify, spread the correct information and respond to suspicions.”

However, he said he rejects criticism of religion.

“They have the right to defend their beliefs as they wish but not to go after others’ beliefs,” he said.

Atheism, in itself, is not criminalized in Egypt, Ibrahim said, adding that other laws are applied in some cases. Last year, Ibrahim’s organization, EIPR, said an Egyptian court upheld a three-year-prison sentence against a blogger charged with contempt of religion and misusing social media. The organization, whose lawyer appealed the earlier verdict, has said the man was accused of managing a Facebook page for Egyptian atheists that allegedly publishes criticism of religions.

In May, Iran hanged two men convicted of blasphemy, carrying out rare death sentences for the crime. They were accused of involvement in a channel on the Telegram message app called “Critique of Superstition and Religion,” according to the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom. The news agency of Iran’s judiciary said the two had insulted Prophet Muhammad and promoted atheism.

In Saudi Arabia, a court has sentenced a man to 10 years in prison and 2,000 lashes on accusations of expressing atheism in Twitter posts; a 2016 media report said religious police found tweets denying the existence of God and ridiculing Quranic verses.

For some Middle Easterners, like Ahmad, disbelief hasn’t caused tensions, at least in their own circles. But the 33-year-old, who grew up in a Shiite Muslim family in Lebanon and now lives in Qatar, spoke only on condition his last name be withheld because of the sensitivity of the subject.

“We have an unspoken agreement: I don’t criticize religion and you don’t criticize my lack of religion,” he said.

Ahmad, who works in the media, is religiously unaffiliated, and says he cannot believe "in something that I cannot touch or cannot see." Some other Lebanese, he said, have abandoned faith because of "sectarian fanaticism" and the exploitation of religion in politics.

The role of sectarian divisions in religiously diverse Lebanon is one reason Talar Demirdjian kept her distance from religion.

"People either go very into their religion or their sects, or the other side, just being completely indifferent or opposing to it all," she said.

She would wonder, "Why is everyone hating on each other?"

"I don't think religions in their essence are bad," she said. "I think it's always the interpretation of religion by men that is bad."

A Lebanese Armenian of Christian heritage, Demirdjian said that in regard to religion, "I identify as 'I don't care.' ... I don't even think about it enough to tick a label."

For one Iraqi woman, doubt started when a childhood dream to become an imam like her grandfather was promptly quashed because she was a girl. Her nine-year-old self believed that the position would bring her closer to God.

Her shock at the dismissal bred lingering questions: "I asked, 'Why? Are men better than me?'"

Iraq's turmoil — and its toll on her life — fueled her disbelief.

The 24-year-old is part of a generation that has witnessed the U.S.-led invasion, sectarian violence, the brutal reign of the Islamic State and increasing clout of militias.

She's worn the Islamic headscarf before and, for a while, even after she identified as agnostic. When militants proliferated where she lived, she donned it simply to stay out of danger; at other times, it was to socially fit in. She'd take it off when she could. Tired of the duplicity, she finally removed it around 2020.

Her life is not normal.

"I am always cautious and worried that something may hurt me, hurt my family or ruin our relationship," she said. "I don't tell people that I am agnostic. ... It'd be an act of stupidity to do so in such a society."

An atheist in northern Nigeria was arrested. Then the attacks against the others worsened

By CHINEDU ASADU Associated Press

KANO, Nigeria (AP) — When the megaphone called out for the daily Islamic prayers, the nonbeliever grabbed his prayer beads and ambled through the streets to join others at the mosque in Kano, northern Nigeria's largest city. Formerly a Muslim, he now identifies as an atheist but remains closeted, performing religious obligations only as a cover.

"To survive as an atheist, you cannot act like one," said the man, who spoke to The Associated Press on condition of anonymity over fears for his safety. He said he narrowly escaped being killed by a mob in 2015 after some people found out he had forsaken Islam.

"If I ever come out in northern Nigeria to say I am an atheist, it will be an automatic death sentence," said the man, a business owner in his 30s.

In parts of the world, the religiously unaffiliated are on the rise, and can safely and publicly be a "none" — someone who identifies as an atheist, agnostic or nothing in particular. In countries like Nigeria, the situation is starkly different.

Nonbelievers in Nigeria said they perennially have been treated as second-class citizens in the deeply religious country whose 210 million population is almost evenly divided between Christians dominant in the south and Muslims who are the majority in the north. While the south is relatively safe for nonbelievers, some say threats and attacks have worsened in the north since the leader of the Humanist Association of Nigeria, Mubarak Bala, was arrested and later jailed for blasphemy.

The Associated Press spoke to seven nonbelievers to document their experiences. Most spoke anonymously and in secret locations over concerns for their safety.

"Bala's imprisonment rolled our movement underground," Leo Igwe, a founder of the humanist associa-

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tion, said of the group's leader, who in 2022 was jailed for 24 years. A court convicted him on an 18-count charge of blaspheming Islam and breach of public peace through his posts on Facebook.

Since Bala was prosecuted by the Kano state government, the humanist association — which has several hundred members — has gone underground, struggling with threats to members who no longer hold meetings, Leo said.

Nigeria's constitution provides for freedom of religion and expression, but activists say threats to religious freedom are common, especially in the north.

Almost half of the countries in Africa, including Nigeria, have statutes outlawing blasphemy. In most secular courts in Nigeria, the stiffest penalty for a blasphemy charge is two years in prison, while it carries a death penalty in the Islamic courts active in the north.

There are no records of any such executions in recent years. The most recent instance of a death sentence, issued in December against an Islamic cleric, has not been carried out.

The Shariah law operating in Islamic courts defines blasphemous acts as those committed by anyone who "intentionally abuses, insults, derogates, humiliates or seeks to incite contempt of the holy Prophet Muhammad."

But what exactly constitutes an insult to Islam is often open to interpretation by accusers; some alleged offenders have been attacked and killed before any trial.

At least three people have been killed for alleged blasphemy in northern Nigeria in the past year. The latest victim was a Muslim stoned to death in June after being accused of blaspheming Islam during an argument at a market. Those who stoned him included children, according to a video reviewed by the AP.

Authorities in Nigeria have failed to act to prevent such attacks, and prosecutions have been rare, said Isa Sanusi, director of Amnesty International in Nigeria.

"The alarming uptick in blasphemy killings and accusations underscores the urgency with which the authorities must wake up to Nigeria's international legal obligations to respect and protect human rights, including freedom of religion," Sanusi said.

Perpetrators of such attacks are ignorant of Islamic teachings, which discourage violence and do not compel anyone to become an adherent unwillingly, said Professor Usman Dutsinma, deputy director of the Center for Islamic Civilization and Interfaith Dialogue at Kano's Bayero University.

"The best thing you can do is to subject him to reasoning," Dutsinma said of nonbelievers. "But if somebody denounces Islam ... some punitive measures must be taken against him. That is what Islam provides."

Threats against the nonreligious in Nigeria are common on social media. On a Facebook group named Anti-Atheist, users frequently posted messages that trolled or threatened atheists, using the Hausa language of northern Nigeria.

The atheist in Kano, in a dimly lit room, spoke with a mix of grit and fear about his experiences as a nonbeliever in a nation where about 98% of the population are Christians or Muslims, according to the Pew Research Center. A Facebook post from Bala in 2015, critiquing some Islamic teachings, influenced the man's shift to atheism.

The man said he created a Facebook account of his own with a fake profile, regularly posting comments that questioned religion.

"My biggest fear is for people I live with to know that I am an atheist," he said.

Even his relatives are unaware he is an atheist, though his wife, a Muslim, accepts him as he is. "Her type is very rare," he said.

Bala, once a Muslim, was seen as an influential member of the humanist community; most of the nonbelievers who spoke to the AP credited him as an inspiration. Until his conviction, he made several posts on Facebook that questioned religion, often attracting threats.

In April 2020, he shared a post noting that he and other humanists in northern Nigeria "claim that there is no God." One user called for Bala to face the death penalty.

Life as a nonbeliever in Nigeria is also difficult for women, who already are severely underrepresented in government and other key sectors.

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"Your achievements are reduced to nothing if you are irreligious," said Abosuahi Nimatu, who dropped out of university in Katsina state in 2020 to escape violence after her peers learned she was no longer a Muslim.

Nimatu was so close to Bala that his prolonged detention depressed her for a year, she said. She used her Facebook account to campaign for his release, prompting threats that reached her cellphone and email inbox. Her home address was shared among people threatening to attack her and her family.

Even at home, there is scant comfort. She is often reminded that — as a female nonbeliever — no man would marry her.

"You are seen as a rebel and as a wayward person," she said.

In 2020, Nigeria became the first secular democracy designated by the U.S. State Department as a "Country of Particular Concern" for engaging in or tolerating "systematic, ongoing, egregious violations of religious freedom." It later was dropped from that list of countries, prompting criticism from the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom, which says Nigeria should be re-added.

"Religious freedom conditions in Nigeria remained poor as both state and non-state actors continued to commit widespread and egregious religious freedom violations," the commission said in its 2022 annual report.

Sometimes, such intolerance comes from one's family.

A man from Yobe state said he was forced to leave home in 2019 when his uncle found out he belonged to an atheist group on WhatsApp, prompting death threats. He returned home only after pretending to be a practicing Muslim even though he remained a closeted atheist, with Bala a strong supporter.

"Before Mubarak was arrested, you had the feeling of someone who could be responsible for you even if your life was in danger. ... But now, you are overwhelmed by a sense of fear and looming danger that you cannot have any way of being supported by anybody," said the man, now a university student.

It is a different reality for the openly faithless in southern Nigeria; they even hold public meetings occasionally. The two atheists who spoke to AP in the commercial hub of Lagos said they had never been attacked or threatened because they are not religious.

Busayo Cole, who was once a Christian and had a foster father who was an Anglican bishop, said his family is indifferent about his religious status. Beyond his family, the worst consequences he faces are occasional snide remarks.

"People are more liberal about things like that down here," said Cole.

At the Kuje prison in Abuja, Bala continues to serve his jail term, receiving visitors from time to time including his wife Amina Ahmed, also a humanist. She went to see him most recently with their 3-year-old son who was only six weeks old when Bala was taken into custody.

He is in good spirits, Ahmed said of her husband. But it has been difficult for her, beginning when she was healing from childbirth while her husband remained behind bars.

"I am trying to be strong (but) my strength sometimes fails me," she said.

In prison, Bala remains resolute as a humanist despite his experiences since April 2020 when he was arrested, though he worries about the safety of his family and the humanists he leads in Nigeria.

Such concerns were what prompted him to plead guilty, his wife said, recalling how worried he had been that a non-guilty plea could cause more anger in northern Nigeria and endanger him more. He also hoped a guilty plea would help him regain access to health care and his young family, which he had been denied for most of the nearly two years he was in solitary confinement before being convicted.

Like Ahmed, the Nigerian humanist community hopes that an appeal of Bala's conviction would bring him freedom.

"For now, I just have to keep pretending (to be religious)," said the atheist in Kano. "Even if I run to somewhere and come out, my family will not be safe."

Kevin McCarthy's ouster as House speaker could cost GOP its best fundraiser heading into 2024

By WILL WEISSERT and BRIAN SLODYSKO Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — Kevin McCarthy spent years raising mountains of Republican campaign cash, flying around the country to recruit top candidates in key districts and painstakingly building political relationships as he worked his way toward becoming speaker of the House.

Now that he's been ousted from the post after less than nine months, some in the GOP are wondering if anyone can take his place as a fundraising dynamo and party builder.

The House isn't scheduled to vote on who could replace McCarthy until at least next week with all legislative work suspended as the chamber navigates a situation never before seen in the nation's history. In the meantime, House Republicans have no clear leader heading into next year's election as they cling to a razor-thin majority.

"Nobody can raise money like him," said Rep. Kelly Armstrong, R-N.D. "And no matter who is the next speaker of the House, none of them can do what Kevin McCarthy did."

The National Republican Congressional Committee, the GOP's House campaign arm, postponed its upcoming fall gala in Dallas that McCarthy was supposed to headline. The committee said McCarthy helped it raise more than \$40 million during the last election cycle and \$20-plus million so far this cycle.

The totals were even higher for a McCarthy-aligned super PAC, the Congressional Leadership Fund, which said that it and its associated nonprofits had raised about \$645 million under McCarthy. That included about \$215 million for the 2020 election, roughly \$350 million during last year's midterm races and around \$80 million so far this cycle.

The leadership fund will shift its alignment to follow the new House speaker once one is elected. Paul Ryan replaced fellow Republican John Boehner in 2015. The GOP retained House control the following year when Donald Trump was elected president.

"Speaker McCarthy has fundamentally altered House elections for Republicans through his recruitment efforts, his unmatched fundraising prowess, and his ability to inspire and generate confidence among donors," Congressional Leadership Fund President Dan Conston said in a statement. "While this is an obvious loss for the House, CLF remains laser-focused on our mission of holding radical Democrats accountable, protecting our vulnerable incumbents, and expanding the House Republican majority."

As speaker and in his prior years leading the Republicans in the minority, McCarthy was viewed by many as less of a legislator and more of a political tactician who found strong Republican candidates and raised enough money to get them elected and to bolster the national party.

McCarthy visiting a district could often be a major draw, juicing fundraiser proceeds, though that's a role any new House speaker can grow into.

A bigger test for the next speaker is whether they will be able to raise the same kind of sums as McCarthy for the party's outside groups, which every year pour millions of dollars into advertising in key races, unburdened by contribution limits for individual campaigns.

"That's where McCarthy has crushed it," said Cam Savage, a longtime Republican strategist who works on House races. "He did the heavy lifting for the Congressional Leadership Fund."

During the 2022 midterms, Republicans underperformed national expectations and eked out a House majority so narrow that McCarthy needed an unprecedented 15 rounds of voting to claim the speakership in January. McCarthy had to remain close to Trump, who is now the front-runner in the party's 2024 primary, and balance the interests of moderates and hard-right members alike. He ultimately couldn't.

The revolt against him featured eight Republicans teaming with House Democrats to vote McCarthy out of the speakership. Ironically, McCarthy had campaigned for some of those who eventually helped strip him of the post he'd worked so long to obtain.

"A lot of them, I helped get elected, so I probably should have picked somebody else," McCarthy joked at a press conference after being forced out.

He may still prove a force in 2024 races. McCarthy has so far suggested that he'll continue to bolster the

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GOP nationally, saying, "My goals have not changed, my ability to fight is just in a different form."

"I intend to make sure that we gain and keep the majority in the next cycle as well," he said.

Holding the House already looked tough since the current majority includes 18 GOP members representing districts that Joe Biden won in 2020. Especially critical could be Republican-held districts in McCarthy's native California, which Democrats were already targeting and could get even more competitive without the clout that comes with the state having one of its own as speaker.

"After this week's chaotic episode, House Republicans have basically upgraded to a Disney fast-pass in their never-ending roller coaster ride to the radical right," said Viet Shelton, a spokesman for the Democratic Congressional Campaign Committee, the party's House campaign arm.

House members in both parties said that what happens next will depend greatly on whether the former speaker endorses his eventual successor. That's because aligning the GOP's various fundraising mechanisms to the new speaker will likely go far smoother if McCarthy supports his replacement.

"It's going to be a challenge," said Marty Obst, who worked for Trump's 2020 campaign and has raised money with McCarthy in the past. "The transition is going to be fairly bumpy."

But other Republicans aren't lamenting his departure. McCarthy noted during his valedictory press conference that he got a text message from a former opponent of one of the eight Republicans who voted against him, Rep. Nancy Mace of South Carolina.

"I did text him because he did dump \$3 million into that run to defeat me," said Katie Arrington, who lost to Mace in a 2022 primary. "He wasted money."

Arrington, who was backed by Trump in her challenge to Mace, questioned the notion of the speaker being the House majority's chief campaigner.

"Why is Kevin McCarthy running around recruiting people, giving them money, picking winners and losers out of Washington?" Arrington asked. "That is the problem with Washington — the elites think that they know better."

In the pope's homeland, more Argentines are seeking spiritual answers beyond the church

By LUIS ANDRES HENAO and NATACHA PISARENKO Associated Press

CAPILLA DEL MONTE, Argentina (AP) — In the pope's homeland, there's a woman who believes in angels and calls them aliens. Another proudly identifies as a witch. And there's a spiritual guru so turned off by the Vatican's opulence that he left the church to help others connect spiritually outside organized religion.

All three are former Catholics who have joined many other Argentines in the growing ranks of the religiously unaffiliated. Known as the "nones," they identify as atheists, agnostics, spiritual but not religious, or simply, nothing in particular.

Pablo Robles says a better label for him would be "all," since he has a rich spiritual life outside religion.

Robles grew up Catholic but became disenchanted while visiting the Vatican during the Great Jubilee of 2000. At a papal Mass, he listened to a sermon on humility — and found himself questioning how the church's vast wealth conflicted with that message.

"I was next to a gold column larger than my apartment," Robles said. "It just unsettled me so much that I said: 'This is not the truth. They're speaking about one thing and doing another.'"

Back in Argentina, he began searching for answers in astrology, Buddhism and Sufism, the mystical side of Islam. He now uses music, yoga and reiki to help others connect spiritually.

"This is growing because it's a moment where the structures and the institutions no longer show coherence and people need freedom instead of the public approval of an institution," he said after meditating at a Zen Buddhist temple in Brazil, where he teaches meditation and yoga.

Most Latin Americans are Christian, and Catholicism remains the dominant religion; about two-thirds of Argentina's 45 million people identify as Catholic. But the church's influence has waned. There's discontent following clergy sex abuse scandals and opposition to the church's stances against abortion and LGBTQ rights.

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More Argentines now seek spiritual answers beyond the church — in yoga, tarot, astrology and beliefs outside religion.

