

Groton Daily Independent

Tuesday, Feb. 22, 2022 ~ Vol. 30 - No. 230 ~ 1 of 68

- [1- Upcoming Events](#)
- [2- Cleaning up after the blizzard](#)
- [3- Weekly Vikings Roundup](#)
- [4- Re:Set Women's Conference Ad](#)
- [5- Weather Pages](#)
- [10- Daily Devotional](#)
- [11- 2022 Community Events](#)
- [12- Subscription Form](#)
- [13- News from the Associated Press](#)

UpComing Events

Tuesday, Feb. 22

NO SCHOOL

Girls Basketball regions begin. Groton plays Milbank at Sisseton at 7:30 p.m.

Thursday, Feb. 24

Girls Basketball regions

Friday, Feb. 25

Boys Basketball vs. Aberdeen Christian at the Aberdeen Civic Center. Not sure if there is a C game yet.

Junior High Basketball at Webster with 7th grade playing at 7 p.m. followed by 8th grade game.

Debate National Qualifiers



Groton Band Students in Watertown

The band group that basked in the warmth of Florida for the past week are attempting to make their way back to frigid Groton. They ended up staying the night in Watertown due to the blizzard conditions.

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

OPEN: **Recycling Trailer in Groton**
The recycling trailer is located west of the city shop. It takes cardboard, papers and aluminum cans.

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Groton Daily Independent

Tuesday, Feb. 22, 2022 ~ Vol. 30 - No. 230 ~ 2 of 68



Snow removal has begun as the blizzard slowly winds down. Not a lot of snow - a few inches, but the wind whipped around what did fall.

Weekly Vikings Roundup Vikings New Coaching Hires By Duane & Jack Kolsrud

Vikings' new coaches

The Vikings finally announced the hiring of their new head coach, Kevin O'Connell, this past Thursday. Rumors started to circulate during the early part of the week that Los Angeles Rams' head coach, Sean McVay, was considering retirement and that O'Connell would return to the Los Angeles Rams to become the Head Coach. This left many Vikings fans worried that the Vikings would have to choose their secondary options to become their next head coach.

However, this scare quickly died down as the Vikings front office got in contact with ESPN reporter, Adam Schefter, to have him inform the public that O'Connell would in fact be the Vikings' head coach and that the delay was because of contract negotiations.

O'Connell will bring with him a much different approach to coaching than his predecessor, Mike Zimmer. In his press conference on Thursday, O'Connell constantly reiterated that he and his coaching staff will be more personable with their players, which was something Zimmer was unwilling to do in the last few years as the Vikings' head coach.

Also, unlike Zimmer, O'Connell will have more of an emphasis on the offensive side of football. With the way the NFL is played and officiated today, offensive-minded head coaches are becoming more and more valuable to teams' successes than defensive-minded coaches. Since 2010, the only defensive-minded head coach, not named Bill Belichick, to win a Super Bowl has been Pete Carroll when his Seahawks beat the Broncos in Super Bowl XLVIII.

With the arrival of Kevin O'Connell, the Viking's defense is going to look much different than it ever has in the team's entire history. On Thursday, the Vikings announced that Ed Donatell would become the team's new defensive coordinator. What is unique about this hire is that Ed Donatell is expected to run a 3-4 defense for the Vikings. For those that don't know, teams usually run either a 4-3 defense or a 3-4 defense. The difference between the two is the number of defensive linemen on the field. For a 4-3 defense, there will be 4 defensive linemen on the field, with the 2 interior linemen lined up between the center and either guard. A 3-4 defense, on the other hand, involves only 3 defensive linemen being on the field, with the 1 interior lineman lined up directly over the center. Although this might not seem like much, this will be a drastic change for this team as it will be the first time in Vikings' history that they are running a 3-4 defense. The days of the Purple People Eaters and the Williams Wall will be no more.

At this moment, many of the positions on the Vikings' coaching staff are still being figured out. As of this weekend, it was just announced that Wes Phillips, son of Wade and grandson of Bum, will be the new offensive coordinator. However, one thing is for certain, it will be almost an entirely new staff of coaches. The only returning coach from last year will be wide receivers coach, Keenan McCardell. McCardell likely received the opportunity to return to the Vikings thanks to Justin Jefferson and Adam Thielen voicing their opinions over social media as to how much they loved McCardell as their coach and wanted him back for the 2022 season.

Looking ahead to key NFL dates:

The NFL offseason will start to take shape here soon as the NFL Scouting Combine will kick off on March 1. After that, on March 16, NFL teams will be permitted to start signing free agents and making trades.

Since the Vikings hired a new head coach, the team will be able to start their offseason workout programs on April 4, which is two weeks earlier than the rest of the league.

And on April 28, the NFL Draft will begin and the new Vikings regime, led by Kwesi Adofo-Mensah and Kevin O'Connell, will get their first opportunity to hopefully build the Minnesota Vikings into a Super Bowl contender.

Next up: what to look for at the NFL Combine.

Guest Speaker
Nicole J Phillips
The Kindness Podcast

*You're
Invited!*

RE:SET

womens conference

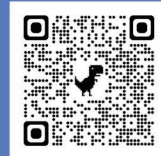
SATURDAY, MARCH 5
AT ROSE HILL CHURCH

IT'S TIME TO RESET AND ENJOY A DAY OF
FELLOWSHIP, WORSHIP, LUNCH, AND MORE!

Rose Hill Evangelical Free Church
12099 Rose Hill Rd, Langford SD
Saturday, March 5, 2022
10 am to 3 pm

Women and girls of all generations are welcome.
Childcare will be available.

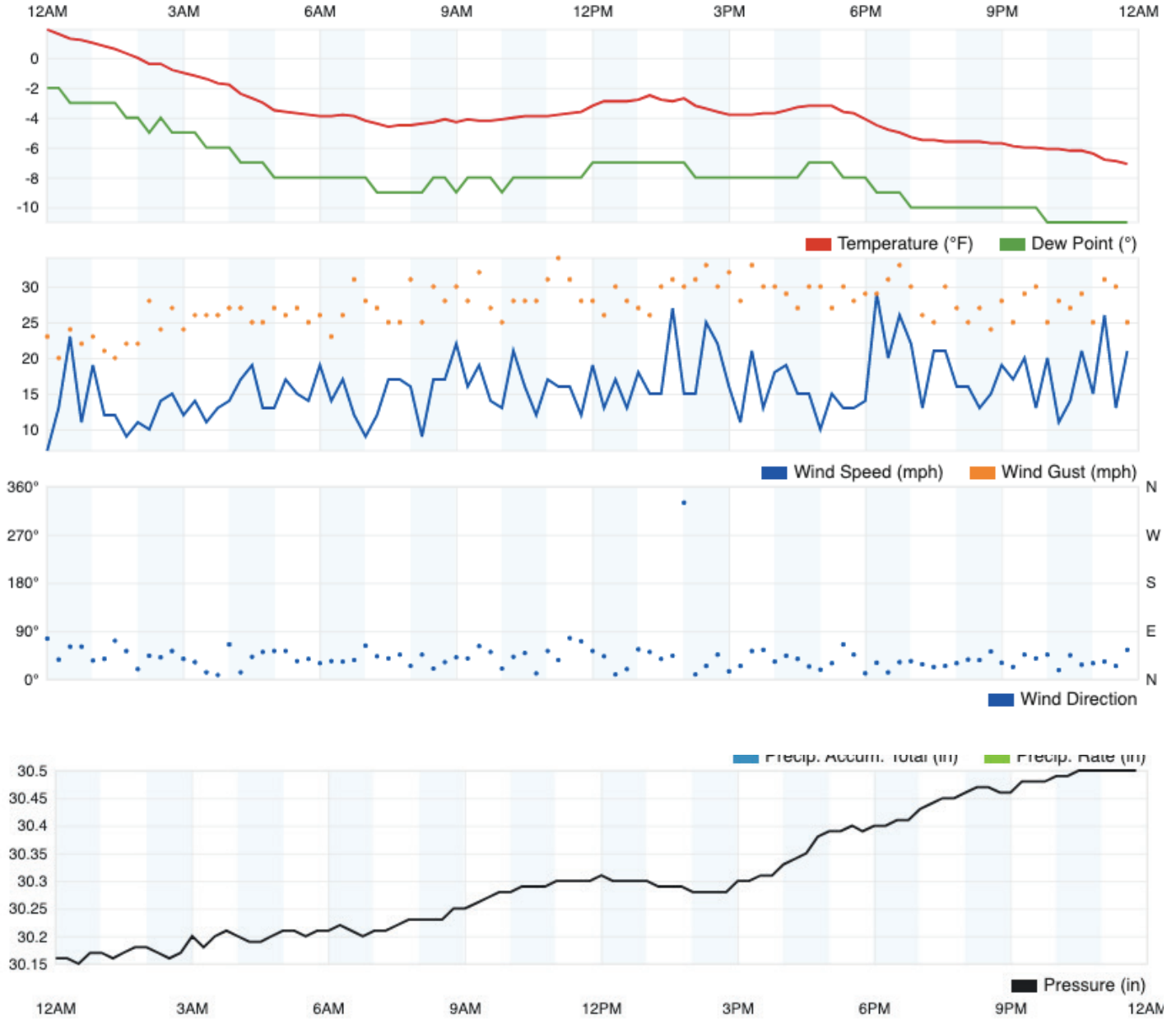
REGISTER FOR THIS FREE EVENT
ONLINE AT ROSEHILLEFC.COM



Groton Daily Independent

Tuesday, Feb. 22, 2022 ~ Vol. 30 - No. 230 ~ 5 of 68

Yesterday's Groton Weather Graphs



Groton Daily Independent

Tuesday, Feb. 22, 2022 ~ Vol. 30 - No. 230 ~ 6 of 68

Blizzard Warning

Today



100%

Snow and Blowing Snow

High: -4 °F

Tonight



20%

Slight Chance Snow and Patchy Blowing Snow

Low: -19 °F

Wednesday



Cold

High: -2 °F

Wednesday Night



Mostly Cloudy

Low: -16 °F

Thursday



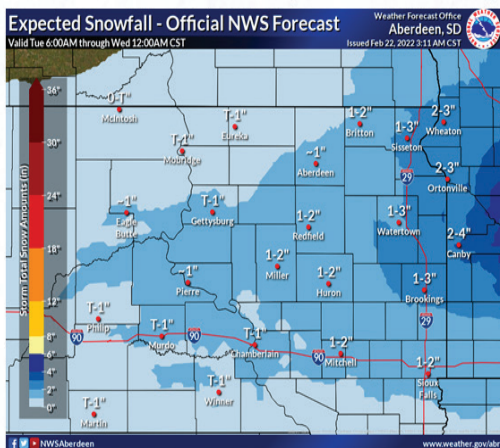
Cold

High: 1 °F

Snow and Blowing Snow Continues Through this Evening

National Weather Service Graphic Created
Aberdeen, SD 2/22/2022 5:14 AM

Additional Snowfall Today Into this Evening



Forecast Wind Chill Values

	Minimum Wind Chill Forecast				
	2/22 Tue	2/23 Wed	2/24 Thu	2/25 Fri	2/26 Sat
Aberdeen	-36	-41	-29	-36	-7
Britton	-40	-41	-31	-40	-10
Eagle Butte	-41	-45	-31	-30	-7
Eureka	-41	-45	-32	-36	-10
Gettysburg	-43	-45	-28	-34	-10
Kennebec	-38	-39	-21	-26	-7
McIntosh	-45	-47	-39	-36	-9
Milbank	-32	-35	-27	-31	-7
Miller	-39	-44	-26	-32	-8
Mobridge	-35	-40	-26	-28	-3
Murdo	-40	-40	-26	-27	-7
Pierre	-35	-37	-20	-23	-6
Redfield	-38	-42	-27	-35	-9
Sisseton	-34	-37	-30	-32	-6
Watertown	-36	-37	-23	-30	-8
Wheaton	-31	-38	-32	-38	-10

What

Snow and blowing snow will continue into this evening, with generally 1 to 3 additional inches expected.

Low visibility in snow and blowing snow through the day.

Impacts

Bitterly and dangerously cold wind chills are forecast through the week. Values as cold as 45 below zero can be expected today into Wednesday.


The second round of snowfall is moving through the region today. Light to moderate snow will continue into this evening, gradually ending from west to east later in the day. North winds will remain gusty throughout the day, ranging from 30 to 40 mph for most locations. This will continue to bring blowing and drifting snow, especially across northern portions of the region and into west central Minnesota, where several inches of snow are already on the ground. Look for dangerously cold wind chills to remain in place through the week, with readings as cold as 35 below to 45 below zero today into Wednesday.

Groton Daily Independent

Tuesday, Feb. 22, 2022 ~ Vol. 30 - No. 230 ~ 7 of 68

	Record Type	Today	Tuesday	Wednesday	Thursday	Friday
Aberdeen	Low High	-10 in 1918	-2 in 1957	-8 in 1910	4 in 1962	-2 in 2019
	Low	-30 in 1918	-24 in 1918	-25 in 1910	-26 in 1940	-29 in 1919
Watertown	Low High	-6 in 1918	-1 in 1910	-3 in 1914	1 in 2003	-1 in 2019
	Low	-25 in 1936	-22 in 1957	-23 in 1914	-22 in 1955	-18 in 1919
Pierre	Low High	6 in 2011	0 in 1957	-3 in 1965	5 in 1962	-1 in 2011
	Low	-17 in 1936	-18 in 1962	-20 in 1965	-22 in 1955	-17 in 2011
Mobridge	Low High	5 in 2011	0 in 1965	2 in 2003	3 in 1950	-1 in 2011
	Low	-25 in 1936	-20 in 1962	-23 in 1914	-22 in 1955	-32 in 1919
Sisseton	Low High	0 in 1936	0 in 2015	4 in 1993	-1 in 1955	-1 in 2019
	Low	-19 in 2001	-19 in 1952	-15 in 1993	-24 in 1955	-15 in 1980

For comparison, here are the records for this week, both the coldest high temperatures and coldest lows. Forecasts vary but we have a shot at a few of these thanks to recent snow and the persistent arctic cold that will last through the week.

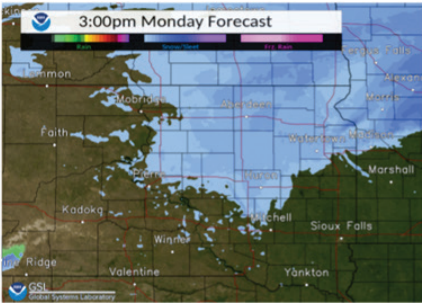
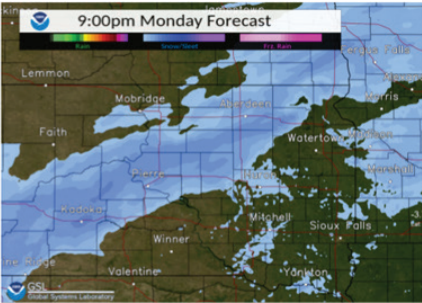
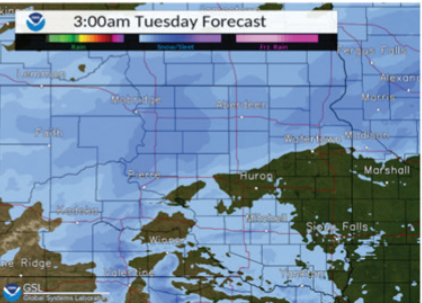


Snowfall Timing

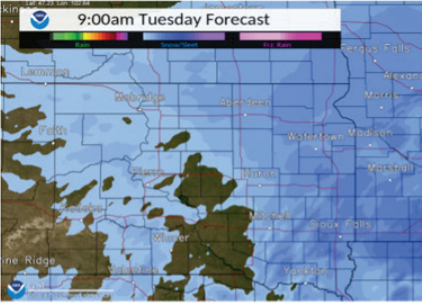
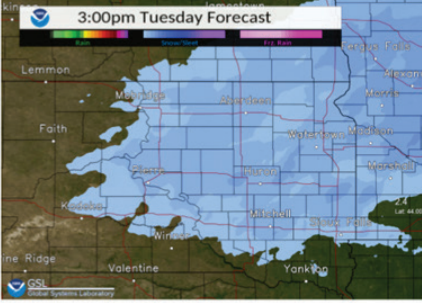

February 21, 2022
3:28 PM


Tonight through Tuesday

Tonight's Timing

Tuesday's Timing



National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration
U.S. Department of Commerce

National Weather Service
Aberdeen, SD

Groton Daily Independent

Tuesday, Feb. 22, 2022 ~ Vol. 30 - No. 230 ~ 8 of 68

Today in Weather History

February 22, 1914: Heavy snow fell across parts of central and north-central South Dakota with 6 to 12 inches accumulations. Snowfall amounts included 6 inches at Timber Lake and Onida, 7 inches at Kennebec, and 12 inches at Murdo.

February 22, 2000: High temperatures across central and northeast South Dakota were in the 50s and 60s. Record highs occurred at Watertown, Pierre, and Kennebec. Watertown rose to 65 degrees, Pierre rose to 69 degrees, and Kennebec warmed to 71 degrees by late in the afternoon. Other high temperatures include; 55 degrees at Sisseton, 59 degrees at Aberdeen, and 64 degrees at Timber Lake.

1971: A 2-day blizzard dumped 36 inches of snow at Buffalo, and 25 inches at Gage, Oklahoma. Follett, Texas picked up 26 inches while Amarillo recorded 14 inches.

1998: Seven tornadoes struck east-central Florida late on this date and early on the 23rd. Three of the tornadoes were rated F3 on the Fujita scale. 24 people were killed in Kissimmee alone. A total of 42 people were killed, with 265 injured, and total damage was \$106 million.

1773 - The memorable "Cold Sabbath" in New England history. Many persons froze extremities while going to church. (David Ludlum)

1936 - Although heat and dust prevailed in the spring and summer, early 1936 brought record cold to parts of the U.S. Sioux Center IA reported 42 inches of snow on the ground, a state record. (20th-22nd) (The Weather Channel)

1986 - A twelve day siege of heavy rain and snow, which produced widespread flooding and mudslides across northern and central California, finally came to an end. The storm caused more than 400 million dollars property damage. Bucks Lake, located in the Sierra Nevada Range, received 49.6 inches of rain during the twelve day period. (Storm Data)

1987 - A storm moving northeastward out of the Gulf of Mexico began to spread heavy snow across the Middle Atlantic Coast Region. Thunderstorms in northern Florida produced wind gusts to 65 mph in Alachua County. (The National Weather Summary) (Storm Data)

1988 - Dry weather prevailed across the nation, with windy conditions from the Central Rockies to northern New England. Winds gusted to 58 mph at Cleveland OH, and reached 63 mph at Erie PA. Winds in the Central Rockies gusted to 120 mph at Mines Peak CO and Rendezvous Peak WY. (The National Weather Summary) (Storm Data)

1989 - Strong northwesterly winds ushering cold arctic air into the north central U.S. produced snow squalls in the Great Lakes Region, with heavy snow near Lake Michigan. Totals in northwest Indiana ranged up to 24 inches at Gary, and up to 16 inches buried northeastern Illinois. (The National Weather Summary) (Storm Data)

1990 - Thunderstorms developing along and ahead of a cold front produced severe weather from southern Mississippi to North Carolina. One thunderstorm spawned a tornado just prior to dawn which touched down near Opp AL injuring ten persons and causing half a million dollars damage. Thunderstorm winds injured four persons south of Troy AL, and five people at Columbus GA. Thunderstorm winds gusted to 76 mph at Dothan AL. (The National Weather Summary) (Storm Data)

Groton Daily Independent

Tuesday, Feb. 22, 2022 ~ Vol. 30 - No. 230 ~ 9 of 68

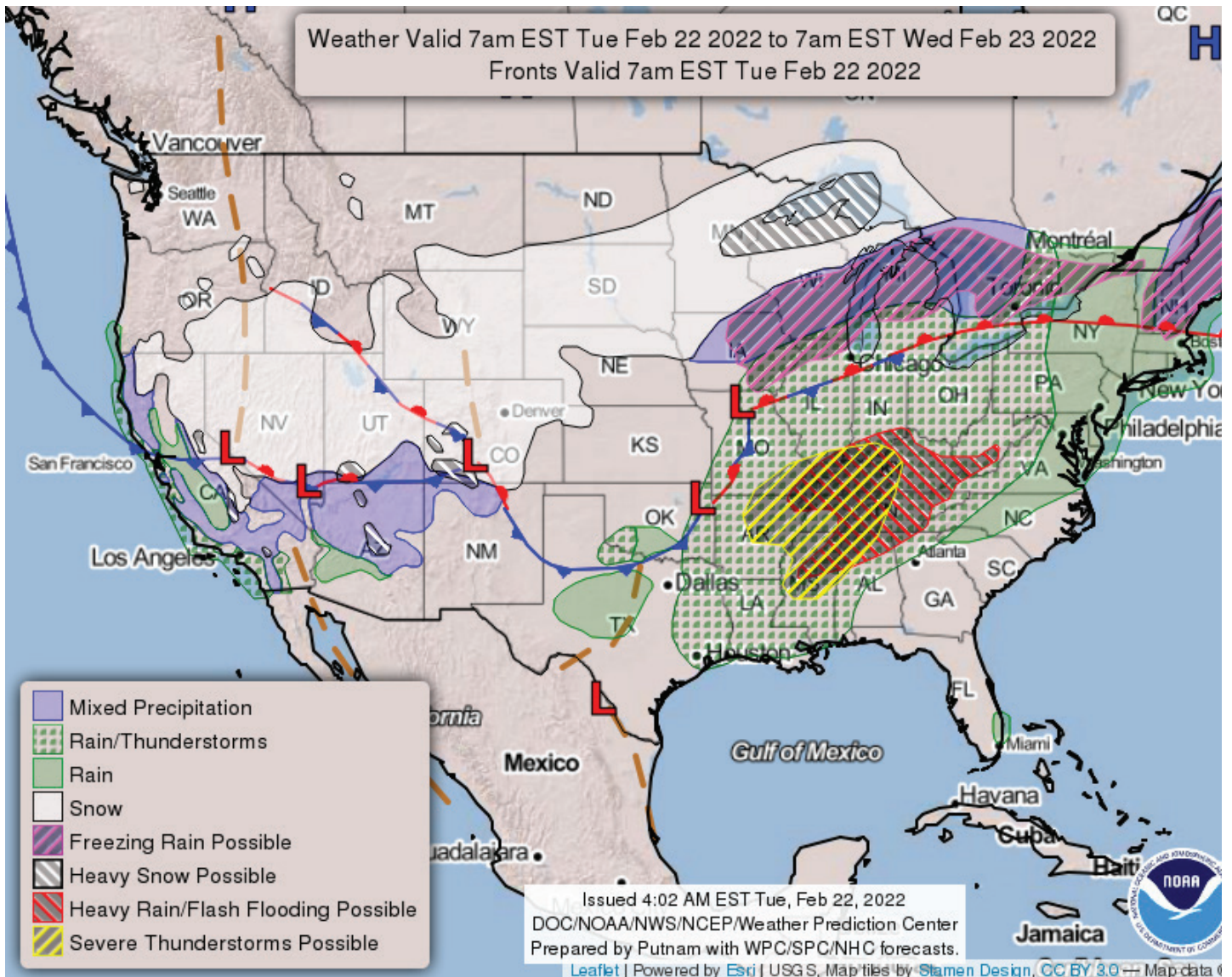
Yesterday's Groton Weather

High Temp: 2 °F at 12:00 AM
Low Temp: -7 °F at 11:57 PM
Wind: 36 mph at 3:33 PM
Precip: 0.00

Day length: 10 hours, 53 minutes
Tomorrow will be 3 minutes longer than today in Groton

Today's Info

Record High: 60 in 2021
Record Low: -24 in 1918
Average High: 31°F
Average Low: 9°F
Average Precip in Feb.: 0.47
Precip to date in Feb.: 0.00
Average Precip to date: 1.02
Precip Year to Date: 0.59
Sunset Tonight: 6:11:02 PM
Sunrise Tomorrow: 7:18:55 AM



Groton Daily Independent

Tuesday, Feb. 22, 2022 ~ Vol. 30 - No. 230 ~ 10 of 68



TMIDNIGHT THANKS

There is a story of a young girl who was demon-possessed and a qualified fortune teller. A group of men saw an opportunity to make large sums of money from her talents, so they formed a syndicate, bought her time and talents, and made a good deal of money.

Not long after they formed their syndicate, an evangelist and his young associate saw the girl and felt sorry for her. The evangelist stood before her, addressed the demon in her and said, "I command you in the name of Jesus Christ to come out of her." Instantly, the demon left her when he heard the voice of the evangelist.

When the owners of the girl realized that their investment and future income was gone, they succeeded in having Paul and Silas arrested. They were given a bloody beating, and then thrown into a dungeon, and their hands and feet were clamped into stocks.

When we look at this story up to this point, we see two men imprisoned for doing what was good and right, yet they were deeply wronged. Did they stop and pity themselves and complain to the God they were serving? Indeed not! At midnight they began to pray and sing praises to God, and a revival broke out. In fact, the jailer was converted.

One thing that cannot be taken away from a Christian is the presence of Christ. With Him and in Him there is a freedom that only He can give - even at midnight. No doubt they were familiar with the words of the Psalmist: "At midnight I rise to give You thanks."

Prayer: It's easy, Father, to give thanks when things are going our way. Give us the strength that we might also give thanks in our trials. In Jesus' Name, Amen.

