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Death Notice: Earl Grandpre

Earl Grandpre, 96, of Conde passed away February 27, 2022 at Avera Mother Joseph Manor in Aberdeen. Services are pending with Paetznick-Garness Funeral Chapel, Groton.

UpComing Events

Monday, Feb. 28

Junior High Basketball: Warner at Groton. 7th grade at 4 p.m. followed by 8th grade game. (Games will be broadcast on GDILIVE.COM)

Tuesday, March 1

Boys Region 1A at Groton: 6 p.m.: Groton Area vs. Sisseton followed by Milbank playing Florence/Henry City Council Meeting, 7 p.m.

Friday, March 4

Boys Region 1A game at 6 p.m. (If Groton wins, the game will be played in Groton).
State Debate in Harrisburg

Saturday, March 5

State Debate in Harrisburg

Tuesday, March 8

Boys SoDak16

Thursday, March 10

End of Third Quarter

Middle School Talent Show, 7 p.m., GHS Gym

Saturday, March 12

Show Choir at Aberdeen Competition

Monday, March 14

School Board Meeting, 7 p.m.

Tuesday, March 15

City Council Meeting, 7 p.m.

Thursday, March 17

Spring Break - No School

Friday, March 18

Spring Break - No School

Saturday, March 19

Mitchell Show Choir Competition

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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Region 1A Boys Basketball on GDILIVE.COM



NO TICKET REQUIRED! FREE TO WATCH



Good Luck Tigers from the GDILIVE.COM sponsors

Allied Climate Professionals
Bahr Spray Foam
Bary Keith at Harr Motors
Bierman Farm Service
BK Custom T's & More
Blocker Construction
Dacotah Bank
Doug Abeln Seed Company
Groton American Legion
Groton Dairy Queen
John Sieh Agency
Locke Electric
Lori's Pharmacy
Matt's Tree Service
Mike-N-Jo's Body-N-Glass
Milbrandt Enterprises Inc.
MJ's Sinclair
S & S Lumber
ThunderSeed with John Wheeting
Weismantel Agency of Columbia

Upper Iowa Upends Northern State Postseason Run

Sioux Falls, S.D. – Despite scoring 40 points in each half, the Northern State University men's basketball team was eliminated from the NSIC/Sanford Health Basketball Tournament on Sunday. The Wolves suffered their first tournament loss since the 2017 season, falling to the second seed from the south, Upper Iowa.

THE QUICK DETAILS

Final Score: NSU 80, UIU 89

Records: NSU 20-12, UIU 25-4

Attendance: 1282

HOW IT HAPPENED

- The contest between the Peacocks and the Wolves saw six tie scores and four lead changes in a battle that came down to scoring in the paint and off turnovers
- Upper Iowa recorded 34 points in the paint to the Wolves 22, and notched 20 points off of 18 Northern State turnovers
- NSU recorded a game high 25 points off the bench and 14 second chance points, out-rebounding UIU 33-26 in the loss
- The Wolves shot 41.0% from the floor, 44.4% from the 3-point line, and 90.0% from the foul line, while the Peacocks shot 54.7% from the floor, 50.0% from the 3-point line, and 85.7% from the foul line in the game
- Northern added 12 made 3-pointers, 15 assists, five blocks, and three steals
- Kailleb Walton-Blanden led the team off the bench and in the game with a career high 20 points, as the Wolves saw four in double figures

NORTHERN STATE STATISTICAL STANDOUTS

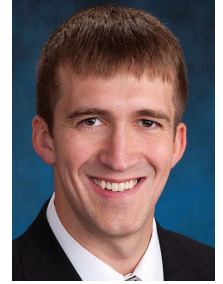
- Kailleb Walton-Blanden: 20 points (career high), 63.6 FG%, 8 rebounds (career high)
- Jordan Belka: 14 points, 4 rebounds
- Sam Masten: 14 points, 5 rebounds, 4 assists
- Jacksen Moni: 10 points, 4 rebounds, 2 assists

UP NEXT

Northern State will await their postseason fate with the NCAA Selection Show on Sunday, March 6 at 9:30 p.m. (CT) on NCAA.com. The Wolves were ranked No. 10 in the last regional release with automatic bids are granted to the winners of the NSIC, GAC and MIAA postseason tournaments, with the remaining five spots being awarded on an at-large basis.

Did Your Doctor “Do Anything”?

Perhaps this has happened to you: Your recent cough kept you up for another night, so you went to the doctor. The nurse took your vitals, the doctor asked you some questions, listened to your lungs, maybe looked at your ears and your throat, and recommended rest, fluids, over the counter treatments, and time. It all seemed fine until you got home and realized the doctor did not “do anything” for you.



Andrew Ellsworth, MD

Why didn't the doctor prescribe an antibiotic? What could it hurt?

The use of antibiotics has been a blessing and a lifesaver. On the flip side, antibiotic resistance and opportunistic infections have been on the rise.