"The growth of those without a religion of belonging in the pope's country is very striking," said Hugo Rabbia, a political psychology professor at the National University of Cordoba.

He said the percentage of people who don't identify with a religion in Argentina doubled within the last 15 years. That's similar to the United States and some other nations.

"It coincides with a series of public debates on sexual and reproductive rights that have strongly influenced the position of some people regarding traditional religions," Rabbia said.

Monsignor Sergio Buenanueva, a bishop in Argentina's Cordoba province, said the church must be less judgmental and more tolerant to reach the nones, especially young people, and bring them back.

"We must be there where the young are," he said. "It's a ministry of presence, of closeness, of support. Not approaching them with an attitude of judges who come to judge the moral behavior."

Disenchantment with the church has led some to formally quit Catholicism, including Lin Pao Rafetta. He is part of the Argentine Coalition for a Secular State that is leading an apostasy movement.

"I started to have a series of reasons to abandon the institution," said Rafetta, who was fired from a Jesuit university as an art history professor after renouncing the faith in a "Collective Apostasy." Other Argentines signed renunciations as well.

Rabbia said many in the growing ranks of nones retain some of the beliefs without being part of the church.

"There's an increasingly significant group of people linked to new spiritualities," he added.

That is evident in Argentina's spiritual hub, Capilla del Monte. The town in Cordoba province, about 500 miles (800 kilometers) northwest of Buenos Aires, is reputed to attract powerful energy, and some say, even extraterrestrial activity.

A group gathered recently at a plateau overlooking Uritorco hill, where some believe an alien city is buried. Passing around condor feathers, Fabian Kloss danced around a bonfire to the bang of drums before meditating inside a pyramid.

"Seven years ago, I started this spiritual journey when I came to Capilla searching for UFOs," said Kloss, who attended a Catholic school but left the religion to pursue a spiritual path. "I've felt so much peace, love and goodness here, and I realized that I wasn't searching for UFOs, but for meaning in life."

Similar searches attract spiritual tourists from afar. Neiva Santos, an architect from Brazil, distanced herself from Catholicism in her 30s.

She recently led a retreat to Capilla del Monte with Brazilians who woke at dawn to meditate in a white-rock labyrinth.

"Religion was always something that didn't allow me to be who I really am ... it was always controlling, always about sins, always about the guilt regarding some of the best things in life," Santos said.

"You pray: 'Holy Father, who art in heaven.' And he's not there. He's inside, right here," she said, pointing to her heart.

Respecting all people and their beliefs is crucial, said Santos. "My religion is me and my divinity is here inside of me."

A spiritual quest brought Daniel Brower from Texas to settle here more than two decades ago. Dream catchers and Tibetan Buddhist flags left behind by visitors decorate his home; a multilingual sign reads: "May peace prevail on Earth." Brower's siblings still attend his former Dallas church. He has focused instead on spirituality through sound healing.

"Spirituality is the reason we're here" said the self-described hippie with a long white beard. "To remember who we are ... that we're part of the universe."

A few miles away, along a dirt road, is Miryam Dietrich's home, overlooking a grassy patch where some believe a spaceship landed. Dietrich says she has had several encounters with beings from a subterranean city thought to be nearby.

"What different religions call angels are these more advanced civilizations, some intraterrestrial, others extraterrestrial," said Dietrich, an attorney who grew up in a conservative Catholic family. "Some are from this solar system ... preventing Earth from being destroyed."

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She also accepts ancestral Indigenous knowledge that sees God or a divine power manifesting in nature. "God is the wind, the trees, the animals," she said. "He's everywhere."

Ana Ottobre, 27, grew up singing in a Catholic choir on Saturdays and attending Mass on Sundays. But she felt constricted: "I wanted to get a tattoo and my grandma would say: 'That's from the devil. Your body is sacred. God wouldn't approve.'"

At 18, she decided against confirmation. She became a tattoo artist, and now proudly identifies as a none and a witch; she has leg tattoos of a sorceress and a black cat.

"This whole holistic world is made up of beautiful people who are looking for their personal evolution," she said. "There's this thing about wanting to improve and help other people on their spiritual path."

Argentina shares many historical and cultural similarities with its neighbor, Uruguay. Their capitals, Buenos Aires and Montevideo, are on the shores of the River Plate where the tango was born in the 19th century. Both nations cherish gaucho or cowboy culture; some people worship soccer as a quasi-religion. But religiosity is markedly different across the river.

"It's surprising that people attribute everything to God," said Fabian Alvarez a sanitation worker and atheist, as he fished on the Uruguayan side. "It's surprising that in a soccer game, someone would ask God to save a penalty shot."

In Uruguay, home to 3.3 million people, more than half identify as religiously unaffiliated — the highest portion in Latin America.

"It's incredible for anyone who sees it from outside, but for us, it's a given," said Valentina Pereira, a professor at Uruguay's Catholic University.

"Religion doesn't visibly hold an important place in Uruguayan society."

Uruguay has a long history of secularization. In the early 20th century, the country banned any mention of God in oaths of office and removed crucifixes from public hospitals, Pereira said. Then holidays were secularized. While Holy Week is the most sacred time of the year for many worldwide, in Uruguay, it's known as Tourism Week. Christmas? It's Family Day.

"Secularism ... is sacred for Uruguayans," she said.

Juan Bucio, a Catholic working at a Montevideo bookstore, said he feels alone. His coworkers are all nones, but he still keeps a holy card of St. Maria Francesca Rubatto — an Italian nun and Uruguay's first saint. "It's a tough place to practice religion."

A few blocks away, the Rev. Bernardo Techera greeted the few parishioners who entered the cathedral for Mass.

"In Uruguay, the priest doesn't have any prestige," Techera said. The upside, he said, is that those who are religious are deeply committed. "You truly live this religion. It's a personal decision, not a social imposition."

Juan Castelli, a software engineer from Montevideo, recalled reading the Bible and praying until age 15 when he stopped believing in God.

"I don't know anyone who goes to church," said Castelli, a former Catholic. He acknowledged that some churches help those struggling with poverty and addiction. But religions, he said, can be harmful, especially when mixed with politics.

Not far from Montevideo lives Uruguay's best-known atheist: former President Jose Mujica. Now, 88, Mujica gained respect globally and across the political spectrum for his simple ways. The former guerrilla leader and Nobel Peace Prize nominee donated most of his salary to charity and declined to live in the presidential palace.

Interviewed at his flower farm, he reflected on the global rise of the religiously unaffiliated.

"I see all religions as very arrogant because the universe's magnitude is so brutal, and yet they try to place humans as the epicenter." Mujica said. "Since we don't want to die, we need to build something that creates the illusion that not everything ends here ... I believe we come from nothing. Heaven, and also hell, is right here."

Trump's intensifying rhetoric offers insight into how he might govern again as president

By MICHELLE L. PRICE and NICHOLAS RICCARDI Associated Press

Over the past two weeks, Donald Trump said shoplifters should be immediately shot, suggested the United States' top general be executed and mocked a political opponent's husband who was beaten with a hammer.

The former president and current front-runner for the Republican presidential nomination also in recent weeks encouraged the impeachment of Democratic President Joe Biden because the "lowlifes Impeached me TWICE," urged his party to shut down the U.S. government with the hope it would stall some of the criminal cases he faces, and said that, if elected to the White House again, he would threaten NBC News and MSNBC's access to the airwaves over news coverage of him that he called "Country Threatening Treason."

From his earliest days in public life as a New York real estate tycoon, Trump has favored language that makes him appear tough and scrappy, particularly when it comes to crime and retribution for his perceived enemies. But the rhetorical escalation on display in recent weeks is notable for its parallels to the hardline approaches that are hallmarks of authoritarian regimes that he has occasionally praised, such as the rule of Russian President Vladimir Putin or North Korean leader Kim Jong-Un.

"Violence is his political project now," said Ruth Ben-Ghiat, a historian at New York University. "It is the thing, besides his own victimhood, that he brings up the most."

Author of a book called "Strongmen," Ben-Ghiat contends that Trump fits well in the category. His recent statements on shooting shoplifters, for example, call to mind strongman leaders he has previously praised such as former Philippines President Rodrigo Duterte, whose war on drugs featured "extrajudicial killings" of thousands of suspects without a trial, or other countries where military leaders disappear after falling out of favor with the regime.

Trump already has a nearly decade-long record of making inflammatory, violent statements, often without follow-through.

He has mulled shooting illegal border crossers in the legs and offered to pay the legal fees of people who roughed up protesters that disrupted his 2016 campaign rallies.

Trump's words also can rile up his supporters and have direct consequences, most glaringly in the case of Jan. 6, 2021, when his lies about his 2020 election loss revved up a mass of supporters who attacked the U.S. Capitol in a failed effort to prevent Congress from certifying Biden's presidential victory.

They can also rile up Trump's own party, which then incorporates the former president's vendettas and impulses into its own agenda.

Following Trump's complaints of political persecution by the Federal Bureau of Investigation, Republicans have now called for dissolving the law enforcement agency and the GOP-controlled House has launched a committee investigating the "weaponization" of the federal government.

After Trump mulled bombing drug labs in Mexico, his rivals for the Republican nomination have pushed increasingly aggressive proposals for using the military to attack cartels in the U.S.' southern neighbor, which would be the sort of unilateral use of force on foreign soil that Trump has railed against.

The violence and vengeance in Trump's remarks has ratcheted up in recent weeks as his lead in the Republican primary has seemed to solidify and his legal peril in four criminal cases, as well as a fraud case threatening his businesses, has intensified.

The remarks have also alarmed the legal system.

On Tuesday, a New York judge overseeing the former president's civil fraud trial issued a gag order barring Trump from talking about his staff, after the former president posted a picture of the judge's clerk on his social media network, Truth Social.

Last month, federal prosecutor Jack Smith asked for a gag order in his criminal case against Trump over his attempt to overturn the 2020 election results, citing Trump's stream of inflammatory remarks about prosecutors, the judge in that case, and even his recent suggestion that Mark Milley, the retiring chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, had committed treason and should be executed.

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The comment was a reference to phone calls Milley made to his counterpart in China toward the end of Trump's term, including after the Jan. 6 Capitol attack, that were meant to give "reassurance" to the U.S.'s chief adversary.

Trump described the calls as a "treasonous act" for which "in times gone by, the punishment would have been DEATH!" In an interview with "60 Minutes," Milley said he had taken precautions to protect himself and his family after Trump's social media post.

Though most in his party have stayed quiet, Trump's comments about Milley horrified some Republicans. His former vice president, Mike Pence, on Tuesday called them "utterly unacceptable" at a national security and foreign policy event at Washington's Georgetown University co-hosted by The Associated Press.

Trump's former White House chief of staff, John Kelly, released a statement to CNN on Tuesday that also bemoaned his former boss' attack on Milley. It also included a long list of behaviors that Kelly, a retired Marine Corps general, said demonstrated that Trump "has nothing but contempt for our democratic institutions, our Constitution, and the rule of law."

Trump campaign spokesman Steven Cheung did not respond to a request for comment about the former president's language.

On the debate stage last week, Trump's rivals for the GOP nomination didn't address the former president's more incendiary rhetoric. They instead focused their relatively infrequent criticism of Trump on his decision to skip the debate, how he added to the national debt while running the country and his comments on abortion.

Democrats, including Biden, have warned that Trump and supporters in his Make America Great Again movement are a threat to American democracy. In a speech the day after the debate, Biden declared of Republicans that "the silence is deafening."

"I think there's a feeling that you don't want to insult his voters and that his words don't matter," Alex Conant, a Republican strategist, said of how gingerly Trump's rivals step around his violent rhetoric. "But if you only criticize him on the margins, you're not going to convince anybody to switch their vote."

Indeed, some of Trump's rivals have even tried to mimic his more violent rhetoric, such as Florida Gov. Ron DeSantis vowing to "start slitting throats" of federal bureaucrats once elected.

Conant said that "part of Trump's schtick is that he says things nobody else will," and while it may offend people and cost him with independent voters, his supporters see it as a sign of authenticity and love that about him.

"Nothing he says has ever really cost him with his own base," he said.

At last week's California Republican Party convention in a hotel ballroom in Anaheim, Trump's rhetoric reached yet another level. In a heavily Democratic state where the GOP's faithful have had little to cheer, the former president's arrival sparked a celebration, with attendees in red, white and blue Trump gear forming a conga line before the former president's speech began.

Trump joked about a hammer attack that left Paul Pelosi, the 80-year-old husband of former Democratic House Speaker Nancy Pelosi, with a fractured skull after a man who touted conservative conspiracy theories broke into their house last year.

"We'll stand up to crazy Nancy Pelosi, who ruined San Francisco — how's her husband doing, anybody know?" Trump said as the crowd laughed loudly and cheered.

America's nonreligious are a growing, diverse phenomenon. They really don't like organized religion

By PETER SMITH Associated Press

Mike Dulak grew up Catholic in Southern California, but by his teen years, he began skipping Mass and driving straight to the shore to play guitar, watch the waves and enjoy the beauty of the morning. "And it felt more spiritual than any time I set foot in a church," he recalled.

Nothing has changed that view in the ensuing decades.

"Most religions are there to control people and get money from them," said Dulak, now 76, of Roche-

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port, Missouri. He also cited sex abuse scandals in Catholic and Southern Baptist churches. "I can't buy into that," he said.

As Dulak rejects being part of a religious flock, he has plenty of company. He is a "none" — no, not that kind of nun. The kind that checks "none" when pollsters ask "What's your religion?"

The decades-long rise of the nones — a diverse, hard-to-summarize group — is one of the most talked about phenomena in U.S. religion. They are reshaping America's religious landscape as we know it.

In U.S. religion today, "the most important story without a shadow of a doubt is the unbelievable rise in the share of Americans who are nonreligious," said Ryan Burge, a political science professor at Eastern Illinois University and author of "The Nones," a book on the phenomenon.

The nones account for a large portion of Americans, as shown by the 30% of U.S. adults who claim no religious affiliation in a survey by The Associated Press-NORC Center for Public Affairs Research.

Other major surveys say the nones have been steadily increasing for as long as three decades.

So who are they?

They're the atheists, the agnostics, the "nothing in particular." Many are "spiritual but not religious," and some are neither or both. They span class, gender, age, race and ethnicity.

While the nones' diversity splinters them into myriad subgroups, most of them have this in common:

They. Really. Don't. Like. Organized. Religion.

Nor its leaders. Nor its politics and social stances. That's according to a large majority of nones in the AP-NORC survey.

But they're not just a statistic. They're real people with unique relationships to belief and nonbelief, and the meaning of life.

They're secular homeschoolers in the Ozark Mountains of Arkansas, Pittsburghers working to overcome addiction. They're a mandolin maker in a small Missouri town, a former evangelical disillusioned with that particular strain of American Christianity. They're college students who found their childhood churches unpersuasive or unwelcoming.

Church "was not very good for me," said Emma Komoroski, a University of Missouri freshman who left her childhood Catholicism in her mid-teens. "I'm a lesbian. So that was kind of like, oh, I didn't really fit, and people don't like me."

The nones also are people like Alric Jones, who cited bad experiences with organized religion ranging from the intolerant churches of his hometown to the ministry that kept soliciting money from his devout late wife — even after Jones lost his job and income after an injury.

"They should have come to us and said, 'Is there something we can do to help you?'" said Jones, 71, of central Michigan. "They kept sending us letters saying, 'Why aren't you sending us money?'"

Although he doesn't believe in organized religion, he believes in God and basic ethical precepts. "People should be treated equally as long as they treat other people equally. That's my spirituality if you want to call it that."

These days, if a visiting relative wants to attend church, he'll go along, "but I'm not prone to listening to anybody telling me this is the way it should be," Jones said.

About 1 in 6 U.S. adults, including Jones and Dulak, is a "nothing in particular." There are as many of them as atheists and agnostics combined (7% each).

"All the media attention is on atheists and agnostics, when most nones are not atheist or agnostic," Burge said.

Many embrace a range of spiritual beliefs — from God, prayer and heaven to karma, reincarnation, astrology or energy in crystals.

"They are definitely not as turned off to religion as atheists and agnostics are," Burge said. "They practice their own type of spirituality, many of them."

Dulak still draws inspiration from nature.

"It just feels so good to be next to something so timeless," he said, sitting in his yard in the Missouri River town he now calls home.

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He finds similar fulfillment in his two-story workshop, where he makes the latest of thousands of mandolins he has created over the decades, enabling people to “share the joy of music.”

“It feels spiritually good,” Dulak said. “It’s not a religion.”

Burge said the nones are rising as the Christian population declines, particularly the “mainline” or moderate to liberal Protestants.

“This is not just some academic exercise for me,” said Burge, who pastors a dwindling American Baptist church in Mt. Vernon, Illinois. It’s “what I’ve seen every single Sunday of my life the last 16 years.”

The statistics show the nones are well-represented in every age group, but especially among young adults. About four in 10 of those under 30 are nones — nearly as many as say they’re Christians.

The trend was evident in interviews on the University of Missouri campus. Several students said they didn’t identify with a religion.

Mia Vogel said she likes “the foundations of a lot of religions — just love everybody, accept everybody.” But she considers herself more spiritual.

“I’m pretty into astrology. I’ve got my crystals charging up in my window right now,” she said. “Honestly, I’ll bet half of it is a total placebo. But I just like the idea that things in life can be explained by greater forces.”

One movement that exemplifies the “spiritual but not religious” ethos is the Twelve Step sobriety program, pioneered by Alcoholics Anonymous and adopted by other recovery groups. Participants turn to a “power greater than ourselves” — the God of each person’s own understanding — but they don’t share any creed.

“If you look at the religions, they have been wracked by scandals, it doesn’t matter the denomination,” said the Rev. Jay Geisler, an Episcopal priest who is spiritual advisor at the Pittsburgh Recovery Center, an addiction treatment site.