Scripture For Today: At midnight I rise to give You thanks. Psalm 119:62

Groton Daily Independent

Tuesday, Feb. 22, 2022 ~ Vol. 30 - No. 230 ~ 11 of 68

2022 Community Events

- 01/30/2022 84th Carnival of Silver Skates 2pm & 6:30pm (Last Sunday of January)
01/30/2022 Groton Robotics Pancake Feed, 10am – 1pm, Groton Community Center, 109 N 3rd St, Groton,
04/07/2022 Groton CDE
04/09/2022 Lions Club Easter Egg Hunt 10am Sharp at the City Park (Saturday a week before Easter)
04/09/2022 Dueling Pianos Baseball Fundraiser at the Legion Post #39 6-11:30pm
04/23/2022 Firemen's Spring Social at the Fire Station 7pm-12:30am (Same Saturday as GHS Prom)
04/24/2022 Princess Prom 4:30-8pm (Sunday after GHS Prom)
05/07/2022 Lions Club Spring Citywide Rummage Sales 8am-3pm (1st Saturday in May)
St John's Lutheran Church VBS 9-11am
05/30/2022 Legion Post #39 Memorial Day Services (Memorial Day)
Transit Fundraiser at the Community Center 4-7pm (Thursday Mid-June)
06/17/2022 SDSU Alumni & Friends Golf Tourney at Olive Grove Golf Course 12pm Start
06/18/2022 Groton Triathlon
Ladies Invitational at Olive Grove Golf Course 9am Registration 10am Start
07/04/2022 Firecracker Couples Golf Tourney at Olive Grove Golf Course 9am Registration, 10am Start
(4th of July)
07/10/2022 Lions Club Summer Fest/Car Show at the City Park 9am-4pm (Sunday Mid-July)
Legion Auxiliary #39 Salad Buffet & Dessert Bar 11am-1pm at the Groton Legion
Baseball Tourney
07/21/2022 Pro Am Golf Tourney at Olive Grove Golf Course
Ferney Open Golf Tourney at Olive Grove Golf Course 9am Start
How can we... "Love Groton"? United Methodist Church 9:30am
Moonlight Swim at the Swimming Pool 9-11pm for 9th grade to age 20
Golf Fundraiser Lunch at Olive Grove Golf Course 11a-1pm
08/05/2022 Wine on Nine at Olive Grove Golf Course 6pm
08/12/2022 GHS Basketball Golf Tournament
United Methodist Church VBS 5-8pm
Groton Firemen Summer Splash Day 4-5pm GHS Parking Lot
09/10/2022 Lions Club Fall Citywide Rummage Sale 8am-3pm (1st Saturday after Labor Day)
6th Annual Doggie Day at the Swimming Pool 3:30-5pm
09/11/2022 Couples Sunflower Tourney at Olive Grove Golf Course 12pm
Groton Airport Fly-In/Drive-In, Groton Municipal Airport
10/14/2022 Lake Region Marching Band Festival 10am (2nd Friday in October)
10/01/2022 Pumpkin Fest at the City Park 10am-3pm
10/31/2022 Downtown Trick or Treat 4-6pm (working day on or closest to Halloween)
10/31/2022 United Methodist Church Trunk or Treat 5:30-7pm
11/12/2022 Legion Post #39 Turkey Party 6:30pm (Saturday closest to Veteran's Day)
11/24/2022 Community Thanksgiving at the Community Center 11:30am-1pm (Thanksgiving)
12/03/2022 Tour of Homes & Holiday Party at Olive Grove Golf Course
Santa Claus Day at Professional Management Services 9am-12pm

Groton Daily Independent

Tuesday, Feb. 22, 2022 ~ Vol. 30 - No. 230 ~ 12 of 68

The Groton Independent Printed & Mailed Weekly Edition

Subscription Form

All prices listed include 6.5% Sales Tax

- Black & White \$41.54/year
- Colored \$74.55/year
- Colored \$42.60/6 months
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Groton Daily Independent

Tuesday, Feb. 22, 2022 ~ Vol. 30 - No. 230 ~ 13 of 68

News from the Associated Press

SD Lottery

By The Associated Press undefined

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

Mega Millions

Estimated jackpot: \$75 million

Powerball

02-36-37-45-69, Powerball: 3, Power Play: 2

(two, thirty-six, thirty-seven, forty-five, sixty-nine; Powerball: three; Power Play: two)

Estimated jackpot: \$37 million

Monday's Scores

The Associated Press

GIRLS PREP BASKETBALL=

SDHSAA Playoffs=

Class B=

First Round=

Region 2=

Potter County 47, Sunshine Bible Academy 9

Region 3=

Lake Preston 65, Iroquois/Doland 55

Region 4=

Canistota 56, Mitchell Christian 45

Region 5=

Menno 32, Frederick 30

Region 6=

Burke 54, Colome 23

Tripp-Delmont/Armour 41, Kimball/White Lake 29

Region 7=

Lyman def. Oelrichs, forfeit

New Underwood 62, Crazy Horse 17

POSTPONEMENTS AND CANCELLATIONS=

Bison vs. McIntosh, ppd. to Feb 23rd.

Langford vs. Wilmot, ppd. to Feb 22nd.

BOYS PREP BASKETBALL=

Beresford 71, Wagner 54

Custer 60, Hill City 48

Dell Rapids 65, Garretson 55

Flandreau 68, Sioux Falls Christian 65

Hamlin 78, Canton 72

Irene-Wakonda 64, Bon Homme 49

Lyman 65, Stanley County 57

Madison 62, Milbank 54

Parkston 63, Corsica/Stickney 38

Rapid City Christian 68, Lead-Deadwood 23

Tri-Valley 55, Baltic 52

Vermillion 98, Flandreau Indian 28
Winner 75, Crow Creek 42
POSTPONEMENTS AND CANCELLATIONS=
Cheyenne-Eagle Butte vs. Mobridge-Pollock, ppd.
Red Cloud vs. Bennett County, ccd.

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

Police work to find suspect in fatal Rapid City bar shooting

RAPID CITY, S.D. (AP) — Investigators have interviewed dozens of people about a fatal shooting at a downtown Rapid City bar as they work to find a suspect, police said.

Police spokesman Brendyn Medina said officers are also trying to identify sources of video that may help determine who was involved, the Rapid City Journal reported.

Officers were called to Teddy's Sports Bar on Main St. about 1 a.m. Sunday on a report of a shooting inside the establishment, said Lt. Kevin Masur.

"When officers arrived, officers found themselves in a very chaotic situation," Masur said.

Police say a large group of people fled from the bar after the shooting.

A man in his 30s died from injuries suffered in the shooting. The victim has not been identified.

Life term handed down in Pine Ridge Reservation slaying

RAPID CITY, S.D. (AP) — Another man convicted of a fatal shooting on the Pine Ridge Reservation in 2016 has been sentenced to life in federal prison.

Thirty-two-year-old Adan Corona was convicted last year along with Francisco Villanueva of first-degree premeditated murder, first-degree felony murder and three other counts in the death of Vinny Brewer.

Corona's attorney argued that Friday's sentence of mandatory life in prison was cruel and unusual punishment and that it will be appealed.

Villanueva was earlier sentenced to two consecutive life terms.

Lisa High Wolf, the victim's mother, said the drug-related killing was senseless and she asked Corona for an apology while fighting back tears, KOTA-TV reported.

"I just wanted him to look at me. I wanted him to apologize," High Wolf said, "but he didn't. He don't have no remorse, and I knew his mother. He's one of the one's that is part Lakota. He's part of our tribe. He comes from the same blood that we do. He gets to live his life out in prison, and my son's dead. At least now we can get some closure. Try to move forward with our lives."

Brewer was shot multiple times on a Sunday afternoon outside of a Boys and Girls Club where families had gathered to watch basketball games.

A third man, Estevan Baquera, 28, pled guilty to accessory to first-degree murder and was sentenced in November to 15 years in prison.

Task force would study changes to juvenile justice system

PIERRE, S.D. (AP) — Frustrated teachers in South Dakota say something needs to be done about the growing number of repeat juvenile offenders who are disrupting classrooms.

The state Senate this week is expected to consider a bill that begins the work toward reforming South Dakota's juvenile justice system.

A Senate committee last week heard heated testimony from educators, public defenders, school board officials and others before passing legislation that would create a 15-member task force to study the current system and make recommendations on reform.

"Students learn quickly that there is very little teeth to the juvenile justice system," Harrisburg High School Principal Ryan Rollinger said. "I've been told directly to my face, 'I don't care, they're just going to

give me three more months of probation.”

The task force would have five House members appointed by the speaker, five senators appointed by the president pro tempore and five people “with knowledge and experience in juvenile justice” appointed by the governor, the Argus Leader reported.

“I don’t think this is going to fix the problem,” said Sen. Michael Rohl, R-Aberdeen, in discussion about the motion to pass. “But it’s certainly going to force all the parties to the table to be able to create something that might be a solution.”

Under the supervision of the Executive Board of the Legislative Research Council, the group will go back to the drawing board to develop alternatives for placement of juvenile offenders, report its findings and recommend legislation by Jan. 1, 2023.

Since South Dakota’s overhaul of the juvenile system in 2015, school district officials say they have seen deteriorating juvenile behavior, including serious felonies ranging from robbery, weapons possession, assault, battery and attempted murder.

World leaders focus on how to punish Russia over Ukraine

By RAF CASERT and FOSTER KLUG Associated Press

BRUSSELS (AP) — With the smell of war in the air over Europe, world leaders got over the shock of Russian President Vladimir Putin’s order to deploy troops to separatist regions of eastern Ukraine and they are focused on producing as forceful a reaction as possible.

Germany made the first big move, taking steps to halt the process of certifying the Nord Stream 2 gas pipeline from Russia — a lucrative deal long sought by Moscow, but criticized by the U.S. for increasing Europe’s reliance on Russian energy supplies.

The rest of the European Union also put some of its cards on the table saying its sanctions would center on several Russian officials, banks financing the Russian armed forces and include a move to limit Moscow’s access to EU capital and financial markets.

The West insisted Putin’s bold moves in Ukraine violated countless international agreements and since the words of diplomacy had failed, it was time to move towards action.

With Western powers long having made clear that the fate of Ukraine wasn’t worth a hot and direct military confrontation with Russia, and the potential of a world war, sanctions were the only, limited, option to crystalize their anger.

“No lows too low, no lies too blatant, no red lines too red to cross,” Lithuanian Prime Minister Ingrida Simonyte said in summing up the political disgust felt from Europe to North America and democracies hugging Russia’s borders in Asia like Japan and South Korea.

However, Putin continued to knock the world off-kilter with a strategy where confusion about the true extent of an invasion, which would automatically kick in major sanctions, remained unclear and debatable.

Russia says it’s sending what it deems “peacekeepers” into eastern Ukraine, but EU foreign policy chief Josep Borrell stressed they were “troops” on sovereign Ukrainian territory.

“I wouldn’t say that’s a fully-fledged invasion, but Russian troops are on Ukrainian soil,” Borrell said.

The latest developments were enough to force the 27-nation bloc into a mode of high alert, and the EU’s foreign ministers would be deciding later Tuesday on how deep a first batch of sanctions, including those put forward early Tuesday by European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen and European Council chief Charles Michel, would have to cut.

It would likely stop far short of the “massive” package threatened by the EU and Washington for a full military invasion into national territory that Kiev still controls.

“The way we respond will define us for the generations to come,” Simonyte said.

Too much too soon, though, could also hurt the international response, Austrian Chancellor Karl Nehammer said.

“There is a variety of sanctions options that now need to be used in a targeted way, because we have to assume that we haven’t yet reached the peak of the escalation,” he said.

Groton Daily Independent

Tuesday, Feb. 22, 2022 ~ Vol. 30 - No. 230 ~ 16 of 68

A conflict could devastate Ukraine and cause huge economic damage across Europe, which is heavily dependent on Russian energy. But Asian nations are also worried.

President Moon Jae-in instructed his officials to prepare for the economic fallout in South Korea if the Ukraine crisis worsens and U.S.-backed nations levy stringent economic sanctions on Russia.

Hopes are dwindling that a major conflict can be averted. Putin's directive came hours after he recognized the two Ukrainian separatist regions, setting up Russian military support and antagonizing Western leaders who regard it as a breach of world order.

Putin blamed NATO for the current crisis and called the U.S.-led alliance an existential threat to Russia.

The global condemnation came amid rising skirmishes in the eastern regions of Ukraine that Western powers believe Russia could use as a pretext for an attack on the Europe-facing democracy that has defied Moscow's attempts to pull it back into its orbit.

New Zealand Foreign Minister Nanaia Mahuta said there was no basis under international law for Putin to recognize the Ukrainian separatist regions.

"We are concerned that this is a calculated act by President Putin to create a pretext for invasion, which would be a clear act of aggression. We again call for urgent diplomatic efforts to find a peaceful resolution," Mahuta said in a statement.

Those on a saddle between Russia and the West were in an uncomfortable position.

NATO-member Turkey, which has close relations to both Ukraine and Russia, criticized Moscow's decision to recognize the independence of the regions in eastern Ukraine.

"We consider this decision by Russia as being unacceptable," Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan said. "We reiterate our calls to the parties to respect common sense and international law."

China, a traditional ally of Russia, sounded a cautious note, calling for restraint and a diplomatic solution to the crisis.

Washington could be much more straightforward. The White House issued an executive order to restrict investment and trade in the separatist regions, and additional measures — likely sanctions — were to be announced Tuesday. Those sanctions are independent of what Washington has prepared in the event of a Russian invasion, according to a senior administration official who briefed reporters on the condition of anonymity.

With an estimated 150,000 Russian troops massed on three sides of Ukraine, the U.S. has warned that Moscow has already decided to invade. Still, President Joe Biden and Putin tentatively agreed to a meeting brokered by French President Emmanuel Macron in a last-ditch effort to avoid war.

The Latest: EU sets out plans for sanctions against Russia

By The Associated Press undefined

The Latest on the Russia-Ukraine crisis:

BRUSSELS — Top European Union officials say the bloc is set to impose sanctions on several Russian officials as well as banks financing the Russian armed forces. It also intends to limit Moscow's access to EU capital and financial markets.

A statement Tuesday said the move would "target those who were involved in the illegal decision" to recognize two rebel-held areas in eastern Ukraine. It didn't identify them.

EU Commission President Ursula von der Leyen and EU Council President Charles Michel said it would also "target trade from the two breakaway regions to and from the EU."

They said the restrictive measures would aim to limit "the ability of the Russian state and government to access the EU's capital and financial markets and services, to limit the financing of escalatory and aggressive policies."

EU foreign ministers are meeting later Tuesday to discuss the measures. The two leaders said that "the EU has prepared and stands ready to adopt additional measures at a later stage if needed in the light of further developments."

Groton Daily Independent

Tuesday, Feb. 22, 2022 ~ Vol. 30 - No. 230 ~ 17 of 68

BELVOIR CASTLE, England — Latvia's defense minister has urged world leaders to act now to stop Russian aggression in Ukraine, arguing that sanctions must be swift and punishing or it would be too late to protect international security.

Defense Minister Artis Pabriks told The Associated Press on Tuesday that it was time for European countries and their allies to impose sanctions on Russia.

He said that "if we do fail to stop Mr. Putin now — to stop his aggression — and if we are not managing to force him to de-escalate now, then our global values will decrease and everybody will think that they can play around with the Europeans — they can play around also with Americans."

HELSINKI -- Finland's president says that, despite Russia's actions in Ukraine, he hasn't seen an increase in Russian military activity in the Baltic Sea, where many countries are suspicious of Moscow's intentions.

President Sauli Niinisto said Tuesday that "strangely enough, situation in the entire Baltic Sea area seems very calm and the number of Russian military equipment dispatched in the area is on the decline."

He said he doesn't currently see Finland, which is a member of the European Union but not NATO, facing a military threat from Russia. The two countries share a long border. But he stressed that Finland will pay close attention to Moscow's future actions outside Ukraine.

Niinisto said he didn't know why Russian has "now simply decided to settle the Ukraine situation that has been going on for some seven, eight years."

He said one reason may be Russia has noticed "that Ukraine has been strengthening year-by-year and is continuing to do so."

BERLIN — German Chancellor Olaf Scholz says Russian President Vladimir Putin may be looking for a pretext to occupy the whole of Ukraine.

Scholz said Tuesday that his and other countries made clear at a U.N. Security Council meeting that Moscow "has no support in the world" for its decision to recognize the independence of rebel-held regions in eastern Ukraine.

He said Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy "deserves our highest respect for his country not letting itself be provoked by Russia, because the Russian president is waiting for just that to have a pretext possibly to occupy all of Ukraine."

Scholz made the comment during an appearance in Berlin at which he announced the suspension of the Nord Stream 2 gas pipeline from Russia to Germany.

BERLIN — Chancellor Olaf Scholz says Germany has taken steps to halt the process of certifying the Nord Stream 2 gas pipeline from Russia.

Scholz told reporters in Berlin on Tuesday that his government was taking the measure in response to Moscow's actions in Ukraine.

The pipeline bringing natural gas from Russia to Germany has long been criticized by the United States and some European countries who argue that it increases Europe's reliance on Russian energy supplies.

Scholz said that the government had decided to "reassess" the certification of the pipeline, which hasn't begun operating yet.

"That will certainly take time, if I may say so," he said.

MOSCOW — Russia says its recognition of independence for areas in eastern Ukraine extends to territory currently held by Ukrainian forces.

The statement Tuesday further raises the stakes amid Western fears that Moscow could follow up on Monday's recognition of rebel regions with a full-fledged invasion of Ukraine.

Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov said that Russia has recognized the rebel regions' independence "in borders that existed when they proclaimed" their independence in 2014.

Groton Daily Independent

Tuesday, Feb. 22, 2022 ~ Vol. 30 - No. 230 ~ 18 of 68

Ukrainian forces later reclaimed control of large part of both regions during a nearly eight-year conflict that has killed over 14,000 people.

DAMASCUS, Syria — Syria's foreign minister has praised Russia's recognition of the independence of rebel regions in eastern Ukraine, describing it as a step "toward defending world peace."

Faisal Mekdad spoke during a visit to Moscow. He said that "we have been cooperating with the republics of Donetsk and Luhansk for a long time, and we believe that these current conditions will help increase this cooperation," Syria's state news agency SANA reported.

Also Tuesday, President Bashar Assad's office released a statement saying that the Syrian president received in December a delegation of Russian legislators, including representatives from the Donetsk region, and told them at the time that Damascus "is ready to recognize the Republic of Donetsk and an agreement was reached to start relations with it."

Russia has been a main backer of Assad's government during the Arab country's decade-old conflict. Russian military intervention since September 2015 has helped tip the balance of power in Assad's favor.

BELGRADE, Serbia - Most of the leaders in the war-scarred Balkans condemned Russia's decision to recognize two separatist regions in eastern Ukraine, while Serbia's president said he fears pressure to join Western sanctions against his Kremlin allies.

"There are now many challenges (for Serbia) of political, security and economic nature," Serbia's President Aleksandar Vucic said. "The political pressures will be greater than ever."

Montenegrin President Milo Djukanovic, who led the small Adriatic state to NATO membership in 2017 despite strong opposition from Russia, gave his support to Ukraine.

"Montenegro confirms its unanimous support of the independence, territorial integrity and sovereignty of Ukraine within its internationally recognized borders," said Djukanovic.

Croatian Prime Minister Andrej Plenkovic also slammed Russian President Vladimir Putin's decision, as did Slovenian Prime Minister Janez Jansa.

ATHENS, Greece — Greece's government says it is drawing up plans to assist some 100,000 ethnic Greeks who live in eastern Ukraine.

Andreas Katsaniotis, a deputy foreign minister for Greek communities abroad, said consular services had been enhanced in the Ukrainian port of Mariupol, where the ethnic Greek community is based.

Plans to assist members of that community were the subject of an emergency meeting convened Tuesday by Prime Minister Kyriakos Mitsotakis with top defense, energy and foreign policy officials. Asked if there was a plan to evacuate ethnic Greeks from the region, Katsaniotis told state television: "Of course, but we still haven't reached that situation."

VIENNA — Austrian Chancellor Karl Nehammer says his country has summoned the Russian ambassador to protest Moscow's breach of Ukraine's sovereignty.

Nehammer said Austria supports the EU's approach of imposing sanctions against Russia step by step, starting with a formal decision Tuesday afternoon by the bloc's foreign ministers.

"There is a variety of sanctions options that now need to be used in a targeted way because we have to assume that we haven't yet reached the peak of the escalation," he told reporters in Vienna.

Nehammer also assured Austrians that even if Russia were to stop delivering natural gas immediately, "the energy supply is secure."

Authorities in Vienna are also stepping up surveillance of potential cyberthreats to Austrian government institutions. The country's foreign ministry was targeted in a cyberattack two years ago that was traced to Russia.

ANKARA, Turkey — Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan says Russia's decision to recognize two separatist regions in eastern Ukraine is "unacceptable" and is calling for a respect of international laws.

Groton Daily Independent

Tuesday, Feb. 22, 2022 ~ Vol. 30 - No. 230 ~ 19 of 68

Speaking to Turkish journalists during a three-nation tour of Africa, Erdogan said the decision was a clear violation of Ukraine's political unity, sovereignty and territorial integrity.

"We consider this decision by Russia as being unacceptable," Erdogan said. "We reiterate our call to the parties to respect common sense and international law."

His comments were reported by Hurriyet newspaper and other media.

BELVOIR CASTLE, England — U.K. Defense Secretary Ben Wallace has warned of worrying signs that Russia has begun to move forces into Ukraine as he opened a conference of defense ministers from Baltic and North Atlantic states.

Wallace issued the warning to a meeting of defense ministers from the nations of the Joint Expeditionary Force on Tuesday in Leicestershire, England, though he said reports of military equipment moving into Ukraine's Donbas region would need to be verified.

"Many of us were forewarning that President Putin already had an agenda – you heard that agenda in his speech last night," Wallace said, referring to Putin's decision to recognize two breakaway regions in eastern Ukraine. "This is a sovereign state which has now had some of its land effectively annexed from it."

SANAA, Yemen — Yemen's Houthi rebels have welcomed Russia's decision to recognize two separatist regions in southeast Ukraine.

Mohammed Ali al-Houthi, the head of the rebels' Supreme Revolutionary Committees, said late Monday that the Iranian-backed Houthis support the recognition of Donetsk and Luhansk as independent republics. He called for restraint to avoid sliding into a war.

The Houthis have been in war against a Saudi-led coalition since 2015, months after the rebels overran Yemen's capital, Sanaa, and ousted the internationally recognized government.

HELSINKI — The Baltic nations of Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania have strongly condemned Russia's decision to recognize the separatist regions of Luhansk and Donetsk as independent states.

Estonian President Alar Karis said that "Russia tore the Minsk agreements into pieces," referring to a 2015 peace deal. He said "this shows that Moscow's aim is to deepen the conflict, not to solve it."

In Baltic neighbor Latvia, President Egils Levits, Prime Minister Krisjanis Karins and the country's Parliament released a joint statement condemning Moscow's actions.

The statement said that "in a gross violation of international law, under a fabricated pretext, and by spreading false information, Russia seeks to induce a change in Ukraine's political leadership and foreign policy course by violent means."

Lithuania Prime Minister Ingrida Simonyte tweeted that Russia President Vladimir "Putin just put Kafka & Orwell to shame: no limits to dictator's imagination, no lows too low, no lies too blatant, no red lines too red to cross."

She added: "What we witnessed (Monday evening) might seem surreal for democratic world. But the way we respond will define us for the generations to come."

BRUSSELS — European Union foreign ministers will meet Tuesday to decide what sanctions to impose over Russia's decision to recognize two separatist regions in southeast Ukraine, the EU's top diplomat said.

EU foreign policy chief Josep Borrell said the meeting in Paris "will take the political decisions vis-à-vis the European response."

"Clearly, that response will be in the form of sanctions," Borrell said. He said the aim is not to impose the whole range of sanctions that the EU has prepared should Russian invade Ukraine, but rather to address the recognition of Donetsk and Luhansk as independent.

Asked whether Russia's decision to send "peacekeepers" in already amounts to an invasion, Borrell said, "I wouldn't say that's a fully fledged invasion, but Russian troops are on Ukrainian soil."

Groton Daily Independent

Tuesday, Feb. 22, 2022 ~ Vol. 30 - No. 230 ~ 20 of 68

LONDON — Prime Minister Boris Johnson says the U.K. will introduce “immediate” economic sanctions against Russia, and warned that President Vladimir Putin is bent on “a full-scale invasion of Ukraine.”

Johnson said Putin had “completely torn up international law” and British sanctions would target not just the regions of Donetsk and Luhansk but “Russian economic interests as hard as we can.”

Johnson is to set out further details of the sanctions in the House of Commons later Tuesday.

He told broadcasters that this would be “just the first barrage of U.K. economic sanctions against Russia because we expect, I’m afraid, that there is more Russian irrational behavior to come.”

“I’m afraid all the evidence is that President Putin is indeed bent on a full-scale invasion of the Ukraine, the overrunning, the subjugation of an independent, sovereign European country and I think, let’s be absolutely clear, that would be absolutely catastrophic.”

Oil prices jump, shares sink as Ukraine crisis escalates

By ELAINE KURTENBACH AP Business Writer

BANGKOK (AP) — Oil prices surged nearly 5% and stock prices dropped after Russian President Vladimir Putin recognized the independence of rebel-held regions of Ukraine, raising fears that a full-scale invasion was near.

Russia is a major energy producer and the tensions over Ukraine have brought wide swings in volatile energy prices, on top of the inevitable risks of a broader conflict.

Oil prices already had surged recently to their highest level since 2014. By early Tuesday, the advance of U.S. benchmark crude oil had abated slightly. It was up about \$3, or 3.5%, to about \$94 per barrel in electronic trading on the New York Mercantile Exchange. The price of Brent crude, the standard for international oils, gained about \$4.50, or nearly 5%, to hit about \$98 per barrel.

U.S. trading was closed Monday for Presidents Day, but markets in Europe and Asia shuddered as Putin moved to secure Russia’s hold on Ukraine’s rebel regions, adding to fears of a full-scale invasion.

Those actions have undermined hopes for averting a conflict that could cause massive casualties, energy shortages on the continent and economic chaos around the globe.

The U.S. and European Union condemned Russia and prepared to hit back with sanctions. On Tuesday, Germany suspended the approval process for the Nord Stream 2 pipeline that would bring Russian natural gas to Europe. Western powers have feared Russia might use skirmishes in Ukraine’s eastern regions as a pretext for an attack on the democracy, which has defied Moscow’s attempts to pull it back into its orbit.

Putin received no support from members of the U.N. Security Council at an emergency meeting Monday night for his actions to bring separatists in eastern Ukraine under Moscow’s control.

U.S. futures were down, with the contract for the S&P 500 down 0.1% and the future for the Dow industrials 0.2% lower.

The biggest losses have been in Russia, where the MOEX index was down 5% Tuesday after losing nearly 11% on Monday.

The ruble was 2.5% lower.

“The current situation is tightening financial conditions for Russian companies, destabilizing markets and reducing business predictability,” Elena Nazarova of FxPro said in a commentary.

But Britain’s FTSE 100 was up about 0.35% to 7,510.59, while Germany’s DAX rose slightly to 14,743.53 and the CAC 40 in Paris was flat at 6,788.13.

In Asia, Tokyo’s Nikkei 225 index dropped 1.7% to 26,449.61 while the Hang Seng in Hong Kong regained some lost ground to close 2.7% lower at 23,520.00. South Korea’s Kospi lost 1.4% to 2,706.79 and the Shanghai Composite index fell 1% to 3,457.15. Australia’s S&P/ASX 200 lost 1% to 7,161.30.

The turmoil in Ukraine has upped uncertainty at a time when investors already are jittery over how the world’s central banks, especially the U.S. Federal Reserve, will act to counter surging inflation while coronavirus outbreaks fueled by the highly contagious omicron variant cloud the outlook for many countries.

“Indeed, a full-scale invasion of Ukraine by Russia will leave many central banks with itchy hiking trigger fingers in a quandary,” Jeffrey Halley of Oanda said in a report.

