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White House threatens FDA chief's job over vaccine approval

In this Sept. 23, 2020, file photo, Dr. Stephen Hahn, commissioner of the U.S. Food and Drug Administration, testifies during a Senate Health, Education, Labor, and Pensions Committee Hearing on the federal government response to COVID-19 on Capitol Hill.

Associated Press

By J. LEMIRE, D. SUPERVILLE and M. PERRONE

Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) —

White House chief of staff Mark Meadows on Friday pressed Food and Drug Administration chief Stephen Hahn to grant an emergency use authorization for Pfizer's coronavirus vaccine by the end of the day or face possible firing, two administration officials said. The vaccine produced by Pfizer Inc. and its German partner BioNTech won a critical endorsement Thursday from an FDA panel of outside advisers, and signoff from the agency — which was expected this weekend — is the next step needed to get the shots to

the public. The FDA is not required to follow the guidance of its advisory committees, but the devastation caused by the virus makes the vaccine's authorization almost certain. Meadows spoke to Hahn by telephone Friday, according to a senior administration official who was familiar with the call but was not authorized to discuss private conversations.

The chief of staff also told Hahn his job was in jeopardy if the emergency use authorization was not issued before Saturday, said a second administration official familiar with the conversation.

Hahn signaled that he would tell regulators to al-

low the vaccine to be issued on an emergency basis, the official said.

President Donald Trump has been pressing for quick approval for the vaccine and tweeted directly at Hahn earlier Friday, complaining that FDA "is still a big, old, slow turtle." Trump has publicly bashed the pace of the FDA's vaccine review process.

"Get the dam vaccines out NOW, Dr. Hahn," Trump tweeted Friday. "Stop playing games and start saving lives."

Hahn disputed characterizations of his conversation with Meadows.

"This is an untrue representation of the phone call with the Chief of Staff,"

Hahn said in a statement. "The FDA was encouraged to continue working expeditiously on Pfizer-BioNTech's EUA request. FDA is committed to issuing this authorization quickly, as we noted in our statement this morning."

The FDA said earlier Friday that it "will rapidly work" to grant emergency use of the vaccine.

Dr. Ashish Jha, dean of Brown University's school of public health, called the pressure an "unforced error" by the White House that could chip away at public confidence in a vaccine.

"It creates a veneer of political meddling," Jha said. "Every time you see the president get involved, you

see vaccine confidence drop by 10%."

Hahn and other top health officials have been working for months to boost public confidence in the government's vaccine effort, which will eventually need to reach most Americans to suppress the virus.

Recent polls show only about half of all Americans are ready to roll up their sleeves for a shot. Many have safety concerns and want to wait and see how the initial rollout fares. But concerns that a vaccine was rushed due to political pressure could further undermine the unprecedented vaccination effort.

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"The last thing this process needs now is to undermine the public's faith in the vaccine with political pressure to hurry up an already rushed process with threats of firings," said Carl Tobias, law professor at the University of Richmond in Virginia. Jha added that FDA officials don't need the added pressure. "They already feel the weight of what's happening in our country," he said.

Trump's frustration with the FDA has been mounting, particularly as other countries have beaten the U.S. in issuing emergency approvals for the vaccine. Meadows issued the ultimatum to Hahn at Trump's direction, a senior administration official said.

The FDA decision — when it comes — will kickstart an unprecedented vaccination campaign needed to eventually defeat the virus, now blamed for nearly 300,000 deaths in the U.S. And the agency's greenlight of the vaccine was virtually assured after Thursday's positive vote by agency advisers.

Typically, the FDA does not publicly comment on the progress or timing of its re-



In this April 24, 2020, file photo, President Donald Trump gestures to Vice President Mike Pence as Dr. Stephen Hahn, commissioner of the U.S. Food and Drug Administration, steps back to the podium to answer a question during a briefing about the coronavirus in the James Brady Press Briefing Room of the White House in Washington.

Associated Press

views, which are considered confidential government information. The FDA's review is critical to assuring the safety and effectiveness of a vaccine that will eventually be given to millions of Americans, including highly vulnerable groups like nursing home residents.

The agency's careful approach is unique around the world in that the FDA actually reanalyzes all

company data to verify its accuracy. That's different from the abbreviated process used by the U.K. and other countries, which rely on summary data produced by manufacturers. Hahn has stated for months that "science, not politics" would determine when the agency gives the vaccine the go-ahead.

He surprised many critics in October by defying the White House and publishing

strict FDA safety guidelines for upcoming COVID-19 vaccines.

The standards effectively closed the door on Trump's long-stated goal of delivering a vaccine by Election Day and undercut White House staffers who had blocked the guidelines for weeks.

More than 150 FDA staffers have been working in shifts over nights, weekends and the Thanksgiving holiday to

review tens of thousands of pages of Pfizer's application.

Hahn told The Associated Press earlier this week that his agency had already teed up authorization by prefilling all the necessary legal paperwork.

"We're doing everything we can to cut down on the red tape, which I think is really important," Hahn told the AP.

Trump has been livid with the FDA for not moving faster to approve the shots, blaming the fact that a vaccine was not available before the Nov. 3 election for his loss. Trump also has leveled unfounded claims that drug companies deliberately delayed vaccine development to hinder his reelection chances, though there is no evidence to suggest that took place.

As he has refused to accept his loss to Democratic President-elect Joe Biden, Trump also has told close confidants that he believes the vaccine is still being slow-walked in a bid to undermine his efforts to challenge the results.

If the vaccine were shipped out sooner, he has argued, it would rally public opinion to his side. □

AP source: Cuomo among contenders for attorney general pick



In this Dec. 3, 2020, photo provided by the Office of Gov. Andrew Cuomo, Cuomo holds up samples of empty packaging for the COVID-19 vaccine during a news conference in the Red Room at the State Capitol in Albany, N.Y.

Associated Press

By ERIC TUCKER
Associated Press
WASHINGTON (AP) — New York Gov. Andrew Cuomo is one of several contenders under consideration by

President-elect Joe Biden for the role of attorney general, a person with knowledge of the search process said Friday.

The other three contend-

ers at the moment include former Alabama Sen. Doug Jones, federal appeals court judge Merrick Garland and former Deputy Attorney General Sally Yates, said the person, who cautioned that no decision had been reached and no announcement was expected imminently. The person was not authorized to discuss the search process by name and spoke on condition of anonymity to The Associated Press.

The Associated Press reported earlier in the week that Jones, who lost his Senate seat last month, and Garland, who was spurned by Republicans four years ago for a spot on the Supreme Court, had emerged as the two front-runners in the

search process.

Spokespeople for Cuomo did not immediately return emails seeking comment on Friday.

It was not clear to what extent the disclosure this week that federal prosecutors were investigating the finances of Biden's son, Hunter, might have scrambled the attorney general search process given that the person who has picked would inherit the probe assuming it remains active next month.

It was also not immediately clear how seriously Cuomo was being considered or how any nomination of him would be greeted by either Republicans, given Cuomo's antagonistic relationship with President Donald Trump, or by civil rights

activists who have encouraged Biden to build a diverse cabinet.

The Rev. Al Sharpton, who was among advocates who met with Biden on Tuesday on the subject of diversity and civil rights, told reporters that he had encouraged Biden to select a Black attorney general but gave him room to select someone of another race as long as they had a background in civil rights.

A former state attorney general and Housing and Urban Development secretary in the Clinton administration, Cuomo has been governor of New York since 2011 and has been the public face of the state's response to the coronavirus pandemic. □

Congress averts shutdown, buys time for more COVID-19 talks

By LISA MASCARO and

ANDREW TAYLOR

Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — Congress sent a temporary government-wide funding bill to President Donald Trump on Friday that would avert a federal shutdown at midnight and buy time for on-again, off-again talks on COVID-19 aid.

The bill sets a new deadline of midnight next Friday. The short-term measure passed the Senate by a unanimous voice vote without much drama and sent senators home for the weekend without a clear picture of what awaits next week. The House passed the bill Wednesday. Trump was expected to sign it before midnight.

The talks are stalled but there is universal agreement that Congress won't adjourn for the year without passing a long-delayed round of pandemic relief. An emerging \$900 billion aid package from a bipartisan group of lawmakers hit a rough patch after Senate Majority Leader Mitch McConnell, R-Ky., swung against the effort. Still, negotiations are ongoing and pressure remains intense. The House has recessed for a few days, with leaders warning members to be prepared to return to Washington to vote on the year-end deals.

Negotiators on a separate \$1.4 trillion catchall spending bill appeared to be moving in a positive direction, said the chairman of the Senate Appropriations Committee, Sen. Richard Shelby, R-Ala.. This bill would serve as a vehicle to carry any year-end virus assistance.

The breakdown over the aid package is a Capitol Hill head-scratcher. Trump has renewed a push for a fresh round of stimulus checks for Americans, proposing \$600 per individual rather than the \$1,200 that was sent out this spring. Cost concerns are responsible for the smaller amount.