In contrast, “there’s actually a spiritual revival in the basement of many of the churches,” where recovery groups often meet, he said.

For some, Geisler said, the God of their understanding is “GUS,” for Guy UpStairs. Or “SAM,” for Sure Ain’t Me.

“Nobody’s fighting in those rooms, they’re not saying, ‘You’re wrong about God,’” Geisler said. The focus is on “how your life is changed.”

Participants echoed those thoughts recently at the center. In keeping with the Twelve Step tradition of anonymity, they shared their experiences on condition only their first names be used.

“I grew up Methodist, but I don’t follow any religion,” said John, 32. “I don’t believe in a big, bearded dude in the sky.” But after surviving overdoses, he knows that “something has been watching over me.”

Some identified as Christian, but skip evangelizing in favor of supporting each others’ individual paths.

“I don’t push my belief on anybody,” said Linda, 57. “The pain bonds us.”

Those interviewed said their newfound community is essential to their recovery — and the lack of community contributed to their initial fall into addiction.

Scholars worry that, as people pull away from congregations and other social groups, they are losing sources of communal support.

But nones said in interviews they were happy to leave religion behind, particularly in toxic situations, and find community elsewhere.

Jones agreed that church connections can have benefits — but not for him.

“When you need references and you need other things, those people are there to support you,” he said. “But again, what are you willing to sacrifice of your own beliefs to develop that kind of relationship?”

Marjorie Logman, 75, of Aurora, Illinois, now finds community among other residents in her multigenerational apartment complex. She doesn’t miss the evangelical circles she was long active in.

“The farther away I get, the freer I feel,” she said, criticizing churches for prioritizing money over caring for people. She recalled seeing church leaders tell people with depression their problem was sin or demonic possession — piling guilt upon unaddressed mental illness.

When she was recovering from an injury at a nursing home in 2010, Logman said, her husband was home by himself in despair and died before she could return home. She said her pastor refused to visit

him because he hadn't been involved in church.

She now identifies as agnostic. "I'm not throwing in the towel on everything," she said. "I still believe in a higher consciousness."

Even far from urban centers, nones are finding community.

Adria Cays and Ashley Miller, who live in nearby towns in northwest Arkansas, helped found a group for parents homeschooling according to secular principles.

Even in a predominately Christian region of the Ozarks, they found "people like us who were approaching education and just raising their children from a more secular view," said Miller, 35.

The women's families regularly share hiking adventures on Instagram. While they don't describe their explorations as spiritual, they aim to inspire wonder and purpose in their children.

"We really want them to have a deep connection to nature," said Cays, 43.

Added Miller: "We are part of something bigger, and that is the Earth. There is meaning just in being."

Biden administration waives 26 federal laws to allow border wall construction in South Texas

By VALERIE GONZALEZ Associated Press

McALLEN, Texas (AP) — The Biden administration announced it waived 26 federal laws in South Texas to allow border wall construction on Wednesday, marking the administration's first use of a sweeping executive power employed often during the Trump presidency.

The Department of Homeland Security posted the announcement on the U.S. Federal Registry with few details outlining the construction in Starr County, Texas, which is part of a busy Border Patrol sector seeing "high illegal entry." According to government data, about 245,000 illegal entries have been recorded so far this fiscal year in the Rio Grande Valley Sector which contains 21 counties.

"There is presently an acute and immediate need to construct physical barriers and roads in the vicinity of the border of the United States in order to prevent unlawful entries into the United States in the project areas," Alejandro Mayorkas, the DHS secretary, stated in the notice.

The Clean Air Act, Safe Drinking Water Act and Endangered Species Act were some of the federal laws waived by DHS to make way for construction that will use funds from a congressional appropriation in 2019 for border wall construction. The waivers avoid time-consuming reviews and lawsuits challenging violation of environmental laws.

Starr County's hilly ranchlands, sitting between Zapata and McAllen, Texas, is home to about 65,000 residents sparsely populating about 1,200 square miles (3,108 square kilometers) that form part of the Lower Rio Grande Valley National Wildlife Refuge.

Although no maps were provided in the announcement, CBP announced the project in June and began gathering public comments in August when it shared a map of the additional construction that can add up to 20 miles (32 kilometers) to the existing border barrier system in the area. Starr County Judge Eloy Vera said it will start south of the Falcon Dam and go past Salineño, Texas.

"The other concern that we have is that area is highly erosive. There's a lot of arroyos," Eloy Vera, the county judge said, pointing out the creeks cutting through the ranchland and leading into the river.

Concern is shared with environmental advocates who say structures will run through public lands, habitats of endangered plants and species like the Ocelot, a spotted wild cat.

"A plan to build a wall through will bulldoze an impermeable barrier straight through the heart of that habitat. It will stop wildlife migrations dead in their tracks. It will destroy a huge amount of wildlife refuge land. And it's a horrific step backwards for the borderlands," Laiken Jordahl, a southwest conservation advocate for the Center for Biological Diversity, said Wednesday afternoon.

During the Trump administration, about 450 miles (724 kilometers) of barriers were built along the southwest border between 2017 and January 2021. Texas Governor Greg Abbott renewed those efforts after the Biden administration halted them at the start of his presidency.

The DHS decision on Wednesday contrasts the Biden administration's posturing when a proclamation

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to end the construction on Jan. 20, 2021, stated, "building a massive wall that spans the entire southern border is not a serious policy solution."

In a statement Wednesday, CBP said the project is consistent with that 2021 proclamation. "Congress appropriated fiscal year 2019 funds for the construction of border barrier in the Rio Grande Valley, and DHS is required to use those funds for their appropriated purpose," the statement said. "CBP remains committed to protecting the nation's cultural and natural resources and will implement sound environmental practices as part of the project covered by this waiver."

The announcement prompted political debate by the Democratic administration facing an increase of migrants entering through the southern border in recent months, including thousands who entered the U.S. through Eagle Pass at the end of September.

"A border wall is a 14th century solution to a 21st century problem. It will not bolster border security in Starr County," U.S. Representative Henry Cuellar said in a statement. "I continue to stand against the wasteful spending of taxpayer dollars on an ineffective border wall."

Political proponents of the border wall said the waivers should be used as a launching pad for a shift in policy.

"After years of denying that a border wall and other physical barriers are effective, the DHS announcement represents a sea change in the administration's thinking: A secure wall is an effective tool for maintaining control of our borders," Dan Stein, president of the Federation for American Immigration Reform, said in a statement. "Having made that concession, the administration needs to immediately begin construction of wall across the border to prevent the illegal traffic from simply moving to other areas of the border."

Highlights from AP-NORC poll about the religiously unaffiliated in the US

By PETER SMITH Associated Press

Thirty percent of Americans don't identify with a religious group — but not all of them are atheists or agnostics.

In fact, 43% of the group known as the "nones" say they believe in God, even if they largely dislike organized religion.

Those are among the findings of a new poll by The Associated Press-NORC Center for Public Affairs Research.

The poll of 1,680 adults was conducted May 11-15 using a sample drawn from NORC's probability-based AmeriSpeak Panel, which is designed to be representative of the U.S. population. The margin of sampling error for all respondents is plus or minus 3.4 percentage points.

RELIGIOUS OR NOT

Thirty percent of adults identified with no religion. That group, commonly called nones, includes those identifying as atheist (7%), agnostic (7%) and nothing in particular (16%).

Sixty-four percent in the poll identified with a Christian tradition, including Protestant (25%), Catholic (19%), "just Christian" (18%), Mormon (1%) and Orthodox (less than 1%).

Other groups included Buddhist, Hindu, Jewish and Muslim (1% each) and something else (2%).

AGE GAP

Forty-three percent of those 18 to 29 are nones, while 52% identify as Christians and 4% are affiliated with other religions.

Adults over 60 are the most religious age group, but even among them, nearly 1 in 5 are nones.

GOD WITHOUT RELIGION

Forty-three percent of all nones professed belief in God or a higher power — including 61% of nothings in particular, 40% of agnostics and 4% of atheists. Overall, 79% of U.S. adults professed faith in God.

BELIEFS

About half of nothings in particular said they believe in angels, the power of prayer and heaven. So did about a quarter of agnostics. Agnostics and nothing in particulars were less likely to believe in hell or

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Satan. Almost no atheists believed in any of that.

But most agnostics (67%) and nothings in particular (79%), and 44% of atheists, agreed "some things can't be explained by science or natural causes."

UNCONVENTIONAL

Nothings in particular were at least as likely as other Americans to accept various beliefs and practices outside of the Judeo-Christian tradition, including astrology, yoga as a spiritual practice, reincarnation, spiritual energies in physical things, the interaction of spirits of the dead with the living and karma.

GOOD OR BAD?

More Americans overall say the trend of people moving away from identifying with a religious group is a bad thing (37%) than that it's a good thing, (23%), but 39% say it's neither.

Among the nones, most atheists say it's good (69%), compared with 52% of agnostics and only 36% of nothings in particular.

About half of those with a religious affiliation say it's a bad thing.

SPIRITUAL BUT NOT RELIGIOUS

In addition to having no religious affiliation, about 9 in 10 nones also don't consider themselves "religious."

But about half of agnostics and those nothings in particular consider themselves "spiritual but not religious." About two-thirds of nothings in particular consider themselves spiritual, religious or both. Eight in 10 atheists consider themselves neither.

WHY NOT RELIGIOUS?

Among the nones who say they are also not personally religious, 68% cited their dislike of organized religion as a very or extremely important reason. For 63%, a top reason is their dislike of the stances religious faiths take on social and political issues, while 54% say the same about reports of abuse or misconduct by religious leaders. Forty-six percent cite disbelieving in God as a top reason. That was true of 81% of atheists, but just 40% of agnostics and 32% of nothings in particular.

GENDER

Nearly two-thirds of atheists and 56% of agnostics are male, while 52% of nothings in particular are women.

RACE

Nones tend to be white, especially atheists. Nothings in particular are a somewhat more diverse subgroup, with a third of them identifying as Black, Hispanic, Asian, multiracial or with another racial or ethnic group other than white.

POLITICS

About two-thirds of atheists and agnostics identify as Democrats or lean toward the Democratic Party, as do half of nothings in particular, while 13% of atheists, 17% of agnostics and 22% of nothings in particular identify with or lean toward the Republicans.

EDUCATION

Forty-one percent of atheists have a college degree, compared with 34% of agnostics and 28% of nothings in particular (and 30% of U.S. adults overall).

WHERE TO FIND FULFILLMENT

Close to three-quarters of religious adults say their faith provides them with at least some meaning and fulfillment, including 46% who say it provides a lot.

While widespread majorities of atheists and agnostics get no fulfillment from religious faith, only 62% of those nothings in particular say the same.

Large majorities of people with and without a religious affiliation said they get at least some fulfillment from spending time outdoors, physical exercise and spending time with family and friends.

From cradle to casket, life for Italians changes as Catholic faith loses relevance

By GIOVANNA DELL'ORTO Associated Press

ISOLA DEL GRAN SASSO, Italy (AP) — In small towns like this mountain one a couple of hours east of Rome, and all across Italy, life has changed over the last generation as the Catholic faith loses relevance in people's routines and choices.

From cradle to casket — from buying contraceptives at the pharmacy to gathering for funeral wakes — the church and its teachings no longer drive daily rhythms. Local parishes have stopped functioning as the towns' gathering spot, where families congregated each Sunday and youth found extracurricular activities from sports to music that schools rarely provided.

In interviews where they work and volunteer in Isola and nearby towns, villagers shared their experiences with a faith that's still nominally embraced but rarely lived.

"I remember I spent my childhood in the parish, it was a way to meet. Youth today prefer different gathering spots," said Assunta Cantalupo in the Sanctuary of San Gabriele dell'Addolorata where she volunteers. "Now even young parents are hard to engage. They bring kids to the doorway for catechism, but don't cross it for Mass."

"My generation is 'I participate when I feel like it,'" added her husband, Antonino Di Odoardo. "For my son's generation, there is a rejection in principle."

"I've zero time," said auto mechanic Francesco Del Papa, expressing a shared sentiment about little leisure time — and the desire to spend it elsewhere than in church. "I'm Catholic. My wife goes to church, I don't."

"From what I hear, it's more a question of keeping up a tradition than of faith," said Michela Vignola of her hair salon clients, who still mostly do church weddings. She estimates believers make up half her town's population — including a majority who aren't practicing.

"People no longer feel guilty about contraceptives," said third-generation pharmacist Marta Orsini, even though they're barred by the Catholic Church. She's also noted depression growing rapidly, especially among the young. "Spirituality isn't where they can find refuge, I think."

"I've noticed a gap of more than a generation at Mass," said elementary school teacher Marcello Tichioni, who feels closest to his own faith when he goes on yearly pilgrimages to San Gabriele.

"Young people care about being together. You can talk about Jesus, but they only care if their friends are also there," said the Rev. Francesco Di Feliciano, the priest in charge of youth ministry at the Sanctuary. Unless religion can be shown as relevant to their lives, "young people really have zero interest."

"Everyone goes on a field trip to see the Pope, but the (local) priest is almost an alien," said public school religion teacher Marco Palareti of his students.

The one exception comes last — at funerals, for which most want a Mass, said Antonio Ruggieri, a fifth-generation funeral home director. "Attendance has remained stable because there's always this reverence for the dead, though we've added different rites for other religions, especially with immigrants."

Q&A: Jose Mujica on Uruguay's secular history, religion, atheism and the global rise of the 'nones'

By LUIS ANDRES HENAO and NATACHA PISARENKO Associated Press

MONTEVIDEO, Uruguay (AP) — In Uruguay, a nation of some 3.3 million people, more than half identify as "nones" — atheist, agnostic or other religiously unaffiliated — the highest portion in Latin America.

Uruguay has a long history of secularization. In the early 20th century, new laws banned any mention of God in oaths of office, and removed symbols, including crucifixes, from public hospitals. Holidays were secularized: Holy Week is known as Tourism Week. Christmas is Family Day.

Uruguay's best-known "none" is former President Jose Mujica. Now 88, Mujica gained respect globally for his simple ways. He donated most of his salary to charity and declined to live in the presidential mansion. His social agenda included laws approving same-sex marriage and creating the world's first national

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marketplace for legal marijuana.

In an interview with The Associated Press at his flower farm near Montevideo, Mujica reflected on his beliefs, Uruguay's secularism and the global rise of the religiously unaffiliated.

Answers have been edited for brevity and clarity.

AP: What do you believe?

MUJICA: I believe there's nothing — life is the adventure of molecules. And there's nothing else.

AP: Would you like to believe?

MUJICA: Yes, but I can't.

AP: Why?

MUJICA: You either believe or you don't believe. I see all religions as very arrogant because the universe's magnitude is so brutal, and yet they try to place humans as the epicenter. ... Why would the universe value human life more than the life of an ant? ... We're just as fleeting. But I respect religions. ...

Human beings are just a kind of utopian animal, and they need to believe in something. ... From that point of view, I consider religions ... because they perform a service of helping to live and die.

AP: Grievous mistakes have been committed in the name of religions. But religions also provide a sense of community, rituals, faith.

MUJICA: And limits ... they help limit some negative tendencies of humans.

AP: You've lived through great challenges. ... When you were imprisoned, what kept you going?

MUJICA: That I was going to get out to keep fighting ... I've never felt defeated in the sense of being crushed, that it was all over. No! ... Our guts rule a lot more than meets the eye. I know there are people born pessimistic. Even if they win the lottery every day, they always see the dark side. And others want to live.

AP: What do you think about the rise of the religiously unaffiliated?

MUJICA: In this evolution, the technological, technical and scientific advancement is probably influencing. That's also a danger — a lack of humility; the arrogance to believe that we have all keys to human life. That's a gross simplification in which we can fall, but it seems that it's the evolution where humanity is heading to. There are societies that have been profoundly secular. One of them ... is the Chinese society ... it gives importance to thinkers, not so much religions.

AP: What are religion's positive and negative aspects?

MUJICA: We're programmed to want to live. But it's not an intellectual decision. The organization of life is a hard drive that nature puts in us — to love life. And we want to live as long as we can. And we know that we die. Do you realize that it's a brutal contradiction? ... Since we don't want to die, we need to build something that creates the illusion that not everything ends here ... I believe we come from nothing. Paradise, and also hell, is right here ... Just as some have built religions, some of us have built causes.

AP: How would you like to be remembered?

MUJICA: No! (laughs). Memory is a historical thing, out of a comic strip. ... There's nothing historical — years pass by and not even the dust remains. ... I have a tree, a sequoia ... and below, I buried my dog, Manuela, who was my companion for 22 years. When I die, they must burn me to ashes and bury me there. ... That's life: there's always an end. Sometimes they'll ask me, "How do you want to be remembered?" Vanity of vanities! Amenhotep IV was probably an important guy who had 300,000 people building his tomb for 20 years. But who remembers Amenhotep IV? Maybe some history buff.

AP: Why do people remember Jesus?

MUJICA: Because ... we need shelter. I don't believe — but it doesn't mean I don't respect religions a lot. Jesus was ... a great political militant. He brought us a sense of equality, a love of life ... I see him as a historical companion. And it transcended religion.

AP: You're respected for keeping true to your convictions.

MUJICA: I live as I think. Otherwise, if I start living differently, I run the risk of thinking about how I live. ... The Aymara people say: Poor is the one who has no community, no partner in life, who walks alone. When we have companions, we're not poor. We have the most important thing: solidarity from comrades. ... They began to call me, "the poor president," (but) they're the poor ones! ... if you must live in that

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government mansion, four floors just to get a cup of tea, I say: "No way!" ... I prefer a small home that I clean when I can with my old lady. ... I'm not poor, I'm comfortable — it's different. ... In life, you must learn to walk light in baggage.