Groton Daily Independent

Tuesday, Feb. 22, 2022 ~ Vol. 30 - No. 230 ~ 21 of 68

Higher oil prices complicate that situation.

Many Asian economies depend on oil and gas imports, and even if those don't come from Russia, the spillover effects on world markets will raise energy costs at a time when countries are still barely recovering from the pandemic.

"Crucially, while Russia may not be the most prominent source of direct energy imports for (emerging markets in) Asia, its sheer heft as a global producer/exporter means energy shocks emanating from Russian supply disruptions will nevertheless be disproportionately large," Mizuho Bank's Vishnu Varathan said in a report.

"So, Ukraine risks are consequential one way or another," he said.

Russia exports coal to India and Vietnam and is the fourth largest supplier of oil to South Korea, Varathan said.

On other fronts, Treasury yields have been falling as investors shift money into the safety of U.S. bonds. The yield on the 10-year Treasury, which affects rates on mortgages and other consumer loans, was at 1.90% by early Tuesday, down from 1.93% on Monday.

In currency trading, the U.S. dollar rose to 114.80 Japanese yen from 114.74 yen late Monday. The euro climbed to \$1.1317 from \$1.1312.

U.S. stocks capped a week of volatile trading with a broad sell-off on Friday.

The S&P 500 and Dow Jones Industrial Average both slipped 0.7%. The Nasdaq composite bore the brunt of the selling, skidding 1.2%. Small company stocks also fell, with the Russell 2000 index down 0.9%.

Hate crimes case in Arbery killing now in hands of jury

By RUSS BYNUM Associated Press

BRUNSWICK, Ga. (AP) — They chased and killed a running Black man who was unarmed and committed no crimes, leaving a trail of racist text messages and social media posts in the months and years before the shooting.

Whether the three white men sentenced to life in prison in state court for murdering Ahmaud Arbery also are guilty of hate crimes is now in the hands of a federal jury.

The panel of eight white people, three Black people and one Hispanic person received the case Monday following a week-long trial in U.S. District Court in the port city of Brunswick. The jurors adjourned for the night after about three hours of deliberations, which were to resume Tuesday morning.

The trial closed Monday with prosecutors saying 25-year-old Arbery's slaying on a residential street was motivated by "pent-up racial anger," revealed by the defendants' electronic messages as well as by witnesses who testified to hearing them make racist tirades and insults.

"All three defendants told you loud and clear, in their own words, how they feel about African Americans," prosecutor Tara Lyons told the jury Monday.

Defense attorneys insisted that past racist statements by their clients offered no proof they violated Arbery's civil rights and targeted him because he's Black. They urged the jury to set aside their emotions.

"It's natural for you to want retribution or revenge," said Pete Theodocion, representing William "Roddie" Bryan. "But we have to elevate ourselves ... even if it's the tough thing."

The basic facts aren't disputed. The slaying of Arbery nearly two years ago, on Feb. 23, 2020, was captured in a graphic cellphone video that sparked widespread outrage. Father and son Greg and Travis McMichael armed themselves after spotting Arbery running past their home and chased him in a pickup truck. Bryan joined his neighbors in his own truck and recorded the video of Travis McMichael firing at point-blank range.

Police found Arbery had no weapon and no stolen items. Prosecutors said he was merely out jogging.

Travis McMichael's attorney, Amy Lee Copeland, told the jury that prosecutors presented no evidence that he "ever spoke to anyone about Mr. Arbery's death in racial terms." She said her client opened fire in self-defense after Arbery tried to take away his shotgun.

Groton Daily Independent

Tuesday, Feb. 22, 2022 ~ Vol. 30 - No. 230 ~ 22 of 68

Greg McMichael's attorney, A.J. Balbo, argued that his client initiated the chase not because Arbery was a Black man, but because he was "THE man" the McMichaels had seen in security camera videos taken from a nearby house under construction.

The McMichaels and Bryan, convicted of murder last fall in a Georgia state court, pleaded not guilty to the federal charges.

FBI agents uncovered roughly two dozen racist text messages and social media posts from the McMichaels and Bryan in the years and months preceding the shooting.

For instance, in 2018, Travis McMichael commented on a Facebook video of a Black man playing a prank on a white person: "I'd kill that f---ing n---r."

Some witnesses testified they heard the McMichaels' racist statements firsthand. A woman who served under Travis McMichael in the U.S. Coast Guard a decade ago said he called her "n---r lover," after learning she'd dated a Black man. Another woman testified Greg McMichael had ranted angrily in 2015 when she remarked on the death of civil rights activist Julian Bond, saying, "All those Blacks are nothing but trouble."

Western leaders allege Russia sending troops to east Ukraine

By VLADIMIR ISACHENKOV and YURAS KARMANAU Associated Press

MOSCOW (AP) — Western leaders said Tuesday that Russian troops have moved into rebel-held areas in eastern Ukraine after President Vladimir Putin's recognized their independence — but some indicated it was not yet the long-feared full-fledged invasion as confusion reigned in the region.

For weeks, Western powers have been bracing for an invasion as Russia massed an estimated 150,000 troops on three sides of neighboring Ukraine. They warned an attack would cause massive casualties, energy shortages in Europe and economic chaos around the globe — and promised swift and severe sanctions if it materialized.

They have also warned Moscow would look for cover to invade — and just such a pretext appeared to come Monday, when Putin recognized as independent two separatist regions in eastern Ukraine, where government troops have long fought Russia-backed rebels. The Kremlin then raised the stakes further Tuesday, by saying that recognition extends even to parts held by Ukrainian forces.

Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov said that Russia has recognized the rebel regions' independence "in borders that existed when they proclaimed" their independence in 2014 — broad territories that extend far beyond the areas now under the rebel control and that include the major Black Sea port of Mariupol.

Ukrainian forces later reclaimed control of large part of both regions early in the nearly eight-year separatist conflict that has killed over 14,000 people.

The recognition move opened the door for Putin to formalize his hold on the regions and send forces in, though Ukraine and its Western allies have long charged Russian troops have been fighting there for years. Moscow has denied those allegations.

Condemnation of Russia's moves from around the world was quick. Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy said he would consider breaking diplomatic ties with Russia and Kyiv recalled its ambassador in Moscow.

But confusion over what exactly was happening on the border threatened to hobble a Western response. "Russian troops have entered in Donbas," the name for the area where the two separatist regions are located, EU foreign policy chief Josep Borrell said in Paris on Tuesday. "We consider Donbas part of Ukraine."

But in a distinction that is sure to complicate a European and Western response, he added: "I wouldn't say that (it is) a fully fledged invasion, but Russian troops are on Ukrainian soil."

He said the European Union would make a decision on sanctions on Tuesday.

Poland's Defense Ministry and British Health Secretary Sajid Javid also said Russian forces had entered Ukraine's east. Javid went further, telling Sky News that "the invasion of Ukraine has begun."

He added: "We are waking up to a very dark day in Europe and it's clear from what we have already seen and found out today that the Russians, President Putin, has decided to attack the sovereignty of Ukraine and its territorial integrity."

Groton Daily Independent

Tuesday, Feb. 22, 2022 ~ Vol. 30 - No. 230 ~ 23 of 68

The Russian moves already elicited a response from Germany, which took steps to suspend the Nord Stream 2 pipeline that was to bring natural gas from Russia. That's a move Berlin has long put off. The pipeline was built to help Germany meet its energy needs, particularly as it switches off its last three nuclear power plants and phases out the use of coal.

Russian officials haven't yet acknowledged any troop deployments to the rebel east, but Vladislav Brig, a member of the separatist local council in Donetsk, told reporters that the Russian troops already had moved in, taking up positions in the region's north and west. Late Monday, convoys of armored vehicles were seen rolling across the separatist-controlled territories. It wasn't immediately clear if they were Russian.

As European leaders scrambled to decide on their response, legislation that will likely set the stage for a deeper move into Ukrainian territory moved through Russia's parliament.

The bills, which sailed quickly through the Kremlin-controlled parliament, envisage military ties between Moscow and the separatist regions, including possible deployment of Russian military bases in the separatist regions.

Even as alarm spread across the globe, Zelenskyy, the Ukrainian president, sought to project calm, telling the country in an address overnight: "We are not afraid of anyone or anything. We don't owe anyone anything. And we won't give anything to anyone."

His foreign minister, Dmytro Kuleba, will be in Washington on Tuesday to meet with Secretary of State Antony Blinken, the State Department said.

"The Kremlin recognized its own aggression against Ukraine," Ukrainian Defense Minister Oleksii Reznikov said on Twitter, describing Moscow's move as a "New Berlin Wall" and urging the West to quickly slap Russia with sanctions.

The White House has already responded, issuing an executive order to prohibit U.S. investment and trade in the separatist regions, and additional measures — likely sanctions — were to be announced Tuesday. Those sanctions are independent of what Washington has prepared in the event of a Russian invasion, according to a senior administration official who briefed reporters on the condition of anonymity.

Other Western allies also said they were planning to announce sanctions, including the EU.

British Prime Minister Boris Johnson said the U.K. will introduce "immediate" economic sanctions against Russia, and warned that Putin is bent on "a full-scale invasion of Ukraine ... that would be absolutely catastrophic."

Johnson said Putin had "completely torn up international law" and British sanctions would target not just the regions of Donetsk and Luhansk but "Russian economic interests as hard as we can."

He later said in a tweet that Russia has sent troops to Ukraine.

Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesperson Wang Wenbin on Tuesday said China would "continue to stay in engagement with all parties," continuing to steer clear from committing to back Russia despite the close ties between Moscow and Beijing.

Russia has long denied it has any plans to invade Ukraine, instead blaming the U.S. and its allies for the current crisis and describing Ukraine's bid to join NATO as an existential challenge to Russia. Putin reiterated those accusations in an hourlong televised speech on Monday, when he announced that Russia would recognize the rebels.

"Ukraine's membership in NATO poses a direct threat to Russia's security," he said.

Russia says it wants Western guarantees that NATO won't allow Ukraine and other former Soviet countries to join as members. Moscow has also demanded the alliance halt weapons deployments to Ukraine and roll back its forces from Eastern Europe — demands flatly rejected by the West.

Putin warned Monday that the Western rejection of Moscow's demands gives Russia the right to take other steps to protect its security.

Sweeping through more than a century of history, Putin painted today's Ukraine as a modern construct used by the West to contain Russia despite the neighbors inextricable links.

In a stark warning to Ukraine, the Russian leader charged that it has unfairly inherited Russia's historic land granted to it by the Communist rulers of the Soviet Union and mocked its effort to shed the Com-

munist past in a so-called "decommunization" campaign.

"We are ready to show you what the real decommunization would mean for Ukraine," Putin added ominously in an apparent signal of his readiness to raise new land claims.

Amid the soaring tensions, U.S. President Joe Biden and Putin tentatively agreed to a meeting in a last-ditch effort to avoid war. But the U.S. always said that if Russia moved in, the meeting would be off.

Hong Kong orders mandatory COVID-19 tests for all residents

By ZEN SOO and ALICE FUNG Associated Press

HONG KONG (AP) — Hong Kong will test its entire population of 7.5 million people for COVID-19 in March, the city's leader said Tuesday, as it grapples with its worst outbreak driven by the omicron variant. The population will be tested three times in March, Hong Kong Chief Executive Carrie Lam said.

She said testing capacity will be boosted to 1 million a day or more.

"Since we have a population of some 7 million people, testing will take about seven days," she said.

Hong Kong has reported about 5,000 new daily infections since Feb. 15, with the cases threatening to overwhelm its healthcare system. Since the current surge began at the beginning of the year, the city has recorded nearly 54,000 cases and 145 deaths.

The order for citywide testing comes after mainland Chinese authorities dispatched epidemiologists, health workers and other medical resources last week to help contain the outbreak in the semi-autonomous Chinese city.

Hong Kong has largely aligned itself with mainland China's "zero-COVID-19" policy, which aims to totally stamp out outbreaks, even as many other countries are shifting their approach to living with the virus.

Lockdowns of entire cities have been imposed in a number of areas of the mainland, but Lam said no such measure is currently being considered in Hong Kong because it is "not realistic."

She also denied that the central Chinese government is giving instructions to Hong Kong on how to handle the epidemic.

"I reiterate that the central government never issued any instructions on our anti-epidemic work," she said. "The central government will offer support as needed or upon our request, but of course we will always exchange our views."

The "zero-COVID-19" strategy means that Hong Kong authorities often take measures such as locking down residential estates for mass testing when positive cases are detected, imposing strict quarantine requirements on travelers and ordering the shuttering of businesses.

The rapid surge of infections in the city has threatened to overwhelm its healthcare system.

Health officials said last week that hospitals were already at 90% of capacity and isolation facilities were full. People who test positive for the virus in Hong Kong must either be admitted to a hospital or a quarantine facility.

Lam acknowledged on Tuesday that the city's isolation facilities are "severely inadequate" and that it is "working very hard with the full support of the central authorities" to build more.

Current social-distancing measures, such as a ban on dining at restaurants after 6 p.m. and the closure of businesses such as gyms and bars, will be extended until April 20.

"This is not good news to the sectors affected, but really at this stage of the pandemic we have no choice but to take these measures," Lam said.

She said the city hopes to boost its vaccination rate to 90% by early March.

Other measures announced Tuesday include ending the school year early and moving the normal July-August summer holidays forward to March and April so that schools can be turned into facilities for testing, isolation and vaccination.

Flight bans from countries classified as high risk, including Australia, Canada, India, Nepal, Pakistan, the Philippines, Britain and the U.S., will be extended to April 20.

Ukraine crisis jolts Europe to push for secure energy supply

By ARITZ PARRA and DAVID McHUGH Associated Press

MADRID (AP) — Surging energy prices and fears of a Russian invasion of Ukraine are making European leaders think hard about energy security — particularly their decades-old reliance on Moscow for natural gas.

The crisis shows Europe's vulnerability after years of limited progress in completing an "energy union" — a 2015 vision to allow affordable gas and electricity to flow across borders while diversifying suppliers and reaching climate goals. As renewables like solar and wind are slowly built up and coal and other fossil fuels are phased out, Europe still needs natural gas, and it's dependent on Russia to get it.

That came into sharp relief as Europe's gas supply dropped and prices soared partly because Russia sold less gas than normal, squeezing households and businesses with rising costs.

With gas reserves low and concerns a war could interrupt pipeline flows from Russia, the EU is focused on getting liquefied natural gas, or LNG, by ship from the United States, Qatar, Algeria and elsewhere until renewables catch up. Environmentalists fear making that even a short-term priority could set back Europe's goals to move away from fossil fuels.

Doubling down on renewables would help reduce dependency on Russian gas, EU Energy Commissioner Kadri Simson said Monday, but reiterated that energy security was critical. An advisory group to coordinate the EU's gas supply security was meeting Tuesday because "it's important that contingency plans are ready for the worst-case scenario," she said.

The 27-nation EU is "on the safe side for this winter" but doing "everything possible to get rid of this dependency," European Commission President Ursula Von der Leyen said Saturday at the Munich Security Conference. She accused Russia's state-owned gas giant Gazprom of "deliberately trying to store and deliver as little as possible while prices and demand are skyrocketing."

Russia has fulfilled long-term contracts but failed to sell additional gas on the spot market, while pushing for German approval of its contentious Nord Stream 2 pipeline as a way to solve Europe's gas squeeze. Germany has suspended the process to certify the pipeline, Chancellor Olaf Scholz said Tuesday, after Russia recognized the independence of separatist regions in Ukraine in a move that could allow troops to deploy.

"We are aware about the low resources of gas in European countries," Russian Energy Minister Nikolai Shulginov said Tuesday at a forum of gas producers in Qatar, according to a provided English translation. He said long-term gas contracts help curb price volatility and that Russian energy companies are "fully committed" to fulfilling existing agreements.

In a conflict, security analysts say Russia would have little interest in a total gas cutoff that would deprive it of revenue and give Europe a further incentive to find other sources of energy.

Countries like Lithuania and Poland have managed to reduce Russian gas imports. But Russia accounts for more than one-third of the EU's supply, and its dominance is entrenched in the Baltic states, Germany, Italy and parts of southeastern Europe.

The core issue is that the 27 EU countries retain substantial control over energy policy. Clashing regulations and standards make transport of gas from one country's system to another difficult, even when the network to do it actually exists. Energy companies moving gas across borders, for example, are sometimes charged tariffs more than once or twice.

"Unfortunately, energy interconnection in Europe is an unresolved issue," Miguel Arias Cañete, former EU energy and climate commissioner who oversaw a proposal for more gas infrastructure, told The Associated Press.

"It's in moments of crisis that we see the need for market integration and enough infrastructure from a security and procurement point of view," he said, adding that the focus on renewables shouldn't neglect the role of natural gas.

After Russia seized Ukraine's Crimea region in 2014, diversifying energy supplies to reduce Russian reliance was enshrined in the EU's 2015 energy union plan. Since then, there has been some significant progress: More two-way pipeline connections have been built and more LNG import terminals are planned.

Groton Daily Independent

Tuesday, Feb. 22, 2022 ~ Vol. 30 - No. 230 ~ 26 of 68

A new pipeline transports gas from Azerbaijan to western Europe via Turkey and Greece. There's also a planned pipeline extension from northeast Greece to southern Bulgaria that would relieve Bulgaria's total dependence on Russian gas. And Greece is moving forward with plans to build a facility to take in LNG imported by sea.

But connecting Europe's energy markets hasn't been done "sufficiently well," said energy policy expert Simone Tagliapietra, a senior fellow at the Bruegel think tank in Brussels. In particular, a pipeline connection from Spain to France was shelved, leaving "a major bottleneck that we didn't manage to solve," he said. Now, gas industry groups are talking about reviving the idea.

Following the Crimea crisis, the priority shifted from energy security to climate change, leading up to the EU's 2019 Green Deal, a wide-ranging plan to cut emissions.

"Energy security disappeared," Tagliapietra said. "It was all about sustainability, decarbonization. Now we are seeing the great comeback of energy security as an issue in Europe."

The question always seems more urgent among newer, eastern EU members with bitter memories of Russian domination during the Cold War.

Poland has been working on pipeline connections with neighboring countries, including the Baltic Pipe, which is set to deliver Norwegian gas to Denmark and others starting in 2023. The country also has built the Swinoujscie LNG port on the Baltic Sea, near the German border. Since 2015, the facility has helped reduce gas imports from Russia via the Yamal pipeline by a third, to less than 60% of its total gas imports.

Polish authorities have vowed not to extend the Yamal deal when it expires next year, relying on more LNG from places like the U.S., Qatar and Australia.

But investing billions in more pipelines or import terminals risks them becoming obsolete amid the long-term shift to renewables, Tagliapietra said. Instead, Europe could require gas companies to begin the winter with adequate storage levels, he said.

Russia's Gazprom didn't fill its underground storage in Europe last summer. "It's up to them to decide, and that's not acceptable," Tagliapietra said.

Governments also are talking about creating a strategic reserve of gas, either shared among several countries or organized at the EU level. Energy-consuming countries have done that with crude oil since the 1970s.

Environmentalists say the solution isn't more gas but action to promote renewables.

"It is a little bit surreal and surprising," said Elif Gündüzyeli, fossil fuels policy campaigner for the Climate Action Network. "This approach of adding more gas to the grid to solve the energy supply issue is a little bit like adding another lane to a highway to solve the traffic issue: more cars come in and it gets even more complicated."

"Getting unhooked from Russia and hooked to the U.S., I don't think it's going to solve any of the EU's energy security issues," she said. "And it definitely doesn't solve the climate urgency."

American women players settle suit vs US Soccer for \$24M

By ANNE M. PETERSON and RONALD BLUM AP Sports Writers

U.S. women soccer players reached a landmark agreement with the sport's American governing body to end a six-year legal battle over equal pay, a deal in which they are promised \$24 million plus bonuses that match those of the men.

The U.S. Soccer Federation and the women announced a deal Tuesday that will have players split \$22 million, about one-third of what they had sought in damages. The USSF also agreed to establish a fund with \$2 million to benefit the players in their post-soccer careers and charitable efforts aimed at growing the sport for women.

The USSF committed to providing an equal rate of pay for the women's and men's national teams — including World Cup bonuses — subject to collective bargaining agreements with the unions that separately represent the women and men.

"For our generation, knowing that we're going to leave the game in an exponentially better place than

Groton Daily Independent

Tuesday, Feb. 22, 2022 ~ Vol. 30 - No. 230 ~ 27 of 68

when we found it is everything," 36-year-old midfielder Megan Rapinoe said during a telephone interview with The Associated Press. "That's what it's all about because, to be honest, there is no justice in all of this if we don't make sure it never happens again."

The settlement was a victory for the players, who sparked fans to chant "Equal Pay!" when they won their second straight title in France in 2019. And it was a success for USSF President Cindy Parlow Cone, a former player who became head of the federation in March 2020.

Cone replaced Carlos Cordeiro, who quit after the federation made a legal filing that claimed women had less physical ability and responsibility than male counterparts.

"This is just one step towards rebuilding the relationship with the women's team. I think this is a great accomplishment and I'm excited about the future and working together with them," Cone said. "Now we can shift the focus to other things, most importantly, growing the game at all levels and increasing opportunities for girls and women."

U.S. women have won four World Cups since the program's start in 1985, while the men haven't reached a semifinal since 1930.

Five American stars led by Morgan and Rapinoe began the challenge with a complaint to the federal Equal Employment Opportunity Commission in April 2016. Women sued three years later, seeking damages under the federal Equal Pay Act and Title VII of the Civil Rights Act.

The sides settled the working conditions portion in December 2020, dealing with issues such as charter flights, accommodations and playing surfaces. They were scheduled to argue on March 7 before the 9th U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals in an attempt to reinstate the equal pay portion thrown out by a U.S. District Court.

"The settlement announced today is an important step in righting the many wrongs of the past," the union for the women's team said in a statement.

While a labor contract remains to be reached and ratified to replace the deal that expires March 31, the settlement was an enormous step.

"It's so gratifying to feel like we can start to mend a relationship with U.S. Soccer that has been severed for so many years because of the discrimination that we faced," said Morgan, a 32-year-old forward. "To finally get to this moment feels like we can almost sigh a breath of relief."

Players were able to put off the legal distractions to continue on-field success.

"The additional hours and stress and outside pressures and discriminations we face, I mean sometimes you think why the hell was I born a female?" Morgan posed. "And then sometimes you think how incredible is it to be able to fight for something that you actually believe in and stand alongside these women. ... There was something more than stepping on the field and wanting to be a starter or wanting to score goals or wanting to win or wanting to have the glory."

The \$22 million will be split into individual amounts proposed by the players, subject to the District Court's approval.

Cone said the federation's method of equalizing World Cup bonuses is yet to be determined. The federation has until now based bonuses on payments from FIFA, which earmarked \$400 million for the 2018 men's tournament, including \$38 million to champion France, and \$30 million for the 2019 women's tournament, including \$4 million to the champion U.S.

American men have been playing under the terms of a CBA that expired in December 2018.

Rapinoe was critical of both Cordeiro and his predecessor, Sunil Gulati, who headed the USSF from 2006-18. Cordeiro is seeking to regain the job from Cone when the USSF National Council meets on March 5 to vote on a four-year term.

"The thing that Cindy did was acknowledge the wrongdoing and apologize for the wrongdoing," Rapinoe said. "It was well within Sunil's ability to not discriminate and to pay us fairly and equally. It was well within Carlos' ability to do that, and they made choices not to. ... I think Cindy has shown a lot of strength in that, and I think the other two, frankly, just showed a ton of weakness and showed really their true colors in allowing this to happen for so long."

Analysis: Putin's take on history may lay groundwork for war

By JOHN DANISZEWSKI Associated Press

WARSAW, Poland (AP) — Russian President Vladimir Putin laid out his version of Ukraine's history, saying essentially that Ukraine was always part of Russia. While that serves his purpose, it is also a fiction. Ukraine has its own thousand-year history.

What is now Ukraine was a contested region of shifting borders for centuries that did not come completely under Moscow's rule until late in the 18th century during the reign of Catherine the Great, and even then the Russian Empire was never able to swallow it easily or completely.

In his present-day effort to bring an independent, Western-looking Ukraine back into Russia's orbit, Putin is following a well-trod path of many of Russia's rulers before him — from Peter the Great to Josef Stalin.

For the West, the question is whether it can limit Putin's revanchist ambitions through diplomacy, sanctions and Ukrainian military resistance. The recognition of the two breakaway regions by Putin, and the sending in of Russian troops already threatening the country, could easily be the trigger for a wider war for all of Ukraine.

"I consider it necessary to take a long-overdue decision: To immediately recognize the independence and sovereignty of Donetsk People's Republic and Luhansk People's Republic," Putin said, referring to two pro-Russian parts of Ukraine in the Donbas region that since 2014 have been engaged in a war with the Kyiv government that has claimed an estimated 14,000 lives already.

Every modern state, especially in Europe, has had centuries of changing borders, and the emotional tug of nationalism can lead to demands, ultimatums and often war for territory, power and influence. In his speech to the Russian public on Monday night, a sometimes sullen, sometimes angry-sounding Putin was dismissive of modern-day Ukraine, arguing that its creation as a sovereign state was a tragedy and an accident of communist leaders in the 20th century.

Acting as though there had never been a historical Ukraine until Soviet times, Putin blamed at times Vladimir Lenin, at times Stalin and at one point he saved scorn for the decision of Nikita Khrushchev to take Crimea from Russia in 1954 and award it to Ukraine.

As with all historical narratives, there were elements of truth in what Putin was saying. Ukrainians and Russians are related eastern Slavic peoples whose destinies have been both intertwined and separated throughout history. But he preferred to focus on the time of Russia's maximum dominance over Ukraine — neatly forgetting that it has been a separate state recognized by international treaties and explicitly by Russia over the last 30 years. Instead, he painted today's Ukraine as a corrupt, barely functioning puppet of the United States that threatens Russia's security and, in his view, has no real reason to exist except in union with Russia.

Both Ukraine and Russia trace themselves to Kievan Rus, a trading center set up by Vikings along the Dnieper River more than 1,000 years ago, before Moscow even existed, that was originally pagan and later embraced Orthodox Christianity. Kievan Rus fell afterward to the early 13th century Mongol invasions of Europe. Muscovy did not emerge from being a vassal state until the late 15th century.

Instead of being connected to Russian Moscow, all of what is now Ukraine instead for centuries was part of the Grand Duchy of Lithuania from the 1300s, and later of the Union of Poland and Lithuania, a vast multilingual, multiethnic state whose territory encompassed almost all of what is now Poland, Lithuania, Belarus and Ukraine (and parts of what is now Russia.)