Sending direct cash payments to households was not included in the bipartisan proposal or a lower

cost plan from Senate Republicans that has failed twice. The idea of another round of cash but has been embraced by some of the president's fiercest critics — including Rep. Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez, D-N.Y., and Sen. Bernie Sanders, I-Vt. "We're not going to go home for the Christmas holidays unless we make sure that we provide for the millions of families in this country who are suffering," Sanders said. House Speaker Nancy Pelosi, D-Calif., said Congress would keep working up to or even after Christmas to get an agreement. The new Congress is being sworn in on Jan. 3. The \$900 billion-plus proposal provides sweeping new funds for vaccines, small businesses, health care providers, schools and families suffering from the virus crisis and the economic shutdowns.

A key hold up has been the standoff over more money for the states, that Democrats - and some Republicans - want and the liability shield that is McConnell's top GOP priority but that most Democrats oppose. The bipartisan group tried to marry those two provisions as a compromise. McConnell had initially proposed a five-year liability shield from virus lawsuits, retroactive to December 2019, but the bipartisan group was eyeing a scaled-back shield of six months to a year. Labor and civil rights groups oppose any shield, which they say strips essential workers of potential legal recourse as they take risks during the pandemic.

Democratic leaders had wanted far more in state and local aid, but were accepting of the lower \$160 billion.

But many Republicans have long viewed the state and local aid as a bailout they would have trouble supporting, despite the pleas for funds coming from governors and mayors nationwide.

Late Thursday, Sen. Dick Durbin and other Democrats pitched another liability proposal to the bi-

partisan group, but it was rejected by Republicans, according to a Senate aide granted anonymity to discuss the private session. The Trump administration is back in the middle of the negotiations with a \$916 billion plan. It would send a \$600 direct payment to most Americans but eliminate a \$300-per-week employment benefit favored by the bipartisan group of Senate negotiators. □



Senate Majority Leader Mitch McConnell of Kentucky, speaks during a news conference following a weekly meeting with the Senate Republican caucus, Tuesday, Dec. 8, 2020 at the Capitol in Washington.

Associated Press



CENTROS DE LA CONSULTA POPULAR EN LA ISLA DE ARUBA

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- **CHOCOGLAM:** Boegoeroi 77B, Noord.
- **CARIBEAN PRINT:** Bubali 107 E, Locales 1 y 2, Noord
- **FRUTERÍA PARADERA:** RTE4 (Av principal de Paradera).
- **LENIN:** Seroe Blanco 78N, Noord.
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Se agradece el uso del tapabocas y mantener la distancia social. Recuerden que también pueden participar de manera virtual en esta Consulta Popular desde este lunes 7 de Diciembre

VENEZOLANOS
SIEMPRE

Utah senator blocks national museums for Latinos, women

By MARY CLARE JALONICK
Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — A lone senator from Utah has singlehandedly blocked the bipartisan approval of two new national museums to honor American Latinos and women, arguing that “last thing we need is to further divide an already divided nation.”

Republican Sen. Mike Lee objected Thursday to the creation of the two proposed Smithsonian museums, stalling two projects that have been in the making for decades and enjoy broad bipartisan support. Senate approval would have sent the legislation approving the Latino museum to President Donald Trump for his signature. The Senate was attempting to pass the measures by voice vote, which requires every senator’s consent.

The dispute on the Senate floor came amid the impasse over a new coronavirus relief bill and highlighted the difficulty of achieving even widely supported goals in the polarized Congress. Lawmakers could still find a way to move forward on the creation of

the museums, including by adding the bills to a must-pass spending package, but doing so could further complicate passage of that legislation.

Lee’s move came after his Republican colleagues had spoken in favor of the efforts. Texas Sen. John Cornyn, who authored the legislation to create the National Museum of the American Latino with New Jersey Sen. Bob Menendez, a Democrat, said just before Lee’s objection that it was an effort 25 years in the making.

“Many Americans simply aren’t aware of the vast contributions made by these men and women who have come before us, and one critical way we can right this wrong is by providing a home for their stories in the nation’s capital,” Cornyn said.

Objecting, Lee countered that point, saying the creation of museums that celebrate individual groups “weaponizes diversity.”

“Especially at the end of such a fraying, fracturing year, Congress should not splinter one of the national institutional cornerstones of



In this Nov. 10, 2020, file photo, Sen. Mike Lee, R-Utah, speaks during a Senate Judiciary Committee hearing on Capitol Hill in Washington.

Associated Press

our distinct national identity,” Lee said, adding that such national division “has turned our college campuses into grievance pageants and loosed Orwellian mobs to cancel anyone daring to express an original thought.”

Lee similarly objected to legislation by Sen. Susan Collins, R-Maine, to create a national women’s museum. Collins said it was a “sad moment” and that she had hoped the bills would move before the end of the year. She said she would not give up the fight.

“Surely, in a year where we are celebrating the 100th anniversary of women’s suffrage, this is the time, this is the moment,” Collins said. Lee said he sees an exception for museums dedicated to American Indians and African Americans that already sit on the National Mall. He said those groups were “essentially written out of our national story and even had their own stories virtually erased” by the U.S. government, therefore it is “uniquely appropriate that the federal government provide the funding to recover and tell

those communities’ specific stories today at dedicated museums in the specific context of having been so long excluded.”

Livid, Menendez pointed to a 1994 internal examination by the Smithsonian — the impetus for the effort to create the museum — that described “willful neglect” on the part of the institution toward Hispanic and Latino culture.

“We have been systematically excluded, not because this senator said so but because the Smithsonian itself said so,” Menendez said. □

Investor in Portland eviction protest says he'd sell home

PORLAND, Ore. (AP) — The real estate investor who owns the Portland, Oregon house that anti-gentrification protesters have surrounded with barricades has offered to sell the property back to the former owners.

Roman Ozeruga bought the home through a foreclosure sale in 2018 for \$260,000. He told The Oregonian/OregonLive in a story published Friday that he would sell it back to the Kinneys, the Black and Indigenous family that owned the house since the 1950s.

Fencing, lumber and other makeshift barricades went up around the property on Dec. 8 after officers arrested about a dozen people in a clash over the eviction of the Kinney family.



Masked protesters by an occupied home speak with a neighborhood resident opposed to their encampment and demonstration in Portland, Ore., on Wednesday, Dec. 9, 2020.

Associated Press

“We are a small family business, we don’t seek to hurt anyone of course,” said Ozeruga, the co-owner of Urban Housing Development LLC. “We’re overwhelmed by the attention to this. We’ve already of-

fered to sell back the property at cost because of course we’ve paid taxes, legal fees, bank fees, etc.” Ozeruga said he would sell the home at cost without providing more specifics and that he has contact-

ed the office of Portland Mayor Ted Wheeler, who has said that he hopes to negotiate a settlement to end the demonstrations at the site.

Ozeruga said he fears for his family’s well-being because of the protest activity.

“I myself am a father of little kids,” he said. “I don’t have a publicity team or even a lawyer for this. I’m concerned for safety to be honest.”

The street behind the blockade in the neighborhood of homes, coffee shops and restaurants is laced with booby traps aimed at keeping officers out — including homemade spike strips, piles of rocks and thick bands of plastic wrap stretched at neck-height across the roadway.

The scene has recalled more than four months of confrontations between police and protesters decrying racial injustice and police brutality that only abated weeks ago.

Supporters of the Kinney family say the home was unjustly taken through predatory lending practices that target people of color.

It’s in a historically Black part of Portland that for decades was one of the few areas Black residents could own homes because of racist real estate and zoning laws.

Police have said between Sept. 1 and Nov. 30, there has been 81 calls to the property for fights, gunshots, burglary, vandalism and noise complaints, among other things. □

Faced with U.S., E.U. sanctions, Erdogan calls for dialogue

By SUZAN FRASER

Associated Press

ANKARA, Turkey (AP) —

Faced with the prospect of sanctions from both the United States and the European Union, Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan said Friday that economic penalties would be detrimental to all sides and that Turkey's disputes with its allies can be resolved through dialogue and co-operation.

Erdogan's comments came hours after the EU gave the green light for the expansion of sanctions against Turkey over its exploration of gas reserves in eastern Mediterranean waters claimed by EU members Greece and Cyprus.

Turkey also faces US sanctions over its purchase of a Russian air defense system, which has already resulted in the NATO-member being kicked out of the U.S. F-35 stealth fighter program.

"We have deep-rooted political and economic relations with both the United States and the European Union, which neither side can ignore or certainly risk losing," Erdogan said in a teleconference address to his ruling party's officials. "There is no issue that cannot be solved through dialogue and cooperation."

The EU leaders said early Friday that Turkey—which is a candidate to join although its membership talks are blocked—has "engaged



Turkey's President Recep Tayyip Erdogan talks during a joint news conference with Azerbaijan's President Ilham Aliyev, in Baku, Azerbaijan, Thursday, Dec. 10, 2020.