Fukushima nuclear plant starts 2nd release of treated radioactive wastewater into the sea

By MARI YAMAGUCHI Associated Press

TOKYO (AP) — Japan's wrecked Fukushima nuclear power plant said it began releasing a second batch of treated radioactive wastewater into the sea on Thursday after the first round of discharges ended smoothly.

Plant operator Tokyo Electric Power Company Holdings said workers activated a pump to dilute the treated water with large amounts of seawater, slowly sending the mixture into the ocean through an underground tunnel.

The wastewater discharges, which are expected to continue for decades, have been strongly opposed by fishing groups and neighboring countries including South Korea, where hundreds of people staged protest rallies. China banned all imports of Japanese seafood, badly hurting Japanese seafood producers and exporters.

The plant's first wastewater release began Aug. 24 and ended Sept. 11. During that release, TEPCO said it discharged 7,800 tons of treated water from 10 tanks. In the second discharge, TEPCO plans to release another 7,800 tons of treated water into the Pacific Ocean over 17 days.

About 1.34 million tons of radioactive wastewater is stored in about 1,000 tanks at the plant. It has accumulated since the plant was crippled by a massive earthquake and tsunami in 2011.

TEPCO and the government say discharging the water into the sea is unavoidable because the tanks will reach capacity early next year and space at the plant will be needed for its decommissioning, which is expected to take decades.

They say the water is treated to reduce radioactive materials to safe levels, and then is diluted with seawater by hundreds of times to make it much safer than international standards.

Some scientists say, however, that the continuing release of low-level radioactive materials is unprecedented and needs to be monitored closely.

Japan's government has set up a relief fund to help find new markets and reduce the impact of China's seafood ban. Measures also include the temporary purchase, freezing and storage of seafood and promotion of seafood sales at home.

Cabinet ministers have traveled to Fukushima to sample local seafood and promote its safety.

TEPCO is tasked with providing compensation for reputational damage to the region's seafood caused by the wastewater release. It started accepting applications this week and immediately received hundreds of inquiries. Most of the damage claims are linked to China's seafood ban and excess supply at home causing price declines, TEPCO said.

Agriculture Minister Ichiro Miyashita promoted Japanese scallops at a food fair in Malaysia on Wednesday on the sidelines of a regional farm ministers' meeting.

The International Atomic Energy Agency has reviewed the safety of the wastewater release and concluded that if carried out as planned, it would have a negligible impact on the environment, marine life and human health.

Twins advance for 1st time in 21 years with 2-0 win to sweep Blue Jays behind Gray, Correa

By DAVE CAMPBELL AP Sports Writer

MINNEAPOLIS (AP) — Carlos Correa endured the worst hitting season of his career after signing the richest contract in Minnesota Twins history, playing through a painful bout of plantar fasciitis in his left foot.

The defense, intelligence and leadership were always there, though. Postseason prowess was part of

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the package, too.

Correa had an RBI single and a quick-twitch tag on a pivotal pickoff throw from Sonny Gray, and the Twins swept the Toronto Blue Jays with a 2-0 win in Game 2 of the AL Wild Card Series on Wednesday.

"Everything is October. The mentality is different. I'm just giving everything out there, everything I have," Correa said. "I'm going to keep doing that for the rest of the time that I'm here in Minnesota."

The Twins advanced — for the first time in 21 years — to play the defending World Series champion Astros. Game 1 of the best-of-five AL Division Series is in Houston on Saturday.

That's familiar territory for Correa, who spent seven seasons with the Astros. He signed with Minnesota in 2022 and re-upped for \$200 million this year after agreed-to deals with the Giants and Mets fell apart over concern about an old ankle injury.

"Superstars show up in the biggest moments," Gray said. "Just the way he sees the game, the way he can slow it down, is a special player."

Correa helped Houston reach three World Series, winning it all in 2017, and he's one round into another memorable October.

"They've got a great team, and so do we," Correa said. "Everywhere you look, we're ready."

The two-time All-Star, who went 3 for 7 with a hit-by-pitch against the Blue Jays, ripped a bases-loaded single in a two-run fourth. The patient Twins delivered precisely when they needed to at the plate, and their bullpen tossed 7 1/3 scoreless innings in the series.

Jhoan Duran, after a delay to tend to a cut on his thumb following his warmup, struck out the side in the ninth to trigger a celebration around the mound.

The Blue Jays, who lost their seventh straight game in the playoffs since the AL Championship Series in 2016, left nine runners on base in each game. Matt Chapman had a line drive hook just foul before grounding into an inning-ending double play with the bases loaded in the sixth against Caleb Thielbar.

"One run in two games, one extra-base hit isn't going to cut it," Toronto manager John Schneider said.

Minnesota, after stopping a record 18-game postseason skid with the 3-1 win in Game 1, ended a nine-round losing streak that started with an ALCS defeat in 2002. The Atlanta Braves (2001-2019) and Chicago Cubs (1910-1998) share the all-time mark with 10 straight series lost.

The Blue Jays made Gray work for his first career win in the playoffs, but the veteran right-hander finished five effective innings. He had three inning-ending strikeouts, before the slick move to finish the fifth when he was in the most trouble.

Gray threw a wild pitch that put runners on second and third. But with a full count on Bo Bichette, Gray whipped around and threw to the shortstop Correa, who grabbed the ball and grazed Vladimir Guerrero Jr.'s chest with his glove a split-second before Guerrero's hand hit the base.

Correa noticed the Blue Jays were taking big leads and having trouble hearing with the crowd noise, so he told Gray he'd signal when to try a pickoff.

"I told him there were some free outs on the bases," Correa said. "It felt like the right situation to do it."

The sellout crowd of 38,518 was even more into the action than Game 1, standing in anticipation of every inning-ending out for the Twins and thriving off the bulldog energy that Gray brought to the mound. He finished third in the major leagues in ERA (2.79) during the regular season and logged 184 innings, his most since 2015.

Gray, who is eligible for free agency after the World Series, grew emotional in his pregame news conference on Tuesday when talking about the motivation that he gets from his two boys. His son, Declan, even issued an ultimatum to his dad before the series: "You better not lose."

BOLD MOVE

Blue Jays starter Jose Berríos threw three scoreless innings against his former team, but Schneider followed through on his promise that the entire pitching staff, excluding Game 1 starter Kevin Gausman, was available to try to extend the series.

Schneider pulled the right-hander Berríos after a leadoff walk by Game 1 star Royce Lewis in the fourth inning. Left-hander Yusei Kikuchi, one of four Blue Jays who made 31 or more starts this season, was greeted by a single by Max Kepler. Pinch-hitter Donovan Solano walked, Correa put the Twins up with his

single, and pinch-hitter Willi Castro's double-play groundout got another run on the board.

"He had electric stuff," Schneider said of Berríos. "Tough to take him out. But I think with the way they're constructed, you want to utilize your whole roster. It didn't work out."

CAREFUL LEWIS

Lewis, whose recovering hamstring strain has limited him to designated-hitter duty, hit a slow roller up the third base line in his first at-bat that prompted a sprint out of the box. The ball rolled foul, making his hustle moot. Then when he hit a grounder straight to shortstop for an inning-ending double play, he cautiously jogged at about half-speed to first.

LONG LIST

Minnesota's postseason series losing streak started with the Angels in 2002 and included the Yankees six times, in the divisional rounds in 2003, 2004, 2009, 2010 and 2019 and in a single wild-card game in 2017. The Twins also lost a division series to the A's in 2006 and a wild-card series to the Astros in 2020. Their division tiebreaker win over the Tigers in 2009 was considered part of the regular season.

September sizzled to records and was so much warmer than average scientists call it 'mind-blowing'

By SETH BORENSTEIN AP Science Writer

After a summer of record-smashing heat, warming somehow got even worse in September as Earth set a new mark for how far above normal temperatures were, the European climate agency reported Thursday.

Last month's average temperature was 0.93 degrees Celsius (1.7 degrees Fahrenheit) above the 1991-2020 average for September. That's the warmest margin above average for a month in 83 years of records kept by the European Space Agency's Copernicus Climate Change Service.

"It's just mind-blowing really," said Copernicus Director Carlo Buontempo. "Never seen anything like that in any month in our records."

While July and August had hotter raw temperatures because they are warmer months on the calendar, September had what scientists call the biggest anomaly, or departure from normal. Temperature anomalies are crucial pieces of data in a warming world.

"This is not a fancy weather statistic," Imperial College of London climate scientist Friederike Otto said in an email. "It's a death sentence for people and ecosystems. It destroys assets, infrastructure, harvest."

Copernicus calculated that the average temperature for September was 16.38 degrees Celsius (61.48 degrees Fahrenheit), which broke the old record set in September 2020 by a whopping half-degree Celsius (0.9 degrees Fahrenheit). That's a huge margin in climate records.

The hot temperatures stretched across the globe but they were chiefly driven by persistent and unusual warmth in the world's oceans, which didn't cool off as much in September as normal and have been record hot since spring, said Buontempo.

Earth is on track for its hottest year on record, about 1.4 degrees Celsius (2.5 degrees Fahrenheit) warmer than pre-industrial times, according to Samantha Burgess, Copernicus' deputy director.

This past September was 1.75 degrees Celsius (3.15 degrees Fahrenheit) warmer than the mid-1800s, Copernicus reported. The world agreed in 2015 to try to limit future warming to 1.5 degrees Celsius (2.7 degrees Fahrenheit) warming since pre-industrial times.

The global threshold goal of 1.5 degrees Celsius is for long-term temperature averages, not a single month or year. But scientists still expressed grave concern at the records being set.

"What we're seeing right now is the backdrop of rapid global warming at a pace that the Earth has not seen in eons coupled with El Nino, natural climate cycle" that's a temporary warming of parts of the Pacific Ocean that changes weather worldwide, said U.S. climate scientist Jessica Moerman, who is also president of the Evangelical Environmental Network. "This double whammy together is where things get dangerous."

Though El Nino is playing a part, climate change has a bigger footprint in this warmth, Buontempo said.

"There really is no end in sight given new oil and gas reserves are still being opened for exploitation," Otto said. "If you have more record hot events, there is no respite for humans and nature, no time to recover."

Buontempo said El Nino is likely to get warmer and cause even higher temperatures next year. "This month was, in my professional opinion as a climate scientist – absolutely gobsmackingly bananas," climate scientist Zeke Hausfather said on X, formerly known as Twitter.

Oregon officials identify victims of plane crash that killed two after spiraling out of the sky

By CLAIRE RUSH Associated Press/Report for America

PORTLAND, Ore. (AP) — Oregon officials have identified the victims who lost their lives after a small plane precipitously dropped out of the sky and crashed through the roof of a home on Tuesday.

Police in Newberg, a small city about 25 miles southwest of Portland, said 20-year-old Barrett Bevacqua and 22-year-old Michele Cavallotti were the two victims found dead at the scene. Cavallotti was an instructor at the pilot training school Hillsboro Aero Academy and Bevacqua was a student pilot, police said in a news release.

The third passenger, 20-year-old Emily Hurd, was airlifted to a hospital with serious injuries.

Dramatic video taken Tuesday evening showed the plane rapidly descending straight down toward the ground. The aircraft crashed through the roof of a home with its wreckage strewn partially inside the house and in the backyard, Tualatin Valley Fire & Rescue said in a news release.

Multiple people were inside the home when the crash occurred, but they were able to evacuate safely, the release said. Nobody on the ground was injured.

Search and rescue crews were sent to inspect the structural stability of the home. Neither the home nor the aircraft caught fire, officials said. The Red Cross is assisting the family that was displaced.

Micah Schauer, the 22-year-old Newberg resident who took the video of the plane spiraling downward, said he was leaving his home when he glimpsed what at first looked like a piece of cardboard falling from the sky.

"I didn't think it was a real plane at all at first," Schauer said. It wasn't until about halfway through the 10-second video that the realization dawned on him, he said.

In disbelief, he sent the video to his girlfriend and family.

"I sent a mass text, like, 'Is that real? Did this happen?'" Schauer said. "They were shocked."

Schauer then went to the site of the crash, where a chaotic scene was unfolding.

"It's such a small town, everybody wanted to go see it," he said. "Life Flight ended up landing right next to me. ... It was wild. I've never seen anything quite like that, ever."

The small Piper PA-44 Seminole plane crashed around 6:45 p.m. Tuesday, National Transportation Safety Board investigator Eric Gutierrez said at a news conference in Newberg on Wednesday. Multiple agencies responded, finding the plane in the back of a house.

Authorities worked to get Hurd out of the plane first so she could be taken to a hospital and then turned to extricating the two others who had died, Patrick Fale, assistant chief of Tualatin Valley Fire & Rescue, said at the news conference.

It is not yet known why the plane crashed, officials said, adding that they didn't yet know if a distress call had been made. Gutierrez said investigators will review the plane's maintenance records, pilot records and weather conditions at the time, among other things.

Gaining access to the plane was difficult because the majority of it remained in the house Wednesday morning, Gutierrez said. Crews were working to move the plane to a secure facility Wednesday afternoon where investigators could do a more thorough examination of the aircraft.

It could take from 18 to 24 months for a plane crash report to be finished and released, Gutierrez said.

The Newberg-Dundee Police Department is partnering with the Yamhill County Medical Examiner and District Attorney's Office to determine a precise cause of death. The Federal Aviation Administration and the National Transportation Safety Board have taken over the investigation related to the cause of the crash.

Trump back in court as fraud trial probes who was responsible for his financial statements

By MICHAEL R. SISAK, BOBBY CAINA CALVAN and JENNIFER PELTZ Associated Press

NEW YORK (AP) — The fraud trial that could block former President Donald Trump from doing business in New York drilled down Wednesday into the question of who — his company or hired accountants — bore responsibility for financial statements that the state calls fraudulent.

With accountants on the witness stand and Trump at the defense table for a third day, his attorneys tried to pin blame on accounting firms for any problems with the statements. But lawyers for New York Attorney General Letitia James sought to show that the accountants relied entirely on information supplied by Trump and his company.

Outside the courtroom, meanwhile, Trump's lawyers appealed a key pretrial ruling: that he engaged in fraud by puffing up the values of prized assets. The trial concerns six claims that remain in the lawsuit after that ruling.

Trump denies any wrongdoing. The trial comes as he leads the race for the 2024 Republican presidential nomination, and the stakes are high for him and the real estate empire that launched him into public life.

The pretrial ruling that's now under appeal could cost him control of Trump Tower and some other properties. At the trial, James is seeking a \$250 million penalty and a prohibition on Trump doing business in New York.

At the heart of the case are the "statements of financial condition," yearly snapshots of Trump's wealth that were given to banks, insurers and others.

James says the statements were wildly inflated. His Trump Tower penthouse was claimed as nearly three times its actual size, for example, and his Mar-a-Lago club in Florida was hugely overvalued at as much as \$739 million, she says.

Trump maintains that the statements actually underestimated the worth of luxury properties. He also emphasizes that the documents came with disclaimers that he characterizes as saying the numbers shouldn't be trusted and lenders should do their own homework.

But accountant Donald Bender, who prepared the financial statements for years, testified Tuesday that the Trump Organization didn't always supply all the information needed to accurately produce the documents. Another accountant, Camron Harris, testified Wednesday that his work on the 2021 statement involved checking information provided by Trump's company for "obvious errors" and formatting it for presentation.

"We do not verify the accuracy of any of the information provided," Harris said. His firm's work agreement with Trump's company specified that the accountants would "not express an opinion or any conclusion nor provide any assurance on the financial statements."

Trump lawyer Jesus M. Suarez, in cross-examining Bender on Tuesday and Wednesday, sought to depict the accountant as sloppy.

Suarez showed video Wednesday of pretrial testimony in which Bender said he didn't recall whether he consulted with any specialists when preparing Trump's financial statements. Yet, Suarez noted, Bender's firm told clients it might need specialists' help to evaluate works of art, jewelry, and some types of securities in closely held businesses and real estate.

When Bender acknowledged on Tuesday that he missed a shift in information about the size of the Trump Tower penthouse, Suarez told the accountant that Trump's company and employees were "going through hell" because "you missed it."

Bender retorted that it was the Trump Organization's mistake, "and we didn't catch it."

As the cross-examination wore on Wednesday with painstaking queries about specific aspects of individual financial statements, Judge Arthur Engoron pounded his fist and said the defense was ignoring his instructions to streamline the questioning.

"This is ridiculous," said the judge, who's hearing the case without a jury because state law doesn't allow for one in this type of lawsuit.

Trump's lawyers complained that the judge was compromising their ability to defend the former president.

"I've never had to negotiate how to ask questions as a lawyer," defense attorney Christopher Kise said. Trump, with familiar rhetoric outside court on Wednesday, called James "incompetent," portrayed her as part of a broader Democratic effort to weaken his 2024 prospects, and termed the case "fake" and the trial "a disgrace."

"Why attend? Because I want to point it out to the press, how corrupt it is," he said as he left court during its lunch break. He headed to Florida, next expected to return to the courtroom when he's called to testify, likely several weeks from now.

James later described his comments as offensive, baseless and "devoid of any facts and/or any evidence." "The Donald Trump show is over. This was nothing more than a political stunt. A fundraising stop. Now, we can continue to go forward with our trial, and we are confident that justice will be served," James told reporters outside court.

Trump has frequently vented in the courthouse hallway and on social media about the trial, James and Engoron, also a Democrat.

After Trump assailed Engoron's principal law clerk on social media Tuesday, the judge imposed a limited gag order, commanding all participants in the trial not to hurl personal attacks at members of his staff. The judge told Trump to delete the "disparaging, untrue and personally identifying post," and the former president took it down.

Jury sees FTX ads with Tom Brady, Larry David, as fraud case is rolled out against Sam Bankman-Fried

By KEN SWEET and LARRY NEUMEISTER Associated Press

NEW YORK (AP) — Splashy advertisements featuring football star Tom Brady and comedian Larry David were among the first evidence seen by jurors Wednesday as prosecutors launched a historic fraud case against cryptocurrency maven Sam Bankman-Fried, depicting him as a villain who portrayed himself as the Robin Hood of the crypto world.