In its eastern and southeastern regions, the union's dominant languages were Polish and Ruthenian, the predecessor to modern-day Ukrainian and Belarusian. The population included Ukrainians, Poles, Belarusians, Lithuanians, Jews and Tartars.

Uprisings by an army of Ukrainian Cossacks against Polish lords and landowners in the middle 1600s led to a Cossack alliance with Moscow and eastern Ukraine breaking off from the Polish-Lithuanian Union and pledging loyalty to the czar in 1654. Western Ukraine remained part of the Polish-Lithuanian Union for another 150 years, until Poland was partitioned for the final time in 1795 and erased from the map of

Europe.

Poland rose again after World War I and fought a territorial war with Soviet Russia between 1919 and 1922, winning back much of Ukraine. Those lands returned to Soviet control a generation later during and after World War II, but after the war Ukrainian nationalist partisans fought on against the Soviets in a guerrilla resistance for several years.

The "great famine" or Holodomor imposed on Ukraine by Stalin in the early 1930s had led to millions of deaths and seeded lingering Ukrainian bitterness toward Soviet Russian rule.

That the Bolsheviks recognized Ukraine as a separate socialist republic when the Soviet Union was created was no accident.

It addressed the reality of Ukraine's separate history and identity, poised somewhere between Moscow and the West for most of its existence, but never given the chance to rule itself until the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991.

Contrary to Putin, most Ukrainians do not clamor to be part of Russia today, and anti-Russian sentiment in most of the country has only increased since Russia's 2014 seizure of Crimea and the taking of the Donbas region by pro-Moscow separatists.

Now with Russian troops marching into the Donbas region of eastern Ukraine again, it looks as though the millennial-long tug of war for dominance in the area, with the use of force of arms or diplomacy as needed, is about to renew again.

The Latest: EU ministers to decide on Russian sanctions

By The Associated Press undefined

The Latest on the Russia-Ukraine crisis (all times local):

BRUSSELS — European Union foreign ministers will meet Tuesday to decide what sanctions to impose over Russia's decision to recognize two separatist regions in southeast Ukraine, the EU's top diplomat said.

EU foreign policy chief Josep Borrell said the meeting in Paris "will take the political decisions vis-à-vis the European response."

"Clearly, that response will be in the form of sanctions," Borrell said. He said the aim is not to impose the whole range of sanctions that the EU has prepared should Russia invade Ukraine, but rather to address the recognition of Donetsk and Luhansk as independent.

Asked whether Russia's decision to send "peacekeepers" in already amounts to an invasion, Borrell said, "I wouldn't say that's a fully fledged invasion, but Russian troops are on Ukrainian soil."

LONDON — Prime Minister Boris Johnson says the U.K. will introduce "immediate" economic sanctions against Russia, and warned that President Vladimir Putin is bent on "a full-scale invasion of Ukraine."

Johnson said Putin had "completely torn up international law" and British sanctions would target not just the regions of Donetsk and Luhansk but "Russian economic interests as hard as we can."

Johnson is to set out further details of the sanctions in the House of Commons later Tuesday.

He told broadcasters that this would be "just the first barrage of U.K. economic sanctions against Russia because we expect, I'm afraid, that there is more Russian irrational behavior to come."

"I'm afraid all the evidence is that President Putin is indeed bent on a full-scale invasion of the Ukraine, the overrunning, the subjugation of an independent, sovereign European country and I think, let's be absolutely clear, that would be absolutely catastrophic."

PARIS: French Foreign Minister Jean-Yves Le Drian condemned in forceful terms on Tuesday the move by Russian President Vladimir Putin to recognize breakaway republics in Ukraine as a violation of international law and the Minsk peace agreement with Ukraine.

"Obviously, we will take the initiative to impose sanctions," he said, adding that EU foreign ministers will meet "to examine together what measures to take."

Groton Daily Independent

Tuesday, Feb. 22, 2022 ~ Vol. 30 - No. 230 ~ 30 of 68

The 27-nation EU has said it would impose sanctions against Russia in case of an invasion of Ukraine.

BRUSSELS — A top European Union official says Russia's recognition of the Ukrainian separatist regions of Luhansk and Donetsk as independent states and to send troops into the territories is an "act of war."

Didier Reynders, the European Commissioner for Justice, said the 27-nation bloc is ready to implement sanctions against Russia.

Speaking to Belgian broadcaster RTBF, Reynders said a unanimous accord from EU member countries is needed for new sanctions to be imposed.

He said the anticipated measures would evolve gradually, depending on Russian actions. The first types would be travel bans against individuals and sanctions against economic entities via the seizing of assets in Europe and abroad.

In addition, Reynders said "it will be necessary to ensure that there are no more imports of goods or services from Russia, such as energy, and that Russia's global access to financial services is terminated."

"Everything is on the table," he said, adding member states were discussing how gradual the moves would be and the possibility for diplomacy to ease the conflict.

LONDON — A British Cabinet minister says a Russian invasion of Ukraine has begun, and the U.K. will respond with sanctions later Tuesday.

Health Secretary Sajid Javid said Russian President Vladimir Putin "has sent in tanks and troops" to two breakaway regions of eastern Ukraine he recognized on Monday.

Javid told Sky News that "we are waking up to a very dark day in Europe and it's clear from what we have already seen and found out today that the Russians, President Putin, has decided to attack the sovereignty of Ukraine and its territorial integrity."

"We have seen that he has recognized these breakaway eastern regions in Ukraine and from the reports we can already tell that he has sent in tanks and troops. From that you can conclude that the invasion of Ukraine has begun."

He said Prime Minister Boris Johnson would address Parliament later about new sanctions on Russia. The U.K. government says it is coordinating its response with the European Union.

COPENHAGEN, Denmark — Nordic leaders condemned Russia's decision to recognize the Ukrainian separatist regions of Luhansk and Donetsk as independent states, saying Tuesday that Moscow had violated Ukraine's sovereignty and territorial integrity. Swedish Foreign Minister Ann Linde called it "a blatant violation of international law."

Denmark Foreign Minister Jepp Kofod called the Russian move "harmful" and said the Scandinavian nation urged Moscow to "stop its breach of international law."

In Finland, President Sauli Niinisto said the country would respond in unison with the European Union, of which it is a member. Non-EU member Norway said the Russian decision "directly contradicts the spirit and the letter of the Minsk agreements."

SINGAPORE — Singapore said Tuesday it is "gravely concerned" about the escalation of tensions on the border between Ukraine and Russia and the "Russian decision to recognize two breakaway Ukrainian regions."

"The sovereignty, independence and territorial integrity of Ukraine must be respected," the Foreign Ministry said in a statement.

It added that the dispute should be settled through talks and diplomacy in "accordance with international law, and avoid action that will further raise tensions in the region."

ATHENS, Greece — Greece on Tuesday strongly condemned Moscow's recognition of two separatist republics in Ukraine, as the country's Prime Minister, Kyriakos Mitsotakis, called an emergency meeting of top government defense and foreign policy officials to discuss the crisis.

Groton Daily Independent

Tuesday, Feb. 22, 2022 ~ Vol. 30 - No. 230 ~ 31 of 68

"Russia's recognition of the illegal and unilateral declaration of 'independence' of the separatist territories of Donetsk and Luhansk in Ukraine is a clear violation of fundamental principles of international law, Ukraine's territorial integrity, and the Minsk agreements," a Foreign Ministry statement said. "We have repeatedly stressed that Greece is in favor of respect for the territorial integrity, sovereignty and independence of all states and condemns any decision that is contrary to these fundamental principles of international law." NATO-member Greece has traditionally friendly ties with Russia.

UNITED NATIONS — Ukraine's U.N. ambassador is demanding that Russia cancel its recognition of the independence of separatist regions in the east, immediately withdraw its "occupation troops" sent there by President Vladimir Putin, and return to negotiations.

Sergiy Kyslytsya told an emergency meeting of the U.N. Security Council on Monday that Ukraine called the rare evening session to protest and condemn Putin's "illegal and illegitimate" decision to recognize the Donetsk and Luhansk regions in violations of Ukraine's sovereignty and territorial integrity.

He said Ukraine's borders "will remain unchangeable regardless of any statements and actions by the Russian Federation."

He said Russia's occupation of Donetsk and Luhansk ruin negotiating frameworks and "may be considered" as Russia's unilateral withdrawal from the Minsk Agreements aimed at restoring peace to eastern Ukraine.

"We are committed to a political diplomatic settlement and do not succumb to provocations," Kyslytsya said.

While Ukraine has the right to self-defense, he said, "We are committed to a peaceful and diplomatic path and we will stay firmly on it. We are on our land. We are not afraid of anything or anyone. We owe nothing to anyone, and we will not give away anything to anyone."

Kyslytsya urged the Security Council to support Ukraine and take action to restore international peace and security, but that will be virtually impossible because of Russia's veto power in the council.

ANKARA, Turkey — Turkey criticized Russia's decision to recognize the independence of two separatist regions in eastern Ukraine, describing the move as a "clear violation of Ukraine's political unity, sovereignty and territorial integrity."

A Turkish Foreign Ministry statement early Tuesday said: "we find this decision by Russia unacceptable and reject it."

"We emphasize our commitment to the preservation of Ukraine's political unity and territorial integrity, and call on all parties to use common sense and comply with international law," the ministry statement read.

NATO-member Turkey has close relations to both Ukraine and Russia and had repeatedly offered to mediate to end the tensions.

Separately, the Turkish Foreign Ministry issued a statement to "strongly recommend" that Turkish citizens leave Ukraine's eastern regions.

SEOUL, South Korea — South Korea's Foreign Ministry says it has grave concerns over the Ukraine crisis and called for related nations to respect the Minsk agreement while finding a diplomatic solution.

Ministry spokesperson Choi Young-sam also said Tuesday that diplomats were still trying to persuade 63 South Koreans in Ukraine to leave. There were around 600 South Koreans in Ukraine at the end of January.

"Our government has consistently supported Ukraine's sovereignty and the preservation of its territory," Choi said.

President Moon Jae-in earlier called for officials to prepare for an economic fallout in South Korea if the Ukraine crisis is prolonged.

UNITED NATIONS — Russia's U.N. ambassador has accused the United States and its Western allies of egging Ukraine toward "an armed provocation."

Speaking at an emergency meeting of the U.N. Security Council on Monday night, Vassily Nebenzia ac-

Groton Daily Independent

Tuesday, Feb. 22, 2022 ~ Vol. 30 - No. 230 ~ 32 of 68

cused Ukraine of sharply increasing shelling in residential areas of the separatist Luhansk and Donetsk regions and in Russian towns and villages near the border.

He said Ukraine has concentrated a 120,000-strong military contingent along the contact line with pro-Russian separatists in the east and "subversive groups" have penetrated or tried to penetrate the territory known as the Donbas to sabotage critical infrastructure.

"So it has become clear that Donbas is on the brink of a new Ukrainian military adventure as was already the case in 2014 and 2015," he said.

Nebenzia said that's why President Vladimir Putin announced earlier Monday that Russia will recognize Luhansk and Donetsk as independent states and is putting Russian troops into the two states as peacekeepers.

The separatist authorities said Monday that at least four civilians were killed by Ukrainian shelling over the past 24 hours, and several others were wounded. Ukraine's military said two Ukrainian soldiers were killed over the weekend, and another serviceman was wounded Monday. Ukrainian military spokesman Pavlo Kovalchuk insisted that Ukrainian forces weren't returning fire.

Nebenzia said Russia was open to diplomacy but wouldn't allow "a new bloodbath in the Donbas," urging the United States and other Western nations to not worsen the situation.

UNITED NATIONS — China has called for restraint and is encouraging every effort to find a diplomatic solution to the Ukraine crisis, saying Beijing believes all countries should solve disputes by peaceful means in line with the U.N. Charter.

China's U.N. Ambassador Zhang Jun called on the key parties in the Ukraine dispute "to continue dialogue and consultation and seek reasonable solutions."

Zhang gave very brief remarks at an emergency meeting of the U.N. Security Council on Monday night called by Ukraine, the U.S. and six other countries following Russian President Vladimir Putin's announcement that Russia will recognize the separatist areas in eastern Ukraine as independent states and is putting Russian troops into Luhansk and Donetsk as peacekeepers.

The Chinese ambassador made no mention of actions on Monday by its usual ally, Russia, saying only that "all parties concerned must exercise restraint, and avoid any action that may fuel tensions," and to "welcome and encourage every effort for a diplomatic solution."

Chinese state media is reporting that China's Embassy in Kyiv notified its citizens in Ukraine to heighten their safety awareness and avoid conflict areas.

TOKYO — Japan's Prime Minister Fumio Kishida criticized Russia for violating Ukrainian sovereignty and territorial integrity and said his country will discuss possible "severe actions" including sanctions with the international community.

Kishida was responding to Russian President Vladimir Putin's signing Monday of decree recognizing the independence of two separatist regions in eastern Ukraine, ordering his troops to "maintain peace" in those areas. Putin's announcement raised fears of an imminent invasion.

"Those actions are unacceptable, and we express our strong condemnation," Kishida told reporters Tuesday. "Japan is watching the development with grave concern."

Separately, Foreign Minister Yoshimasa Hayashi said Tuesday it was important that Group of Seven nations that share values such as democracy and rule of law stick together and lead the international community.

UNITED NATIONS — The U.S. ambassador to the United Nations has dismissed "as nonsense" Russian President Vladimir Putin's announcement that he is putting Russian troops in separatist areas of eastern Ukraine as peacekeepers, saying their presence is "clearly the basis for Russia's attempt to create a pretext for a further invasion of Ukraine."

Linda Thomas-Greenfield told an emergency meeting of the U.N. Security Council on Monday night that this move and Putin's earlier announcement that Russia will recognize the separatist areas as "independent

Groton Daily Independent

Tuesday, Feb. 22, 2022 ~ Vol. 30 - No. 230 ~ 33 of 68

states" are also an "unprovoked" attack on Ukraine's sovereignty and territorial integrity. By his actions, she said, Putin "has torn the Minsk Agreement to shreds."

Thomas-Greenfield said Putin "has put before the world a choice" and it "must not look away" because "history tells us that looking the other way in the face of such hostility will be a far more costly path."

She said Putin is testing to see "how far he can push us all," and all countries must stand up for the sovereignty, independence and territorial integrity of all countries.

Thomas-Greenfield warned that "the consequences of Russia's actions will be dire — across Ukraine, across Europe, and across the globe."

WELLINGTON, New Zealand — New Zealand Foreign Minister Nanaia Mahuta said there was no basis under international law for recognizing the separatist regions, and that by doing so Russia was further undermining Ukraine's sovereignty and territorial integrity.

"We are concerned that this is a calculated act by President Putin to create a pretext for invasion, which would be a clear act of aggression. We again call for urgent diplomatic efforts to find a peaceful resolution," Mahuta said in a statement.

TRIABUNNA, Australia — Australia's Prime Minister Scott Morrison said Russia should "unconditionally withdraw" from Ukrainian territory and cease to threaten its neighbors.

Russian President Vladimir Putin ordered forces Monday to "maintain peace" in separatist regions of eastern Ukraine, hours after the Kremlin recognized the area's independence. The announcement raised fears that an invasion was imminent, if not already underway.

Morrison at a news conference Tuesday in Australia's Tasmania state said Russia's actions were "unacceptable, it's unprovoked, it's unwarranted."

"It is important that like-minded countries who denounce this sort of behavior do stick together and I can assure you that the moment that other countries put in place strong and severe sanctions on Russia, we will be in lockstep with them," he said.

Poverty, fear drive exodus from Syria's one-time IS capital

By SAMYA KULLAB Associated Press

RAQQA, Syria (AP) — In a square that a few years ago was a grim stage for the Islamic State group's brutal rule in the Syrian city of Raqqa, Mahmoud Dander sat deep in thought.

He wants to leave Syria, but has a problem: The 75-year-old has no money. He recalled the old days before protests and wars led to his country's collapse and national currency crash: Syria wasn't thriving back then, but he had work, his children had university degrees and decent futures, and food was always on the table.

That's all gone now. "We have fallen, just like our currency," he said.

Raqqa, the former de facto capital of the self-proclaimed IS caliphate and home to about 300,000 people, is now free, but many of its residents try to leave. Those with property are trying to sell it to save up for the journey to Turkey. Those without money struggle to get by.

At least 3,000 people left Raqqa for Turkey in 2021, according to the city's civil council co-chair Mohammed Nour.

Their reasons span the spectrum of post-war life in Syria, one of the world's most complex conflict zones. They include economic collapse and widespread unemployment following one of the worst years of drought, as well as fears of an IS comeback and a proliferation of criminal gangs. And there is the looming specter of conflict between rival powers that control various parts of northern Syria, including Turkey, Russia and Syrian government forces.

On the surface, the city's slow recovery from IS rule is evident. Cafes and restaurant are full of patrons. Kurdish-led forces stand guard at every major intersection.

But poverty is rampant in the majority Arab city administered by U.S.-backed Kurdish-led forces. People

Groton Daily Independent

Tuesday, Feb. 22, 2022 ~ Vol. 30 - No. 230 ~ 34 of 68

line up for basics such as bread. Unemployed young men sit around. Water and electricity are limited. Many live among bombed-out ruins. Local officials say at least 30% of the city remains destroyed.

Poverty and unemployment drive young men into the arms of IS. Kurdish investigators say new IS recruits captured last month had been lured by money. At the same time, the Kurdish-led city administration received applications from 27,000 job seekers last year, but had no jobs.

Milhem Daher, a 35-year-old engineer, is in the process of selling his home, businesses and properties to pay a smuggler to take him and his family of eight to Turkey, a key route for Syrian migrants trying to win asylum in Europe.

He plans to leave as soon as he has enough money.

Daher had survived Raqqa's recent violent history, including the outbreak of Syria's civil war in 2011, and the 2014 takeover by IS militants who turned the city into the capital of their caliphate spanning parts of Syria and Iraq. A U.S.-led coalition dropped thousands of bombs on the once vibrant city to drive out IS, liberating it in 2017. IS lost its last territorial foothold in Syria in 2019.

Daher emerged from the dark chapter ready to invest, but said he faced many obstacles, including a lack of resources and export markets. "If you sell to locals, it won't generate profit," he said.

For his first project, Daher bought seeds to cultivate vegetables. When it was time to harvest, traders weren't interested in paying the asking price.

He purchased trucks to lift rubble amid reconstruction efforts. But the quality of the vehicles quickly degraded as a result of poor fuel in the market and lack of materials for upkeep. A potato chip factory and internet service company also floundered.

Finally, Daher bought livestock, but a devastating drought led to shortages in animal feed. His cattle died.

Now he is selling off what remains of these failed businesses to start a new life. He needs \$10,000.

In Raqqa, having money can also be a problem as kidnappings-for-ransom are on the rise.

Real estate developer Imam al-Hasan, 37, was taken from his home and held for days by attackers in military fatigues. To secure his release, he paid \$400,000, money belonging to him and traders who trusted him with their life savings. He complained to the local authorities, but he said nothing was done. A month after the ordeal, bruises are still visible on his face and legs.

Al-Hasan, too, is selling his home and belongings. "There is nothing left for me here," he said.

Two of Al-Hasan's relatives who left in September and recently arrived in Europe said that apart from economic uncertainty it was the threat of more violence that pushed them to leave.

"At any moment the situation could explode, how can I stay there?" said Ibrahim, 27. He and Mohammed, 41, spoke under the condition that only their first names be used, citing security concerns for their wives and children still living in the city.

Like many others, their journey from northeastern Syria to Europe began via tunnels along the town of Ras al-Ain, which straddles the border with Turkey.

The smuggler had charged \$2,000 per person. From there, the path to Europe was riddled with risk.

Ibrahim arrived in Germany last week after an arduous journey that began in Belarus. Mohammed walked for treacherous miles before setting off for Greece by boat. He ended up in The Netherlands in October.

Mohammed is waiting for a chance to bring his family from Raqqa to Europe, he said in a phone interview. For now, he is without work.

Back in Raqqa, Reem al-Ani, 70, prepares tea for two. Her son is the only one of four children who has remained in Syria. The others are spread across the world.

The stairs leading to their apartment are riddled with bullet holes, remnants of battles to dislodge IS. The ceilings are charred from smoke.

She has grown accustomed to a silent house. "I miss them," she said of her children.

Nearby, in Naim Square, the elderly Dander says he barely makes ends meet, surviving on his rapidly diminishing pension from his previous government job.

His three children have university degrees in engineering and literature, and one was a teacher, he said. But none have been able to find work. He wishes he had the money to help them leave.

"I spend every day thinking about how to get out," he said.

War fears grow as Putin orders troops to eastern Ukraine

By VLADIMIR ISACHENKOV, YURAS KARMANAU and LORNE COOK Associated Press

MOSCOW (AP) — A long-feared Russian invasion of Ukraine appeared to be imminent Monday, if not already underway, with Russian President Vladimir Putin ordering forces into separatist regions of eastern Ukraine.

A vaguely worded decree signed by Putin did not say if troops were on the move, and it cast the order as an effort to “maintain peace.” But it appeared to dash the slim remaining hopes of averting a major conflict in Europe that could cause massive casualties, energy shortages on the continent and economic chaos around the globe.

Putin’s directive came hours after he recognized the separatist regions in a rambling, fact-bending discourse on European history. The move paved the way to provide them military support, antagonizing Western leaders who regard it as a breach of world order, and set off a frenzied scramble by the U.S. and others to respond.

Underscoring the urgency, the U.N. Security Council held a rare nighttime emergency meeting on Monday at the request of Ukraine, the U.S. and other countries. Undersecretary-General Rosemary DiCarlo opened the session with a warning that “the risk of major conflict is real and needs to be prevented at all costs.”

Ukraine’s president, Volodymyr Zelenskyy, sought to project calm, telling the country: “We are not afraid of anyone or anything. We don’t owe anyone anything. And we won’t give anything to anyone.” His foreign minister, Dmytro Kuleba, would be in Washington on Tuesday to meet with Secretary of State Antony Blinken, the State Department said.

The White House issued an executive order to prohibit U.S. investment and trade in the separatist regions, and additional measures — likely sanctions — were to be announced Tuesday. Those sanctions are independent of what Washington has prepared in the event of a Russian invasion, according to a senior administration official who briefed reporters on the condition of anonymity.

The State Department, meanwhile, said U.S. personnel in Lviv — in Ukraine’s far west — would spend the night in Poland but return to Ukraine to continue their diplomatic work and emergency consular services. It again urged any American citizens in Ukraine to leave immediately.

The developments came during a spike in skirmishes in the eastern regions that Western powers believe Russia could use as a pretext for an attack on the Western-looking democracy that has defied Moscow’s attempts to pull it back into its orbit.

Putin justified his decision in a far-reaching, pre-recorded speech blaming NATO for the current crisis and calling the U.S.-led alliance an existential threat to Russia. Sweeping through more than a century of history, he painted today’s Ukraine as a modern construct that is inextricably linked to Russia. He charged that Ukraine had inherited Russia’s historic lands and after the Soviet collapse was used by the West to contain Russia.

“I consider it necessary to take a long-overdue decision: To immediately recognize the independence and sovereignty of Donetsk People’s Republic and Luhansk People’s Republic,” Putin said.

Afterward he signed matching decrees recognizing the two regions’ independence, eight years after fighting erupted between Russia-backed separatists and Ukrainian forces, and called on lawmakers to approve measures paving the way for military support.

Until now, Ukraine and the West have accused Russia of supporting the separatists with arms and troops, but Moscow has denied that, saying that Russians who fought there were volunteers.

At an earlier meeting of Putin’s Security Council, a stream of top officials argued for recognizing the regions’ independence. One slipped up and said he favored including them as part of Russia — but Putin quickly corrected him.

Recognizing the separatist regions’ independence is likely to be popular in Russia, where many share Putin’s worldview. Russian state media released images of people in Donetsk setting off fireworks, waving large Russian flags and playing Russia’s national anthem.

Groton Daily Independent

Tuesday, Feb. 22, 2022 ~ Vol. 30 - No. 230 ~ 36 of 68

Ukrainians in Kyiv, meanwhile, bristled at the move.

"Why should Russia recognize (the rebel-held regions)? If neighbors come to you and say, 'This room will be ours,' would you care about their opinion or not? It's your flat, and it will be always your flat," said Maria Levchyshchyna, a 48-year-old painter in the Ukrainian capital. "Let them recognize whatever they want. But in my view, it can also provoke a war, because normal people will fight for their country."

With an estimated 150,000 Russian troops massed on three sides of Ukraine, the U.S. has warned that Moscow has already decided to invade. Still, President Joe Biden and Putin tentatively agreed to a meeting brokered by French President Emmanuel Macron in a last-ditch effort to avoid war.

If Russia moves in, the meeting will be off, but the prospect of a face-to-face summit resuscitated hopes in diplomacy to prevent a conflict that could devastate Ukraine and cause huge economic damage across Europe, which is heavily dependent on Russian energy.

Russia says it wants Western guarantees that NATO won't allow Ukraine and other former Soviet countries to join as members — and Putin said Monday that a simple moratorium on Ukraine's accession wouldn't be enough. Moscow has also demanded the alliance halt weapons deployments to Ukraine and roll back its forces from Eastern Europe — demands flatly rejected by the West.

Macron's office said Biden and Putin had "accepted the principle of such a summit," to be followed by a broader meeting that would include other "relevant stakeholders to discuss security and strategic stability in Europe."

U.S. national security adviser Jake Sullivan, meanwhile, said the administration has always been ready to talk to avert a war — but was also prepared to respond to any attack.

During Monday night's emergency meeting, the U.S. ambassador to the United Nations, Linda Thomas-Greenfield, said Putin "has put before the world a choice" and it "must not look away" because "history tells us that looking the other way in the face of such hostility will be a far more costly path."

China's U.N. Ambassador Zhang Jun called for restraint and a diplomatic solution to the crisis.

Putin's announcement shattered a 2015 peace deal signed in Minsk requiring Ukraine to offer broad self-rule to the rebel regions, a major diplomatic coup for Moscow.

That deal was resented by many in Ukraine who saw it as a capitulation, a blow to the country's integrity and a betrayal of national interests. Putin and other officials argued Monday that the Ukrainian government has shown no appetite for implementing it.

Over 14,000 people have been killed since conflict erupted in the eastern industrial heartland of Donbas in 2014, shortly after Moscow annexed Ukraine's Crimean Peninsula.

Potential flashpoints multiplied. Sustained shelling continued Monday along the tense line of contact separating the opposing forces. Unusually, Russia said it had fended off an "incursion" from Ukraine — which Ukrainian officials denied. And Russia decided to prolong military drills in Belarus, which could offer a staging ground for an attack on the Ukrainian capital, Kyiv.

Ukraine and the separatist rebels have traded blame for cease-fire violations with hundreds of explosions recorded daily.