Associated Press

in unilateral actions and provocations and escalated its rhetoric against the EU." This was despite the fact that they had offered trade and other incentives to Turkey to halt its activities during their last summit in October, they said.

The leaders tasked EU foreign policy chief Josep Borrell with drawing up a report on the state of EU-Turkey political, economic and trade relations and with suggesting how to proceed, including on widening sanctions. Borrell was asked to submit the report to the leaders by the time they hold a summit in

March.

Turkey's Foreign Ministry slammed the EU decision, saying Ankara rejects the 27-member group's "biased and unlawful attitude." It added that the decision was approved out of solidarity with Greece and Cyprus.

But Erdogan, speaking to reporters earlier on Friday, suggested that the decision was less severe than what Greece and Cyprus had hoped for.

"(The decision) did not meet the expectations of some countries, because their demand was not just," Erdogan said. "Some rea-

sonable countries within the EU asserted their positive stance and spoiled their game."

EU countries are split over how best to handle Turkey. France and Cyprus have pushed for tougher measures such as economic sanctions, but other countries are concerned about further undermining the country's already ravaged economy and destabilizing the region.

French President Emmanuel Macron, speaking in Brussels after the EU summit said Europe "remains obviously always open to dialogue but won't accept a policy

destabilizing its member states as well as its regional environment."

He praised the EU decision and the prospect of U.S. sanctions as a response to "Turkey's inconsistencies within NATO."

Greek Prime Minister Kyriakos Mitsotakis said the EU took a strong step warning Turkey to "change behavior."

He said that, for Greece, sanctions were not a goal in and of themselves.

"But the threat of sanctions in case Turkey continues its provocative action is the best tool we have at our disposal," he said. "We don't want Turkey to be a provocative and aggressive neighbor. And I don't believe this is to the benefit of Turkey or of Greece or of Europe."

Tensions between NATO allies Turkey and Greece escalated over the summer with a military build-up after Turkey sent its seismic survey vessel Oruc Reis, escorted by navy frigates, into disputed waters. The move prompted Greece to also send its warships, and both countries conducted military exercises to assert their claims.

Late last month, Oruc Reis returned to port, as it had done before October's EU meeting. However, another research ship, the Barbaros Hayreddin Pasa, remains off Cyprus' southwestern coast. □

Report: Afghans losing hope for peace process amid violence

By TAMEEM AKHGAN

Associated Press

KABUL, Afghanistan (AP) —

Optimism among Afghans regarding the country's peace process has decreased significantly in the past few months amid a spike in violence, according to a survey released Friday. The Institute of War and Peace Studies found optimism had dropped to 57% when the survey was conducted from Sept. 29 to Oct. 18. That's down from 86% of those surveyed according to the previous assessment conducted over the summer and released in August. Ongoing peace

talks between the Afghan government and the Taliban in Qatar had been at an impasse until last week, when in a breakthrough, the two sides agreed on rules and procedures for the negotiations.

However, since the Afghan-Taliban talks started in September, violence has spiked significantly. The Taliban have staged deadly attacks on Afghan forces while keeping their promise not to attack U.S. and NATO troops. The attacks have drawn a mighty retaliation by the Afghan air force, backed by U.S. warplanes. International rights

groups have warned both sides to avoid inflicting civilian casualties. Another 64% were also against any fundamental reforms to the structure of the country's security forces, something the Taliban have insisted on, saying these forces were created by foreign powers. The institute polled 8,627 people across Afghanistan's 34 provinces—58% men and 42% women—and received funding to conduct the survey from the European Union and the Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency. The survey had a 5% margin of error. □



In this Sept 14, 2020 file photo, families and friends of students who were killed in local conflicts gather at the graves of their relatives, adorned with their pictures, on the outskirts of Kabul, Afghanistan.

Associated Press

Alarm as Ethiopia returns refugees who fled Tigray fighting

By CARA ANNA

Associated Press

NAIROBI, Kenya (AP) — In a development the United Nations called "disturbing," Ethiopia on Friday said it is returning thousands of refugees who ran from camps in its Tigray region as war swept through, putting them on buses back to the border area with Eritrea, the country the refugees originally fled.

The news came as the United States said it believes Eritrean troops are active in Ethiopia, a "grave development." A State Department spokesperson in an email cited credible reports and said "we urge that any such troops be withdrawn immediately."

The U.N. refugee chief, Filippo Grandi, said that "over the last month we have received an overwhelming number of disturbing reports of Eritrean refugees in Tigray being killed, abducted and forcibly returned to Eritrea. If confirmed, these actions would constitute a major violation of international law." He said his agency has met with some refugees in the capital, Addis Ababa, and he again urged unhindered humanitarian access to Tigray.

Ethiopia said its recently completed military offensive against the now-fugitive Tigray regional government "was not a direct threat" to the 96,000 "misinformed" Eritrean refugees — even as aid groups said four staffers had been killed in the fighting, at least one in a refugee camp.

U.N. Secretary-General Antonio Guterres this week said Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed, last year's Nobel Peace Prize winner, "guar-



Tigray refugee children sing and dance inside a tent run by UNICEF for children's activities, in Umm Rakuba refugee camp in Qadarif, eastern Sudan, Thursday, Dec. 10, 2020.

Associated Press

anteed to me that (Eritrean forces) have not entered Tigrayan territory." But Tigray residents have asserted that gunfire came from the direction of Eritrea as the conflict began.

Eritrea, described by rights groups as one of the world's most repressive countries, is a bitter enemy of the fugitive Tigray government.

The U.N. refugee agency said it hadn't been informed in advance of the Eritrean refugees' return. "We received alarming messages from Eritreans living abroad and when we looked into them, ascertained that several hundred refugees had been put on buses this morning to be returned to the Tigray region," it said.

Any forced return, it said, "would be absolutely unacceptable."

Given the trauma that refugees say they witnessed in Tigray, they should be

protected elsewhere, the agency said. It said the refugee camps have had no access to food or other supplies for more than a month.

The International Organization for Migration said it was "extremely concerned" about the refugees' "forced" return and denied it was involved, saying Ethiopia took over one of its transit centers in the capital, Addis Ababa, on Dec. 3.

Aid groups say thousands of Eritrean refugees had fled to Addis Ababa and the Tigray capital, Mekele. Ethiopia said their "unregulated movement" makes it difficult to ensure their security.

Their camps are now stable and under "full control," Ethiopia said, adding that food delivery there "is under way."

But communication and transport links to Tigray remain so challenging that the International Rescue Committee said it was still trying to confirm details around the killing of a colleague in the Hitsats refugee camp in Shire town, the base of aid operations. Separately, the Danish Refugee Council said three staffers who worked as guards at a project site were killed last month. It was not clear where, but

the group also supports the Eritrean refugees.

"Sadly, due to the lack of communications and ongoing insecurity in the region, it has not yet been possible to reach their families," the group said.

"Now, more than ever, it is a matter of urgency to cease all hostilities," the European Union's commissioner for crisis management, Janez Lenarcic, said while condemning the killings.

Tigray remains largely sealed off from the world five weeks after fighting erupted between Ethiopia's government and the Tigray one following a months-long power struggle. The governments regard each other as illegitimate, the result of months of friction since Abiy took office in 2018 and sidelined the once-dominant Tigray People's Liberation Front.

Thousands of people are thought to have been killed in the fighting that began Nov. 4 and has threatened to destabilize the Horn of Africa.

Ethiopia rejects "interference" as fighting reportedly continues, while the U.N. has pleaded for neutral, unfettered access. "Food rations for displaced people in Tigray have run out," the U.N. humanitarian office tweeted.

"Every day that we don't

have access is a day lost. Every day that we don't have access is a day that increases the suffering of civilians," U.N. spokesman Stephane Dujarric told reporters, and he referred questions to Ethiopia's side. Ethiopia says it is responsible for ensuring the security of aid efforts — though the conflict and related ethnic tensions have left many Tigrayans wary of government forces.

On Friday, Ethiopia said it had begun delivering aid to areas in Tigray under its control, including Shire and Mekele, a city of a half-million people.

"Suggestions that humanitarian assistance is impeded due to active military combat in several cities and surrounding areas within the Tigray region is untrue and undermines the critical work undertaken by the National Defense Forces to stabilize the region," the prime minister's office said, noting only "sporadic gunfire" remained.

Some 6 million people live in Tigray. About 1 million are now thought to be displaced. The impact on civilians has been "appalling," the U.N. human rights chief said this week.

This week, Ethiopia said its forces shot at and briefly detained U.N. staffers conducting their first security assessment in Tigray, a crucial step in delivering aid. Ethiopia said they were trying to go where they weren't allowed.

Meanwhile, nearly 50,000 Ethiopians have fled to Sudan and more are still arriving.

"The recent groups coming from areas deeper inside Tigray are arriving weak and exhausted, some reporting they spent two weeks on the run inside Ethiopia as they made their way to the border," U.N. refugee spokesman Babar Baloch told reporters. "They have told us harrowing accounts of being stopped by armed groups and robbed of their possessions."