Assistant U.S. Attorney Nathan Rehn said in his opening statement in Manhattan federal court that it was only a year ago that Bankman-Fried seemed to be "on top of the world," operating the multibillion dollar company he founded, FTX, a seemingly pioneering cryptocurrency trading platform.

Rehn said the 31-year-old lived in a \$30 million apartment in the Bahamas, jetted around the world on private planes, socialized with celebrities and spent billions of dollars as he flaunted power and made big political donations to gain influence in Washington over cryptocurrency regulation.

The prosecutor, though, said that the son of two Stanford law professors was not as he seemed.

"Sam Bankman-Fried was committing a massive fraud by taking billions of dollars from thousands of victims," Rehn said. When his businesses were collapsing, he backdated documents and tried to cover up his crimes by deleting messages and ordering employees to automatically delete all messages every month, the prosecutor said.

Adam Yedidia, one of the trial's first witnesses, supported the government's claims when he testified that he met Bankman-Fried and they became "longtime friends" when they were both students at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology before they worked and lived together in the Bahamas.

Yedidia said he quit FTX and stopped talking to Bankman-Fried when he learned in early November of last year that Bankman-Fried had used FTX customer deposits to pay back creditors of Alameda Research, Bankman-Fried's crypto hedge fund.

On the stand, Yedidia confirmed he was testifying under an immunity order that will prevent him from being prosecuted as long as he testifies truthfully. He said the protection seemed necessary because, as an FTX developer, he might have unwittingly written code that contributed to a crime. His testimony will continue Thursday.

Bankman-Fried became a target of investigators when FTX collapsed last November amid a rush of customers seeking to recover their deposits, less than a year after Bankman-Fried spent millions of dollars

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on the 2022 Super Bowl with celebrity advertisements promoting FTX as the "safest and easiest way to buy and sell crypto."

David, along with other celebrities including Brady and basketball star Stephen Curry, have been named in a lawsuit that argued their celebrity status made them culpable for promoting the firm's failed business model.

Bankman-Fried was extradited to the United States from the Bahamas after his arrest last December. He was first ordered to remain at home with his parents in Palo Alto, California, as part of a \$250 million bail package, but his bond was revoked and he was jailed in August after Judge Lewis A. Kaplan concluded he'd tried to influence trial witnesses.

The casting of Bankman-Fried as the bad boy of crypto was contested by defense lawyer Mark Cohen, who told jurors in his opening statement that his client had "a very different story" to tell than prosecutors about what happened as he built his cryptocurrency empire between 2017 and 2022.

"Sam didn't defraud anyone, didn't intend to defraud anyone," he told jurors.

He called Bankman-Fried a "math nerd who didn't drink or party," someone who launched his businesses after being educated at MIT and working on Wall Street for several years.

Cohen said Bankman-Fried's actions in the final days as head of his companies prove that he believed he was managing a liquidity crisis caused by cryptocurrency values that collapsed by over 70 percent and criticism from one of his biggest competitors that caused a run on his companies by customers seeking to recover their deposits.

Cohen said Bankman-Fried's lieutenants failed to do their jobs, including setting up appropriate financial hedges that would have protected FTX from last year's crash in crypto prices.

He said the employees also failed to close software loopholes, among multiple reasons why FTX failed that were not Bankman-Fried's fault.

"Sam acted in good faith and made, at the time, what were considered sound businesses decisions," he said.

"It is not a crime to be a CEO of a company that filed for bankruptcy," Cohen said. "It's not a crime to try to get Tom Brady to go on ads for your company."

Bankman-Fried faces seven charges, including wire fraud and conspiracy. In court Wednesday, he sat with a water bottle and a laptop computer in front of him.

Assistant U.S. Attorney Rehn said three former executives at Bankman-Fried's companies will testify during the trial, including Caroline Ellison, his sometimes girlfriend who has pleaded guilty to charges in the case along with two other former executives who also have pleaded guilty.

Seated in the first row at the trial was U.S. Attorney Damian Williams, who said months ago that the fraud surrounding FTX was one of the biggest in U.S. history. Also in the courtroom were Bankman-Fried's parents, who arrived to court holding hands.

Suspect charged in rapper Tupac Shakur's fatal shooting makes first court appearance in Las Vegas

By RIO YAMAT and KEN RITTER Associated Press

LAS VEGAS (AP) — A self-described gangster who police and prosecutors say masterminded the 1996 shooting death of Tupac Shakur in Las Vegas made his first court appearance Wednesday on a murder charge.

Duane "Keffe D" Davis, 60, stood shackled, wearing a dark-blue jail uniform and plastic orange slippers. He was scheduled to be arraigned on the charge Wednesday, but the hearing was cut short after he asked Clark County District Judge Tierra Jones to postpone the hearing while he retains counsel in Las Vegas.

Mopreme Shakur, the rapper's stepbrother, wasn't in court Wednesday but told The Associated Press that he's been following developments in the case from his home in Los Angeles, even as he and his family are "trying to manage our expectations."

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"Young Black men often deal with delayed justice because we're often viewed as the criminals," he said. "So justice has been delayed for quite some time — in spite of all the eyes, all the attention, despite the celebrity of my brother."

Davis was arrested last Friday near his home in suburban Henderson. A few hours later, a grand jury indictment was unsealed in Clark County District Court charging him with murder. Davis denied a request from the AP for an interview from jail where he's being held without bond.

Grand jurors also voted to add sentencing enhancements for the use of a deadly weapon and alleged gang activity. If Davis is convicted, that could add decades to his sentence. In Nevada, a person can be convicted of murder for helping another person commit the crime.

Los Angeles-based attorney Edi Faal told the AP in a brief phone call after the hearing that he is Davis' longtime personal lawyer and is helping him find a Nevada attorney.

"I have worked with him for more than two decades," Faal said. "But at this point I do not have a comment."

Davis had been a long-known suspect in the case, and publicly admitted his role in the killing in interviews ahead of his 2019 tell-all memoir, "Compton Street Legend."

"There's one thing that's for sure when living that gangster lifestyle," he wrote. "You already know that the stuff you put out is going to come back; you never know how or when, but there's never a doubt that it's coming."

Davis' own comments revived the police investigation that led to the indictment, police and prosecutors said. In mid-July, Las Vegas police raided Davis' home, drawing renewed attention to one of hip-hop music's most enduring mysteries.

Prosecutors allege Shakur's killing stemmed from a rivalry and competition for dominance in a musical genre that, at the time, was dubbed "gangsta rap." It pitted East Coast members of a Bloods gang sect associated with rap music mogul Marion "Suge" Knight against West Coast members of a Crips sect that Davis has said he led in Compton, California.

Tension escalated in Las Vegas the night of Sept. 7, 1996, when a brawl broke out between Shakur and Davis' nephew, Orlando "Baby Lane" Anderson, at the MGM Grand hotel-casino following a heavyweight championship boxing match won by Mike Tyson.

Knight and Shakur went to the fight, as did members of the South Side Crips, prosecutor Marc DiGiacomo said last week in court. "And (Knight) brought his entourage, which involved Mob Piru gang members."

After the casino brawl, Knight drove a BMW with Shakur in the front passenger seat. The car was stopped at a red light near the Las Vegas Strip when a white Cadillac pulled up on the passenger side and gunfire erupted.

Davis has said he was in the front passenger seat of the Cadillac and handed a .40-caliber handgun to his nephew in the back seat, from which he said the shots were fired.

Shot multiple times, Shakur died a week later at age 25. Knight was grazed by a bullet fragment but survived. Now 58, he is serving a 28-year prison sentence for running over and killing a Compton businessman outside a burger stand in January 2015.

Among the four people in the Cadillac that night, Davis is the only one who is still alive. Anderson died in a May 1998 shooting in Compton. Before his death, Anderson denied involvement in Shakur's death. The other backseat passenger, DeAndre "Big Dre" or "Freaky" Smith, died in 2004. The driver, Terrence "Bubble Up" Brown, died in a 2015 shooting in Compton.

Sheriff Kevin McMahon, who oversees the Las Vegas Metropolitan Police Department, has acknowledged criticism that his agency was slow to investigate Shakur's killing.

"That was simply not the case," McMahon said. He called the investigation "important to this police department."

Say goodbye to the COVID-19 vaccination card. The CDC has stopped printing them

By DEVI SHASTRI AP Health Writer

It's the end of an era for a once-critical pandemic document: The ubiquitous white COVID-19 vaccination cards are being phased out.

Now that COVID-19 vaccines are not being distributed by the federal government, the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention has stopped printing new cards.

The federal government shipped more than 980 million cards between late 2020, when the first vaccines came out, through May 10, according to the latest available data from the CDC.

Federal and local health officials don't expect the discontinuation of the cards to be a particularly big change, since the days of keeping them tucked in purses and wallets to ensure entry into festivals, bars and restaurants are largely over. If you've held on to your card, it's still valid as proof of vaccination. Otherwise, people who need their COVID-19 immunization records will need to request them just like any other vaccine.

In many cases, the clinic, pharmacy or health department that provided the shot can provide those records. Every state and some cities have an immunization registry, though rules vary on when records are included and options for obtaining copies of your records. Records from the mass vaccination sites held early in the pandemic also should be available in those registries, depending on state laws. There is no national registry for immunization records.

For example, Texas requires patients' written consent to be included in the registry, San Antonio Metropolitan Health District spokesman David Andres Alegria said. Other places, including Wyoming and Philadelphia's city-specific record system, require vaccine providers to log all vaccinations.

Many states offer digital vaccination records for individuals either online or through an app. Users can save a certificate or a QR code that proves they are vaccinated. And some websites will even track and alert patients when they're due for another one.

"One of the positives (during the pandemic) was having increased autonomy on your patient record, especially the immunization record," said Jeff Chorath, who manages the immunization information system in Washington state. Washington offers two digital options for obtaining vaccination records — a comprehensive list of all of a person's vaccinations noted in the state database and one specific to COVID-19 vaccines.

Other states don't have the same options, so it might take longer to get your records. There could also be gaps in state databases; for example, if you were vaccinated by a federal health provider, those records may be tracked in a separate system.

As for your old card — if you still have it — maybe don't mail it off to the Smithsonian quite yet. You should save it like any other health record, Wyoming Department of Health nurse consultant Heidi Gurov said.

"It's always good to keep those in a safe spot," she said.

Four million people in the U.S. have received the latest COVID-19 vaccine since it was approved last month, CDC director Dr. Mandy Cohen said Wednesday, and a total of 10 million doses have been shipped to providers.

Simone Biles leads U.S. women to record 7th straight team title at gymnastics world championships

By SAMUEL PETREQUIN AP Sports Writer

ANTWERP, Belgium (AP) — Simone Biles and her teammates were far from perfect, and yet nothing could stand in the way of a victory that set a record for both the U.S. women's team and the greatest gymnast in history.

The U.S. women earned a record seventh consecutive team title at the gymnastics world championships on Wednesday night. For Biles, it was also her 33rd major championship medal — across the worlds and

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Olympics — to make her the most decorated female gymnast ever.

And it's fitting that it came in Antwerp, the Belgian port city where Biles came to international prominence 10 years ago by winning her first world title in 2013.

"It wasn't Team USA's best day," Biles said. "It's crazy, we still pulled it out. So I'm really, really proud of the team."

The American team of Biles, Shilese Jones, Skye Blakely, Joscelyn Roberson and Leanne Wong combined for a total of 167.729 points to edge second-place Brazil and France.

The U.S. team won by a margin of 2.199 points as the final proved to be a closer contest than anticipated after the Americans put up a dominant performance in qualifying to finish more than five points ahead of the field.

"We had some mistakes here and there, but just keep going, keep relying on our training," Biles said. "But I think this team that we have brought this year has the most great courage and fight. ... We had so many emotions going throughout the day."

The U.S. women have won gold in the team event at every world championship that included a team competition since 2011. Their victory in Antwerp broke a tie with the Chinese men for the longest streak of consecutive team titles.

Biles now has 26 world championship medals, 20 of them gold, to go with her seven Olympic medals, including the 2016 Olympic title. Her 33 combined medals at the sport's two biggest events are one more than what Larisa Latynina of the Soviet Union achieved.

Russia was banned from the event because of sanctions imposed by the International Gymnastics Federation (FIG) as a result of the war against Ukraine. In the absence of their Russian rivals — the defending Olympic champions — the Americans were the overwhelming favorites.

But the U.S. team overcame an early scare as Roberson was forced out of the event even before it started after she seemed to hurt an ankle while warming up at the vault. She was helped off the mat and subbed by Wong.

"My ankle just ... popped," Roberson said.

Jones then kicked off the competition smoothly for the Americans with a Double Twist Yurchenko, with only a small hop. Wong responded to the last-minute call with a clean effort before Biles opted for the slightly safer "Cheng" vault rather than the Yurchenko Double Pike she performed during qualifying on Sunday.

The Americans amassed 42.966 points and were second behind China after the first rotation following the Chinese gymnasts' excellent display on uneven bars.

Biles and her teammates then bested their Chinese opponents' performance on bars as they took the overall lead with a margin of 1.467 points. They increased it a bit further after the beam — despite a sixth-place finish on that apparatus — as Biles made up for the modest 11.700 Wong received by scoring 14.300 with a solid routine.

Biles capped off a successful night for the U.S. team with a spectacular floor routine rewarded by a 15.166.

Biles is competing at her first international competition following a two-year absence. Her previous appearance was at the pandemic-delayed Tokyo Olympics, where she was hampered by a bout with a mental block known as "the twisties" that gymnasts can experience while in the air, and withdrew from several events.

Now she's back in the same city that catapulted her to international fame a decade ago, winning the first of her five world all-around titles as a 16-year-old prodigy.

"Each and every time you are crowned world champion, it feels a little bit different," Biles said. "I'm still surprised that I'm still going, I'm 26, I'm a little bit older. It's different, but it's exciting."

Biles, who posted an overall score of 58.732 points, is also the favorite to add a sixth all-around title on Friday, although she will likely face a strong challenge from Brazilian Rebeca Andrade, the reigning world all-around champion. The event finals are scheduled for Saturday and Sunday.

Andrade led Brazil to its first medal ever in the women's team competition. The French team, spurred on by the hundreds of fans cheering for them, secured their first women's team medal at the world champi-

onships since a silver in 1950.

3 scientists win Nobel in chemistry for quantum dots research used in electronics, medical imaging

By DAVID KEYTON, CHRISTINA LARSON and RODRIQUE NGOWI Associated Press

STOCKHOLM (AP) — Three scientists won the Nobel Prize in chemistry Wednesday for their work on quantum dots — tiny particles just a few nanometers in diameter that can release very bright colored light and whose applications in everyday life include electronics and medical imaging.

Moungi Bawendi of MIT, Louis Brus of Columbia University, and Alexei Ekimov of Nanocrystals Technology Inc., were honored for their work with the tiny particles that “have unique properties and now spread their light from television screens and LED lamps,” according to the Royal Swedish Academy of Sciences, which announced the award in Stockholm.

The suspense surrounding the academy’s decision took an unusual turn when Swedish media reported the winners several hours before the prize was announced. The advance notice apparently came from a news release sent out early by mistake.

WHAT DISCOVERY WON THE NOBEL PRIZE IN CHEMISTRY?

Quantum dots are tiny inorganic particles that glow a range of colors from red to blue when exposed to light. The color they emit depends upon the size of the particle.

Scientists can engineer the dots from materials that include gold, graphene and cadmium, and create their color by controlling their size. The tiniest particles, in which electrons are most tightly confined, emit blue light. Slightly larger particles, in which electrons bounce around a longer wavelength, emit red light.

Chemists sometimes compare the size of the particle itself to a confining box.

The underlying “particle in a box” theory of quantum mechanics was first described nearly a century ago. But it wasn’t until several decades later that scientists could manufacture quantum dots in a lab.

In the 1980s, Ekimov, 78, and Brus, 80, honed the theory and developed early laboratory techniques for creating particles that emit varying colors by adjusting sizes. In 1993, Bawendi, 62, developed new chemical methods for producing the particles quickly and uniformly — which soon enabled a variety of scalable commercial applications, including in electronics displays.

Judy Giordan, president of the American Chemical Society, said she was thrilled at this year’s winners.

“What we care about a lot in chemistry is being able to make and tailor novel structures and architectures to solve problems that help people and the planet,” Giordan said.

Rigoberto Advincula, a materials chemist at Oak Ridge National Laboratory in Tennessee, said the work helped bridge the fields of physics and chemistry, adding: “This technology is very easy to reproduce — that’s why it became so popular and so widespread.”

Today quantum dots are commonly used in electronics displays and biomedical imaging. The florescent quality of the particles allows researchers to track how drugs are delivered within the human body, as well as to study the precise location and growth of a tumor, for example.

WERE THE WINNERS ANNOUNCED PREMATURELY?

Swedish media reported hours before Wednesday’s announcement that the Royal Swedish Academy of Sciences had sent out a news release that identified Bawendi, Brus and Ekimov as the latest Nobel laureates.

Public broadcaster SVT said the release said they were receiving the prize for the “discovery and synthesis of quantum dots.”

After officially announcing the three winners, Secretary-General Hans Ellegren said the Swedish academy would investigate how the information got out in advance.

“There was a press release sent out for still unknown reasons. We have been very active this morning to find out exactly what happened,” he said. “This is very unfortunate and we deeply regret what happened.”

The academy, which awards the physics, chemistry and economics prizes, asks for nominations a year in advance from thousands of university professors and other scholars around the world.

A committee for each prize then discusses candidates in a series of meetings before presenting one or

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more proposals to the full academy for a vote. The deliberations, including the names of nominees other than the winners, are kept confidential for 50 years.