While separatists have charged that Ukrainian forces were firing on residential areas, Associated Press journalists reporting from several towns and villages in Ukrainian-held territory along the line of contact have not witnessed any notable escalation from the Ukrainian side and have documented signs of intensified shelling by the separatists that destroyed homes and ripped up roads.

Some residents of the main rebel-held city of Donetsk described sporadic shelling by Ukrainian forces, but they added that it wasn't on the same scale as earlier in the conflict.

The separatist authorities said Monday that at least four civilians were killed by Ukrainian shelling over the past 24 hours, and several others were wounded. Ukraine's military said two Ukrainian soldiers were killed over the weekend, and another serviceman was wounded Monday.

Ukrainian military spokesman Pavlo Kovalchuk insisted that Ukrainian forces weren't returning fire.

In the village of Novognativka on the Ukraine government-controlled side, 60-year-old Ekaterina Evseeva said the shelling was worse than at the height of fighting early in the conflict.

"We are on the edge of nervous breakdowns," she said, her voice trembling. "And there is nowhere to run."

Groton Daily Independent

Tuesday, Feb. 22, 2022 ~ Vol. 30 - No. 230 ~ 37 of 68

In another worrying sign, the Russian military said it killed five suspected "saboteurs" who crossed from Ukraine into Russia's Rostov region and also destroyed two armored vehicles and took a Ukrainian serviceman prisoner. Ukrainian Border Guard spokesman Andriy Demchenko dismissed the claim as "disinformation."

With fears of invasion high, the U.S. administration sent a letter to the United Nations human rights chief claiming that Moscow has compiled a list of Ukrainians to be killed or sent to detention camps after the invasion. The letter, first reported by The New York Times, was obtained by the AP.

Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov said the claim was a lie and no such list exists.

Biden agency vacancies to drag on White House priorities

By FATIMA HUSSEIN, RICARDO ALONSO-ZALDIVAR, HOPE YEN and COLLEEN LONG Associated Press WASHINGTON (AP) — For more than a year, the Food and Drug Administration lacked a permanent head when the agency was central in the battle against COVID-19. Once President Joe Biden nominated Dr. Robert Califf to head the agency, it took the Senate three months to confirm him.

The political battles over Califf's nomination highlight the difficulties that Biden faces in filling key positions throughout his administration.

The vacancies in high-ranking positions across the executive branch could put a drag on Biden's ability to fight the pandemic, implement the \$1 trillion bipartisan infrastructure law and boost the economy with inflation levels at a 40-year high.

"Without leadership and experts, we've seen departments increasingly stressed," said Maya MacGuineas, president of the bipartisan Committee for a Responsible Federal Budget. "There is a struggle to get appropriations done, there is talk about defaulting on the debt ceiling," she said, adding that unfilled jobs affect the government's fiscal position and the president's overall agenda.

The nonprofit Partnership for Public Service, which works to make government more effective, points to 70 high-ranking positions across the government without a confirmed nominee, including at the Department of Health and Human Services, the Treasury Department and the Transportation Department.

The White House blames gridlock from Republicans in a sharply divided Senate, but it also has not submitted nominations for many of the open positions.

The White House says the Biden administration has nominated 569 people, of whom 302 have been confirmed and 247 are waiting to go through the confirmation process. That's out of 1,200 civilian positions requiring Senate confirmation.

In Biden's first year, the Senate confirmed 41% of his nominations, according to the Partnership for Public Service. In comparison, 75% of George W. Bush's nominees were confirmed in his first year, compared with 69% for Barack Obama and 57% for Donald Trump.

The group is calling for a reduction in the number of Senate-confirmed nominees, stating that vetting and disclosure requirements are increasingly complex, and delays in the Senate confirmation process grow with each transition.

"Would it be better if it could happen faster? Yes," said former Treasury Secretary Jack Lew. "Ideally the confirmation process would be streamlined." But he added that there needs to be accountability for these important positions and a process for questioning nominees about how they would do the job.

Lew was confirmed by the Senate less than two months after he was nominated by Obama.

What the vacancies mean for some of Biden's policy priorities:

CREATING FISCAL POLICY

At the Treasury Department, at least five Senate-confirmed positions are unfilled, including the undersecretary for international affairs and treasurer of the U.S.

A Treasury Department without an international affairs head will make Secretary Janet Yellen's hope to lead the implementation of a global corporate taxation agreement increasingly difficult.

Lew told The Associated Press that having Senate-confirmed people with prior policymaking and government experience on staff will at least fill in the gaps where vacancies exist.

"If you look at the Treasury team, starting at the very top, you have the secretary and and deputy

Groton Daily Independent

Tuesday, Feb. 22, 2022 ~ Vol. 30 - No. 230 ~ 38 of 68

secretary with deep experience in policymaking," he said. "You've got a lot of career talent, which makes transitions go more smoothly."

The key to filling empty seats, he said, "is getting the congressional process to work better."

FIGHTING THE PANDEMIC

At the Department of Health and Human Services, two major science agencies remain without permanent Senate-confirmed leadership at a time as the administration struggles with its communications on the pandemic and the country might be reopening.

One of the agencies is the FDA. Califf's nomination had stalled for months in the Senate in part due to his consulting work for pharmaceutical companies and allegations that he had failed to effectively regulate addictive opioids. He was narrowly confirmed last week to the post, which he had held briefly under Obama.

The National Institutes of Health is also missing a director, although budget uncertainty is currently a bigger concern, said Ellie Dehoney a top policy expert with Research!America, a nonprofit that advocates for national spending on health and medical research.

"They are constrained because they are under an old budget and they can't launch new programs very easily," she said.

Staff morale remains steady nonetheless. "What we have heard around NIH is a desire to stay and particularly to see through this pandemic," Dehoney said.

IMPLEMENTING INFRASTRUCTURE PLANS

At the Transportation Department, acting heads are in place at the Federal Highway Administration and the Federal Motor Carrier Safety Administration, two of the three agencies at the forefront of promoting roadway safety, even as the department launches a new national strategy to stave off record increases in traffic fatalities. The third agency, the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration, is awaiting full Senate confirmation of Steven Cliff, Biden's pick to head the agency, after a committee approved the nomination Feb. 2.

The department also lacks a nominee for head of the Pipeline Hazardous Materials Safety Administration and will soon have a vacancy as well for head of the Federal Aviation Administration after Stephen Dickson steps down on March 31.

At the highway agency, deputy administrator Stephanie Pollack, a former state transportation secretary in Massachusetts, is key in implementing provisions of Biden's new infrastructure law, such as helping to issue guidance to states on use of billions in highway money and distribute competitive grants to promote traffic safety.

At the motor carrier agency, which regulates the trucking industry, Biden lost his pick for administrator after Meera Joshi left to take a post in New York Mayor Eric Adams' administration. The department recently shifted its deputy assistant secretary for safety policy, Robin Hutcheson, to serve as the agency's acting administrator.

Jonathan Adkins, executive director of the Governors Highway Safety Association, which represents state safety offices, expressed concern about the ability of the acting heads to effectively get work done.

Acting leaders typically have fewer staff around them and tend to be less publicly visible, he said. Currently the motor carrier agency has a number of proposed truck safety regulations yet to complete and is also working on changes to ease congestion in the U.S. supply chain. The highway agency, meanwhile, stands at the forefront of prodding states and localities to embrace changes to road design and speed limits to help curtail deaths.

EXPLORING GUN CONTROL

Early in his presidency, Biden nominated David Chipman to lead the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms and Explosives, but the former ATF agent and gun control advocate faced opposition in the Senate and was seen as one of the administration's most contentious nominees. The nomination was withdrawn.

The withdrawal continued a pattern for both Republican and Democratic administrations with the politically fraught position since it was made confirmable in 2006. Since then, only one nominee, former U.S. Attorney B. Todd Jones, has been confirmed. Jones made it through the Senate in 2013 but only after a

Groton Daily Independent

Tuesday, Feb. 22, 2022 ~ Vol. 30 - No. 230 ~ 39 of 68

six-month struggle. Jones was acting director when Obama nominated him in January 2013.

Trump's nomination of Chuck Canterbury, a former president of the Fraternal Order of Police, was withdrawn in 2020 over Republican concerns about his gun rights stance.

"Our collective view here is that the blocking of a fully qualified, experienced former ATF agent from serving in that role certainly is something Republicans didn't have to take the step to do, but here we are," said White House press secretary Jen Psaki. She did not blame Democrats, who also said they would not vote for him. "So, we have to nominate a new person. And when the president finds the right person, I'm sure he'll be prepared to do that."

MacGuineas, of the Committee for a Responsible Federal Budget, said a "failure to govern" is to blame for the slowed nomination process.

"People have been nominated who are too controversial to be nominated, or the White House knows they're going to be held up," she said. "The way we are organized right now is highly inefficient with Congress highly polarized."

One American life, set on new course by Nixon's China visit

By TED ANTHONY AP National Writer

BEIJING (AP) — Each afternoon, just after the midday rest break, we'd gather in the music room of Fangcaodi Elementary School. The teacher would hand out a song sheet, mimeographed on pulp paper. We'd stand, ramrod straight, and sing Chinese songs with stirring tunes and — no other way to put it — lyrics of Communist propaganda.

"We are all crack shots. Every bullet annihilates one enemy."

"We are thankful to dear Chairman Mao for building our beautiful school."

"Worker, farmer, soldier — unite and rise up!"

It was the fall of 1979, and I was 11. Three months earlier, I had been sitting in Three Rivers Stadium in Pittsburgh, watching the Pirates start a run that would end in a World Series win I would miss. I was a suburban kid who just wanted to hang out with my friends.

Suddenly I found myself in the belly of what was still, back home, being called "Red China." Though I didn't realize the momentousness of it at first, we were one of the earliest American families to move to China in the months after it and the United States normalized relations.

For this, I had Richard Nixon to thank.

Nixon visited Mao Zedong in Beijing 50 years ago this week, when they both led their respective nations. Nixon called it "the week that changed the world." Seven years later, on Jan. 1, 1979, that meeting echoed into irrevocable history when their successors, President Jimmy Carter and then-Vice Premier Deng Xiaoping, officially established diplomatic relations.

Deng was not China's "paramount leader" yet. But his new project — launching something called "reform and opening-up" that would help infuse capitalism into the communist system — was part of why I ended up in China at age 11.

When China opened to Americans, young people hurried there to teach English. But other than being native speakers, few had language-teaching qualifications. So to teach its teachers to teach English after years of isolation, the Chinese Education Ministry recruited language teachers like my parents, linguists at the University of Pittsburgh.

And so it was that in mid-July 1979 we joined the earliest wave of American families to move to China. My parents were dubbed "foreign experts" and were named to one-year posts at the Beijing Foreign Languages Institute No. 1.

We were installed in the Friendship Hotel, a sprawling compound in then-bucolic northwest Beijing that had been built in the 1950s to house Soviet advisers. It was a miniature city, complete with barbers, a butcher, a movie theater and a huge swimming pool with a 10-meter diving platform. We had the run of most of the place.

Groton Daily Independent

Tuesday, Feb. 22, 2022 ~ Vol. 30 - No. 230 ~ 40 of 68

One day, in the compound's "international club," where my parents drank Wuxing Beer with their friends, a rumor spread. Chinese television was going to broadcast its first American show, and the club was the only public place in the compound with a TV set.

The next week we all gathered around a tiny screen. The credits rolled. It was "The Man From Atlantis," a forgettable sci-fi show starring Patrick Duffy, later of "Dallas." It's hard to convey today, in our on-demand world, how thrilled we handful of American kids were at the rare connection to home.

Most Chinese people we encountered — from my teachers at Fangcaodi to my parents' colleagues to random workers I befriended after learning to speak their language — were fascinated by America and knew little of its citizens. They loved hearing about baseball, about McDonald's (which would arrive 12 years later) and about something that astonished everyone in this culture of bicycles: Most Americans had their own cars.

Not everyone was captivated by the United States, though — or, at least, by its leadership. After all, China had just lived through the traumatic Cultural Revolution and had been conditioned to view Americans as bourgeois capitalist "running dogs."

Across Beijing then were red billboards documenting various iterations of "Mao Zhuxi sixiang" — "Chairman Mao thought." We were with a Chinese colleague of my parents and passed such a sign being erected. It was bright red and still blank.

The colleague pointed to it, looked at my parents and quipped: "Jimmy Carter thought."

For me today, China in 1979 seems like a distant movie montage that plays in my head.

I picture old men on street corners selling roasted sunflower seeds out of burlap sacks — snacks that tasted vaguely like the burning coal whose scent filled the winter air. I picture young women selling penny popsicles from icebox pushcarts. I picture my school, where kids from divergent cultures — Burma, Bangladesh, Uganda, Rhodesia, even North Korea — were being taught music and math and art in Chinese and could interact and play only if we learned the language. We did, and fast.

I picture our epic, tightly supervised railroad trip across China in February 1980 — all the way from Beijing to Sichuan, out west, before we boarded a boat back east down the Yangtze River. We encountered town after town of people who'd never seen Westerners before — much less Westerners who spoke Beijing-accented Chinese.

They'd gather around us in droves, watching and smiling, always willing to engage and — when they learned we shared a language — tell us about themselves. They'd pepper me with questions, usually about the little instamatic camera I was carrying. If I got a Chinese tone wrong, they'd instantly correct me; I may have been a foreigner, but I was still a child, after all. I learned as much from those conversations as I did from my classes back in Beijing.

Those images have been overwritten in my mind by images of a new China — a modern China, a fast-moving China, an intricate global presence that touches most every corner of human existence.

So many years later, this is what I want to tell you about living in China at that more-pivotal-than-we-realized moment in history: For me, it shaped what being an American meant.

Before humans could access the world on the phones in our pockets, it was rare to see your country both from the inside looking out and from the outside looking in — particularly from the vantage point of a culture so eager to engage. That perspective, given to me as a child by so many Chinese people both remembered and forgotten, is something I carry with me.

My travels through China that year, and the people I met, also gave me insight into how to listen. The men and women who wanted to know about my American life also told me about their Chinese lives. And though I knew I was passing through and living a life of drastically different circumstances, the language I suddenly shared with them made me realize they were not merely people to see, but people to hear — and, by extension, to work to understand. Which is what brought me back to China years later.

On Sunday, 43 years after moving to Beijing as a child and two decades after living here as a journalist, I covered the closing ceremony of the Winter Olympics. For two weeks, I'd been moving around the

COVID "bubble" with the places I loved just out of reach. I had dinner a block from my old school but could not take my colleagues to see it. I smelled Beijing's winter air and caught no whiff of coal. I was sad, but I was OK with it, too. That China is gone, and the complex nation that has replaced it is just as exciting, if not more so.

I still have the pulp pages of those long-ago songs that tried to indoctrinate me. They remind me of something my mother told me long ago: As important as it is to learn about a culture and respect its customs when you live there, you must leave something valuable behind, too. That way, people contemplating the question "What is an American like?" might use you as the example — for the right reason. China became my proving ground for that.

And all that, oddly, is why I — and, I'd wager, other American kids I knew here so long ago — owe an unlikely debt of gratitude to Richard Nixon, who 50 years ago this week helped open the door.

3 cops' trial in Floyd killing heads to closing arguments

By STEVE KARNOWSKI and AMY FORLITI Associated Press

ST. PAUL, Minn. (AP) — Closing arguments were expected Tuesday in the federal trial of three former Minneapolis police officers charged with violating George Floyd's civil rights, with jurors to get the case after a month of testimony.

Thomas Lane was the final officer to present his defense, testifying Monday he didn't realize how dire Floyd's condition was while handcuffed, facedown on the street with Officer Derek Chauvin's knee pressed to his neck — until paramedics turned Floyd over.

"What went through your mind when you saw his face there, once he was tipped over?" Earl Gray, Lane's attorney, asked.

"Um. He didn't look good," Lane said.

Lane, J. Alexander Kueng and Tou Thao are charged with depriving Floyd of his right to medical care as Chauvin pressed his knee into Floyd's neck for 9 1/2 minutes. Lane held the 45-year-old Black man's feet, Kueng knelt on his back and Thao held back bystanders.

Kueng and Thao are also charged with failing to intervene to stop Chauvin in the May 25, 2020, killing that triggered protests worldwide and a re-examination of racism and policing.

Chauvin pleaded guilty in the federal case in December, months after being convicted of state murder and manslaughter charges.

The judge and attorneys have indicated closing arguments could take almost the whole day Tuesday. The jury will get instructions from the judge before deliberations begin.

The trial was nearing an end just as another major civil rights case went to a jury Monday in Georgia. In that case, three white men are charged with hate crimes in the death of Ahmaud Arbery, the 25-year-old Black man who was chased and shot in February 2020.

In the Minnesota trial, prosecutors have argued that the officers violated their training by not rolling Floyd onto his side or giving him CPR. Defense attorneys have attacked the department's training as inadequate and said they have highlighted a culture that they said emphasized deference to senior officers like Chauvin.

Prosecutors said at the start of the trial that the officers stood by as Chauvin slowly killed Floyd in front of them.

They presented weeks of testimony and evidence about the officers' training, arguing that they knew they had a duty to intervene to stop Chauvin, and that they knew they had a duty to render medical aid. They have argued that Floyd's condition was so serious, even bystanders without basic medical training could see he needed help.

Defense attorneys have argued the Minneapolis Police Department's training was inadequate. They also attacked a police culture that they said teaches officers to defer to their seniors, saying that Chauvin called all the shots at the scene. Lane and Kueng, both rookies, argued they deferred to Chauvin.

Lane testified that he asked twice if Floyd should be rolled over, but was rebuffed, and he held his position because an ambulance was on the way.

Kueng testified that Chauvin was his former training officer who had considerable sway over his career. He said he trusted Chauvin's advice.

Thao testified that he was watching the bystanders and he trusted that the officers behind him were caring for Floyd.

At the start of the monthlong trial, U.S. District Judge Paul Magnuson selected a total of 18 jurors, including six alternates. Fifteen people now remain — 12 who will deliberate and three alternates. The court did not release demographic information, but the jury appeared largely white, with one woman who appeared to be of Asian descent, among the 12 expected to deliberate.

Lane, who is white; Kueng, who is Black; and Thao, who is Hmong American, also face a separate state trial in June on charges alleging that they aided and abetted murder and manslaughter.

Michigan's Howard suspended 5 games for Wisconsin melee

By LARRY LAGE AP Sports Writer

ANN ARBOR, Mich. (AP) — Michigan basketball coach Juwan Howard has been suspended the final five games of the regular season and fined \$40,000 for hitting a Wisconsin assistant in the head, triggering a postgame melee.

The Big Ten Conference also on Monday suspended three players one game for the altercation following the Badgers' 77-63 win on Sunday: Michigan's Moussa Diabate and Terrance Williams II, and Jahcobi Neath of Wisconsin.

Wisconsin coach Greg Gard was fined \$10,000 for violating the conference's sportsmanship policy, but was not suspended. Howard is expected to be back for the Big Ten tournament, which begins March 9 in Indianapolis.

"After taking time to reflect on all that happened, I realize how unacceptable both my actions and words were, and how they affected so many," Howard said Monday in a statement released by the university. "I am truly sorry."

Phil Martelli will serve as Michigan's interim coach in Howard's absence. Michigan's final five regular-season games are home contests with Rutgers on Wednesday, No. 15 Illinois on Sunday, Michigan State on March 1 and No. 25 Iowa on March 3 plus a visit to No. 22 Ohio State on March 6.

"Big Ten Conference coaches and student-athletes are expected to display the highest level of sportsmanship conduct," Big Ten Commissioner Kevin Warren said in a statement. "I am grateful for the partnership with Michigan Athletics Director, Warde Manuel and Wisconsin Athletics Director, Chris McIntosh. Our expectation is that the incident yesterday will provide our coaches and student-athletes with the opportunity to reflect, learn and move forward in a manner that demonstrates decorum and leadership on and off of the court."

Howard, a former NBA player and the reigning Associated Press men's coach of the year, was upset after Gard called a timeout with 15 seconds left and his team leading by 15 on Sunday.

The altercation began in the postgame handshake line, when Gard grabbed Howard by the arm in an attempt to explain why he called the timeout. Howard yelled "Don't (expletive) touch me!" and put his right index finger in Gard's face as the two began to argue.

"At that point, I felt it was time to protect myself," Howard said in his postgame news conference.

After the two coaches were separated, Howard swung his right hand and struck Wisconsin assistant Joe Krabbenhoft on the left side of the head with an open hand.

"Someone touched me and I think it was very uncalled for, for them to touch me, as we were verbalizing and communicating with one another," Howard said Sunday. "That's what escalated it."

Players from each side got involved in the skirmish, and video appeared to show Diabate and Neath throwing punches.

In his statement Monday, Howard apologized to Krabbenhoft as well as Michigan's players and their families, his staff, his own family and "Michigan fans around the world."

"I speak a lot about being a Michigan man and representing the University of Michigan with class and

Groton Daily Independent

Tuesday, Feb. 22, 2022 ~ Vol. 30 - No. 230 ~ 43 of 68

pride," Howard said. "I did not do that, nor did I set the right example in the right way for my student-athletes. I will learn from this mistake, and this mistake will never happen again. No excuses!"

Gard said Sunday he took the timeout because his backup players had four seconds to get the ball across half court and he wanted to reset the clock to 10 seconds.

"Maybe he doesn't know the rule, that you get the 10 seconds reset," Gard said. "I wasn't going to put my players in that type of situation, to have to break a press in four seconds coming in cold off the bench. I wouldn't do that for a regular group. I can take a timeout. That gives my players the best chance to have success. So that's where it started. He said, 'I'll remember that. I'll remember that.' I said, 'Hey, let me tell you why I did.' He didn't want any part of that."

Wisconsin athletic director Chris McIntosh said after the game that the Badgers had staff members who were "affected and injured," during the altercation.

"Needless to say, there is no place in college athletics for what happened at the end of Sunday's game," McIntosh said Monday in a statement. "Neither Coach Gard nor his staff had any intent to provoke or incite any of what took place. I want to commend those on our staff - and student-athletes - who were trying to de-escalate the situation.

"Our staff has my complete support, as do our student-athletes. I consider the \$10,000 fine from the Big Ten to be a 'Wisconsin fine' and not a 'Greg Gard fine.' Wisconsin Athletics will assume the responsibility for paying the fine."

Michigan athletic director Warde Manuel issued a statement Sunday saying that he had apologized to McIntosh and that Michigan President Mary Sue Coleman had contacted Wisconsin Chancellor Rebecca Blank "to apologize for the totally unacceptable behavior."

"Today's disciplinary action underscores the seriousness with which we take the incident that unfolded on Sunday," Manuel said Monday in a statement. "Simply put, there is no room at U-M for the behavior we saw. We will learn from this incident as a department, work to improve ourselves while operating under a spotlight, and move forward in a positive light."

This isn't Howard's first high-profile incident with another Big Ten coach.

Last season, Howard got into a shouting match with then-Maryland coach Mark Turgeon and had to be restrained during the conference tournament. Howard drew two technical fouls and was ejected from a game Michigan ended up winning 79-66.

The Wolverines (14-11, 8-7) started the season with aspirations of contending for the national championship and are closing it trying to earn an NCAA Tournament bid.

Howard is in his third season as Michigan's coach after being part of Michigan's Fab Five teams three decades ago. Last season, he helped the Wolverines win the Big Ten title, 23 games and reach the NCAA Tournament regional finals.

Diabate has 5.7 rebounds per game to rank second on Michigan's team and also averages 9.3 points. Williams is a reserve forward playing 15.4 minutes per game.

Neath is a reserve guard playing 8.9 minutes per game for Wisconsin. He will miss the 13th-ranked Badgers' game Wednesday at Minnesota.

Protester drives at New Zealand police as cordon tightens

By NICK PERRY Associated Press

WELLINGTON, New Zealand (AP) — One protester drove a car toward a New Zealand police line, narrowly avoiding officers, while other protesters sprayed officers with a stinging substance, police said Tuesday, as they tightened a cordon around a convoy that has been camped outside Parliament for two weeks.

The clashes in the capital of Wellington came a day after police reported that some of the protesters had thrown human feces at them.

Police Assistant Commissioner Richard Chambers told reporters the actions of some of the protesters, who oppose coronavirus vaccine mandates, were unacceptable and would be dealt with assertively.

"Our focus remains on opening the roads up to Wellingtonians and doing our absolute best to restore

Groton Daily Independent

Tuesday, Feb. 22, 2022 ~ Vol. 30 - No. 230 ~ 44 of 68

peaceful protest," Chambers said. "The behavior of a certain group within the protest community is absolutely disgraceful."

Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern said protesters had taken things too far and needed to return home.

"What's happening in Wellington is wrong," she said.

The latest clashes began after about 250 officers and staff arrived at dawn and used forklifts to move concrete barriers into a tighter cordon around the encampment, where hundreds of cars and trucks remain blocking city streets. Police have used the barriers this week to allow protest cars to leave but none to enter.

Video posted online shows a white car driving the wrong way down a one-way street toward a group of officers who quickly get out of the way while people shout. The vehicle comes to a stop at the police line and several officers climb inside and pull out the driver.

Police said the officers had been lucky to escape injury after the car stopped just short of colliding with them. They said they had arrested one person for driving in a dangerous manner and two others for obstructing police.

Chambers said the three officers who were sprayed with the unknown stinging substance had been treated at a hospital and were recovering well.

The protest, which began when a convoy of cars and trucks drove to Parliament, was inspired by similar protests in Canada. Protesters have been well organized, setting up tents on the lawns outside Parliament and trucking in portable toilets, crates of donated food, and bales of straw to lay down when the grass turned to mud after Parliament Speaker Trevor Mallard turned on the sprinklers and blasted Barry Manilow tunes in a failed effort to make them leave.

Protesters have even dug a vegetable garden, set up a daycare tent, and assembled makeshift showers as they signal their intent to stay for a long time.

New Zealand has mandated that certain workers get vaccinated against COVID-19, including teachers, doctors, nurses, police and military personnel. A vaccine pass is also required to enter most stores and restaurants.

The protests come as New Zealand experiences its first big COVID-19 outbreak, which has been fueled by the omicron variant. Daily case numbers jumped to a new high of more than 2,800 on Tuesday, although only a single patient was hospitalized in an intensive care unit. About 77% of the population is vaccinated.

Since the beginning of the pandemic, New Zealand has reported just 56 virus deaths among its population of 5 million, after it imposed strict border controls and lockdowns to eliminate earlier outbreaks.

Ardern said earlier this week she plans to begin easing virus mandates and restrictions once the peak of the current outbreak has passed.

For Chinese leaders, Olympics weren't 2022's big-ticket item

By KEN MORITSUGU Associated Press

BEIJING (AP) — The just-concluded Winter Olympics weren't China's big event of the year — internally, at least. For the Communist Party, that comes this fall at a major meeting that will likely cement Xi Jinping's position as one of the nation's most powerful leaders in its seven decades of Communist rule.