Without access in Ethiopia, he said, "we are unable to verify these disturbing reports." □

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Argentina's lower house approves bill legalizing abortion

By ALMUDENA CALATRAVA
Associated Press

BUENOS AIRES, Argentina (AP) — Lawmakers in Argentina's lower house on Friday passed a bill that would legalize elective abortions to the 14th week of pregnancy, a proposal from President Alberto Fernández in response to long-sought demands from women's rights activists in the homeland of Pope Francis.

The bill still needs approval from the country's Senate in a debate expected before the end of the year.

The proposed law was approved in a 131-117 vote with six abstentions after a marathon debate that extended from Thursday into the early hours of Friday morning. Some of its backers were lawmakers in the opposition. Demonstrators in favor of decriminalizing abortion, who had spent the night outside the congress building in Buenos Aires, erupted with joy and embraced each other as they listened to the parliamentary speaker reading the vote's results on screens. Many of them wore face masks in the green color that has become a symbol for their movement.

Hundreds of meters (yards) away, not far from the parliament building, hundreds of opponents dressed in light blue and carrying the national flag deplored the result, with some shedding tears. Latin America has some of the world's most



Abortion-rights activists rally outside Congress as lawmakers debate a bill on its legalization, in Buenos Aires, Argentina, Thursday, Dec. 10, 2020.

restrictive abortion laws. Mexico City, Cuba and Uruguay are among the few places in the region where women can undergo abortions during the first 12 weeks of pregnancy regardless of the circumstances. Currently, many women who have an abortion in Argentina, as well as people who assist them with the procedure, can face prosecution. Exemptions are only considered in cases of rape or if pregnancy poses a risk to the mother's health.

Before getting elected one year ago, Fernández had promised to push for making abortion voluntary and cost-free.

While the bill passed the lower house, the outlook is

less clear in the country's Senate.

Two years ago, during the administration of more conservative President Mauricio Macri, the upper house voted against a similar bill to legalize abortion after it was narrowly approved by the lower house.

Ahead of Thursday's debate, the Roman Catholic Church had appealed to legislators for "a second of reflection on what respect for life means," echoing the position of Pope Francis, an Argentine, that abortion is part of today's "throw-away culture" that doesn't respect the dignity of the unborn, the weak or elderly.

Several thousand women seeking abortions have

died during unsafe, clandestine procedures in Argentina since 1983, and about 38,000 women are hospitalized every year because of botched procedures conducted in secret, according to the government.

The bill approved Friday follows more than a decade of campaigning by the National Campaign for the Right to Free and Safe Legal Abortion.

Speaking minutes before the congressional debate ended, Silvia Lospennato, one of the opposition lawmakers who backed the ruling party's initiative, said it was time "to finish writing the rights and move on to the stage of equality."

"To each woman who

wears the green scarf demanding to decide, to those who never lower their arms: May abortion be legal and free! Let it be law!" Lospennato said.

But lawmakers from several parties have argued that abortions would be a violation of the American Convention on Human Rights, which they say takes precedence over the national Constitution and that establishes that the right to life should be protected by law, "in general, from the moment of conception."

Opposition legislator Graciela Camaño equated legalizing abortion to "the lack of political capacity to solve society's problems."

If passed in the Senate, a traditionally more conservative chamber, abortions would be possible beyond the 14th week if the pregnancy is the result of rape or if it endangers the person carrying the fetus.

Those below the age of 16 would exercise "their rights through their legal representatives" and can seek "legal assistance" in cases of "conflict of interest."

In hopes of winning more votes, legislators who support the bill made last-minute changes to the text that would allow private clinics in which all medical workers oppose abortion rights to refrain from providing the procedure. Such clinics, though, would be required to refer women to another facility that does abortion procedures. □

Cuba's president to drop its dual currency system Jan. 1

HAVANA (AP) — Cuba will unify its monetary system on New Year's Day, President Miguel Díaz-Canel announced Thursday evening, closing the door on more than 25 years with two national currencies in circulation.

Díaz-Canel said in a national radio and television broadcast that the country will revert to using its peso, which has an official exchange rate of 24 for a U.S. dollar. It will drop the convertible peso, which is worth about \$1.

Government officials for several years had conceded the difficulties of having the two currencies and different exchange rates, but they made no move to impose a reorganization because of worries about the potential negative impact, including inflation.

Most Cubans have been paid in the regular peso, which is worth about four cents. The stronger currency was introduced as a replacement for the dollars traded on the black market during the island's

post-Soviet economic crisis in the 1990s.

Over time, the communist government used the two currencies to set extremely low prices for goods and services considered basic rights and extremely high prices for others considered luxuries, creating distortions that hindered economic growth. It also bred resentment at Cubans who worked in tourism and had access to the stronger currency. Cuba is suffering a severe economic crisis arising from its unproductive



A worker shows a wad of Cuban pesos in Havana, Cuba, Friday, Dec. 11, 2020.

Associated Press

Donald Trump to pressure the government. □

LOCAL



Starbucks Aruba opens its fifth store bringing its unmatched Starbucks Experience now at Gloria Plaza



ORANJESTAD — Starbucks Aruba announces the opening of its fifth store in the country, which will be located at Gloria Plaza. Through this opening, Starbucks reaffirms its commitment to Aruba and its local customers with the introduction of its second kiosk concept, offering them both convenience and connection while providing a safe, high-quality coffee experience and handcrafted beverages served by knowledgeable and passionate baristas. Starbucks kiosk format is just one way the company is adapting its Third Place, mainly in its stores in high-traffic, metropolitan areas.

"We are proud and excited to expand Starbucks presence in Aruba, providing positive economic impact and creating jobs while sharing our coffee passion with the local community", celebrated Mrs. Wanda Broeksema, country man-

ager at Starbucks Aruba & Curacao. "Through each opening, we not only seek to provide a warm and welcoming place outside our customers' home and workspaces, but we also carry out initiatives that strengthen the communities where we are".

Starbucks relationship with Aruba began in 2009 when the company opened its first store at Renaissance Marketplace. Today, more than ten years later, Starbucks remains committed to the Aruban market in the long-term.

Starbucks stores are designed to create a welcoming space, rooted in its coffee heritage. This store's layout is an open and welcoming experience. Its design consists of earthy tones, a trendy green bar and touches of brass providing a tropic-chic look that can relate to both locals and tourists.



Starbucks Aruba welcomes all its costumers at Gloria Plaza, from Monday through Sunday from 630AM till 11PM serving the community the best coffee experience on the island with enhanced sanitation protocols and physical distancing in place, following all the recommendations of the local health department.

About Starbucks

Since 1971, Starbucks Coffee Company has been committed to ethically sourcing and roasting high-quality Arabica coffee.



Today, with over 32,000 stores around the globe, the company is the premier roaster and retailer of specialty coffee in the world. Through our unwavering

commitment to excellence and our guiding principles, we bring the unique Starbucks Experience to life for every customer through every cup.□

10 years coming to paradise



EAGLE BEACH — The Aruba Tourism Authority is very pleased to announce the restart to their honorary program once again! Recently, Kimberley Richardson of the Aruba Tourism Authority had the great pleasure to honor Aruba's loyal and friendly visitors as a Distinguished Visitors of Aruba. The symbolic honorary Distinguished Visitor certificate is presented on behalf of the Minister of Tourism, as

a token of appreciation to guests who visit Aruba 10 years and more consecutively.

The honoree was Leon Libin who have been visiting Aruba for 10 years consecutively.

Leon Libin stated that he loves the island very much, especially for its year-round sunny weather, nice sandy beaches and picturesque sunsets, delicious variety of foods,

its safety, and Aruba's warm and friendly people who have become like family to him.

Richardson, together with the representatives of the Paradise Beach Villas presented the certificate to the honoree, handed over some presents and also thanked him for choosing Aruba as their favorite vacation destination and as their home-away-from-home.□

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All AHATA Excellence Award 2020 winners celebrated

ORANJESTAD — Each year, the Aruba Hotel & Tourism Association (AHATA) organizes the AHATA Excellence Awards with a dinner event to honor exceptional employees within the tourism industry. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, the elaborate award evening could not take place this year.

However, during a year where the tourism industry was devastated and needs a renewed commitment from one and all to rebuild, it is even more important to recognize the individuals that contributed extraordinarily during a crisis.

Many dedicated employees of Aruba's tourism industry have continuously shown resilience, motivation, and productivity during the 2020 crisis and are contributing significantly to the recovery of Aruba's tourism and economy. Consequently, AHATA is determined to recognize the extraordinary efforts of employees in the sector that are at the front line of the tourism industry recovery efforts. AHATA has honored these exemplary employees in the sector with the "AHATA Excellence in 2020 Awards".

AHATA member companies had the opportunity to select one employee that stood out most during the crisis for their motivation, dedication, and productivity in the battle to overcome our economic crisis and lift the tourism industry back on its feet.