HOW DID THE WINNERS REACT?

Bawendi told a news conference he was "very surprised, sleepy, shocked, unexpected and very honored."

Asked about the leak, he said he didn't know he'd been made a Nobel laureate until he was called by the academy.

Bawendi said he was not thinking about the possible applications of his work when he started researching quantum dots.

"The motivation really is the basic science. A basic understanding, the curiosity of how does the world work? And that's what drives scientists and academic scientists to do what they do," he said.

Brus, a professor emeritus at Columbia, said he didn't pick up the phone when the early morning call came from the Swedish academy to notify him.

"It was ringing during the night, but I didn't answer it because I'm trying to get some sleep, basically," he told The Associated Press. He finally saw the news online when he got up around 6 a.m.

"I certainly was not expecting this," Brus said.

Brus said he was glad to see recognition for the area of chemistry he practices. The practical applications of quantum dots, like creating the colors in flat-screen TVs, are something he was hoping for when he started the work decades ago, he said.

"Basic research is extremely hard to predict exactly how it's going to work out," Brus said. "It's more for the knowledge base than it is for the actual materials. But in this case, it's both."

Ekimov agreed, crediting the scientific curiosity that was instilled in him as a student and researcher in the Soviet Union in the 1980s for some of his success.

"Back then, it was a career based on curiosity, not for making money or anything else," said Ekimov, the former chief scientist at New York-based Nanocrystals Technology, where he began working in 1999 after immigrating to the U.S.

On Tuesday, the physics prize went to French-Swedish physicist Anne L'Huillier, French scientist Pierre Agostini and Hungarian-born Ferenc Krausz for producing the first split-second glimpse into the super-fast world of spinning electrons.

On Monday, Hungarian-American Katalin Karikó and American Drew Weissman won the Nobel Prize in medicine for discoveries that enabled the creation of mRNA vaccines against COVID-19.

The prizes in literature, peace and economics follow, with one announcement every weekday until Monday.

The Nobel Prizes carry a cash award of 11 million Swedish kronor (\$1 million) from a bequest left by the prize's creator, Swedish inventor Alfred Nobel.

McCarthy's ouster leaves the House adrift as divided Republicans seek to unite behind a new leader

By FARNOUSH AMIRI and STEPHEN GROVES Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — The stunning removal of Kevin McCarthy as speaker has left the House adrift as Republicans struggle to bring order to their fractured majority and begin the difficult and potentially prolonged process of uniting around a new leader.

The House convened briefly Wednesday and then went into recess, with North Carolina Rep. Patrick McHenry, the caretaker speaker pro tempore, serving in the job with very little power for the foreseeable future. Other Republicans left Washington, awaiting the next steps.

The House will try to elect a speaker as soon as next week. The timing is nowhere near certain as Republicans line up for their chance at the gavel amid the bitter divisions that sparked the chaos.

The House majority leader, Rep. Steve Scalise, R-La., is in line for the post, but he faced an immediate challenge from Rep. Jim Jordan, R-Ohio, the Judiciary Committee chairman and a favorite of conservatives, who quickly announced his own candidacy. Others are expected to emerge.

McCarthy, who has yet to weigh in on who should be his successor, said Wednesday that he's good

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friends with both men.

He added that "both would do great in the job."

Many doubt that anyone can get the 218 votes needed to become speaker. Voting for McCarthy in January took 15 excruciating rounds even though he was the consensus choice of the GOP conference.

House Republicans plan to meet next Tuesday evening at the Capitol for a first round of internal party voting.

"I think the circus stuff needs to happen behind closed doors," said Rep. Garret Graves, R-La.

It is shaping up to be wide-open battle just as Congress faces a new deadline to fund the government by mid-November. Work on that legislation in the House is on hold due to the vacancy in the speaker's office, creating the potential for extended paralysis.

Senate Majority Leader Chuck Schumer, D-N.Y., called it a "dangerous situation."

At the White House, President Joe Biden said the American people still expected the government to get its work done in a timely fashion. McCarthy was ousted because he worked with Democrats to keep the government open and avoid a shutdown, and the Democratic president said, "We need to stop seeing each other as enemies."

Electing a new speaker risks inflaming the divisions that have plagued House Republicans all year, particularly if lawmakers make new demands before pledging support.

Scalise has long been viewed as a potential speaker-in-waiting and is revered as a survivor after he was shot in the hip at a congressional baseball team practice in 2017. But Scalise is also being treated for a form of blood cancer, forcing him away from the Capitol at times.

In a letter to colleagues asking for their support, Scalise acknowledged the challenges ahead for him and Republicans, but said he has overcome adversity before.

"This next chapter won't be easy, but I know what it takes to fight and I am prepared for the battles that lie ahead," he wrote.

Jordan made his own pitch by emphasizing his oversight work and aspirations. He echoed Scalise's call for unity during "divided times."

"The problems we face are challenging, but they are not insurmountable," he said.

Jordan and Scalise are expected to be joined in the race by at least one other Republican: Oklahoma Rep. Kevin Hern, chair of the Republican Study Committee, the largest GOP caucus in the House.

All three men, as well as Majority Whip Tom Emmer of Minnesota, spoke at a luncheon of the Texas congressional delegation, which represents the largest bloc of GOP members in the House.

"I think you have to have a different set of skill sets, you know, I spent 35 years in business working at some of the largest corporations in the world," Hern said as he left the meeting. "Strife is something that's common when you have people working together and finding common solutions for it takes experience."

But some Republicans, including Rep. Marjorie Taylor Greene of Georgia, say lawmakers should look outside the Capitol for their next speaker, as the Constitution allows, and draft former President Donald Trump.

Trump told reporters at a New York courthouse Wednesday that he will "do whatever it is to help" Republicans in the speakership race, but that he is focused "totally" on his presidential campaign.

"If I can help them during the process, I would do it. But we have some great people in the Republican Party that could do a great job as speaker," he said.

The more immediate challenge for Republicans is moving past the extraordinary strife that has plagued their conference in recent weeks. The raw feelings were apparent at a closed-door meeting Tuesday evening where members unloaded their anger at the eight Republicans who joined with Democrats to depose McCarthy.

Rep. Mike Kelly, R-Pa., pointed at the lawmakers who voted against McCarthy and said, "I've never been part of a worse team," according to a Republican in the room who was granted anonymity to discuss the private session.

Voter rolls are becoming the new battleground over secure elections as amateur sleuths hunt fraud

By MORGAN LEE and ANTHONY IZAGUIRRE Associated Press

SANTA FE, N.M. (AP) — A group has been impersonating government officials, harassing New York residents at their homes and falsely accusing them of breaking the law, state officials have warned.

But what sounds like a scam aimed at people's pocketbooks is actually part of a shakedown with a much different target: voters.

State prosecutors have sent a cease-and-desist order to a group called New York Citizens Audit demanding that it halt any "unlawful voter deception" and "intimidation efforts."

It's the type of tactic that concerns many state election officials across the country as conservative groups, some with ties to allies of former President Donald Trump and motivated by false claims of widespread fraud in 2020, push to access and sometimes publish state voter registration rolls, which list names, home addresses and in some cases party registration. One goal is to create free online databases for groups and individuals who want to take it upon themselves to try to find potential fraud.

The lists could find their way into the hands of malicious actors and individual efforts to inspect the rolls could disenfranchise voters through intimidation or canceled registrations, state election officials and privacy advocates warned. They worry that local election offices may be flooded with challenges to voter registration listings as those agencies prepare for the 2024 elections.

John Davisson, director of litigation at the Electronic Privacy Information Center, said the concern reflects the competing interests over voter data – a need to protect voter rolls from cybersecurity attacks against the desire to make them accessible so elections are transparent.

"It's not surprising that this is a battleground right now," he said.

Baseless claims of widespread voter fraud are part of what's driving the efforts to obtain the rolls, leading to lawsuits over whether to hand over the data in several states, including Maine, New Mexico and Pennsylvania.

In New York, a warning from the state elections board preceded the cease-and-desist letter from the state attorney general's office. Voters in 13 counties had been approached at their homes in recent weeks in an apparently coordinated effort by people impersonating election officials, in some cases wielding phony IDs, the board said. Residents were confronted about their voter registration status and accused of misconduct.

In one instance, people wearing identification badges accused a woman at her Glens Falls home of committing a crime by apparently being registered to vote in two counties, said Warren County spokesman Don Lehman. But the woman had already filed to change her registration and canvassers were apparently using out-of-date information, he said.

"She was quite shaken by the whole thing," Lehman said. "She did nothing nefarious at all. Either these people don't understand that or understand how the process works, but it seems like they were quite accusatory."

State prosecutors found no evidence that any of the those contacted had committed voter fraud or any other type of crime, they said in their warning letter.

NY Citizens Audit emailed a statement that dismissed as "absurd" concerns that its canvassers might have impersonated an official or harassed anyone. Instead, the group urged election officials to investigate "each of these millions of suspected illegal registrations."

"We train our people to do legal canvassing, and if ever verified, voter intimidation would be completely unacceptable and against our policy," NY Citizens Audit Director Kim Hermance said in the statement.

One of the most ambitious groups, the Voter Reference Foundation, was founded after the 2020 presidential election by Republican Doug Truax of Illinois with a goal of posting online lists from every state. The VoteRef.com database so far includes information from 32 states and the District of Columbia and is run by Gina Swoboda, a former organizer of Trump's 2020 campaign in Arizona.

A federal trial is scheduled to start later this month over the group's fight to access and use New Mexico's voter registration list.

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The group also sued Pennsylvania, which refused to hand over the information and said that publishing it would put every registered voter at greater risk of identity theft or misuse of their information, said the state's Office of Open Records.

Truax declined to speak to The Associated Press, but has said in a statement on the Pennsylvania case that, "We have a crisis of confidence in America when it comes to election results, and the answer is more transparency, not less."

The head of elections in New Mexico, Democratic Secretary of State Maggie Toulouse Oliver, fears many voters might withdraw from registration lists as personal data is posted online. Her office cites email inquiries about how to cancel voter registrations during a short-lived canvassing effort by election activists last year in southern New Mexico.

"Voters can and should expect a reasonable amount of privacy," said Toulouse Oliver, a Democrat. "What Voter Reference is doing is saying, 'If you have doubts about the election and who is registered to vote and who is voting, here is every voter's information. Go out and figure it out for yourself whether these people are real.'"

The Voter Reference Foundation argues that federal law is on its side, citing public disclosure provisions of the National Voter Registration Act that require states to make a "reasonable" effort to keep the registration lists free of people who died or moved away. The foundation also invokes free speech and due-process rights.

Nearly every state prohibits the use or transfer of the lists for commercial purposes, while several confine access to political candidates, parties for campaign purposes and some government activities.

In March, New Mexico banned the transfer or publication of voter data online, with felony penalties and possible fines of \$100 per voter.

Virginia data was removed from VoteRef.com after Republicans and Democrats united last year to ban online publication of registrations.

In Maine, an ongoing legal dispute over privacy and the use of voter lists is pitting state election regulators against a conservative-backed group that has been highlighting and litigating what it says are shortcomings in election systems for a decade. It has assembled voter rolls from multiple states.

The state historically provided voter registration lists to candidates and political parties before being sued in 2019 for failing to provide its voter list to the Public Interest Law Foundation. In 2021, Maine's governor signed a bill allowing the voter registration lists to be turned over to additional organizations, but with a stipulation that no voter names could be published in a way that compromises privacy.

The restrictions interfere with comparing lists across states, said the group's president, J. Christian Adams, whose case against the state is scheduled for legal arguments Thursday at a Boston federal appeals court. Adams, a Republican, served on a commission Trump convened after his 2016 win to investigate voter fraud. The commission was disbanded without any finding of widespread fraud.

Maine Secretary of State Shenna Bellows, a Democrat, said residents sharing details about voters, including addresses, is a bad idea.

"In an era of conspiracies and lies about our elections, integrity of voter information is hugely important," she said. "We want to make sure that no voters are targeted or harassed or threatened because of their decision to register and cast a ballot."

Biden suggests he has a path around Congress to get more aid to Ukraine and plans major speech

By CHRIS MEGERIAN and JOSH BOAK Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — Facing a likely roadblock from House Republicans on aid for Ukraine, President Joe Biden said Wednesday he's planning to give a major speech on the issue and suggested there may be "another means" to provide support for Kyiv if Congress continues to balk.

"I'm going to be announcing very shortly a major speech I'm going to make on this issue and why it's

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critically important for the United States and our allies that we keep our commitment" to Ukraine, Biden told reporters after giving unrelated remarks at the White House.

White House officials declined to say when Biden planned to give his speech. The president did not elaborate on the alternate method he was looking at to get additional military aid to Ukraine in its ongoing war with Russia.

"There is another means by which we may be able to find funding, but I'm not going to get into that right now," he said.

Aid for Ukraine has been a source of tension and uncertainty as several Republicans in the House have severe doubts or openly oppose additional funding to sustain the Ukrainian military.

The president said the resistance does "worry" him, but he noted that there is broad bipartisan support. Still, last week's deal to keep the government open through mid-November excluded the \$13 billion in supplemental aid that the Biden administration sought last month, raising questions about just how long the U.S. could continue to send money to Ukraine.

The agreement to temporarily keep the U.S. government open came at a steep political price for former House Speaker Kevin McCarthy, R-Calif. At the instigation of Rep. Matt Gaetz, R-Florida, and other conservatives, McCarthy on Tuesday became the first speaker to be ousted from his post.

After Biden spoke, White House press secretary Karine Jean-Pierre said during the Wednesday news briefing that Biden was "confident" Ukraine aid would be approved because there is broad bipartisan support. But she noted the objections by some House Republicans were an obstacle to the United States' work with allies to support Ukraine, which Russia invaded in February 2022.

"When you have a small fraction of a party that is causing that type of chaos, you know, it doesn't look great across the globe," Jean-Pierre said. "That doesn't look very promising."

Biden held a call Tuesday with allies in Europe, Japan and Canada to say the U.S. government still supported Ukraine

2030 World Cup set to be hosted by Spain-Portugal-Morocco with 3 South American countries added

By GRAHAM DUNBAR AP Sports Writer

GENEVA (AP) — The 2030 men's soccer World Cup is set to feature games in six countries on three continents in a unique format that will allow the tournament to celebrate its 100th anniversary in Uruguay.

FIFA reached an agreement Wednesday between soccer's continental leaders to accept a bid spearheaded by co-hosts Spain, Portugal and Morocco as the only candidate for the hosting rights. The agreement also includes staging games in South American countries Argentina, Paraguay and Uruguay, which had earlier promoted a rival co-hosting bid.

Those three countries will each host one match to start the tournament, which allows FIFA to stage the opening game in the Uruguayan capital of Montevideo, where the Centenario Stadium hosted the inaugural 1930 World Cup final.

The bid had started out as a joint venture between Spain and Portugal before expanding to include Morocco, in northern Africa, earlier this year.

All six host nations will get automatic entry to the 48-team tournament, FIFA said. It is the first time the World Cup will be played on more than one continent.

"The centennial World Cup could not be far from South America, where everything began," said Alejandro Dominguez, the president of South American soccer body CONMEBOL. "The 2030 World Cup will be played in three continents."

The consensus reached by the continental soccer bodies also allowed FIFA to open bidding for the 2034 World Cup, with only member federations from Asia and Oceania eligible to bid for the hosting rights.

Saudi Arabia immediately entered that contest and Australia is also interested after successfully co-hosting the Women's World Cup this year with New Zealand. Either way, the 2034 tournament will almost

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certainly be played in November and December — like last year's World Cup in Qatar, in the heart of the European club soccer season.

Accelerating the choice of a 2034 host to the end of next year will be widely seen as a victory for Saudi Arabia and Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman, who has built close ties to FIFA president Gianni Infantino in the past six years.

"We want to celebrate our football culture and share our country with the world," Yasser Al Missehal, the president of the Saudi soccer federation and a member of the FIFA Council, said in a government statement announcing its intention to bid.

The FIFA Council's acceptance of a unified 2030 candidacy still needs formal approval next year at a meeting of the 211 member federations. That should be just a formality. The 2034 pick will be made at a separate congress, FIFA said.

"In 2030, we will have a unique global footprint, three continents — Africa, Europe and South America — six countries — Argentina, Morocco, Paraguay, Portugal, Spain and Uruguay — welcoming and uniting the world while celebrating together the beautiful game, the centenary and the FIFA World Cup," Infantino said in a statement.

The 48-team tournament scheduled for June-July 2030 is set to start in Uruguay, Argentina and Paraguay — which FIFA branded as "Centenary Celebration Matches" — before the action moves to the core host nations Spain, Portugal and Morocco.

The plan involves an unprecedented amount of travel across distances and time zones, including 13-hour flights from Buenos Aires to Madrid.

It was not popular with Football Supporters Europe, the fan group officially recognized by European soccer body UEFA.

"FIFA continues its cycle of destruction against the greatest tournament on earth," FSE said in a statement. "Horrendous for supporters, disregards the environment and rolls the red carpet out to a host for 2034 with an appalling human rights record."

Saudi Arabia and Australia both are members of the Asian Football Confederation yet the organization's president, Bahraini royal Sheikh Salman bin Ebrahim Al Khalifa, stated a clear preference Wednesday.

"The entire Asian football family will stand united in support of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia's momentous initiative," Sheikh Salman said in an AFC statement, adding it was committed to working for its win. Australia was a losing candidate when Qatar won its hosting vote in 2010.

The South American co-host bid has been promoted since the 2018 World Cup in Russia and had included Chile, which was not mentioned Wednesday.

Ukraine was also dropped after it was added to the European bid a year ago at a news conference at UEFA headquarters in Switzerland. However, Ukraine had not been mentioned in official comments about the UEFA-backed bid this year.