The party congress, held every five years, is expected to appoint Xi to a third five-year term as its leader, breaking with recent past practice that limited the top person to 10 years in power. That would pave the way for him to get a third term as China's president at the following year's annual meeting of the legislature.

For China's 1.4 billion people and the rest of the world, Xi's tightening grip on power signals at least a partial return to the cult of personality that characterized the rule of Mao Zedong, who led Communist China from its founding in 1949 until his death in 1976, and that the party had moved away from after the disaster of Mao's Cultural Revolution.

"The 20th Party Congress will be extremely important even though and maybe because there will be no leadership change," said Bonnie Glaser, the director of the Asia Program at the German Marshall Fund of the United States. "Xi Jinping will likely lay out his priority agenda, which will provide insights into the legacy items he hopes to achieve."

Groton Daily Independent

Tuesday, Feb. 22, 2022 ~ Vol. 30 - No. 230 ~ 45 of 68

An overarching goal, which predates Xi, is to “rejuvenate” China, to build it into a strong nation that will be on equal footing with other major countries. Xi has sought to accelerate that process, making it a central part of his mandate and expanding China’s global role.

His Belt and Road Initiative has built ports, railways and other infrastructure around the world. Chinese vaccines and other pandemic-related goods have followed. China’s foreign policy has become more muscular as it uses growing military strength to stake out claims to territory in the Pacific and rejects Western critiques of the Communist Party’s authoritarian ways.

While China remains a middle-income country on a per-person basis, Xi seems to be saying the time has come for the world’s second-largest economy to stand up as an equal in international affairs.

That attitude was on display at the Winter Olympics, which wrapped up in Beijing on Sunday. China held the Games on its own terms, publicly dismissing a diplomatic boycott led by the United States over China’s human rights record.

It still got leaders from about 20 countries to attend the opening ceremony, most prominently Russia’s Vladimir Putin, who is finding common ground with Xi in the face of his own differences with America. Others came from Mongolia, Argentina, Ecuador, the United Arab Emirates, Kazakhstan and other central Asian nations.

Calls from human rights groups for the International Olympic Committee to hold the Games outside of China and for corporate sponsors to withdraw support fell on deaf ears.

Glaser said that while the diplomatic boycott sent an important signal of growing concern, “more collective action by a larger community of nations is needed, and it remains to be seen whether China’s policies can be influenced on human rights.”

The party congress brings together 2,300 delegates who hear reports and nominally elect their leaders. In reality, the names are carefully vetted and the outcomes decided by negotiations among those at the top.

At the end, the handful of members of a new standing committee — the very top of the party leadership — appear on stage, revealing who they are for the first time.

Notably, the standing committee that appeared at the last congress in 2017 did not include an obvious successor to Xi, raising speculation that he did not intend to step down in 2022.

That speculation was confirmed when Xi, at a meeting of the legislature the next year, had lawmakers abolish a two-term limit on the office of president, opening the way for him to remain the head of state for more than 10 years. There is no official limit on the party leadership.

Another cornerstone of Xi’s rule: strengthening the Communist Party by pushing patriotism and patriotic studies, putting the party’s role at the center of China’s achievements and quashing any dissent through online censorship, detentions and arrests.

The future of both the party and the nation have become deeply intertwined in party statements that say the path to China’s “rejuvenation” depends on the party and Xi himself.

The Communist Party has defined his ideas, known as “Xi Jinping Thought,” as a guiding principle and recognized his “core” role, saying both are “of decisive significance for advancing the cause of the Party and the country ... and for driving forward the historic process of national rejuvenation.”

Xi delivered a more than three-hour speech at the 2017 congress in which he laid out his vision for building China into a country that is prosperous, strong and “harmonious” by the middle of the 21st century, when the party hopes to mark 100 years of Communist rule.

“Achieving national rejuvenation will be no walk in the park. It will take more than drum beating and gong clanging to get there,” he said. “Every one of us in the party must be prepared to work even harder toward this goal.”

Barring any surprises, this fall’s party congress will likely affirm Xi’s stature as one of the three most dominant leaders of China’s Communist era, along with Mao and Deng Xiaoping, who launched an opening up of the country in 1978 that led to its meteoric economic rise.

While some have speculated Xi is setting himself up to rule for life, the 68-year-old leader has given no public indication of his plans.

Canada lawmakers extend emergency powers for truck protests

By ROB GILLIES Associated Press

TORONTO (AP) — Canadian lawmakers voted Monday night to extend the emergency powers that police can invoke to quell any potential restart of blockades by those opposed to COVID-19 restrictions.

Lawmakers in the House of Commons voted 185 to 151 to affirm the powers.

Prime Minister Justin Trudeau said earlier that the powers were still needed despite police ending the occupation of the nation's capital by truckers over the weekend and police ending border blockades before that.

Emergency Preparedness Minister Bill Blair said the protesters were going for the "lifeblood of this nation, which is trade with the United States."

Trudeau noted there were some truckers just outside Ottawa who might be planning further blockades or occupations. His public safety minister said there was an attempt to block a border crossing in British Columbia over the weekend.

The emergencies act allows authorities to declare certain areas as no-go zones. It also allows police to freeze truckers' personal and corporate bank accounts and compel tow truck companies to haul away vehicles.

The trucker protest grew until it closed a handful of Canada-U.S. border posts and shut down key parts of the capital for more than three weeks. But all border blockades have now ended and the streets around the Canadian Parliament are quiet.

Ottawa protesters who vowed never to give up are largely gone, chased away by police in riot gear in what was the biggest police operation in the nation's history.

"The situation is still fragile, the state of emergency is still there," Trudeau said before the vote.

Opposition New Democratic Party leader Jagmeet Singh's party supported it, ensuring Trudeau had enough votes. Singh said they know there are protesters waiting in the surrounding areas of Ottawa and in the capital itself.

"They need to be cleared out," said Singh, who also noted there have been convoys that have been intercepted.

"This is an attack on our democracy. This is a group of folks who are very clearly connected to the extreme right wing, The organizers clearly have a goal in mind to undermine democracy. That's something we can't allow to continue."

The Royal Canadian Mounted Police said those who had their bank accounts frozen were "influencers in the illegal protest in Ottawa, and owners and/or drivers of vehicles who did not want to leave the area."

Finance Minister Chrystia Freeland said earlier anyone affected has an easy way to have their accounts unfrozen: "Stop being a part of the blockade," she said.

Public Safety Minister Marco Mendicino said allowing police to designate Ottawa's downtown a no-go zone has been particularly effective. About 100 police checkpoints remain. "We saw calm, peace and quiet," Mendicino said.

The trucker protests grew until it closed a handful of Canada-U.S. border posts and shut down key parts of the capital city for more than three weeks.

"While we always will defend people's right to opinion, expression and assembly there are limits to rights when they begin to impact so severely on the rights of others and we saw that here in Ottawa," said Blair, the emergency preparedness minister. "We also watched with growing concern as part of this protest group starting targeting critical infrastructure when they went to the border at Windsor."

But all border blockades have now ended and the streets around the Canadian Parliament are quiet.

The protests, which were first aimed at a COVID-19 vaccine mandate for cross-border truckers but also encompassed fury over the range of COVID-19 restrictions and hatred of Trudeau, reflected the spread of disinformation in Canada and simmering populist and right-wing anger.

The self-styled Freedom Convoy shook Canada's reputation for civility, inspired convoys in France, New

Groton Daily Independent

Tuesday, Feb. 22, 2022 ~ Vol. 30 - No. 230 ~ 47 of 68

Zealand and the Netherlands and interrupted trade, causing economic damage on both sides of the border. Hundreds of trucks eventually occupied the streets around Parliament, a display that was part protest and part carnival.

For almost a week the busiest U.S.-Canada border crossing, the Ambassador Bridge between Windsor, Ontario and Detroit, was blocked. The crossing sees more than 25% of the trade between the two countries.

Authorities moved to reopen the border posts, but police in Ottawa did little but issue warnings until Friday, even as hundreds and sometimes thousands of protesters clogged the streets of the city and besieged Parliament Hill.

On Friday, authorities launched the largest police operation in Canadian history, arresting a string of Ottawa protesters and increasing that pressure on Saturday until the streets in front of Parliament were clear. Eventually, police arrested at least 191 people and towed away 79 vehicles. Many protesters retreated as the pressure increased.

Trudeau said people in Ottawa were harassed for weeks and said billions of dollars in trade were stalled by the border blockades, putting people's jobs at risk.

The protests have been cheered on in the U.S. by Fox News personalities and conservatives like former U.S. President Donald Trump. Millions of dollars in donations have flowed across the border to the protesters.

"A flood of misinformation and disinformation washed over Canada, including from foreign sources," Trudeau said.

"After these illegal blockades and occupations received disturbing amounts of foreign funding to destabilize Canada's democracy it became clear that local and provincial authorities needed more tools to restore order."

Analysis: China's bubble Olympics kept reality at a distance

By TED ANTHONY AP National Writer

BEIJING (AP) — They did it — that much seems obvious. But what, exactly, was the "it" that they did?

China pulled off a logistically adept Olympics with very few mechanical glitches — no small affair in the pandemic era. It made that happen primarily by creating what it called, in inimitable Chinese government style, a "closed-loop system" — the now-renowned Olympic "bubble" designed to corral anyone affiliated with the Olympics and, just as important, keep them from infecting the rest of the country.

For these Games, the government made sure to put out the nice China. Inside the loop, all was amiable — fronted by young and enthusiastic volunteers, embodied by a cheerful fat panda mascot named Bing Dwen Dwen. The earnest men and women in hazmat suits were friendly, at least as far as one could tell underneath the masks and goggles and full-body plastic. Even the relatively few police encountered inside the bubble were, by Chinese law-enforcement standards, downright chatty.

And yet.

The closed-loop bubble removed a sizable portion of heart and soul from the 2022 Olympics — a global moment that in the best of circumstances is supposed to be overflowing with both. And here's what it also did: created some convenient side effects that surely didn't displease the Chinese authorities.

First, some background. For decades, the country's Communist Party and government have honed a multipronged system of keeping visitors from seeing — and reporting on — what's really going on across the astonishingly multifaceted nation that is China.

Since the bloody 1989 crackdown on pro-democracy protesters in Beijing's Tiananmen Square in particular, those who try to peer behind the curtain — be they journalists, activists or sometimes just curious tourists — are often blocked, slapped back or redirected to more innocuous locations and pursuits.

Today, international journalists living and working in China — if they're not among those getting kicked out — have a challenging time piercing the official narrative and have to fashion innovative end runs to get at the more contentious topics.

For many years, "foreign affairs offices" in different Chinese cities, ostensibly designed to facilitate things for visitors, have in fact become official impediments in many cases. Many foreigners trying to travel solo

Groton Daily Independent

Tuesday, Feb. 22, 2022 ~ Vol. 30 - No. 230 ~ 48 of 68

to one of the places the central government considers restive — the western regions of Xinjiang and Tibet in particular — might well be thwarted.

And Chinese journalists? In a society where propaganda is positioned as patriotic rather than repugnant, they face perils and pressures that would be hard for anyone who grew up in a democracy to imagine.

So in a way, the Olympic bubble was the perfect microcosm of hide-all-the-blemishes business as usual, set against a globalized, mascot-saturated, winter-wonderland backdrop.

Regular international spectators weren't permitted to come, which eliminated one random element. More saliently, thousands of visiting international Olympics journalists with prying eyes and rollicking story ideas were effectively prevented from any encounters with regular Chinese people other than a carefully vetted, inside-the-loop cadre of pre-approved representatives.

The reason, obviously, was COVID interdiction. But the outcomes are more than aligned with the goals and practices of Xi Jinping's government.

This is not to imply that the bubble was created for anything other than COVID-19 interdiction. Certainly Tokyo had a system last year for its Summer Games that shared some characteristics with Beijing's, though was much less hardcore, reflecting the differing types of governments that Japan and China have.

And as China readily points out, the bubble system worked. As of Saturday, the segregated system that effectively turned Beijing into two cities — one sequestered, one proceeding very much as normal — had produced only 463 positive results out of 1.85 million tests among thousands of visitors entering the bubble since Jan. 23.

"The success in insulating the event from the virus and keeping disruption to sports events to a minimum also reflected the effectiveness and flexibility of China's overall zero-COVID policies," the Global Times newspaper, which is pro-government even by Chinese standards, enthused.

So those "authoritarian Olympics" that human rights groups criticized and that some Western governments boycotted (even as they sent their athletes)? The bubble created to host them was, in some ways, not unlike the bubble town that the Marvel character Wanda Maximoff created in last year's popular TV series "WandaVision."

Like the fictional Westview, Bubble Beijing definitely had some things in common with reality, and sometimes you could glimpse the real world from inside. But it was shiny and closely calibrated and — unless you did some serious digging to find the seams — you couldn't really leave until the story played out.

Ultimately, the 2022 Winter Olympics enter the books with two dominant storylines. One is the sports story — a narrative dotted with the triumphs of Eileen Gu and Nathan Chen and Su Yiming, the sadness of Mikaela Shiffrin and the mess that is Russian figure skating.

The other, though, captured from inside that bubble, is the story of the Olympic host country. That one is a pandemic-era tale of apparent medical and logistical triumph on the surface, with a different reality floating below, sanitized for the government's protection and viewed, inevitably, through the COVID-flavored prism of our era — as if through a mask, goggles and a full-body plastic hazmat suit.

Colombia's highest court legalizes abortion up to 24 weeks

By MANUEL RUEDA Associated Press

BOGOTA, Colombia (AP) — Colombia became the latest country in Latin America to expand access to abortion Monday as the nation's Constitutional Court voted to legalize the procedure until the 24th week of pregnancy.

The decision by the tribunal of nine judges fell short of the expectations of pro-choice groups that had been pushing for abortion to be completely decriminalized in Colombia. But it was nevertheless described as a historic event by women's rights groups, which estimate 400,000 women get clandestine abortions in the country each year.

Before the ruling, Colombia allowed abortions only when a woman's life was in danger, a fetus had malformations or a pregnancy resulted from rape.

Now women in Colombia will be able to get abortions until the 24th week of their pregnancy without

having to provide any justification. After the 24th week of pregnancy, abortion will still face restrictions. "We were trying to get the complete decriminalization of abortion ... but this is still a historic step," said Cristina Rosero, a lawyer for the New York-based Center for Reproductive Rights, an advocacy group that was one of five organizations that filed a lawsuit in 2020 to get the high court to review Colombia's abortions laws.

The lawsuit argued that restrictions on abortion discriminated against women from low income areas for whom it was harder to get legal abortions, because they had less access to doctors, lawyers or psychologists who could help them to prove that carrying out pregnancies would put their health at risk.

Rosero said the changes made to Colombian law will now make it easier for people of lower income levels to access safe abortions.

"Our challenge now is to ensure that this ruling is implemented" she said.

Elsewhere in Latin America, Argentina, Uruguay and Cuba also allow abortions without restrictions until certain stages of pregnancy, while in Mexico a supreme court ruling recently said that women cannot be tried in court for terminating their pregnancies.

Latin America is also a region where some countries prohibit the termination of pregnancy without exception, like in El Salvador, Nicaragua, Honduras and the Dominican Republic.

In Colombia, where a majority of the population identifies as Roman Catholic abortion has long been a controversial issue. Judges met several times to review the lawsuit filed by women's rights groups without voting on it. Meanwhile pro-choice groups waving green flags, faced off against pro-life protesters dressed in blue.

Jonathan Silva, an activist for the pro-life group United for Life, said he was surprised by Monday's decision. "We don't understand how this happened" he said. "But we will have to stage protests, and call on members of congress to regulate abortion."

A poll conducted last year in Colombia said that 25% of people considered abortion a crime, while 42% disagreed with that statement. In Colombia, women who get illegal abortions can face up to three years in prison.

Trump's social media app launches year after Twitter ban

By BERNARD CONDON Associated Press

NEW YORK (AP) — Former President Donald Trump's social media app that he hopes will rival Twitter launched Monday as he seeks a new digital stage to rally his supporters and fight Big Tech limits on speech, a year after he was banned from Twitter, Facebook and YouTube.

His Truth Social app was offered for download from the Apple App Store to a limited number of subscribers who had preordered. Others who were added to a waiting list are to be given access over the next 10 days.

The site encountered technical glitches shortly after launch, with reports that subscribers were shut out for hours. Others had trouble signing on. The site is not expected to be open to anyone who wants to download it until next month.

"Due to massive demand, we have placed you on our waitlist," read a message to some of those trying to access the platform, adding, "We love you."

Trump is hoping Truth Social will attract the millions who followed him on Twitter as he hints at a third presidential run, triggering a wave of other subscribers to justify the billions of dollars that investors have bet on the venture. Shares in a company that plans to buy Trump Media and Technology Group, the parent of Truth Social, have soared in recent months.

According to Apple's rankings, Truth Social was the top free app in the U.S. on Monday morning, besting the "Talking Ben the Dog" children's game, streaming service HBO Max, TikTok, YouTube, Instagram and Facebook.

The partial launch Monday follows an experimental "beta" launch to test the platform last week.

Trump was banned from top social media platforms following the Jan. 6 Capitol riot last year that critics accused him of inciting. The ban has raised difficult questions about free speech in a social media industry

Groton Daily Independent

Tuesday, Feb. 22, 2022 ~ Vol. 30 - No. 230 ~ 50 of 68

dominated by a few tech giants — an issue that Trump and conservative media have seized upon.

Republicans were quick to use the launch of Truth Social to raise money for their election efforts.

"After over A YEAR of muzzling by the Liberal Big Tech Tyrants: TRUMP. IS. BACK," wrote GOP House Minority Leader Kevin McCarthy in a fundraising email appeal Monday.

Groups like the Republican National Committee and the Congressional Leadership Fund also have been fundraising off the launch.

"Our main goal here is to give people their voice back," Trump Media CEO and former GOP Congressman Devin Nunes said Sunday on Fox News. He added that the app offers "the opposite of some Silicon Valley tech oligarch freak telling people what they want to think and deciding who can or cannot be on the platform."

Nunes said the app should be "fully operational" by the end of March.

For all the fanfare, Trump appears to have largely stayed away from the app on launch day. A screenshot taken of his Truth Social account showed no new messages as of 4 p.m. Eastern. His last message was from a week earlier: "Get Ready! Your favorite President will see you soon!"

Before Twitter permanently barred him from posting last year, Trump had tweeted nearly 60,000 times and had attracted almost 90 million followers.

His Truth Social followers on Monday were listed at 12,000.

Trump is hoping to tap into outrage over the social media bans to attract a broad audience to keep the stock rising — and possibly hand him hundreds of millions of dollars personally — but he faces significant challenges.

None of alternative messaging platforms already open to public, such as Gettr and Parler, have been able to move beyond an echo chamber of conservative political commentary.

Trump's company, Trump Media, also faces financial hurdles. It has been promised nearly \$300 million from a publicly traded company that plans to merge with it and got pledges from dozens of private investors for an additional \$1 billion to fund its operations, but it still needs approval from regulators for the deal before it can access the cash.

The company it hopes to merge with, Digital World Acquisition Corp., has said regulators are investigating following reports that it may have broken security rules last year by talking to Trump representatives about possibly joining forces before selling stock to the public. Digital World is a so-called blank-check company that is only allowed a quick path to going public without many disclosures if it has not identified a target to buy yet.

Another regulatory investigation is focused on possible stock trading violations earlier in the fall.

Investors in shares of Digital World are valuing its eventual merger target, Trump Media, at \$10 billion.

Jury adjourns for day without verdict in Ahmaud Arbery case

By RUSS BYNUM Associated Press

BRUNSWICK, Ga. (AP) — Three white men who chased and killed Ahmaud Arbery on a residential street acted out of "pent-up racial anger" and should be convicted of hate crimes, a federal prosecutor told a jury Monday. Defense attorneys argued that the Black man was fatally shot in self-defense and had acted suspiciously during prior trips to the neighborhood.

The jury of eight white people, three Black people and one Hispanic person adjourned without a verdict Monday evening after deliberating about for about three hours following closing legal arguments in U.S. District Court. Verdicts on hate crime charges rest not on whether the pursuit and shooting were justified, but whether they were motivated by racism.

The jury was to resume deliberations Tuesday morning.

The trial, which began a week ago, has been taking place simultaneously with that of three former Minneapolis police officers who have been charged with violating the civil rights of George Floyd. Floyd died on May 25, 2020, when then-officer Derek Chauvin pinned him to the ground and pressed a knee to his neck for what authorities say was 9 1/2 minutes. Defense attorneys for the third officer rested their case

Groton Daily Independent

Tuesday, Feb. 22, 2022 ~ Vol. 30 - No. 230 ~ 51 of 68

Monday, paving the way for closing arguments.

In Georgia, prosecutor Christopher Perras argued that Travis McMichael "was just looking for a reason" to hurt a Black person when the 25-year-old Arbery jogged past his home on a Sunday afternoon. Perras cited a slew of racist comments and videos the defendant had posted online.

And when McMichael, his father and a neighbor began chasing Arbery, they had no evidence he had done anything wrong, but they assumed he had because he was Black, Perras said.

When McMichael's father, Greg McMichael, saw Arbery jogging down the street, "he didn't grab his phone and call police," Perras said. "He called his son and grabbed his gun."

"There's a big difference between being vigilant and being a vigilante," said Perras, later adding: "It's important for you to understand the full depth of the defendants' racial hatred."

Defense attorneys insisted past racist statements by their clients offered no proof that they targeted Arbery because of his race. They urged the jury to set aside emotions when deciding the case.

"It's natural for you to want retribution or revenge," said Pete Theodocion, Bryan's attorney. "But we have to elevate ourselves ... even if it's the tough thing."

It's been nearly two years since Arbery fell dead from two shotgun blasts on Feb. 23, 2020, after a five-minute chase through the Satilla Shores subdivision just outside the port city of Brunswick. The slaying was captured in a graphic cellphone video that sparked outrage far beyond Georgia.

Basic facts of the case aren't disputed. The McMichaels armed themselves and chased Arbery in a pickup truck after he was spotted running past their home on a Sunday afternoon. A neighbor, William "Roddie" Bryan, joined the pursuit in his own truck and recorded the video of Travis McMichael firing the fatal shots at point-blank range.

Travis McMichael's attorney, Amy Lee Copeland, told the jury prosecutors presented no evidence that he "ever spoke to anyone about Mr. Arbery's death in racial terms" or committed prior acts of racial violence.

Copeland noted the McMichaels pursued Arbery because they recognized him from videos recorded by security cameras inside a neighboring home under construction, which Arbery had entered at night four times in the months before the shooting. She said the behavior was suspicious, though there was no evidence Arbery had stolen anything.

As for the shooting, Copeland said it was "based on self-defense," with Travis McMichael opening fire after Arbery tried to grab his shotgun.

"Mr. Arbery tried to wrestle the gun out of Travis McMichael's hand," Copeland said. "You can see the struggle on the recording."

The McMichaels and Bryan were all convicted of murder last fall in a Georgia state court. The U.S. Justice Department charged them separately in federal court with hate crimes, alleging that all three men violated Arbery's civil rights and targeted him because he's Black. They are also charged with attempted kidnapping, and the McMichaels face counts of using guns in the commission of a crime.

Regardless of the outcome of the hate crimes case, the McMichaels have been sentenced to life in prison without parole for their murder convictions. Bryan also received a life sentence, with parole possible only after he's served at least 30 years.

Legal experts have said that it's tougher to prove hate crimes than it is the crime of murder. The McMichaels and Bryan have all pleaded not guilty to the hate crimes.

Defense attorneys insisted the trio pursued Arbery based on an earnest, though erroneous, suspicion that he had committed crimes in their neighborhood. Greg McMichael told police he recognized Arbery from security camera videos from the neighboring construction site as he came running out of the same unfinished house the day of the shooting.

Greg McMichael's attorney, A.J. Balbo, said Monday that his client had previously confronted a white person he suspected of possibly committing crimes in the area. Balbo said his client didn't chase Arbery because he was a Black man, but because he was "THE man" from the security videos.

Those videos showed Arbery taking nothing from the construction site. An officer told the McMichaels there was no evidence of him stealing. Bryan, who knew nothing of the security footage, told investigators

Groton Daily Independent

Tuesday, Feb. 22, 2022 ~ Vol. 30 - No. 230 ~ 52 of 68

he assumed Arbery had done something wrong when he ran past Bryan's house with the McMichaels in pursuit.

Theodocion argued it was "entirely reasonable" for his client to assume that a truck he recognized as belonging to someone in the neighborhood was chasing Arbery because he had done something wrong. He said the chase and Bryan's participation in it "would have happened regardless of race, based on the circumstances."

FBI agents uncovered roughly two dozen racist text messages and social media posts from the McMichaels and Bryan in the years and months preceding the shooting.

In 2018, Travis McMichael commented on a Facebook video of a Black man playing a prank on a white person: "I'd kill that f---ing n---r." Greg McMichael had posted a Facebook meme saying white Irish "slaves" were treated worse than any race in U.S. history. And for several years on Martin Luther King Jr. Day, Bryan wrote messages in which he mocked the holiday honoring the civil rights leader.

Some witnesses testified they heard the McMichaels' racist statements firsthand. A woman who served under Travis McMichael in the U.S. Coast Guard a decade ago said he made crude sexual jokes after learning she had dated a Black man and called her "n---r lover." Another woman testified Greg McMichael had ranted angrily in 2015 when she remarked on the death of civil rights activist Julian Bond, saying, "All those Blacks are nothing but trouble."

Dr. Paul Farmer, global humanitarian leader, dies at 62

By STEVE LeBLANC and DÁNICA COTO Associated Press

BOSTON (AP) — Dr. Paul Farmer, a U.S. physician, humanitarian and author renowned for providing health care to millions of impoverished people worldwide and who co-founded the global nonprofit Partners in Health, has died. He was 62.

The Boston-based organization confirmed Farmer's death on Monday, calling it "devastating" and noting he unexpectedly passed away in his sleep from an acute cardiac event while in Rwanda, where he had been teaching.

Farmer was a professor of medicine at Harvard Medical School and chief of the division of global health equity at Brigham and Women's Hospital. He wrote extensively on health, human rights and social inequality, according to Partners in Health.

"A compassionate physician and infectious disease specialist, a brilliant and influential medical anthropologist, and among the greatest humanitarians of our time — perhaps all time — Paul dedicated his life to improving human health and advocating for health equity and social justice on a global scale," wrote George Q. Daley, dean of Harvard University's Faculty of Medicine, in a statement.

Partners in Health, founded in 1987, said its mission is "to provide a preferential option for the poor in health care." The organization began its work in Cange, a rural village in Haiti's central plateau, and later expanded its operations to regions including Africa, Eastern Europe and Latin America.