May we present to you the winners of "AHATA Excellence in 2020 Awards":



Vashni Jeminah Wix-Chirino
Vashni is Sales Associate at ECO DMS Aruba & Curacao. During the uncertainty, she was a strong leader to her peers and also contributed to almost every project. Her creativity, pro-activeness, and motivation fairly earned her a valuable reward.



Veronica E. Castañeda Espinoza
Veronica is Housekeeping Assistant Supervisor at Boardwalk Hotel Aruba. She has been with the Boardwalk for an astounding 23 years! Veronica's amazingly positive attitude and her resilient character are what earned her this year's Excellence in 2020 Award.



Victor Francisco Macdonal Morla
Victor works in the Room Care/ Maintenance Department at Amsterdam Manor Beach Resort Aruba. He reframed the crisis as an opportunity to learn and quickly adapted to the new circumstances at work. He also went above and beyond to support and motivate his team.



William Bautista
William is Pool, Beach, & Garden Supervisor at Manchebo Beach Resort & Spa. He was one of the few who still came to work and focused on maintaining the property in optimal condition. He went the extra mile to make the resort a safe place for both guests and members.

CMB Caribbean Mercantile Bank N.V. provided a valuable gift to all the winners.

AHATA would like to congratulate all the winners and thanks them for their efforts on the frontline of Aruba's tourism recovery. □

More Award winners on next page

All AHATA Excellence Award 2020 winners celebrated

Award winners continued from Page 9



Eriberto Holsman
Eriberto is a Technician at Professional Pest Control Aruba. Throughout the crisis, he presented suggestions. His strong work ethic and dedication to customer service makes him another deserving recipient of this award.



Adele John
Adele is F&B and Health Protocol Manager at Brickell Bay Beach Aruba. Throughout her 16 year career, she progressed and developed through self-education. Her steadfast dedication and tremendous support during the crisis are what earned her this year's Excellence in 2020 Award.



Aldrick Pontilius
Aldrick is Senior Bartender at Bucuti & Tara Beach Resort. During the lockdown, his agile mindset allowed him to quickly adapt to the new circumstances at work while keeping the team encouraged.



Alexander de los Santos
Alexander is Marriott's Aruba Ocean Club Engineer II. His can-do attitude motivated not only his department but the entire resort! He has been a key player during these difficult times with his uncommon willingness to go the extra mile. Without a doubt, he has rightfully earned this year's Excellence in 2020 Award.



Amaris Werleman
Amaris is the Internal Auditor at La Cabana Beach Resort & Casino and also became the leader of the resort's Steering Committee. Amaris' unwavering leadership in establishing the new Hygiene and Cleanliness Protocol in a timely manner astonished her team and rightfully earned her this year's Excellence in 2020 Award.



Anoushka De Cuba
Anoushka is the Director of Human Resources at Eagle Aruba Resort & Casino. Her relentless dedication and attentiveness for her associates is what made her a source of inspiration to the Eagle team during the COVID-19 pandemic and earned her the Excellence in 2020 Award.



Audey Bronstein
Audey is Director of Security Hyatt Regency Aruba Resort & Casino. He went above and beyond in leading his team and ensuring the entire hotel operation ran smoothly this difficult year.



Bibiana Cano
Bibiana is Restaurant Supervisor at Po-Ké Ono. She was the executrix behind 'Po-Ke at Home'. Her drive and dedication to ensure each delivery was coordinated and delivered with the highest health and sanitation measures are one of the many reasons she received this year's Excellence in 2020 Award.



Earlyson Hooi
Earlyson is a Driver & Tour Guide at El Tours Aruba. He has been incredibly helpful during the crisis and has kept his colleagues' morale high. He always goes the extra mile with a smile on his face!



Edy Paidin
Edy is a Mechanic & Road Service Technician at Hertz Aruba Car Rental. Edy almost singlehandedly gave support to the tourists that remained on the island after the crisis started.



Ereline E. Presentacion
Ereline is Bus Driver/ Tour Guide at De Palm Tours. She did an outstanding job as "acting coordinator" during the crisis. Her love, patience, and tremendous support during the crisis are what earned her this year's Excellence in 2020 Award.



Esmeralda Ophelia Scholman
Esmeralda is Cruise, Risk, and Quality Manager at Fofoti Tours & Transfers. She was the driving force that ensured staff received training and followed all COVID protocols. Her positive attitude and immense support throughout the pandemic earned her the AHATA Excellence in 2020 Awards.



Audey Bronstein
Audey is Director of Security Hyatt Regency Aruba Resort & Casino. He went above and beyond in leading his team and ensuring the entire hotel operation ran smoothly this difficult year.



Jenny Erazo
Jenny is the Director of Retail at Aruba Marriott Resort & Stellaris® Casino. Jenny was instrumental in implementation of COVID measures and clean standards. Her professionalism and inexhaustible devotedness are what earned her the Excellence in 2020 Award.



Jose Alcocer
Jose is Pool and Beach Attendant at Courtyard by Marriott Aruba Resort. He is known for being dependable, efficient, and always punctual. This year, he handled an overwhelming amount of work. Colleagues at Courtyard held a secret voting poll to select the next recipient for the AHATA Excellence in 2020 Awards, whereby he was the unanimous winner.



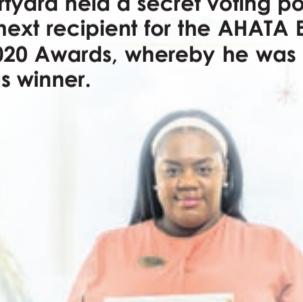
Marie-Elise Tromp
Marie-Elise is Reservations Agent for both Blue Aruba and Azure Residences Aruba. She worked hard handling all the changes due to the crisis and maintained a kind and resilient attitude at all times.



Luis Araque
Luis is Security Manager at Renaissance Aruba Resort & Casino. He has been a strong leader throughout the crisis, using creative ways to keep the team motivated.



Ryan Bareño
Ryan is Director of Engineering at Marriott's Aruba Surf Club. He has been instrumental from the beginning of the crisis by spreading awareness and organizing role plays to fine-tune operations. He even fogs the associate entrance every day to keep everyone safe! His agility is what earned him this year's Excellence in 2020 Award.



Shakell Bird
Shakell is Front Office Agent at Divi Phoenix Beach Resort. During the pandemic, she demonstrated her true leadership capabilities. She even put her own career advancement on hold to focus on handling the crisis this year.



Sue Ann Lin
Sue Ann is the Director of Loss Prevention at Holiday Inn Resort Aruba-Beach Resort & Casino. She was a source of inspiration during the pandemic and has gone above and beyond to be available day and night by moving on property. Her selflessness, commitment, and above all, professionalism, are what earned her this year's Excellence in 2020 Award.

Retailers urge shoppers to buy early amid shipping crunch

By ANNE D'INNOCENZIO
and JOSEPH PISANI

AP Retail Writers

NEW YORK (AP) — A number of retailers, including J.C. Penney, Lowe's and Kohl's, are telling shoppers they need to place their online orders soon or else pay expedited shipping fees if they want to get their packages delivered in time for the holidays.

The earlier-than-usual deadlines come as more people turn to online shopping during the pandemic, creating a logjam for shipping companies as well as delivery delays. For some retailers, like H&M and Lego, the deadlines have passed.

Jason Goldberg, chief commerce strategy officer at Publicis Communications, part of Publicis Groupe SA, estimates that a majority of retailers have pushed up deadlines by at least a day or two, and about a quarter by at least a week. Meanwhile, behemoths like Walmart, Target and Best Buy haven't had to make big changes because they've already transformed their stores into shipping hubs for online orders. That makes them less dependent on major carriers' national networks.

"Everyone knows there is going to be a problem 10 days from now, but we just don't know how big it's going to be," said Rob Hahn, chief operating officer at Whitebox, a fulfillment service for retailers. "So everyone is being conservative, and everyone is trying to pull forward that purchase behavior."

The earlier deadlines could drive more last-minute shoppers into physical stores at a time when coronavirus cases are spiking. The U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention says holiday shopping in crowded stores is a "higher risk" activity.

Ken Perkins of RetailMetrics, says he doesn't expect "a massive crush," but he believes customer traffic will be heavier than what stores have seen so far during the season. Shoppers will also turn more to curb-



A driver with FedEx carries a package away from a van, Tuesday, Dec. 8, 2020, in Seattle. Stores are warning online shoppers that if holiday purchases aren't made soon, they may not be delivered in time for Christmas.

Associated Press

side pickup in the days before Christmas.

The warnings on earlier deadlines are needed, said Moody's Charlie O'Shea, because if an item arrives late, frustrated shoppers blame the retailer — not the shipping company. And retailers can ill-afford to lose business at a time when many people have already cut back on their spending.

Robin Gorman Newman, a theater producer from Great Neck, New York, ordered a few gifts online during Thanksgiving weekend, including an eyeglass case from Anthropologie. She just learned that the eyeglass case was out of stock and needed to be back-ordered.