The first 48-team men's World Cup will be hosted in 2026 by the United States, Canada and Mexico.

The 2030 decision marks a victory for Morocco, which has invested heavily in infrastructure in its largest cities and was last week chosen to host the 2025 African Cup of Nations. The men's national team helped push its case by reaching the World Cup semifinals in Qatar, eliminating Spain and Portugal in the previous rounds. It will be the second African nation to host the tournament after South Africa in 2010.

In a statement on Wednesday, Moroccan King Mohammed VI's Royal Cabinet said the selection "recognized Morocco's choice place in the ranks of great nations."

The 2030 deal was clinched six weeks after the former president of Spain's soccer federation became an international embarrassment for his behavior at the Women's World Cup final.

Luis Rubiales was suspended by FIFA and eventually forced to resign after kissing a player on the lips during the awards ceremony in Sydney, Australia on Aug. 20, which drew attention away from the greatest achievement of Spain's women's soccer team. He is now under criminal investigation.

Spain's Prime Minister Pedro Sánchez had expressed public concern that Rubiales could derail the bid to host the men's World Cup if he remained in office.

Sánchez said in Spanish on X, the social media platform formerly known as Twitter: "We will show the

strength of our country as champions of the men's and women's world titles, and we will defend the values of equality, solidarity and fair play that should always be present in sports."

Spain previously hosted the 1982 World Cup, Argentina was the 1978 host and Uruguay had the inaugural 1930 tournament. Portugal, Morocco and Paraguay will be first-time hosts.

New York City moves to suspend 'right to shelter' as migrant influx continues

By ANTHONY IZAGUIRRE Associated Press

ALBANY, N.Y. (AP) — New York City is challenging a unique legal agreement that requires it to provide emergency housing to anyone who asks for it, as the city's shelter system strains under a large influx of international migrants who have arrived since last year.

The city filed a request late Tuesday asking a court to allow it to suspend the requirement when there is a state of emergency where the shelter population of single adults increases at a rapid rate.

The filing came as Mayor Eric Adams embarks on a four-day trip through Latin America, starting Wednesday in Mexico, where he said he will discourage people from coming to New York, telling them the city's shelter system is at capacity and its resources are overwhelmed.

The city has been moving to suspend the so called right to shelter for months under the surge of migrants, arguing the requirement was never intended to be applied to a humanitarian crisis such as the latest influx.

The shelter requirement has been in place for more than four decades in New York City, following a legal agreement struck in 1981 that required the city to provide temporary housing for every homeless person. No other big city in America has such a requirement.

"With more than 122,700 asylum seekers having come through our intake system since the spring of 2022, and projected costs of over \$12 billion for three years, it is abundantly clear that the status quo cannot continue," Adams, a Democrat, said in a statement. "New York City cannot continue to do this alone."

Adams had heralded the shelter requirement at the start of the crisis as a display of the city's empathy toward asylum seekers. In the months since, his rhetoric has hardened as the city has spent more than a billion dollars to rent space in hotels, erect large emergency shelters and provide government services for migrants who arrive without housing or jobs.

"This issue will destroy New York City," Adams said last month.

The mayor has also recently tightened New York shelter rules by limiting adult migrants to just 30 days in city-run facilities amid overcrowding.

Josh Goldfein, a staff attorney at The Legal Aid Society, said the city's request, if successful, would be disastrous for the city.

"What is the alternative? If we do not have a right to shelter, if we are turning people away from the shelter system, if people are now living in the streets, in the subways, in the parks, is that the outcome that they want?" he said. "That is something we have not seen in decades. I don't think any New Yorker wants to see that. I don't think city officials want to see that but that will be the result if they were to prevail here."

Amphibians are the world's most vulnerable animals and threats are increasing

By CHRISTINA LARSON AP Science Writer

The world's frogs, salamanders, newts and other amphibians remain in serious trouble.

A new global assessment has found that 41% of amphibian species that scientists have studied are threatened with extinction, meaning they are either vulnerable, endangered or critically endangered. That's up from 39% reported in the last assessment, in 2004.

"Amphibians are the world's most threatened animals," said Duke University's Junjie Yao, a frog researcher who was not involved in the study. "Their unique biology and permeable skin make them very sensitive

to environmental changes.”

The study, published Wednesday in the journal *Nature*, found that the loss of habitat from the expansion of farming and ranching is the single biggest threat to amphibians worldwide. But a growing percentage of amphibian species are now also pushed to the brink by novel diseases and climate change, the study found.

Amphibians are especially vulnerable animals. They have distinct life stages that each often require separate habitats, so they can be disrupted by changes in either aquatic or land environments, said University of Texas biologist Michael Ryan, who was not involved in the study.

They are also at risk because of their delicate skin. Most amphibians absorb oxygen to breathe through their skin, and so they do not have scales, feathers or fur to protect them. Chemical pollution, bacteria and fungal infections impact them quickly, as do heightened swings in temperature and moisture levels due to climate change.

For example, frogs are usually nocturnal. If it's too hot, they won't come out even at night because they would lose too much water through their skin, said Patricia Burrowes, a study co-author and researcher at the National Museum of Natural Sciences in Madrid. But remaining in sheltered resting places limits frogs' ability to eat and to breed.

This summer was the hottest on record for the Northern Hemisphere, and 2023 is on track to be the 2nd hottest globally, after 2016.

Juan Manuel Guayasamin, a frog biologist at the University San Francisco of Quito, Ecuador, said that advances in technology to track animals and climate variations allowed the new study to use much more precise data than the 2004 assessment.

“We have a much better understanding of some risks,” said Guayasamin, who was not involved in the report.

The study identified the greatest concentrations of threatened amphibian species in several biodiversity hotspots, including the Caribbean islands, the tropical Andes, Madagascar and Sri Lanka. Other locations with large numbers of threatened amphibians include Brazil's Atlantic Forest, southern China and the southeastern United States.

A test case of another kind for the Supreme Court: Who can sue hotels over disability access

By MARK SHERMAN Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — A few years back, Joseph Stramondo was a last-minute replacement as a conference speaker in Salt Lake City. He went online and made a reservation for a room accessible for people with disabilities.

“I figured, ‘OK, I should be set,’” Stramondo said.

But when he checked in, the room he was given looked like a standard room, without bars in the bathroom or a door wide enough to accommodate his wheelchair.

Returning to the front desk, Stramondo learned the room was accessible — for people with hearing loss.

The Supreme Court on Wednesday wrestled with a case that Stramondo, his wife, Leah Smith, and other people with disabilities worry could make it harder to learn in advance what accommodations are available that meet their needs.

The justices are being asked to limit the ability of so-called testers to file lawsuits against hotels that fail to disclose accessibility information on their websites and through other reservation services.

The information is required by a 2010 Justice Department rule. People who suffer discrimination can sue under the landmark Americans with Disabilities Act, signed into law in 1990.

The issue in the Supreme Court case is whether Deborah Laufer, a woman with disabilities, has the right to sue a hotel in Maine that lacked the accessibility information on its website, despite having no plans to visit it. Laufer, who would not agree to an interview for this story, has filed some 600 similar lawsuits.

A district court dismissed her complaint, but the federal appeals court in Boston revived it. Appeals courts around the country have issued conflicting rulings over whether ADA testers have standing to sue

if they don't intend to go to the hotels.

Several justices questioned whether Laufer encountered discrimination through her website searches, but the outcome did not appear clear.

It's possible the Supreme Court could dismiss the case as moot without even reaching the main issue, though the hotel is urging the justices to reach a decision.

Acheson Hotels and the business interests supporting it argue that Laufer's admission that she wasn't planning to visit the hotel should end the case. Acheson owned the hotel, the Coast Village Inn and Cottages in Wells, Maine, when Laufer filed her lawsuit but has since sold it.

"What we've seen for the last 20 years is that people just sit at their house and troll through websites. Small businesses in particular have been targeted," said Karen Harned, executive director of the Center for Constitutional Responsibility.

On the other side of the case, civil rights groups fear a broad ruling for the hotel could limit the use of testers who have been crucial in identifying racial discrimination in housing and other areas.

In the context of disabilities, testers can't sue for money, just to get facilities to change their practices. That's a critical role, Stramondo and Smith said.

Stramondo, a philosophy professor at San Diego State University, and Smith are each under 4 feet, and even a hotel room deemed accessible "doesn't mean that it's accessible for us," Smith said, adding that they often turn over a room's trashcan to use as a stepstool. Smith is the director of the National Center for Disability Equity and Intersectionality.

There's no federal agency dedicated to enforcing the ADA. "And so we need to have some kind of enforcement mechanism. And the best one that I've seen is testers," Stramondo said.

30 years ago, the Kremlin crushed a parliamentary uprising, leading to strong presidential rule

By The Associated Press undefined

Three decades ago, the world held its breath as tanks blasted the Russian parliament building in central Moscow while the Kremlin moved to flush out rebellious lawmakers in a crisis that shaped the country's post-Soviet history.

While Russia narrowly avoided what many feared could be a civil war, the violent clashes on Oct. 3-4, 1993, marked a watershed. It led to the creation of a top-down government system short of the checks and balances that later allowed Vladimir Putin to establish a tight grip on the country and become the longest-serving Kremlin leader since Soviet dictator Josef Stalin.

The crushing of the parliamentary rebellion against then-President Boris Yeltsin was widely seen as a lesser evil, compared with a possible victory of nationalist and Communist forces that supported it.

Many observers, however, said the use of military force to end the crisis dealt a heavy blow to the nascent Russian democracy and strengthened authoritarian trends in its politics, which resulted in Putin's unchecked powers that he used to send troops into Ukraine.

After putting out the mutiny, Yeltsin initiated the adoption of a new constitution that gave broad powers to the presidency, leaving parliament with little authority.

Russia's politics remained turbulent throughout the 1990s, with Yeltsin's foes continually challenging his power. After Putin became president in 2000, he has used the legal framework created under his predecessor to methodically tighten control of the country and eventually unleash a relentless crackdown on dissent.

In 2020, Putin called a constitutional plebiscite that reset the clock on his tenure that could see him serving two more six-year terms and remaining in office until 2036.

After years of cracking down on the opposition, Putin faced little challenge to his authority until mercenary chief Yevgeny Prigozhin's aborted rebellion in June. While that mutiny dented his grip on power and eroded his authority amid the fighting in Ukraine, an Aug. 23 plane crash that killed Prigozhin and his top lieutenants sent a chilling message to anyone daring to defy Putin.

"With suspicions running rife in the wake of the insurrection, the Russian elite was obliged to redouble their efforts to demonstrate loyalty to Putin," said Andrei Kolesnikov, a senior fellow at the Carnegie Russia Eurasia Center.

The public feels scared and intimidated after years of sweeping Kremlin efforts to quash dissent, he said. "Any major anti-Putin street protest would be quashed within seconds by today's police state," Kolesnikov said in a recent commentary.

Asked this week if a repeat of the events in 1993 is possible in today's Russia, Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov ruled it out, saying the country has "left the dark times behind and drawn its lessons."

"The level of our country's consolidation is a guarantee against the repeat of such situations," Peskov said. Yeltsin moved into the Kremlin after the USSR collapsed in 1991, following a failed attempt by hard-line members of the Soviet leadership to oust President Mikhail Gorbachev from power and reverse his reforms.

The violent clashes in October 1993 between government forces and supporters of the rebellious parliament followed a long showdown between Yeltsin and hard-line lawmakers who opposed his chaotic and painful free-market reforms. Yeltsin's vice president, Alexander Rutskoi, sided with the rebel lawmakers.

As tensions soared, Yeltsin ordered the parliament disbanded, a move that Russia's Constitutional Court declared illegal. Attempts to negotiate a settlement failed, and the crisis erupted into violence on Oct. 3, when demonstrators supporting the parliament clashed with police, stormed the mayor's office and made an abortive attempt to seize the state TV broadcasting center.

Viktor Alksnis, a retired military officer who supported the rebellion, said in a recent podcast that "power was lying on the ground" on that day, and the parliament's supporters could have won if their leaders showed a stronger will and determination.

The next day, Yeltsin ordered the military to intervene and it used tanks to pummel the parliament building, setting it ablaze in an attack that played out on live television worldwide. The authorities said 123 people were killed in the clashes, while unofficial estimates put the death toll in the hundreds.

Grigory Yavlinsky, a veteran politician who defied Yeltsin and later opposed Putin, described the 1993 events as a key moment that determined Russia's post-Soviet history. He argued that while the parliament's defenders included hard-liners who unleashed the violence that made the use of force inevitable, the crisis and the subsequent passage of the new constitution put the country on the wrong track.

"The result is ... the system that has led Russia where it now is," he said in a recent commentary.

5 people were wounded in a shooting after a homecoming event at Morgan State University in Baltimore

By LEA SKENE and DENISE LAVOIE Associated Press

BALTIMORE (AP) — A shooting interrupted a homecoming week celebration at Baltimore's Morgan State University on Tuesday, wounding five people and prompting an hourslong lockdown of the historically Black college.

Students hunkered down for several hours, as police went room to room looking for suspects. No arrests were made.

Police Commissioner Richard Worley said the five victims, four men and one woman, are between the ages of 18 and 22. Their injuries were not life-threatening, he told reporters at a news conference early Wednesday.

Morgan State Police Chief Lance Hatcher said four of the victims are students at the university. The police did not release information about a suspect or suspects, and Worley said that investigators didn't know how many shooters were involved.

The shooting happened shortly after the coronation of Mister & Miss Morgan State at the Murphy Fine Arts Center, as students were heading to a campus ball. A police news release said officers responded to a report of the shooting around 9:25 p.m.

Konnor Crowder, a sophomore from Baltimore, said he and his friends had been waiting for the corona-

tion ball to start when they saw people running.

"First I was wondering what they were running for, then I was wondering where we should go," he said.

Worley said police heard gunshots and several dorm windows shattered, so officials initially thought there was an active shooter on campus and acted accordingly. He said they ended the shelter-in-place order around 12:30 a.m., after SWAT officers cleared a building where a suspect was feared to be hiding.

Shortly after midnight, dozens of students wearing gowns and suits started trickling out of the student center, where they had been waiting. Many were trying to process the chaos and fear that overwhelmed an evening of festivities.

Orange evidence markers were visible on the ground in front of a building next to the dorm where the shooting occurred. Yellow crime tape encircled the area as officers used flashlights to search for evidence.

Parents gathered outside a police blockade at the south entrance to campus. James Willoughby, a Morgan State alum whose daughter is a freshman, said he wasn't leaving until he laid eyes on her. "I'm gonna be here until I can physically see her," he said.

Glenmore Blackwood came to the campus after hearing from his son, a senior who told him the shooting occurred just as the coronation was concluding.

Blackwood said his son was in the arts center's auditorium. He sang in the ceremony and was planning to host a prayer service afterward.

"That's my son. He's going to make sure I know he's OK," Blackwood said. "It's just sad. They were doing a good thing — an event to promote positivity — and all this negativity happens."

Morgan State University President David Wilson said he had canceled Wednesday's classes, and would hold an emergency meeting Wednesday morning to decide whether to hold other events planned for the runup to the school's homecoming game, which is scheduled to be played on Saturday.

"It is unfortunate that this tragedy happened here tonight," he said. "By no means will it define who we are as a university."

The university, which has about 9,000 students, was founded in 1867 as the Centenary Biblical Institute with an initial mission of training men for ministry, according to its website. It moved to its current site in northeast Baltimore in 1917, and was purchased by the state of Maryland in 1939 as it aimed to provide more opportunities for Black citizens.

Baltimore Mayor Brandon Scott noted recent declines in the city's homicide rate and said the shooting Tuesday indicates a need for national gun reform.

"We have to deal with this issue nationally," he said. "We have to get serious about guns."

Pope Francis opens a big Vatican meeting on the church's future and says 'everyone' is welcome

By NICOLE WINFIELD Associated Press

VATICAN CITY (AP) — Pope Francis said the Catholic Church needed to be rebuilt to make it a place of welcome for "everyone, everyone, everyone," as he opened a divisive meeting on the future of the church that has sparked hope among progressives and alarm among conservatives.

Francis presided over a solemn Mass in St. Peter's Square to formally open the meeting. But he warned both camps in the church's culture wars to put their "human strategies, political calculations or ideological battles" aside and let the Holy Spirit guide debate.

"We're not here to create a parliament, but to walk together with the gaze of Jesus," he said.

Rarely in recent times has a Vatican gathering generated as much hope, hype and fear as this three-week, closed-door meeting, known as a synod. It won't make any binding decisions and is only the first session of a two-year process. But it nevertheless has drawn an acute battle line in the church's perennial left-right divide and marks a defining moment for Francis and his reform agenda.

On the table are calls to take concrete steps to elevate more women to decision-making roles in the church, including as deacons, and for ordinary Catholic faithful to have more of a say in church governance.

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Also under consideration are ways to better welcome of LGBTQ+ Catholics and others who have been marginalized by the church, and for new accountability measures to check how bishops exercise their authority to prevent abuses.

Even before it started, the gathering was historic because Francis decided to let women and laypeople vote alongside bishops in any final document produced. While fewer than a quarter of the 365 voting members are non-bishops, the reform is a radical shift away from a hierarchy-focused Synod of Bishops and evidence of Francis' belief that the church is more about its flock than its shepherds.

The opening Mass and seating arrangements made that clear: The lay participants led off the processional into St. Peter's Square, followed by the vested clerics, suggesting their primacy of place. Inside the synod auditorium, laypeople sat at round tables alongside cardinals and bishops, rather than in the upper back row of the Vatican's audience hall as in previous synods.

"It's a watershed moment," said JoAnn Lopez, an Indian-born lay minister who helped organize two years of consultations prior to the meeting at parishes where she has worked in Seattle and Toronto.

"This is the first time that women have a very qualitatively different voice at the table, and the opportunity to vote in decision-making is huge," she said.