Pulitzer Prize-winning author Tracy Kidder, who wrote the nonfiction book, "Mountains Beyond Mountains: The Quest of Dr. Paul Farmer, A Man Who Would Cure the World," told The Associated Press the two traveled together for a month as Farmer treated prisoners and impoverished people in Haiti, Moscow and Paris.

"He was an important figure in the world," Kidder said. "He had a way of looking around corners and of connecting things. He couldn't obviously go and cure the whole world all by himself, but he could, with help of his friends, give proof of possibility."

One of Kidder's strongest memories of Farmer occurred in Peru, where the doctor was treating patients with multidrug-resistant tuberculosis. Kidder recalled a woman wearing a Mickey Mouse shirt who followed them to their car, looking very shy.

With her head down, she said, "Thank you," to Farmer in Spanish. Kidder recalled: "Paul turned, took each of her hands in his and said, 'For me, it is a privilege,' in Spanish."

He added that Farmer was instrumental in getting AIDS treatments, and created various health systems around the world.

Groton Daily Independent

Tuesday, Feb. 22, 2022 ~ Vol. 30 - No. 230 ~ 53 of 68

"It really humiliates the nay-sayers, who think it's somehow OK for some people to get health care and others not," Kidder said. "It just drove him nuts."

Michelle Karshan, vice president of a nonprofit prison health care system in Haiti who worked closely with Farmer, said he was determined, innovative and always knew how to get around obstacles and bureaucracy.

"He didn't take no for an answer," she said. "He didn't think anybody was too poor or too illiterate to be entitled to receive health care."

She noted that when the World Health Organization resisted giving HIV medication to people who were illiterate in Haiti for fear they would not know when or how to take it, Farmer set up his own program and created a chart that relied on the sun's position. He also hired people known as "accompaniers," who would hike through Haiti's rough mountainous terrain to make sure patients had water, food and were taking their medications.

"I'm so sad for all the people who are not going to have him in their lives. He was there for everybody," Karshan said.

Haiti's Prime Minister Ariel Henry praised Farmer's work, as did former U.S. President Bill Clinton.

"Paul Farmer changed the way health care is delivered in the most impoverished places on Earth. He saw every day as a new opportunity to teach, learn, give, and serve — and it was impossible to spend any time with him and not feel the same," Clinton said in a statement.

At the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic, with thousands of cases reported daily in Massachusetts, local health departments were overwhelmed by the task of contact tracing to help slow the spread of the disease.

The state launched a contact tracing collaborative in April 2020, and asked Partners in Health to lead the initiative, which made more than 2.7 million calls to residents at a total cost of about \$158 million, according to the state.

Farmer is survived by his Haitian wife, Didi Bertrand Farmer, and their three children.

Gold mining site blast reportedly kills 59 in Burkina Faso

By SAM MEDNICK Associated Press

OUAGADOUGOU, Burkina Faso (AP) — A strong explosion near a gold mining site in southwestern Burkina Faso killed 59 people and injured more than 100 others Monday, the national broadcaster and witnesses reported.

The provisional toll was provided by regional authorities following the blast in the village of Gbomblora, RTB reported. The explosion was believed to have been caused by chemicals used to treat gold that were stocked at the site.

"I saw bodies everywhere. It was horrible," Sansan Kambou, a forest ranger who was at the site during the explosion, told The Associated Press by phone.

The first blast happened around 2 p.m., with more explosions following as people ran for their lives, he said.

Burkina Faso is the fastest-growing gold producer in Africa and currently the fifth largest on the continent, with gold being the country's most important export. The industry employs about 1.5 million people and was worth about \$2 billion in 2019.

Small gold mines like Gbomblora have grown in recent years, with some 800 across the country. Much of the gold is being smuggled into neighboring Togo, Benin, Niger and Ghana, according to the South Africa-based Institute for Security Studies.

The small-scale mines are also reportedly used by jihadis linked to al-Qaida and the Islamic State, which have staged attacks in the country since 2016. The groups reportedly raise funds by taxing miners, and also use the mine sites for recruiting fighters and seeking refuge.

Mining experts say the small-scale mines have fewer regulations than industrial ones and thus can be more dangerous.

"The limited regulation of the artisanal and small-scale mining sector contributes to increased risks that

can be very dangerous, including the use of explosives which are often smuggled into the country and used illegally," said Marcena Hunter, senior analyst at Global Initiative, a Swiss-based think tank.

Putin's recognition of Ukraine's rebels ups ante in crisis

By VLADIMIR ISACHENKOV Associated Press

MOSCOW (AP) — It was a piece of fast-moving political theater in Moscow, a carefully orchestrated political announcement years in the making.

Russian President Vladimir Putin moved quickly on Monday to recognize the independence of separatist regions in eastern Ukraine, framing his show of defiance against the West in a series of nationally televised appearances that came amid Western fears of Russian invasion in Ukraine.

Immediately after the pro-Russian leaders of Ukraine's separatist "people's republics" were shown on Russian TV pleading with Putin to acknowledge them as independent states, Putin chaired a Kremlin meeting Monday in which a lineup of senior Russian officials all backed the move.

Hours later, Putin spoke in an hour-long televised address to the nation and then was shown on TV signing the recognition decrees.

The quick move by Putin represents a sharp change of course for the Kremlin, which in the past hoped to use a 2015 peace agreement brokered by France and Germany to have Ukraine's rebel regions gain more power inside the country to stymie its bid for NATO membership. The strategy didn't work, because most Ukrainians resented the deal as a betrayal of national interests and its implementation has stalled.

During the Kremlin meeting on Monday, several top officials suggested that Putin wait for several days to recognize the separatist regions to give the West the last chance to persuade Ukraine to abide by its obligation under the deal to offer the rebels a broad self-rule. However, Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov and other officials argued that it makes no sense to wait, saying that a delay wouldn't change the situation.

The recognition of the rebel regions came as over 150,000 Russian troops have surrounded Ukraine from three sides in what the U.S. and its allies saw as a sign of an imminent invasion. The U.S. has warned that Moscow could try to create the pretext for attacking Ukraine with false-flag attacks in the volatile rebel east or other similar action.

On Thursday, tensions spiked along the line of contact between Ukrainian forces and Russia-backed separatists in the conflict that erupted in 2014 and has killed over 14,000 people. The rebels have charged that a sharp increase in skirmishes heralded Ukraine's intention to reclaim control of the region by force. Ukrainian authorities have rejected any such intentions, said they were not responding to increased shelling, and accused the rebels of provocation.

In a fast-moving chain of events, rebel leaders announced massive evacuation in a video that was aired Friday but was recorded two days earlier, according to the data embedded in it — a sign of a pre-arranged plot. They followed up Monday by asking Putin to recognize their regions' independence, setting stage for the Kremlin's political show.

In a long ranting address to the nation before the signing ceremony, Putin described Ukraine's bid to join NATO as an existential threat to Russia, brushing off Western assurances that the alliance doesn't threaten Russia. He described the prospective deployment of U.S. missiles in Ukraine as a "knife to our throat," saying that they would be capable of reaching Moscow in just 4-5 minutes.

"Ukraine's membership in NATO poses a direct threat to Russia's security," he said.

The Russian president spent a large part of his address denigrating Ukraine and trying to delegitimize the country as a creation of the Communist rulers of the Soviet Union. He said sarcastically that Ukraine could be named after Soviet founder Vladimir Lenin, who had handed over wide swathes of Russia's historic lands to it.

Putin mocked Ukraine's "decommunization" campaign that saw the destruction of Lenin's monuments, saying: "You want decommunization, it suits us well."

"We are ready to show you what the real decommunization would mean for Ukraine," Putin said in a stark

warning that appeared to reflect a threat to take back the lands that he felt were "robbed" from Russia by the 1991 collapse of the Soviet Union.

Boris Johnson scraps remaining COVID restrictions in England

By JILL LAWLESS Associated Press

LONDON (AP) — British Prime Minister Boris Johnson is scrapping the last domestic coronavirus restrictions in England, including the requirement for people with COVID-19 to self-isolate, even as he acknowledged Monday the potential for new and more deadly variants of the virus.

Johnson told lawmakers in the House of Commons that the country was "moving from government restrictions to personal responsibility" as part of a plan for treating COVID-19 like other transmissible illnesses such as flu.

He said it marked an end to "two of the darkest, grimmest years in our peacetime history."

"Today is not the day we can declare victory over COVID, because this virus is not going away," Johnson said at a televised news conference. "But it is the day when all the efforts of the last two years finally enabled us to protect ourselves whilst restoring our liberties in full."

Johnson confirmed that mandatory self-isolation for people with COVID-19 will end starting Thursday and the routine tracing of infected people's contacts will stop. People will still be advised to stay home if they are sick — but will no longer get extra financial support.

Monday's announcement applies only to England, which is home to 56 million of the U.K.'s 67 million people. It leaves England with fewer restrictions than most other European countries, with the exception of Denmark.

Many people in England who think they have COVID-19 may now never know for sure. Starting April 1, lab-confirmed PCR tests for the virus will be available free only to older people and the immune-compromised. The government will also stop offering the public free rapid virus tests, though they will be available for purchase.

Yet the government stressed that the pandemic isn't over and the virus could still spring nasty surprises. Johnson said scientists were "certain there will be new variants and it is very possible they will be worse than omicron," the currently dominant strain.

Johnson said the fact that Queen Elizabeth II tested positive for COVID-19 on Sunday was a reminder that this virus was still prevalent. Buckingham Palace said the 95-year-old monarch was experiencing mild, cold-like symptoms.

The government plan foresees keeping the virus in check with vaccines and treatments. Everyone 75 and older will be offered a fourth vaccine dose, along with those 12 and up who have conditions that make them vulnerable to severe disease.

Some scientists said removing all restrictions was a risky move that could bring a surge in infections and weaken the country's defenses against more virulent future strains.

The government insisted it would retain a strong surveillance system, including the Infection Survey conducted by the Office for National Statistics, which is considered invaluable because it tests people whether or not they have symptoms. It said it also will keep the ability to ramp up testing if needed.

Chris Whitty, the chief medical officer for England, said prevalence of the virus was still "very high" and urged people to continue to self-isolate if they had COVID-19.

"People should still, if they have COVID, try to prevent other people getting it, and that means self-isolating," he said.

The leader of the opposition Labour Party, Keir Starmer, said the government's "half-baked" approach would leave Britain vulnerable.

"'Ignorance is bliss' is not a responsible approach to a deadly virus," Starmer said.

Johnson's Conservative government lifted most virus restrictions in January, scrapping vaccine passports for venues and ending mask mandates in most settings apart from hospitals in England. Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland, which set their own public health rules, also have opened up, although more slowly.

Groton Daily Independent

Tuesday, Feb. 22, 2022 ~ Vol. 30 - No. 230 ~ 56 of 68

A combination of high vaccination rates in the U.K. and the milder omicron variant meant that easing restrictions last month didn't lead to a surge in hospitalizations and deaths. Both are falling, though the U.K. still has Europe's highest coronavirus toll after Russia, with more than 161,000 recorded deaths.

In Britain, 85% of people age 12 and up have had two vaccine doses and almost two-thirds have had a third booster shot.

Monday's announcement was cheered by many Conservative Party lawmakers, who argue that the restrictions were inefficient and disproportionate. It could — and critics say was designed to — shore up Johnson's position among party lawmakers, who have been mulling an attempt to oust him over scandals including lockdown-breaching government parties during the pandemic.

But some scientists expressed alarm, saying that ending support for people to test and isolate would hit poor people the hardest.

"Today's announcement is not a plan for living with COVID, it is a plan for reducing spending on testing and cutting support for people who have or may have COVID," said Trish Greenhalgh, professor of primary care health services at the University of Oxford.

"Learning to live with COVID does not mean pretending it isn't highly prevalent or pretending the virus is no longer dangerous," she noted.

EXPLAINER: The story behind Ukraine's separatist regions

By VLADIMIR ISACHENKOV Associated Press

MOSCOW (AP) — Russian President Vladimir Putin on Monday recognized the independence of Moscow-backed rebel regions in eastern Ukraine, a move that will further fuel tensions with the West amid fears of Russian invasion.

Putin's move follows days of heightened tensions in Ukraine's eastern industrial heartland, where Ukrainian forces are locked in a nearly eight-year conflict with Russia-backed separatists that has left more than 14,000 people dead.

Here is a look at the rebel-controlled territories in eastern Ukraine:

SEPARATIST REBELLION IN THE EAST

When Ukraine's Moscow-friendly president was driven from office by mass protests in February 2014, Russia responded by annexing Ukraine's Crimean Peninsula. It then threw its weight behind an insurgency in the mostly Russian-speaking eastern Ukraine region known as Donbas.

In April 2014, Russia-backed rebels seized government buildings in the Donetsk and Luhansk regions, proclaimed the creation of "people's republics" and battled Ukrainian troops and volunteer battalions.

The following month, the separatist regions held a popular vote to declare independence and make a bid to become part of Russia. Moscow hasn't accepted the motion, just used the regions as a tool to keep Ukraine in its orbit and prevent it from joining NATO.

Ukraine and the West accused Russia of backing the rebels with troops and weapons. Moscow denied that, saying any Russians who fought there were volunteers.

Amid ferocious battles involving tanks, heavy artillery and warplanes, Malaysia Airlines Flight 17 was shot down over eastern Ukraine on July 17, 2014, killing all 298 people aboard. An international probe concluded that the passenger jet was downed by a Russia-supplied missile from the rebel-controlled territory in Ukraine. Moscow still denied any involvement.

PEACE AGREEMENTS FOR EASTERN UKRAINE

After a massive defeat of Ukrainian troops in August 2014, envoys from Kyiv, the rebels and the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe signed a truce in the Belarusian capital of Minsk in September 2014.

The document envisaged an OSCE-observed cease-fire, a pullback of all foreign fighters, an exchange of prisoners and hostages, an amnesty for the rebels and a promise that separatist regions could have a degree of self-rule.

The deal quickly collapsed and large-scale fighting resumed, leading to another major defeat for Ukrai-

Groton Daily Independent

Tuesday, Feb. 22, 2022 ~ Vol. 30 - No. 230 ~ 57 of 68

nian forces at Debaltseve in January-February of 2015.

France and Germany brokered another peace agreement, which was signed in Minsk in February 2015 by representatives of Ukraine, Russia and the rebels. It envisaged a new cease-fire, a pullback of heavy weapons and a series of moves toward a political settlement. A declaration backing the deal was signed by the leaders of Russia, Ukraine, France and Germany.

A FROZEN CONFLICT IN UKRAINE

The 2015 peace deal was a major diplomatic coup for the Kremlin, obliging Ukraine to grant special status to the separatist regions, allowing them to create their own police force and have a say in appointing local prosecutors and judges. It also envisaged that Ukraine could only regain control over the roughly 200-kilometer (125-mile) border with Russia in rebel regions after they get self-rule and hold OSCE-monitored local elections — balloting that would almost certainly keep pro-Moscow rebels in power there.

Many Ukrainians see it as a betrayal of national interests and its implementation has stalled.

The Minsk document helped end full-scale fighting, but the situation has remained tense and regular skirmishes have continued.

With the Minsk deal stalled, Moscow's hope to use rebel regions to directly influence Ukraine's politics has failed but the frozen conflict has drained Kyiv's resources and effectively stymied its goal of joining NATO — which is enshrined in the Ukrainian constitution.

Moscow also has worked to secure its hold on the rebel regions by handing out more than 720,000 Russian passports to roughly one-fifth of their population of about 3.6 million. It has provided economic and financial assistance to the separatist territories, but the aid has been insufficient to alleviate the massive damage from fighting and shore up the economy. The Donbas region accounted for about 16% of Ukraine's GDP before the conflict.

EFFORTS TO REVIVE PEACE DEAL

Amid soaring tensions over the Russian troop concentration near Ukraine, France and Germany embarked on renewed efforts to encourage compliance with the 2015 deal, in hopes that it could help defuse the current standoff.

Facing calls from Berlin and Paris for its implementation, Ukrainian officials have strengthened their criticism of the Minsk deal and warned that it could lead to the country's demise. Two rounds of talks in Paris and Berlin between presidential envoys from Russia, Ukraine, France and Germany have yielded no progress.

The lower house of the Russian parliament, meanwhile, urged Putin last week to recognize the independence of Ukraine's rebel regions.

PUTIN RECOGNIZES REBEL REGIONS' INDEPENDENCE

Putin's recognition of the rebel-held territories' independence effectively shatters the Minsk peace agreements and will further fuel tensions with the West. He said that Moscow would sign friendship treaties with the rebel territories, a move that could pave the way for Russia to openly support them with troops and weapons.

The move follows several days of shelling that erupted along the line of contact in Donetsk and Luhansk. Ukraine and the West accused Moscow of fomenting the tensions to create a pretext for an invasion. Russia, in turn, accused Ukraine of trying to reclaim the rebel-held territories by force, the claim that Kyiv strongly rejected.

On Friday, separatist leaders released video statements announcing the evacuation of civilians in the face of what they described as a Ukrainian "aggression." The data embedded in the video indicated that their statements had been pre-recorded two days earlier when the situation was still relatively calm, suggesting a deliberate plan to try to sever the regions from Ukraine.

The rebel chiefs put out new video statements Monday urging Putin to recognize their regions' independence and the Russian leader responded quickly by convening a carefully orchestrated meeting of his Security Council and then signing the recognition decrees in a televised ceremony.

Tribe grapples with missing women crisis on California coast

Groton Daily Independent

Tuesday, Feb. 22, 2022 ~ Vol. 30 - No. 230 ~ 58 of 68

By GILLIAN FLACCUS Associated Press

YUROK RESERVATION, Calif. (AP) — The young mother had behaved erratically for months, hitchhiking and wandering naked through two Native American reservations and a small town clustered along Northern California's rugged Lost Coast.

But things escalated when Emmilee Risling was charged with arson for igniting a fire in a cemetery. Her family hoped the case would force her into mental health and addiction services. Instead, she was released over the pleas of loved ones and a tribal police chief.

The 33-year-old college graduate — an accomplished traditional dancer with ancestry from three area tribes — was last seen soon after, walking across a bridge near a place marked End of Road, a far corner of the Yurok Reservation where the rutted pavement dissolves into thick woods.

Her disappearance is one of five instances in the past 18 months where Indigenous women have gone missing or been killed in this isolated expanse of Pacific coastline between San Francisco and Oregon, a region where the Yurok, Hupa, Karuk, Tolowa and Wiyot people have coexisted for millennia. Two other women died from what authorities say were overdoses despite relatives' questions about severe bruises.

The crisis has spurred the Yurok Tribe to issue an emergency declaration and brought increased urgency to efforts to build California's first database of such cases and regain sovereignty over key services.

"I came to this issue as both a researcher and a learner, but just in this last year, I knew three of the women who have gone missing or were murdered — and we shared so much in common," said Blythe George, a Yurok tribal member who consults on a project documenting the problem. "You can't help but see yourself in those people."

The recent cases spotlight an epidemic that is difficult to quantify but has long disproportionately plagued Native Americans.

A 2021 report by a government watchdog found the true number of missing and murdered Indigenous women is unknown due to reporting problems, distrust of law enforcement and jurisdictional conflicts. But Native women face murder rates almost three times those of white women overall — and up to 10 times the national average in certain locations, according to a 2021 summary of the existing research by the National Congress of American Indians. More than 80% have experienced violence.

In this area peppered with illegal marijuana farms and defined by wilderness, almost everyone knows someone who has vanished.

Missing person posters flutter from gas station doors and road signs. Even the tribal police chief isn't untouched: He took in the daughter of one missing woman, and Emmilee — an enrolled Hoopa Valley tribal member with Yurok and Karuk blood — babysat his children.

In California alone, the Yurok Tribe and the Sovereign Bodies Institute, an Indigenous-run research and advocacy group, uncovered 18 cases of missing or slain Native American women in roughly the past year — a number they consider a vast undercount. An estimated 62% of those cases are not listed in state or federal databases for missing persons.

Hupa citizen Brandice Davis attended school with the daughters of a woman who disappeared in 1991 and now has daughters of her own, ages 9 and 13.

"Here, we're all related, in a sense," she said of the place where many families are connected by marriage or community ties.

She cautions her daughters about what it means to be female, Native American and growing up on a reservation: "You're a statistic. But we have to keep going. We have to show people we're still here."

Like countless cases involving Indigenous women, Emmilee's disappearance has gotten no attention from the outside world.

But many here see in her story the ugly intersection of generations of trauma inflicted on Native Americans by their white colonizers, the marginalization of Native peoples and tribal law enforcement's lack of authority over many crimes committed on their land.

Virtually all of the area's Indigenous residents, including Emmilee, have ancestors who were shipped

Groton Daily Independent

Tuesday, Feb. 22, 2022 ~ Vol. 30 - No. 230 ~ 59 of 68

to boarding schools as children and forced to give up their language and culture as part of a federal assimilation campaign. Further back, Yurok people spent years away from home as indentured servants for colonizers, said Judge Abby Abinanti, the tribe's chief judge.

The trauma caused by those removals echoes among the Yurok in the form of drug abuse and domestic violence, which trickles down to the youth, she said. About 110 Yurok children are in foster care.

"You say, 'OK, how did we get to this situation where we're losing our children?'" said Abinanti. "There were big gaps in knowledge, including parenting, and generationally those play out."

An analysis of cases by the Yurok and Sovereign Bodies found most of the region's missing women had either been in foster care themselves or had children taken from them by the state. An analysis of jail bookings also showed Yurok citizens in the two-county region are 11 times more likely to go to jail in a given year — and half those arrested are female, usually for low-level crimes. That's an arrest rate for Yurok women roughly five times the rate of female incarcerations nationwide, said George, the University of California, Merced sociologist consulting with the tribe.

The Yurok run a tribal wellness court for addiction and operate one of the country's only state-certified tribal domestic violence perpetrator programs. They also recently hired a tribal prosecutor, another step toward building an Indigenous justice system that would ultimately handle all but the most serious felonies.

The Yurok also are working to reclaim supervision over foster care and hope to transfer their first foster family from state court within months, said Jessica Carter, the Yurok Tribal Court director. A tribal-run guardianship court follows another 50 children who live with relatives.

The long-term plan — mostly funded by grants — is a massive undertaking that will take years to accomplish, but the Yurok see regaining sovereignty over these systems as the only way to end the cycle of loss that's taken the greatest toll on their women.

"If we are successful, we can use that as a gift to other tribes to say, 'Here's the steps we took,'" said Rosemary Deck, the newly hired tribal prosecutor. "You can take this as a blueprint and assert your own sovereignty."

Emmilee was born into a prominent Native family, and a bright future beckoned.

Starting at a young age, she was groomed to one day lead the intricate dances that knit the modern-day people to generations of tradition nearly broken by colonization. Her family, a "dance family," has the rare distinction of owning enough regalia that it can outfit the brush, jump and flower dances without borrowing a single piece.

At 15, Emmilee paraded down the National Mall with other tribal members at the opening of the Smithsonian's National Museum of the American Indian. The Washington Post published a front-page photo of her in a Karuk dress of dried bear grass, a woven basket cap and a white leather sash adorned with Pileated woodpecker scalps.

The straight-A student earned a scholarship to the University of Oregon, where she helped lead a prominent Native students' group. Her success, however, was darkened by the first sign of trouble: an abusive relationship with a Native man whom, her mother believes, she felt she could save through her positive influence.

Later, Emmilee dated another man, became pregnant and returned home to have the baby before finishing her degree.

She then worked with disadvantaged Native families and eventually got accepted into a master's program. She helped coach her son's T-ball team and signed him up for swim lessons.

But over time, her family says, they noticed changes.

Emmilee was uncharacteristically tardy for work and grew more combative. She often dropped off her son with family, and she fell in with another abusive boyfriend. Her son was removed from her care when he was 5; a girl born in 2020 was taken away as a newborn as Emmilee's behavior deteriorated.

Her parents remain bewildered by her rapid decline and think she developed a mental illness — possibly postpartum psychosis — compounded by drugs and the trauma of domestic abuse. At first, she would see a doctor or therapist at her family's insistence but eventually rebuffed all help.

Groton Daily Independent

Tuesday, Feb. 22, 2022 ~ Vol. 30 - No. 230 ~ 60 of 68

After her daughter's birth, Emmilee spiraled rapidly, "like a light switched," and she began to let go of the Native identity that had been her defining force, said her sister, Mary.

"That was her life, and when you let that go, when you don't have your kids ... what are you?" she said.

In the months before she vanished, Emmilee was frequently seen walking naked in public, talking to herself. She was picked up many times by sheriff's deputies and tribal police but never charged.

The only in-patient psychiatric facility within 300 miles (480 kilometers) was always too full to admit her. Once, she was taken to the emergency room and fled barefoot in her hospital gown.

"People tended to look the other way. They didn't really help her. In less than 24 hours, she was just back on the street, literally on the street," said Judy Risling, her mother. "There were just no services for her."

In September, Emmilee was arrested after she was found dancing around a small fire in the Hoopa Valley Reservation cemetery.

Then-Hoopa Valley Tribal Police Chief Bob Kane appeared in a Humboldt County court by video and explained her repeated police contacts and mental health problems. Emmilee mumbled during the hearing then shouted out that she didn't set the fire.

She was released with an order to appear again in 12 days after her public defender argued she had no criminal convictions and the court couldn't hold her on the basis of her mental health.

Then, Emmilee disappeared.

"We had predicted that something like this may ... happen in the future," said Kane. "And you know, now we're here."

If Emmilee fell through the cracks before she went missing, she has become even more invisible in her absence.

One of the biggest hurdles in Indian Country once a woman is reported missing is unraveling a confusing jumble of federal, state, local and tribal agencies that must coordinate. Poor communication and oversights can result in overlooked evidence or delayed investigations.

The problem is more acute in rural regions like the one where Emmilee disappeared, said Abigail Echo-Hawk, citizen of the Pawnee Nation of Oklahoma and director of the Urban Indian Health Institute in Seattle.

"Particularly in reservations and in village areas, there is a maze of jurisdictions, of policies, of procedures of who investigates what," she said.

Moreover, many cases aren't logged in federal missing persons databases, and medical examiners sometimes misclassify Native women as white or Asian, said Gretta Goodwin, of the U.S. Government Accountability Office's homeland security and justice team.

Recent efforts at the state and federal level seek to address what advocates say have been decades of neglect regarding missing and murdered Indigenous women.

Former President Donald Trump signed a bill that required federal, state, tribal and local law enforcement agencies to create or update their protocols for handling such cases. And in November, President Joe Biden signed an executive order to set up guidelines between the federal government and tribal police that would help track, solve and prevent crimes against all Native Americans.

A number of states, including California, Oregon, Washington and Arizona, are also taking on the crisis with greater funding to tribes, studies of the problem or proposals to create Amber Alert-style notifications.