"I had gifts earmarked for particular people," Newman said. Now, she says, "I will be happy if everyone gets their gifts this month." But she said she won't be going back to stores to pick up goods as virus cases surge.

Retailers' shipping networks were already strained when shoppers dramatically shifted their spending online during the early part of the pandemic — a savior for many who were afraid of going out. But now, with the pan-

demic getting worse and everyone shopping for the holidays at the same time, those networks are strained even further. Online volume is expected to triple compared to last year's holiday season. Satish Jindel, president of ShipMatrix, which analyzes shipping package data, predicts 7 million packages a day could face delays from Thanksgiving to Christmas. Goldberg says the shipping problem is so acute that even Amazon, which has its own shipping network, could run out of capacity, sending shoppers to places like eBay. Amazon hasn't released a holiday shipping deadline yet, but said in a statement that it will be delivering packages up until Christmas Eve.

Jindel says that the three major carriers — FedEx, UPS and the U.S. Postal Service — have been holding up fairly well given the huge spike in volume, although on-time delivery declined the final week of November. Collectively, the on-time delivery was 94.2% during the Nov. 22 to Nov. 28 period, Jindel says. However, the U.S. Postal Service has been taking packages that UPS and FedEx won't take and has seen a decrease in on-time

delivery, says Convey Inc., which specializes in delivery tracking.

Carriers have been slapping surcharges and putting limits on how many packages retailers can ship each day. According to a report in the Wall Street Journal last week, UPS notified drivers across the U.S. to stop picking up packages at six retailers, including L.L. Bean, Hot Topic, Newegg and Macy's last week. "UPS continues to work closely with our largest customers to steer volume to capacity and ensure the UPS network is reliable for all customers," UPS said in a statement to The Associated Press late last week. "This collaboration includes specific capacity allocations last weekend and throughout the holiday season."

The holiday shipping crunch has been particularly hard on small retailers that badly need the last two weeks before Christmas to make up for a loss of sales when they were forced to close at the beginning of the pandemic. But online-only small businesses are also feeling the strain.

Lisa Pawlik is CEO and co-founder of a recently launched Austin, Texas-based startup VoChill,

which makes personal wine glass chillers. She says her distributor, inundated with a backlog of orders, told her to set the ordering deadline for Dec. 11. She plans to do her own packing and shipping of the items with her family's help. "We are a new brand, and I am not going to give up my customers' experience," Pawlik said.

Sara Skirboll, a shopping expert at deals site RetailMeNot, said some of the delays are happening at warehouses, where it's taking longer to get orders out the door to be shipped. Shoppers should read the fine print, she said, because even if a store is promising two-day shipping, it could take days before it leaves the warehouse.

Compounding the problem is the fact that there is less space available on tractor trailers that move goods from warehouses to distribution centers.

Isaac Larian, CEO of MGA Entertainment, the maker of the popular LOL dolls, says he had 200 containers, or at least \$15 million worth of merchandise, stuck at the Los Angeles port for three weeks.

The toys have since been cleared, but he says, "it's too late for Christmas." □

Medical privacy changes would smooth info sharing in crises

By RICARDO ALONSO-ZALDIVAR

Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) —

Urged on by hospitals, doctors and patients, U.S. health officials are proposing changes to medical privacy rules that could ease information sharing in crisis situations.

Trump administration officials at the Department of Health and Human Services say their proposal, being released Thursday, adapts lessons learned from the opioid epidemic and the coronavirus pandemic.

There's no way the rule can be finalized before President-elect Joe Biden takes office, but the officials are hoping the incoming administration will support the changes and see them through.

"These are needed, uncontroversial, bipartisan reforms to these regulations," Eric Hargan, deputy HHS secretary, said in an interview. "This was based on our request for information, and we got a lot of feedback."

Some of the proposals also would affect everyday patient interactions. One that many people might notice: Patients would have a clear legal right to take photos of their records on the spot at the doctor's office or in the hospital, if it didn't interfere with care. That includes images from MRIs. Some medical offices now allow it, while others don't.

The overhaul involves regulations under the 1996



In this Jan. 24, 2018, then-acting Health and Human Services Secretary Eric Hargan speaks to reporters at the Kentucky Governor's Mansion in Frankfort, Ky.

Associated Press

Health Insurance Portability and Accountability Act, the statute behind the medical privacy rules people run into at hospitals, pharmacies and in their own doctor's offices. While protecting sensitive personal information, the law, widely known by its initials HIPAA, has also generated piles of paperwork and chronic uncertainty about what is and isn't permitted.

Among a series of changes if the proposal is finalized:

— Medical personnel could provide details about a patient's condition to family members or caregivers in an emergency if they have a "good faith" belief it would be in the patient's best interest, and there's no objection from the pa-

tient. That would address situations such as parents trying to help an adult child who's just come out of detox for an opioid overdose. People recovering from overdose are at high risk of relapse, and officials said current rules have had the unintended consequence of chilling potentially life-saving communication.

— A subtle wording change would encourage sharing of critical information sooner in cases where there's a serious threat of harm to the patient or others. Legal permission would be triggered by a "reasonably foreseeable" threat, instead of the current requirement for an "imminent" threat. That could help when a patient is struggling with thoughts of

suicide. Or it could facilitate contact tracing, as when a nursing home patient transported to the hospital for a heart problem tests positive for COVID-19 during routine screening.

— In a health care system that's notoriously compartmentalized, the changes would make it easier for a hospital or medical office to provide pertinent details about a patient's condition to another health care service provider. Medical providers would also again greater ability to coordinate with social service and caregiving agencies. Privacy expert Deven McGraw, a former career government lawyer who once was tasked with enforcing the statute, said the pro-

posal addresses problems regulators have been grappling with for years.

"I don't think these are partisan changes to the rules," she said. The principal changes seem to reflect "reasonable and measured approaches."

McGraw is now chief regulatory officer with Ciitizen, a health technology company she cofounded that helps people collect and organize their medical records to help them get the best treatment.

Roger Severino, who currently heads the HHS office that oversees medical privacy protections, said a companion set of changes in the proposal would make it easier for patients to get access to their medical records.

For example, current rules give medical offices 30 days to respond to a patient's request for records. That would be shortened to 15 days. "With the internet age, 30 days is a relic of past times," said Severino. Also, if a patient authorizes a doctor to see medical records from another provider, the proposed rules stipulate that the doctor's office — not the patient — would have the responsibility of getting the files.

Generally, medical offices that offer access to records via electronic portals would not be able to charge extra for patients to download the files. "We want to make sure entities are only charging reasonable costs," said Severino. □

Google CEO says company will review AI scholar's abrupt exit



In this Oct. 3, 2019 file photo, Google CEO Sundar Pichai speaks during a visit to El Centro College in Dallas.

Associated Press

By MATT O'BRIEN

AP Technology Writer

Google CEO Sundar Pichai has apologized for how a prominent artificial intelligence researcher's abrupt departure last week has "seeded doubts" in the company.

Pichai told Google employees in a Wednesday memo obtained by Axios that the tech company is beginning a review of the circumstances leading up to Black computer scientist Timnit Gebru's exit and how Google could have "led a more respectful process."

Gebru, a top scholar in the field of AI ethics, said she was fired last week. Google has referred to it as a resignation. Pichai's note doesn't call it either a firing or a resignation but says "we need to accept responsibility for the fact that a prominent Black, female leader with immense talent left Google unhappily."

The dispute centered around Google's push to disassociate itself from a research paper Gebru co-authored examining

the societal dangers of an AI technology used by Google. Gebru criticized Pichai's memo Wednesday on Twitter, saying she saw "no plans for accountability" in it and because it offered no apology for what happened to her.

Thousands of people, many of them Google employees, have signed an open letter showing support for Gebru and accusing Google of "unprecedented research censorship," racism and defensiveness. □

World carbon dioxide emissions drop 7% in pandemic-hit 2020

By SETH BORENSTEIN

AP Science Writer

A locked-down pandemic-struck world cut its carbon dioxide emissions this year by 7%, the biggest drop ever, new preliminary figures show.

The Global Carbon Project, an authoritative group of dozens of international scientists who track emissions, calculated that the world will have put 37 billion U.S. tons (34 billion metric tons) of carbon dioxide in the air in 2020. That's down from 40.1 billion US tons (36.4 billion metric tons) in 2019, according to a study published Thursday in the journal *Earth System Science Data*.

Scientists say this drop is chiefly because people are staying home, traveling less by car and plane, and that emissions are expected to jump back up after the pandemic ends. Ground transportation makes up about one-fifth of emissions of carbon dioxide, the chief man-made heat-trapping gas. "Of course, lockdown is absolutely not the way to tackle climate change," said study co-author Corinne LeQuere, a climate scientist at the University of East Anglia.

The same group of scientists months ago predicted emission drops of 4% to 7%, depending on the progression of COVID-19. A second coronavirus wave and continued travel reductions pushed the decrease to 7%, LeQuere said.