In his homily, Francis recalled that his namesake St. Francis of Assisi, whose feast day is celebrated Wednesday, also faced divisions and tensions in his lifetime and responded with prayer, charity, humility and unity when he was told: "Go and rebuild my church."

"Let us do the same!" Francis said. "And if God's holy people with their shepherds from all over the world have expectations, hopes and even some fears about the synod we are beginning, let us continue to remember that it is not a political gathering, but a convocation in the spirit; not a polarized parliament, but a place of grace and communion."

He repeated that theme during the first working session of the synod and laid out the ground rules for participants, confirming a media blackout of the meeting. Francis called for a "fasting of the public word" to allow for free debate without the glare or pressures of media coverage.

"More than speaking, the priority is listening," he said.

Women have long complained they are treated as second-class citizens in the church, barred from the priesthood and highest ranks of power yet responsible for the lion's share of church work — teaching in Catholic schools, running Catholic hospitals and passing the faith down to next generations.

They have long demanded a greater say in church governance, at the very least with voting rights at the periodic synods but also the right to preach at Mass and be ordained as priests or deacons. Before the opening Mass got under way, advocates for women priests unfurled a giant purple banner at a piazza nearby reading "Ordain Women."

Lopez, 34, and other women are particularly excited about the potential that the synod might in some way endorse allowing women to be ordained as deacons, a ministry that is currently limited to men. The issue is on the agenda, and delegation from Lopez' group, Discerning Deacons, was in Rome for sideline events.

For years, supporters of female deacons have argued that women in the early church served as deacons and that restoring the ministry would both serve the church and recognize the gifts that women bring to it.

Francis has convened two study commissions to research the issue and was asked to consider it at a previous synod on the Amazon, but he has so far refused to make any change.

In his homily opening the synod, Francis said such "preconceived" ideas had no place in the gathering. But repeating his new mantra about the church as a place of welcome, he said "tutti, tutti, tutti" must be allowed in: Everyone, everyone, everyone.

The potential that this synod process could lead to real change on previously taboo topics has given hope to many women and progressive Catholics and sparked alarm from conservatives who have warned its call for radical inclusion of LGBTQ+ people could lead to schism.

They have written books, held conferences and taken to social media claiming that Francis' reforms are sowing confusion, undermining the true nature of the church and all it has taught over two millennia. Among the most vocal are conservatives in the U.S.

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On the eve of the meeting, one of the synod's most outspoken critics, American Cardinal Raymond Burke, delivered a stinging rebuke of Francis' vision of "synodality" as well as his overall reform project for the church.

"It's unfortunately very clear that the invocation of the Holy Spirit by some has the aim of bringing forward an agenda that is more political and human than ecclesial and divine," Burke told a conference entitled "The Synodal Babel."

In the audience was Cardinal Robert Sarah, who along with Burke and three other cardinals had formally challenged Francis to affirm church teaching on homosexuality and women's ordination before the synod.

In an exchange of letters made public Monday, Francis didn't bite and instead said the cardinals shouldn't be afraid of questions that are posed by a changing world. Asked specifically about church blessings for same-sex unions, Francis suggested they could be allowed as long as such benedictions aren't confused with sacramental marriage.

Stealing the show: Acuña leads speedsters seeking October impact in pitch clock era

By CHARLES ODUM AP Sports Writer

ATLANTA (AP) — The image of Ronald Acuña Jr. stealing second base and then holding the bag above his head in triumphant glory is a signature moment from the Atlanta Braves' season.

The steal did more than make Acuña the game's charter member of the 40-70 club. It also set him up to score the go-ahead run in a 6-5 win over the Chicago Cubs on Sept. 27.

The game of baseball has changed, and players with game-changing speed are taking advantage.

Fans only now turning their attention to baseball for the postseason will find a different game. Players are running much more than a year ago thanks to new rules that also promise to have an impact on the playoffs. There were 3,503 stolen bases in the regular season, a dramatic jump of more than 1,000 from a year ago. It's the highest total since 1987's record of 3,585.

Expect the rampant running to continue in the playoffs.

"Guys are going to be turning it loose like they have all year," said Braves manager Brian Snitker. "Teams like Arizona are going to be flying all over the place. I don't really see a change from the season."

Minnesota Twins manager Rocco Baldelli said before Tuesday's AL Wild Card Series opener against Toronto that the speed potential of backup outfielder Andrew Stevenson was a big factor in Stevenson earning one of the last roster spots for the series.

"I think speed and defense is always something to think about in a postseason scenario," Baldelli said.

"You start getting in these close ball games in the eighth or ninth inning, you need a run. Your leadoff guy on, putting something like that in the game creates a lot of issues for the other team. We know it because we experience it on that side of the ball, too. Everyone sees it. Everyone feels it and knows that there's a lot of ways to score when you have an elite baserunner out there."

The new rules accentuate the speed factor.

MLB introduced bigger bases, a pitch timer and, most notably, a rule limiting pitchers to just two disengagements — like a pickoff throw — from the rubber per plate appearance. The bigger bags slightly reduced the distance between bases, but that distance shrinks more with baserunners feeling empowered to take bigger leads.

Acuña led the majors with 73 stolen bases while hitting 41 homers. The Braves stole 132 bases, a big jump from their 87 in 2022, and still ranked only 10th in the majors. Cincinnati was first with 190, followed by Arizona (166), Kansas City (163) and Tampa Bay (160). The Diamondbacks and Rays are competing in the wild-card round, while the NL East champion Braves earned a buy to the NL Division Series.

It's a dramatic change from 2022, when the Texas Rangers led the majors with 128 steals, a total that would have ranked only 12th this season. The Rangers stole two bases in their 4-0 win over the Rays in their Wild Card Series opener Tuesday.

Acuña, a leading NL MVP candidate along with the Dodgers' Mookie Betts, supplies speed and power as

the face of the game's new look.

"I can't wait until we get that thing going to see what he can do," Snitker said of Acuña on the postseason stage. "Great ones, they have that penchant to love that spotlight and he's one of the great ones. ... The one place that kid is not going to feel pressure is between those lines. He's in his world there."

Acuña and the Braves, who led the majors with 104 wins, will play the winner of the Philadelphia-Miami NL Wild Card Series.

Braves reliever A.J. Minter says pitchers adjusted to the new rules relatively quickly. Even so, he's wary of a postseason game being decided by a rule that wasn't part of the game a year ago.

"I would hate for a crucial Game 5, Game 7 in the postseason to come down to a pitch-clock violation," Minter said. "Hopefully the umpires will have a little bit of feel on that. But at the same time we want them to be consistent with it. Hopefully we're not in that scenario where that does happen."

Study finds more people are moving into high flood zones, increasing risk of water disasters

By SETH BORENSTEIN AP Science Writer

Far more people are in harm's way as they move into high flood zones across the globe, adding to an increase in watery disasters from climate change, a new study said.

Since 1985, the number of the world's settlements in the riskiest flood zones has increased 122%, compared to 80% for the safest areas, according to a study in Wednesday's journal *Nature* by researchers at The World Bank. The authors looked at settlement extent and expansion using satellites instead of population, with the world's built-up regions growing 85% overall from 1985 to 2015.

"People are on a search for better lives and better jobs and then sort of get stuck in bad lands because that's what they can afford," said study co-author Stephane Hallegatte, a World Bank senior climate adviser and expert on disaster economics. He said they know it's dangerous when they arrive.

The problem is driven by middle- and low-income countries, the study found. Richer countries like the United States and parts of Europe are seeing more growth in safer areas than flood-prone ones and the poorest nations haven't quite developed as heavily in flood-prone areas, it said.

China and Vietnam both saw their settlement extent more than tripling in the past 30 years, increasing far more than their dry land areas. Most countries, especially in East Asia, saw more settlements in regular flood zones and ultra high flood zones than in dry areas. Libya, which suffered from devastating flooding last month, had an 83% increase in settlement extent in the worst flood zones. Pakistan, also the victim of catastrophic flooding both last year and this year, had an 89% increase.

What's happening is that as a nation grows a bit wealthier there's a change from rural to urban and people leave the country to go to cities, which are often near waterways that flood in places, said study lead author Jun Rentschler, a World Bank economist.

"What we're trying to do with the study is to track the process of urban development over time," Rentschler said. "What you would expect is that initially you settle in a safe space, but as the city expands, it's more likely to grow into areas that it previously avoided, flood zones for instance."

Then comes the issue of is it cheaper to fortify these dangerous areas or better to move people out, the study authors said.

Dar Es Salaam, Tanzania, is a poster city for this problem, they said. It boomed from a fishing village of about 83,000 people in 1950 to more than 7 million people now, according to World Population Review.

On the other hand, the United States saw dry settlements increase 76% and the highest flood settlements go up only 46%. Other countries with more dry settlements than ultra-wet include France, Sweden, Austria, Finland, Japan, Canada and India.

"It is an important paper that compiles data on both developed areas and assets exposed to flooding as never has been done before," said Columbia University climate scientist Klaus Jacob, who wasn't part of the research. "Especially the data on differentiating the countries by income levels is of importance and provides interesting socioeconomic insights."

Populations growing into flood zones doesn't mean that climate change isn't a major problem, the study authors said. In fact, they are intertwined, Rentschler said.

And in both cases poorer countries could keep from falling into a trap middle income countries are doing now, Hallegatte said. With urban development, smart planning can prevent some of the moving into the riskiest places, he said.

"It's way cheaper to fix it now than it is to fix it later," Hallegatte said. "We're making the same argument on carbon emissions."

Rep. Patrick McHenry of North Carolina is the leader of the House, at least for now

By GARY D. ROBERTSON Associated Press

RALEIGH, N.C. (AP) — As Kevin McCarthy got pushed out of his job as House speaker, in part by colleagues who helped put him on the dais nine months ago, one of his top lieutenants stepped in to preside — at least temporarily.

North Carolina GOP Rep. Patrick McHenry took the gavel after Tuesday's vote to oust McCarthy — a historic first for a House speaker. According to House rules, McHenry was picked from a list McCarthy was required to keep and will serve essentially as the acting speaker — known as speaker pro tempore — until the chamber figures out who will be the next leader.

For McHenry, who stands out with his signature bow ties, the interim job marks his most public position to date during his 10 terms in the House.

But he had already risen in stature and prominence within the House. McHenry was one of McCarthy's closest allies, and helped him win the speaker's contest in January and negotiate the debt limit deal that McCarthy made with President Joe Biden earlier this year.

He helped McCarthy keep his fragile majority together until it came apart following the decision to work with Democrats to keep the federal government open rather than risk a shutdown. He gave a floor speech Tuesday supporting McCarthy.

Dee Stewart, McHenry's longtime political consultant and his first chief of staff on Capitol Hill, said it doesn't surprise him that, for now, his close friend is presiding over one of the world's most important legislative bodies.

"He's demonstrated a tremendous acumen as a member of Congress and is widely respected by most everyone who deals with him," said Stewart, who first met McHenry in 1996 at a convention of the North Carolina Federation of College Republicans.

One of McHenry's first acts in the temporary position was to oust Speaker Emerita Nancy Pelosi from her honorary office at the Capitol while she was away in California to pay tribute to the late Sen. Dianne Feinstein.

Pelosi called the eviction "a sharp departure from tradition." But she added: "Office space doesn't matter to me, but it seems to be important to them. Now that the new Republican Leadership has settled this important matter, let's hope they get to work on what's truly important for the American people."

McHenry, who will turn 48 later this month, grew up around the Charlotte area. He went to North Carolina State University before graduating from Belmont Abbey College, a small Catholic school just west of Charlotte.

While still in college, he ran unsuccessfully for a state House seat in 1998, but he won four years later at age 27. McHenry had worked for a Washington-based media consulting firm, for George W. Bush's 2000 presidential campaign, and as a special assistant to the U.S. Secretary of Labor.

McHenry served just one term in the General Assembly, where he witnessed a historic stalemate over who should be the chamber's speaker. The fight ended with a Democrat and a Republican sharing the job, with each gaveling in sessions on alternate days.

But McHenry was looking ahead, and in 2004 he pulled off a Republican primary victory for the seat in

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the blue-collar, manufacturing-focused 10th Congressional District seat being vacated by the retiring GOP Rep. Cass Ballenger.

He advanced to a runoff, where he defeated a popular local sheriff by just 85 votes out of 30,000 cast to win the party nomination. Aides credited McHenry's grassroots campaigning — Stewart said they knocked on 60,000 doors — for defeating rivals who were nearly twice his age and outspent him heavily.

After defeating the Democratic nominee in 2004, McHenry entered Congress as a hardline conservative willing to speak against leadership. He broke against GOP leaders by upholding a campaign promise to vote against the Central American Free Trade Agreement.

But over time McHenry rose up the GOP leadership ladder, becoming the Republicans' chief deputy whip in 2015, and a key part of McCarthy's team. This year he's been the House Financial Services Committee chairman.

McHenry "really earned his stripes by (being) willing to take on tough issues in a vocal way during his first couple of terms," Stewart said, adding that he was granted more responsibilities as he "demonstrated his loyalty to the conservative cause."

Former Speaker John Boehner told Politico in 2017 after leaving office, "McHenry's going to be the speaker one day."

Stewart was careful about whether McHenry could become the permanent speaker, saying Stewart was "taking a wait-and-see approach."

McHenry has won reelection by comfortable margins, a reflection of Republican dominance in rural western North Carolina. Married to a U.S. government economist and father to three children, McHenry lives on Lake Norman within the 10th District.

Known for his deadpan jokes, McHenry can also have a fiery side.

While on the dais Tuesday, he read carefully from a paper saying it would be "prudent" to recess the House so that party caucuses and conferences could meet "to discuss the path forward."

McHenry then slammed the gavel down very hard — and the footage went viral on social media.

Today in History: October 5, Earl Warren becomes chief justice

By The Associated Press undefined

Today in History

Today is Thursday, Oct. 5, the 278th day of 2023. There are 87 days left in the year.

Today's Highlight in History:

On Oct. 5, 1953, Earl Warren was sworn in as the 14th chief justice of the United States, succeeding Fred M. Vinson.

On this date:

In 1892, the Dalton Gang, notorious for its train robberies, was practically wiped out while attempting to rob a pair of banks in Coffeyville, Kansas.

In 1947, President Harry S. Truman delivered the first televised White House address as he spoke on the world food crisis.

In 1958, racially-desegregated Clinton High School in Clinton, Tennessee, was nearly leveled by an early morning bombing.

In 1983, Solidarity founder Lech Walesa (lek vah-WEN'-sah) was named winner of the Nobel Peace Prize.

In 1989, a jury in Charlotte, North Carolina, convicted former P-T-L evangelist Jim Bakker of using his television show to defraud followers. (Sentenced to 45 years in prison, Bakker was freed in December 1994 after serving 4 1/2 years.)

In 1994, 48 people were found dead in an apparent murder-suicide carried out simultaneously in two Swiss villages by members of a secret religious doomsday cult known as the Order of the Solar Temple.

In 2001, tabloid photo editor Robert Stevens died from inhaled anthrax, the first of a series of anthrax cases in Florida, New York, New Jersey and Washington.

In 2005, defying the White House, senators voted 90-9 to approve an amendment sponsored by Repub-

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lican Sen. John McCain that would prohibit the use of "cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment" against anyone in U.S. government custody.

In 2011, Steve Jobs the Apple founder and former chief executive who'd invented and master-marketed ever sleeker gadgets that transformed everyday technology from the personal computer to the iPod and iPhone, died in Palo Alto, California at age 56.

In 2015, the United States, Japan and 10 other nations in Asia and the Americas reached agreement on the landmark Trans-Pacific Partnership trade deal.

In 2017, Hollywood executive Harvey Weinstein announced that he was taking a leave of absence from his company after a New York Times article detailed decades of alleged sexual harassment against women.

In 2018, a jury in Chicago convicted white police officer Jason Van Dyke of second-degree murder in the 2014 shooting of Black teenager Laquan McDonald.

In 2020, President Donald Trump made a dramatic return to the White House after leaving the military hospital where he was receiving an unprecedented level of care for COVID-19.

In 2021, a former Facebook employee, data scientist Frances Haugen, told a Senate panel that the company knew that its platform spread misinformation and content that harmed children, but that it refused to make changes that could hurt its profits.

In 2022, Russian President Vladimir Putin signed the final papers to annex four regions of Ukraine while his military struggled to control the new territory.

Today's Birthdays: Actor Glynis Johns is 100. College Football Hall of Fame coach Barry Switzer is 86. R&B singer Arlene Smith (The Chantels) is 82. Singer-musician Steve Miller is 80. Sen. Benjamin L. Cardin, D-Md., is 80. Rock singer Brian Johnson (AC/DC) is 76. Blues musician Rick Estrin is 74. Actor Karen Allen is 72. Writer-producer-director Clive Barker is 71. Rock musician David Bryson (Counting Crows) is 69. Astrophysicist-author Neil deGrasse Tyson is 65. Memorial designer Maya Lin is 64. Actor Daniel Baldwin is 63. Rock singer-musician Dave Dederer is 59. Hockey Hall of Famer Mario Lemieux is 58. Actor Guy Pearce is 56. Actor Josie Bissett is 53. Singer-actor Heather Headley is 49. Pop-rock singer Colin Meloy (The Decemberists) is 49. Actor Parminder Nagra (pahr-MIHN'-da NAH'-grah) is 48. Actor Scott Weinger is 48. Actor Kate Winslet is 48. Rock musician James Valentine (Maroon 5) is 45. Rock musician Paul Thomas (Good Charlotte) is 43. Actor Jesse Eisenberg is 40. TV personality Nicky Hilton is 40. Actor Azure Parsons is 39. R&B singer Brooke Valentine is 38. Actor Kevin Bigley is 37. Actor Joshua Logan Moore is 29. Actor Jacob Tremblay is 17.