Emmilee's case illustrates some of the challenges. She was a citizen of the Hoopa Valley Tribe and was arrested on its reservation, but she is presumed missing on the neighboring Yurok Tribe's reservation.

The Yurok police are in charge of the missing persons probe, but the Humboldt County Sheriff's Office will decide when to declare the case cold, which could trigger federal help.

The remote terrain where Emmilee was last seen — two hours from the nearest town — created hurdles common on reservations.

Law enforcement determined there wasn't enough information to launch a formal search and rescue operation in such a vast, mountainous area. The Yurok police opted to forgo their own search because of

liability concerns and a lack of training, said Yurok Tribal Police Chief Greg O'Rourke.

Instead, Yurok and Hoopa Valley police and sheriff's deputies plied the rain-swollen Klamath River by boat and drove back roads.

Emmilee's father, Gary Risling, says the sheriff's office failed to act on anonymous tips, was slow to follow up on possible sightings and focused more resources on other missing person's cases, including a wayward hunter and a kayaker lost at sea.

"I don't want to seem like I'm picking on them, but that effort is sure not put forward when it becomes a missing Indian woman," he said.

Humboldt County Sheriff William Honsal declined interview requests, saying the Yurok are in charge and there are no signs of foul play. O'Rourke said the tips aren't enough for a search warrant and there's nothing further the tribal police can do.

The police chief, who knew Emmilee well, says his work is frequently stymied by a broader system that discounts tribal sovereignty.

"The role of police is protect the vulnerable. As tribal police, we're doing that in a system that's broken," he said. "I think that is the reason that Native women get all but dismissed."

Emmilee's family, meanwhile, is struggling to shield her children, now 10 and almost 2, from the trauma of their mother's disappearance — trauma they worry could trigger another generational cycle of loss.

The boy has been having nightmares and recently spoke everyone's worst fear.

"It's real difficult when you deal with the grandkids, and the grandkid says, 'Grandpa, can you take me down the river and can we look for my mama?' What do you tell him? 'We're looking, we're looking every day,'" said Gary Risling, choking back tears.

"And then he says, 'What happens if we can't find her?'"

Northern Europe battered by 3rd major storm; deaths hit 14

By DANICA KIRKA Associated Press

LONDON (AP) — Northern Europe has been battered by its third major storm in five days, with heavy rains and high winds killing at least two more people, disrupting travel and prompting hundreds of flood alerts across a region still recovering from last week's hurricane-force winds.

Storm Franklin pushed in from the North Atlantic on Sunday afternoon even as crews worked to clear fallen trees and restore power to thousands of customers hit by storms Dudley and Eunice last week. Heavy rains and high winds swept across Northern Ireland and northern England on Monday before moving on to France. England's environment agency issued more than 300 flood warnings and alerts and train operators urged people not to travel.

In France, a couple in their 70s died Sunday after their car was swept into the English Channel near a small town in Normandy. The couple had called for help but it did not reach them in time.

"With the wind, the car skidded," Herve Bougon, mayor of Bricqueville-Sur-Mer, told the Ouest-France newspaper. "It was pushed onto its side as it sank into the water."

At least 14 people have died across Europe during a week of wild weather that meteorologists say is being fueled by an unusually strong jet stream over the North Atlantic. The storms have left hundreds of thousands of people without power and triggered local flooding and evacuations as high winds ripped the roofs off buildings.

Gusts of up to 87 mph (140 kph) were recorded late Sunday on the Isle of Wight. A gust of 122 mph (196 kph), provisionally the highest ever recorded in England, was measured Friday on the Isle of Wight as Storm Eunice hit the region. Hurricane-level winds start at 74 mph.

Official weather warnings in Germany, where the latest storm is known as Antonia, were lifted on Monday, though disruption to transport continued in northern parts of the country.

Experts said the weather toll for the week has been extensive for the environment as well. The German Aerospace Center, DLR, says the current storms hitting northern Europe would likely result in widespread damage to already weakened forests.

In a study released Monday, the government-funded agency said satellite data shows massive forest loss due to drought and bark beetle infestation between 2018 and 2021. These factors — which are exacerbated by global warming — weaken trees, making them vulnerable, DLR said.

“The current storm situation across Germany will probably again lead to the need to remove damaged trees in many areas,” it said.

Insurance broker Aon estimated the insured damage in Germany from the successive storms at 1.6 billion euros (\$1.8 billion). The Dutch insurers’ association estimated that the three storms caused at least 500 million euros (\$567 million) of damage across the Netherlands.

Despite preparations and warning by weather authorities, “the February storms have sparked a record number of claims and an enormous damages bill,” said Richard Weurding, general director of the Dutch Association of Insurers.

The storms blew roofs off buildings and uprooted trees across the Netherlands, killing four people on Friday as Eunice lashed the country. Insurers warned that more damage could still be to come with strong winds forecast in coming days.

In Denmark, the storm uprooted trees and disrupted rail services in and around Copenhagen, the capital. Sweden saw heavy snowfall that shut down buses in its capital city of Stockholm.

Like in Arizona, botched baptisms roiled Michigan church

By ED WHITE Associated Press

DETROIT (AP) — One word caught the ear of a young priest a few years ago when his father shared a video of his 1990 baptism at a suburban Detroit church.

“Wait,” the Rev. Matthew Hood recalled thinking. “Something doesn’t seem right here.”

Indeed, an error by a deacon who said “We baptize” instead of “I baptize” spoiled Hood’s baptism in the eyes of the Catholic Church — and, in domino-like fashion, erased his other sacraments and meant that he wasn’t really a priest.

It was perhaps the most significant consequence from a controversy that emerged nearly two years ago at St. Anastasia Church in Troy, after the Vatican said the use of “we” invalidates baptisms in the Catholic faith.

Thousands of Arizona Catholics recently made headlines when they learned that they, too, may have been improperly baptized with the wrong words in a separate but similar matter involving a popular pastor, the Rev. Andres Arango, who resigned Feb. 1.

In Michigan, Hood was baptized, given other sacraments and swiftly ordained again to the priesthood within days in 2020. But the Archdiocese of Detroit still hasn’t heard from hundreds of people whose rites at St. Anastasia are considered invalid, despite outreach efforts and publicity.

It immediately caused confusion and anger as frustrated members of St. Anastasia wondered why the Catholic Church was hung up on a single word expressed by a deacon during baptisms in the 1980s and ‘90s.

“Why do you think so many people are leaving the Catholic Church?” a woman, who wasn’t identified, said during a 2020 question-and-answer session with clergy that’s posted online. “This is a great example why. This is just awful.”

An unidentified man at the meeting posed a question commonly asked in thorny situations: “What would Jesus do?”

“I think he would be on a different side here and say by what you’re doing you have disrupted so many lives, so many people,” the man said.

The archdiocese said Deacon Mark Springer, now retired, performed nearly 800 baptisms at St. Anastasia from 1986-99. After the decree by the Vatican, local church officials said all were presumed invalid unless there’s clear evidence that he didn’t use the phrase “we baptize.”

It’s not the “we” of the congregation doing the baptizing, but rather the “I” of Jesus Christ, working through a priest or deacon, that makes a baptism valid, the Vatican said in a global order.

Groton Daily Independent

Tuesday, Feb. 22, 2022 ~ Vol. 30 - No. 230 ~ 63 of 68

That sent people at St. Anastasia scrambling to find videos of their children's baptism, the official entry into the church and a gateway sacrament to other Catholic rites, such as Holy Communion and even marriage.

About 200 baptisms were found to be valid, while 71 people stepped forward to go through baptism and other initiation sacraments again, archdiocese spokeswoman Holly Fournier told The Associated Press.

Another 47 people are making new arrangements, she added, but 455 still have not responded. Ten declined to participate.

"We reached out directly, mailing letters to everyone impacted using the most recent records we had on each individual. ... We're eager to accompany anyone who comes forward," Fournier said.

She declined to make clergy available for interviews to discuss why they believe so many people haven't responded over the past 18 months.

During the meeting at St. Anastasia in 2020, Monsignor Ronald Browne, a church lawyer, revealed that officials in 1999 learned that Springer was using "we baptize" and ordered him to stop. But experts who were consulted at the time also said his earlier baptisms still were OK.

Then nothing happened for two decades — until Hood asked questions about what he had heard in his boyhood baptism video, and the Vatican separately declared that "we baptize" voids the sacrament, Browne said.

"I'm sorry," he said.

Springer told the AP that he couldn't comment, on the request of the archdiocese.

The consequences for Hood went beyond his own baptism and other sacraments, including priestly ordination. He had officiated at roughly 30 marriages during his initial three years as a priest. Those couples had to make their vows again.

"I was expecting them to be angry, upset, confused," Hood said. "Their reaction was 'Father Matt, we feel so bad for you.'"

Hood, 31, currently serves Catholic college students, especially around Wayne State University in Detroit. They are around the same age as many of the young people who haven't reached out to the church about being baptized a second time.

"The sacraments are the mystery of God crashing into our lives," Hood said. "It isn't just a checklist that you need to make in a Christian life. It's something that changes us completely."

He said Pope Francis has likened the Catholic Church to a "field hospital" serving people at all stages of their faith.

"We're aware there are young people who no longer practice the faith. This problem has opened that up," Hood said of the botched baptisms. "But for some individuals, it has been the opportunity to say I haven't taken my faith seriously and this is an opportunity to do that, to realize something real is at play here."

Myanmar seeks to have Rohingya case thrown out of UN court

By MIKE CORDER Associated Press

THE HAGUE, Netherlands (AP) — Lawyers for Myanmar's military rulers on Monday sought the dismissal of a case that accuses the Southeast Asian nation of genocide against the Rohingya ethnic minority, saying the United Nations' top court lacked jurisdiction.

Public hearings at the International Court of Justice went ahead amid questions about who should represent Myanmar in the aftermath of the military take-over of the country last year.

The decision to allow Myanmar's military-installed government to represent the country at the hearings drew sharp criticism.

"It is outrageous for the ICJ to proceed with these hearings on the basis of junta representation. The junta is not the government of Myanmar, it does not represent the state of Myanmar, and it is dangerous for the court to allow it to present itself as such," said Chris Sidoti of advocacy group Special Advisory Council for Myanmar.

A shadow administration known as the National Unity Government made up of representatives including elected lawmakers who were prevented from taking their seats by the military takeover had argued that

Groton Daily Independent

Tuesday, Feb. 22, 2022 ~ Vol. 30 - No. 230 ~ 64 of 68

it should be representing Myanmar in court.

But, instead, it was the administration installed by the military. The legal team was led by Ko Ko Hlaing, the minister for international cooperation. He replaced pro-democracy icon Aung San Suu Kyi, who led the country's legal team at earlier hearings in the case in 2019. She now is in prison after being convicted on what her supporters call trumped-up charges.

As the hearing started, the court's president, U.S. Judge Joan Donoghue, noted "that the parties to a contentious case before the court are states, not particular governments."

A Myanmar rights group questioned the court's decision to allow the military regime to represent Myanmar, which was formerly known as Burma.

"We are glad the case is going forward but find it deeply troubling that the military is allowed to appear before the court as representatives of Burma," Burma Human Rights Network's Executive Director Kyaw Win said in a statement. "The coup regime is in the middle of a horrific campaign of violence against civilians, and the last thing they should be given is any legitimacy in a U.N. body."

Lawyers representing Myanmar argued that the case should be tossed out because the court only hears cases between states and the Rohingya complaint was brought by Gambia on behalf of the Organization of Islamic States.

They also argued that Gambia could not bring the case to court as it was not directly linked to the events in Myanmar and that a legal dispute did not exist between the two countries before the case was filed.

Lawyers for Gambia are scheduled to respond on Wednesday. Judges will likely take months to rule on the preliminary objections.

Ahead of Monday's hearing, members of Myanmar's National Unity Government, urged the court not to accept representatives of the military rulers.

"It would be a most profound injustice to the Rohingya if the military were to be both their abusers and have any voice in the court," said the unity government's foreign minister, Zin Mar Aung.

The organization said it has contacted the court seeking to withdraw Myanmar's preliminary objections to the case. The national unity government says it is the country's only legitimate government but no foreign government has recognized it.

The dispute at the world court in The Hague reflects a broader struggle in the international community over whom to accept as Myanmar's legitimate rulers in the aftermath of the coup.

Southeast Asian foreign ministers held their annual retreat last week without their counterpart from Myanmar, who was blackballed from participating but allowed to attend online as an observer.

The military launched what it called a clearance campaign in Rakhine state in 2017 after an attack by a Rohingya insurgent group. More than 700,000 Rohingya fled into neighboring Bangladesh and security forces were accused of mass rapes, killings and torching thousands of homes.

In 2019, lawyers representing Gambia at the ICJ outlined their allegations of genocide by showing judges maps, satellite images and graphic photos of the military campaign. That led the court to order Myanmar to do all it can to prevent genocide against the Rohingya. The interim ruling was intended to protect the minority while the case is decided in The Hague, a process likely to take years.

Last year's military takeover in Myanmar sparked widespread peaceful protests and civil disobedience that security forces suppressed with lethal force. About 1,500 civilians have been killed, according to the Assistance Association for Political Prisoners.

The International Court of Justice rules on disputes between states, including responsibility for breaches of international law. It is not linked to the International Criminal Court, also based in The Hague, which holds individuals accountable for atrocities. Prosecutors at the ICC are investigating crimes committed against the Rohingya who were forced to flee to Bangladesh. They have not yet filed any indictments.

EXPLAINER: How fake electors tried to throw result to Trump

By FARNOUSH AMIRI Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — State attorneys general and the House committee investigating the Jan. 6 at-

Groton Daily Independent

Tuesday, Feb. 22, 2022 ~ Vol. 30 - No. 230 ~ 65 of 68

tack on the Capitol are digging deeper into the role that fake slates of electors played in Donald Trump's desperate effort to cling to power after his defeat in the 2020 presidential election.

Electors in seven battleground states signed certificates falsely stating that Trump, not Democrat Joe Biden, had won their states. They mailed those certificates to the National Archives and Congress, where they were ignored.

Now those certificates are getting a second look from lawmakers as they conduct an expansive review of the riot on Jan. 6, 2021, and the events preceding it. More than a dozen people have been subpoenaed so far.

A look at who the electors are, how the scheme unfolded and why lawmakers are investigating now:

WHO ARE THE PRESIDENTIAL ELECTORS?

Electors are people appointed by state parties, sometimes before the general election, to represent voters. The job is often given to current and former party officials, state lawmakers and party activists.

The winner of the state's popular vote determines which party's electors are sent to the Electoral College, which convenes in December after the election to certify the winner of the White House.

There's very little guidance in the Constitution about the qualifications of electors except that no senator, representative or person holding federal office can be appointed to the position. After the Civil War, the 14th Amendment also specified that state officials "who have engaged in insurrection or rebellion against the United States" cannot serve as electors.

There are currently 538 electors, matching the number of U.S. senators and representatives, plus three for the District of Columbia, which gets those electoral votes even though it has no voting representation in Congress.

Once chosen to be an elector, members gather in their respective state capitals on the first Monday after the second Wednesday in December to certify their statewide popular vote winner. Each elector gets two votes: one for president and one for vice president through a process laid out by the 12th Amendment.

To cast the votes, each elector signs six certificates. One gets mailed to the Senate president, two go to their state's secretary of state and two go to the National Archives. The last is sent to a local judge.

HOW DOES CONGRESS COUNT ELECTORAL CERTIFICATES?

Once the certificates are sent, Congress gathers on Jan. 6 at 1 p.m. for a joint session to tally votes in the Electoral College. The process is prescribed by federal law and, up until 2020, was mostly routine.

The sitting vice president — in 2021 it was Mike Pence — presides over the session and opens the vote certificates from each state in alphabetical order.

After the certificates are opened, they are passed off to four tellers — two from the House and two from the Senate — who announce the results. House tellers include one representative from each party and are appointed by the House speaker. At the end of the count, the vice president announces the name of the next president.

The certification of the results on Jan. 6, 2021, was upended as a mob of Trump's supporters fought past police and broke into the Capitol, halting the process and forcing lawmakers and Pence into hiding. Biden's victory in the Electoral College was certified in the early morning of Jan. 7 after it took police all day to clear the rioters and secure the building.

SO WHAT WERE TRUMP ALLIES TRYING TO DO?

On Dec. 14, 2020, as Democratic electors in key swing states met at their seat of state government to cast their votes, Republicans who would have been electors had Trump won gathered as well. They declared themselves the rightful electors and submitted false Electoral College certificates declaring Trump the winner of the presidential election in Arizona, Georgia, Michigan, New Mexico, Nevada, Pennsylvania and Wisconsin,

Those certificates from the "alternate electors" in seven states were sent to Congress. Several of Trump's Republican allies in the House and Senate used them to justify delaying or blocking the certification of the election during the joint session of Congress.

On two of the certificates, from New Mexico and Pennsylvania, the fake electors added a caveat saying

Groton Daily Independent

Tuesday, Feb. 22, 2022 ~ Vol. 30 - No. 230 ~ 66 of 68

the certificate was submitted in case they were later recognized as duly elected, qualified electors. That would only have been possible if Trump had won any of the several dozen legal challenges he filed in the weeks after the election. Instead, he lost them all.

But the lies about election fraud from the former president and his allies ended up having grave consequences beyond the Electoral College certification, fueling the deadly insurrection on the Capitol building that day.

WHY DIDN'T IT WORK?

The attempt to throw the election did not succeed, in part, because of centuries-old safeguards. While Congress and the National Archives received the fake certificates, the only ones that were counted during the joint session were the official slates of electors from each of the swing states in question.

When Pence was pressed by Trump allies to introduce the unofficial pro-Trump electors to cast doubt on Biden's victory on Jan. 6, he declined. And though Republicans in Congress filed challenges to several of the electoral college votes, none succeeded. Lawmakers ultimately certified the results and Biden's win.

But the insurrection and Trump's brazen campaign to throw the results have led to a bipartisan effort in Congress to update the laws governing the Electoral College to ensure no future president can abuse the process to stay in power.

WHAT DOES THE JAN. 6 COMMITTEE WANT TO KNOW?

The House wants to identify whether there was any fraudulent activity in the preparation of the fake Electoral College certificates. They are also looking into the people who planned and implemented the efforts in each of the seven states. Attorneys general in New Mexico and Michigan are conducting their own investigations.

At least 20 people in connection with the fake electors scheme have been subpoenaed by the House panel, including former Trump campaign members, state party officials and state lawmakers.

While the false-electors push was public at the time, lawmakers want to know more about the involvement of Trump's White House and members of his campaign, in part to determine whether any crimes may have been committed.

"This was a coordinated effort — a multistate effort," California Rep. Zoe Lofgren, a Democratic member of the committee, told MSNBC shortly after the first subpoenas were issued to the fake electors. "The fake documents are similar and we'd like to know who coordinated this and who asked them to do this."

With all eyes on Ukraine, Putin to send his envoy to Balkans

By DUSAN STOJANOVIC Associated Press

BELGRADE, Serbia (AP) — With all eyes on a possible Russian invasion of Ukraine, Russian President Vladimir Putin is sending his top security envoy to the Balkans where Moscow has been trying to maintain influence mainly through its ally Serbia, according to reports.

Serbia's pro-government media said Monday Nikolai Patrushev, the powerful secretary of the Kremlin's Security Council, is due to arrive in Belgrade in the coming days for talks with Serbia President Aleksandar Vucic. Moscow hasn't made an announcement about Patrushev's trip.

The talks are reportedly to focus on Moscow's claims that "mercenaries" from Albania, Kosovo and Bosnia are being sent from those Balkan states to fight on the Ukrainian side against the pro-Russia rebels amid fears of a Russian attack.

Officials from Albania, Kosovo and Bosnia have rejected those claims, which were made by Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov last week.

"There's information that mercenaries are being recruited in Kosovo, Albania and Bosnia and Herzegovina to knock Russia out of balance and send them to places including Donbass," Lavrov said according to the Russian TASS news agency, referring to the rebel-held territory in eastern Ukraine. "We are now double-checking that."

Vucic on Monday called a meeting of Serbia's top security officials who reportedly also discussed the reports of "mercenaries" from the Balkans going to Ukraine. Dozens of Serb fighters have in the past

Groton Daily Independent

Tuesday, Feb. 22, 2022 ~ Vol. 30 - No. 230 ~ 67 of 68

fought in eastern Ukraine, but on the side of the pro-Russia rebels.

Serbia has formally declared neutrality in the Russia-Ukraine standoff that threatens a major war in Europe. However, Serbia's state-controlled media is squarely supporting Moscow in the crisis, carrying Russian propaganda without any questions raised.

Although formally seeking European Union membership, Serbia has refused to align its foreign policies with the 27-nation bloc and has instead strengthened its political, economic and military ties with Russia and China.

The increasingly autocratic Vucic, who faces an April 3 general election, opened his campaign this past weekend by declaring that as long as he is in power, Serbia will never join NATO and will maintain its close ties with Moscow and Beijing.

Illustrating growing ties between the two Slavic allies, Serbia and Russia have recently formed a "working group" tasked with combating popular revolts known as "color revolutions" that the two countries' top security officials described as instruments of the West to destabilize "free states."

Western officials have accused Kremlin of "malign" influence in the Balkans that has helped fuel a wave of nationalism which threatens to undo peace in Bosnia after its 1992-95 war, reignite armed conflict over Kosovo that split from Serbia in 2008, and stir up political troubles in NATO-members North Macedonia and Montenegro.

Moscow has repeatedly denied those claims, although maintaining that Bosnia, Serbia and Kosovo must never join NATO.

Bosnia is in the middle of a political crisis, with EU foreign ministers meeting in Brussels to discuss ways to ease tensions and prevent the possible breakup of the ethnically divided Balkan country. Bosnian Serbs, who have the support of Serbia and Russia, are threatening to split from the federation.

Today in History

By The Associated Press undefined

Today in History

Today is Tuesday, Feb. 22, the 53rd day of 2022. There are 312 days left in the year.

Today's Highlight in History:

On Feb. 22, 2021, the number of U.S. deaths from COVID-19 topped 500,000, according to Johns Hopkins University.

On this date:

In 1630, English colonists in the Massachusetts Bay Colony first sampled popcorn brought to them by a Native American named Quadequina for their Thanksgiving celebration.

In 1732 (New Style date), the first president of the United States, George Washington, was born in Westmoreland County in the Virginia Colony.

In 1784, a U.S. merchant ship, the Empress of China, left New York for the Far East to trade goods with China.

In 1935, it became illegal for airplanes to fly over the White House.

In 1959, the inaugural Daytona 500 race was held; although Johnny Beauchamp was initially declared the winner, the victory was later awarded to Lee Petty.

In 1967, more than 25,000 U.S. and South Vietnamese troops launched Operation Junction City, aimed at smashing a Vietcong stronghold near the Cambodian border. (Although the communists were driven out, they later returned.)

In 1980, the "Miracle on Ice" took place in Lake Placid, New York, as the United States Olympic hockey team upset the Soviets, 4-3. (The U.S. team went on to win the gold medal.)

In 1987, pop artist Andy Warhol died at a New York City hospital at age 58.

In 1997, scientists in Scotland announced they had succeeded in cloning an adult mammal, producing a lamb named "Dolly." (Dolly, however, was later put down after a short life marred by premature aging and disease.)

Groton Daily Independent

Tuesday, Feb. 22, 2022 ~ Vol. 30 - No. 230 ~ 68 of 68

In 2010, Najibullah Zazi (nah-jee-BOO'-lah ZAH'-zee), accused of buying beauty supplies to make bombs for an attack on New York City subways, pleaded guilty to charges including conspiring to use weapons of mass destruction. (Zazi faced up to life in prison but spent nearly a decade after his arrest helping the U.S. identify and prosecute terrorists; he was given a 10-year sentence followed by supervised release.)

In 2016, the City Council of Charlotte, North Carolina, voted 7-4 to pass a new law allowing transgender people to choose public bathrooms that corresponded to their gender identity.

In 2020, Bernie Sanders scored a resounding win in Nevada's presidential caucuses, cementing his status as the Democrats' front-runner.

Ten years ago: Mitt Romney and Rick Santorum swapped accusations about health care, spending earmarks and federal bailouts in the 20th debate of the roller-coaster race for the Republican presidential nomination, held in Mesa, Arizona. Two Marine Corps helicopters collided over a remote section of the California desert during a nighttime exercise, killing seven Marines.

Five years ago: The Trump administration lifted federal guidelines that said transgender students should be allowed to use public school bathrooms and locker rooms matching their chosen gender identity. Most of the Dakota Access pipeline opponents abandoned their protest camp ahead of a government deadline to get off the federal land. A shooting at a bar in Olathe (oh-LAY'-thuh), Kansas, left one man dead and two others wounded; witnesses said a man yelled, "Get out of my country" before opening fire on two Indian nationals who worked as engineers at GPS-maker Garmin. (The gunman was sentenced to life in prison for murder, attempted murder and hate crimes.)

One year ago: In a significant defeat for former President Donald Trump, the Supreme Court declined to step in to halt the turnover of his tax records to a New York state prosecutor. Dominion Voting Systems filed a \$1.3 billion defamation lawsuit against the founder and CEO of MyPillow, saying that Mike Lindell falsely accused the company of rigging the 2020 presidential election; the company had filed similar lawsuits against Trump lawyers Rudolph Giuliani and Sidney Powell. State lawmakers gave final approval to a bill to end capital punishment in Virginia, a state that had executed more people in its history than any other. Poet, publisher and bookseller Lawrence Ferlinghetti, who helped launch and perpetuate the Beat movement, died in San Francisco at age 101.

Today's Birthdays: Actor Paul Dooley is 94. Actor James Hong is 93. Actor John Ashton is 74. Actor Miou-Miou is 72. Actor Julie Walters is 72. Basketball Hall of Famer Julius Erving is 72. Actor Ellen Greene is 71. Former Sen. Bill Frist, R-Tenn., is 70. Former White House adviser David Axelrod is 67. Actor Kyle MacLachlan is 63. World Golf Hall of Famer Vijay Singh is 59. Actor-comedian Rachel Dratch is 56. Actor Paul Lieberstein is 55. Actor Jeri Ryan is 54. Actor Thomas Jane is 53. TV host Clinton Kelly is 53. Actor Tamara Mello is 52. Actor-singer Lea Salonga (LAY'-uh suh-LONG'-guh) is 51. Actor Jose Solano is 51. International Tennis Hall of Famer Michael Chang is 50. Rock musician Scott Phillips is 49. Singer James Blunt is 48. Actor Drew Barrymore is 47. Actor Liza Huber is 47. Rock singer Tom Higgenson (Plain White T's) is 43. Rock musician Joe Hottinger (Halestorm) is 40. Actor Zach Roerig is 37.