Emissions dropped 12% in the United States and 11% in Europe, but only 1.7% in China. That's because China had an earlier lockdown with less of a second

wave. Also China's emissions are more industrial based than other countries and its industry was less affected than transportation, LeQuere said.

The calculations — based on reports detailing energy use, industrial production and daily mobility counts — were praised as accurate by outside scientists.

Even with the drop in 2020, the world on average put 1,185 tons (1,075 metric tons) of carbon dioxide into the air every second.

Final figures for 2019 published in the same study



In this Friday, March 20, 2020 file photo, extremely light traffic moves along the 110 Harbor Freeway toward downtown Los Angeles in the mid-afternoon.

Associated Press

show that from 2018 to 2019 emissions of the main man-made heat-trapping gas increased only 0.1%, much smaller than annual jumps of around 3% a decade or two ago. Even with emissions expected to rise after

the pandemic, scientists are wondering if 2019 be the peak of carbon pollution, LeQuere said. □

SUDOKU

Conceptis Sudoku

By Dave Green

	1		5			8	
9		3				6	
	5		2				
7				4			
		5			2		
			9			1	
6				9		3	4
	4			5	2		

Difficulty Level ★★★★

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Solution on Page 14

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Disney unveils plans to stream a galaxy of new series, films

By JAKE COYLE

AP Film Writer

NEW YORK (AP) — The Walt Disney Co.'s streaming plans shifted into hyper speed Thursday, as the studio unveiled a galaxy's worth of new streaming offerings including plans for 10 "Star Wars" series spinoffs and 10 Marvel series that will debut on Disney+. In a virtual presentation for investors, Disney chief executive Bob Chapek laid out super-sized ambitions for its direct-to-consumer efforts, leaning heavily on some of the company's biggest brands. Over the next few years, Disney is planning to premiere directly on Disney+ not just an armada of "Star Wars" and Marvel series but 15 live-action, Pixar and animated series, and 15 live-action, Pixar and animated movies.

Chapek said Disney+ subscribers worldwide have reached 86.8 million, up from 74 million last month. The service has easily exceeded most forecasts, reaching that number 13 months since its launch in November 2019. Disney will increase the monthly price by \$1 to \$8 a month in March. The company forecasts 230-260 million subscribers by 2024.

To keep subscriber numbers climbing, Disney presented a blizzard of remakes, sequels and spinoffs of various shapes and sizes on Thursday — 100 new titles



This image released by Disney/Marvel Studios shows Scarlett Johansson in a scene from "Black Widow."

in all — including a "Beauty and the Beast" prequel series, a "Moana" animated series, a "Three Men and a Baby" reboot with Zac Efron, a "Swiss Family Robinson" series and, yes, even the Kardashians.

But Disney also kept its biggest films — including Marvel's "Black Widow," Pixar's "Luca," a "Lion King" prequel — on course for theatrical release. Whereas WarnerMedia last week pushed its entire 2021 slate to streaming, Disney executives signaled that theatrical release remains essential to its big-budget spectacles and its business, overall.

"We build the franchises through the theatrical window," said Chapek. Still, the four-hour presentation presented a more

seamless vision of content across platforms that made scant mention of its closed theme parks, or of the pandemic. That included a dizzying amount of series, many of them connected to big-screen movies past and present. Marvel Studios President Kevin Feige said a pair of new Marvel series — "Secret Invasion," with Samuel Jackson, and "Ironheart" — will "tie directly to Marvel future films." The only difference between the company's short-form TV content and its theatrical content, said Bob Iger, executive chairman, "is length." Not all the news was in streaming. Lucasfilm announced that Patty Jenkins ("Wonder Woman") will direct the next "Star Wars" theatrical film, "Rogue

Squadron," with a release in theaters planned for Christmas 2023.

Jenkins becomes the first woman to direct a "Star Wars" film. In a video, she said the film, about starship fighters, will satisfy a long-held dream of hers as the daughter of an Air Force captain. "When he lost his life in service of this country, it ignited a desire in me to turn all of that tragedy and thrill into one day making the greatest fighter pilot movie of all time," said Jenkins in a video message.

Other films are going ahead with theatrical plans, among them a Buzz Lightyear prequel, due in 2020, and the "Black Panther" sequel. Feige confirmed that the role of the late Chadwick Boseman will not be recast but that

Associated Press

its makers are still interested in "exploring the world of Wakanda" in Ryan Coogler's film, due in theaters July 2022.

Among the "Star Wars" series are two spinoffs of "The Mandalorian," set during the series' timeline: "Rangers of the New Republic" and "Ahsoka," with Rosario Dawson. Shooting also recently began on "Andor," a series developed by Tony Gilroy ("Bourne Identity"), with Diego Luna's character from the 2016 film "Rogue One."

Other, less expected "Star Wars" stars are returning. Hayden Christensen, who played Anakin Skywalker in the prequels, will reprise his role as Death Vader in "Obi-Wan Kenobi," with Ewan McGregor.

"We have a vast and expansive timeline in the 'Star Wars' mythology, spanning over 25,000 years of history in the galaxy with each era being a rich resource for storytelling," said Kathleen Kennedy, president of Lucasfilm. "Now with Disney+ we can explore limitless story possibilities like never before and fulfill the promise that there is truly a 'Star Wars' story for everyone."

Disney steered several upcoming movies to its streaming service, including "Pinocchio," with Tom Hanks, "Peter Pan & Wendy" and an "Enchanted" sequel with Amy Adams titled "Disenchanted." The animated "Raya and the Last Dragon" will in March debut simultaneously in theaters and by premier access on Disney+. That's the same approach the company took earlier this fall for "Mulan," with a \$30 early-access fee on top of the monthly subscription. □

SOLUTION SUDOKU



This image released by Disney/Marvel Studios shows Scarlett Johansson in a scene from "Black Widow."

Associated Press

Medium Level ★★★								
1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9
3	4	1	7	8	5	6	2	9
6	7	9	1	3	2	8	5	4
5	8	2	4	9	6	1	3	7
2	3	4	9	5	8	7	6	1
1	9	5	3	6	7	2	4	8
7	6	8	2	1	4	3	9	5
8	5	7	6	2	9	4	1	3
9	2	3	8	4	1	5	7	6
4	1	6	5	7	3	9	8	2

Puzzle on Page 13

Biden, Harris named Time magazine's 'Person of the Year'

WASHINGTON (AP) — Time magazine has named President-elect Joe Biden and Vice President-elect Kamala Harris its "Person of the Year."

Time's editor-in-chief Edward Felsenthal says Biden and Harris won the honor for "changing the American story, for showing that the forces of empathy are greater than the furies of division, for sharing a vision of healing in a grieving world."

Felsenthal notes, "Every elected President since FDR has at some point dur-

ing his term been a Person of the Year, nearly a dozen of those in a presidential election year. This is the first time we have included a Vice President."

Time's other Person of the Year candidates were President Donald Trump; frontline health care workers and Dr. Anthony Fauci; and the movement for racial justice.

Also Thursday, Time named the Korean boy band BTS its Entertainer of the Year and named Los Angeles Lakers star LeBron James its Athlete of the Year. □

With playoffs unlikely, fading Patriots have questions at QB

By KYLE HIGHTOWER

AP Sports Writer

For the first time in more than a decade, the New England Patriots will head into their final three games of the season with an unsettled playoff fate.

The Patriots entered the week in 10th place in the AFC and trudging through one of their worst years of Bill Belichick's tenure. Now 6-7 following a 24-3 loss to the Los Angeles Rams on Thursday night, New England's long-shot hopes of extending an NFL-record run of 11 consecutive playoff appearances have faded even more.

And the questions about New England's future at quarterback that surrounded the team this offseason following Tom Brady's departure have returned, with perhaps even greater urgency. The Patriots' loss to the Rams was marked by the same problems that have plagued New England for most of 2020.

Cam Newton's struggles in the passing game re-emerged, leaving the offense one-dimensional and predictable opposite a dogged Los Angeles defense that disrupted the Patriots' run game and plowed through an offensive line that surrendered a season-high six sacks.

It led to Newton being benched in the fourth quarter in favor of backup Jarrett Stidham, raising the question of whether a more



New England Patriots quarterback Cam Newton, center, is sacked by Los Angeles Rams linebacker Kenny Young during the second half of an NFL football game Thursday, Dec. 10, 2020, in Inglewood, Calif.

Associated Press

permanent change could be on the horizon. But when asked postgame whether he plans to continue with Newton as the starter, Belichick was unequivocal. "Cam's our quarterback," he said. Belichick was queried again on Friday and again dismissed the idea of starting Stidham.

"I've answered that question for the last time," Belichick said.

As for where the Patriots go from here, safety and team captain Devin McCourty said their approach will remain unchanged until they're eliminated from playoff contention.

"Just keep playing. It is what it is right now. We'll

keep fighting. We'll see how it works out," he said. "But there's no easy answer other than we have three games left. The goal is still the same. Try to win the remaining three games."

It was a sentiment that was repeated by his teammates.

"We ain't a bunch of quitters," defensive tackle Lawrence Guy said. "It doesn't matter what the record is. It doesn't matter what the outcome is. ... We're going to go out there and play some football."

WHAT'S WORKING

Special teams play continues to be one of the few bright spots for the Patriots. Gunner Olszewski, who en-

tered the game leading the NFL with a 26.9-yard punt return average, returned a punt 21 yards in the fourth quarter. Nick Folk also extended his made field goals streak to 21.

WHAT NEEDS HELP

When New England did move the ball on offense, it couldn't finish drives, which has been a familiar refrain. The Patriots were 0 for 4 in the red zone Thursday and failed to reach the end zone for the second time this season. Through 13 games, they are ranked 27th in the NFL in the red zone, scoring a touchdown on 52.3% of their opportunities.

STOCK UP

Cornerback Myles Bryant continues to impress. The undrafted rookie notched his first career interception in the first quarter, wresting the ball away from Robert Woods for the pick. Bryant rolled to his feet and returned the ball 32 yards for an apparent touchdown, but he was ruled down by contact after a review, negating the score.

STOCK DOWN

The run defense. LA's Cam Akers rushed for 35 yards on the second play of the game. It set the tone for a night on which Los Angeles picked through a New England defense that allowed 186 rushing yards. It marked the fourth time the Patriots have given up 150 or more yards on the ground this season.

INJURIES

Safety Adrian Phillips injured his hand before half-time, but returned in the second half. Damien Harris, who leads the team in rushing, also left the field in the fourth quarter.

KEY NUMBER

17 — The streak of consecutive 10-win seasons by the Patriots that was snapped with Thursday's loss.

NEXT STEPS

At a minimum, New England will be two games out of the AFC's final wild-card spot following this weekend's games. The Patriots finish the season against the Dolphins (8-4), the AFC East-leading Bills (9-3) and the winless Jets (0-12). □

Joshua, Pulev weigh in, then talk trash wearing face masks

LONDON (AP) — Heavyweight champion Anthony Joshua and challenger Kubrat Pulev jawed at each other through black face masks Friday on the eve of their title fight at Wembley Arena. Joshua pointed a finger in Pulev's face as they exchanged words while beefy security guards kept the peace during their weigh-in for Saturday's bout.

During the exchange, Pulev twice readjusted his mask after it slipped below his nose, and Joshua's mask also drooped low at

one point.

The Bulgarian challenger will fight at his lightest weight — 239 1/2 pounds (108 3/4 kilograms) — in 11 years. The 31-year-old Joshua will be lean as well after weighing in at 240 3/4 pounds (109 kilograms). That's slightly heavier than his last fight but still the second-lightest he's fought at in six years.

Pulev appears to be the only hurdle Joshua needs to clear before a shot at being the undisputed world heavyweight champion. First, Joshua must take

care of business against the hardened Pulev, who didn't wait for Saturday to get things started. He yelled at Joshua even before the champion was able to weigh in.

Promoter Eddie Hearn relayed some of the face-to-face exchange:

"Pulev said, 'You're nothing. I'm better than you,'" Hearn said. "AJ said, 'Who have you beaten?' Pulev said, 'I'll end you.'"

Joshua later told Sky Sports: "I would have clapped him on his jaw ... but I have to wait 'til tomorrow." □



In this file photo dated Saturday, Nov. 15, 2014, Bulgarian boxer Kubrat Pulev, avoids a punch from Vladimir Klitschko of Ukraine, during their IBF heavy-weight world championships title bout in Hamburg, Germany.

Associated Press

From Cape Cod to Alaska, college leagues eye MLB changes

By JAKE SEINER
AP Sports Writer

Years before he became commissioner of the Alaska Baseball League, Chris Beck pointed to the 6-foot-7 slugger in the Anchorage Glacier Pilots' uniform and told his son to say hello. Beck had a feeling about the freshman from Fresno State — a towering outfielder named Aaron Judge.

"I told my son to go get his autograph, because he just was different," Beck said.

It was a quintessential college summer league experience, an up-close look at a major league star long before his big break. It's one Beck hopes fans in the 49th State will have for years — but he's not entirely confident they will.

Already burdened by the coronavirus pandemic and changes in player development that have limited their prospect pool, collegiate summer leagues like the ABL were hit by another potential obstacle recently when Major League Baseball announced the formation of at least two amateur leagues for college players with professional aspirations.

The Appalachian League, formerly a Rookie-level minor league, will convert into a 10-team wood bat summer league in 2021 for college players entering their freshman and sophomore seasons. Meanwhile, the six-team MLB Draft League is launching for college and high school players during their draft-eligible year.

Both leagues have spawned as MLB shrinks its affiliated minors from 160 teams to 120, repurposing franchises to serve amateur talent. The new leagues will offer those players access to top-level coaching, guaranteed looks from pro scouts, and ballparks outfitted with the latest cameras and tracking systems that provide prized data to major league front offices.

It's mostly good news for players hoping to get noticed. Less ideal for the leagues that used to give them that chance.

"Any time MLB puts their name on something, they

do it well," Beck said. "They have the money to back it. The problem is it's going to put some of the smaller leagues out of business, I think."

tory, nothing has changed in that respect," Zmuda said.

The squeeze is more likely to be felt further down the ladder in leagues that were

believe MLB's incursion is an existential threat on its own.

For starters, the league's sustainability isn't tied strictly to the talent. It helps

team travel. There's no indication at this point that MLB plans to pull that funding, but if it did in the future, it could put NACSB members in a difficult position.

"Certainly it would have an impact," McGrath said. "It's a lot of ticket sales or several sponsorships to offset that loss."

Summer league executives say they are full-steam ahead on planning for the 2021 season after most lost 2020 to the pandemic — the Northwoods League was among the exceptions and even hosted several hundred fans at many games.

Even those that didn't play remain in decent financial shape. The timing of March's coronavirus surge meant leagues avoided most of their biggest expenses, like baseballs, bats, umpire fees and travel.

Uncertainty remains for next season, though, pending the status of a virus vaccine. Franchises rely on host families for players, a potentially dangerous arrangement amid a pandemic. They also depend on sponsorships and donations from community businesses that have been hit harder.

"If those two things go away, we're all in trouble," Beck said.

The alumni list for Beck's ABL includes some of the best in baseball history — Tom Seaver, Barry Bonds and Randy Johnson. It's already become less common for players of that caliber to pass through Alaska. Beck is hoping the obstacles presented by 2020 don't make things worse.

"When they can see the Aaron Judges," he said, "the guys that go on to play in the big leagues, and they can remember that time they saw him in Alaska, the average fan, that helps our attendance and helps everything." □



In this June 20, 2006, file photo, teams line up along the baselines during the playing of the national anthem before the first game, in the inaugural season, of the State College Spike baseball team in State College, Pa.

Associated Press

Wood-bat college summer leagues have played a crucial role in the development of many major leaguers. Most leagues start in May or June, after the completion of the spring college season, and they offer players high-end competition at parks filled with pro scouts and equipped with some of the same technology they'll find in MLB's leagues.

For decades, the leagues have run largely independent of MLB, and they figure to be affected differently.

The Cape Cod League has long been the top destination for rising college juniors and has produced over 1,400 big leaguers. With the Appalachian League targeting incoming freshman and sophomores and the MLB Draft League likely to draw players heading into their senior seasons or later, Cape Cod Commissioner Eric Zmuda expects his league to hold its ground as the premier stop for players with two years of college experience.

"When you look at our his-

already dealing with complications stemming from changes in player development. In-game reps — although still important — are less of a priority for modern players. Pitchers are limiting their workloads to try to stay healthy, and players on both sides of the ball are placing a premium on other training, like weightlifting or lab work at facilities like Driveline.

Sean McGrath, commissioner of the New England Collegiate Baseball League, said recruiting has undoubtedly become a greater challenge in recent years, and he acknowledged that is likely to be complicated further by the new Appalachian and MLB Draft Leagues.

Even so, he remains optimistic leagues like the NECBL will still find future big leaguers.

"I truly don't believe that every kid who will play professional baseball will appear in one of (MLB's new) leagues," he said.

Northwoods League Commissioner Ryan Voz holds a similar view and doesn't

that the NWL's alumni list includes MLB stars like Max Scherzer, Chris Sale and Pete Alonso, but the business model for its franchises is tied more closely to their community value as an affordable, family-friendly gathering spot.

"Fans are looking for good baseball, but they're looking for great entertainment," Voz said. "And that's where the Northwoods League we feel is really kind of a combination of all of them."

Of course, competition for players isn't the only concern for some leagues.

The Cape and NECBL are members of the National Alliance of College Summer Baseball, a 12-league organization that receives funding from MLB. Leagues can apply for grants worth thousands of dollars for crucial expenses like baseballs, umpire fees and

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