Our bodies naturally produce good, beneficial bacteria in our gut and on our skin. Antibiotics can kill off some of those good bacteria, causing diarrhea or a yeast infection. Other problems triggered by antibiotics are not immediately apparent. For example, normal bacteria on your skin may become resistant, causing methicillin-resistant Staph aureus or MRSA, which can cause a stubborn infection the next time you get a cut or scratch.

With less competition from normal bacteria in your gut, the bad bug *Clostridioides difficile* or *C. diff* can take hold causing severe diarrhea and inflammation of the colon which is hard to treat and even harder to eliminate. Or perhaps you may have an allergic reaction to an antibiotic, or worse, a severe sloughing of the skin called Stevens-Johnson syndrome and toxic epidermal necrolysis. All the above may cause hospitalizations and even death.

Most cold symptoms like a sore throat or cough are caused by viruses. Antibiotics are not effective against viruses, and early antibiotic use, often in the first week of symptoms, has not been shown to decrease the risk of a bacterial infection taking hold. In fact, if one does take hold, it may become even more resistant.

Your doctor wants to help you feel better. It would be quick and easy to immediately prescribe an antibiotic, but that may not be what is best for you and your health. After listening to you, reviewing your medical history, your medications, your vitals, and doing an examination, and after further conversation with you, I trust that if a test, an x-ray, or antibiotics are warranted, the doctor will likely recommend it.

If you feel like the doctor didn't “do anything” for you, please consider the risks of antibiotics. Of course, if your condition does not improve, and you start to feel worse, notify the doctor. But, if you do get better without additional tests and antibiotics, consider being grateful. The human body is a marvel.

Andrew Ellsworth, M.D. is part of The Prairie Doc® team of physicians and currently practices family medicine in Brookings, South Dakota. Follow The Prairie Doc® at www.prairiedoc.org and on Facebook featuring On Call with the Prairie Doc® a medical Q&A show celebrating its twentieth season of truthful, tested, and timely medical information, broadcast on SDPB and streaming live on Facebook most Thursdays at 7 p.m. central.

Groton Robotic teams take home 2nd place at State Tournament in Rapid City

Groton Robotics sent 3 teams down to Rapid City on Saturday, February 26th for the South Dakota VRC State Championship held at Douglas High School in Box Elder. Competing against 27 other South Dakota teams. G-Force 9050A (Travis Townsend, Jace Kroll) Gear Heads 9050B (Jack Dinger, Ethan Clark, Axel Warrington) Galaxy 9050E (Corbin Weismantel, River Pardick, Isaac Higgins, Bradyn Wienk and Destin Pardick).

The competition started off with 38 qualifying matches, with 30 teams competing 5 times. At the end of the 38 qualifying matches G-Force ranked 4th, Gear Heads 12th and Galaxy 17th. G-Force picked Gear Heads for their alliance partner, after an interesting alliance selection.

The two Groton teams strategized together pushing their way to the finals playing the best two out of three. G-Force and Gear Heads won their first match by playing good defense and succeeded in balancing two robots and two mobile goals on their platform.

The tiebreaker came in the third game and the whole crowd was on the edge of their seats as G-Force and Gear Heads gave it their all. Unfortunately in the end their opponents from Harrisburg, SD and Jefferson, SD came out ahead by balancing more mobile goals on their platform. It was a great game to watch as these two teams fought hard pushing, shoving and stealing, ALL legitimate and common moves with this year's game.

Galaxy's journey for the day ended in the quarter finals, but also had a good run and made some pretty major adjustments to their robot since the beginning of the year. Most of Galaxy's team is made up of first-time robotists, with the exception of River Pardick. River is a senior but didn't not start helping until late in the season due to other commitments. Time is a factor and given more of it Galaxy had the potential.

The goal of the game is to get as many mobile goals as possible on your side in 1 minute and 30 seconds. Each match begins with 30 seconds of autonomous, this means the teams program their robot to move on it's own, no controller, by measuring and calculating with a touch of computer programming. The goal of autonomous is to have the robot grab and drag a mobile goal to your side, the winner of that is awarded extra points.

Balancing mobile goals (those yellow, blue, and red objects) and robots on platforms brings in a LOT of points. The more 'stuff' you can get balanced on your platform the better. But the other team is trying



Second place tournament winners: G-Force 9050A (Jace Kroll, Travis Townsend) with alliance partner Gear Heads 9050B (Ethan Clark, Jack Dinger, Axel Warrington) (Courtesy of Robotics Parents)

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to steal your goals and drag them across to their side just as fast. Good strategy is to not balance stuff on your platform right away as the other team can, and will, tip it all off, totally legal, except in the last 30 seconds robots are not allowed to touch their opponent's platform.

Congratulations to all the robotists who participated! For more information check out the Vex VRC robotics website, download the VEX via app and follow Groton Tiger Robotics on Facebook. G-Force and Gear Heads will advance to the US Open held April in Council Bluffs, Iowa—STAY TUNED! Thanks to all who support Groton Robotics by attending our fundraising events or personal donations!

Submitted by Groton Robotics



Good luck to our departing Groton Robotics seniors—River Pardick, Travis Townsend and Jace Kroll! Best wishes on your future endeavors! (Courtesy of Robotics Parents)



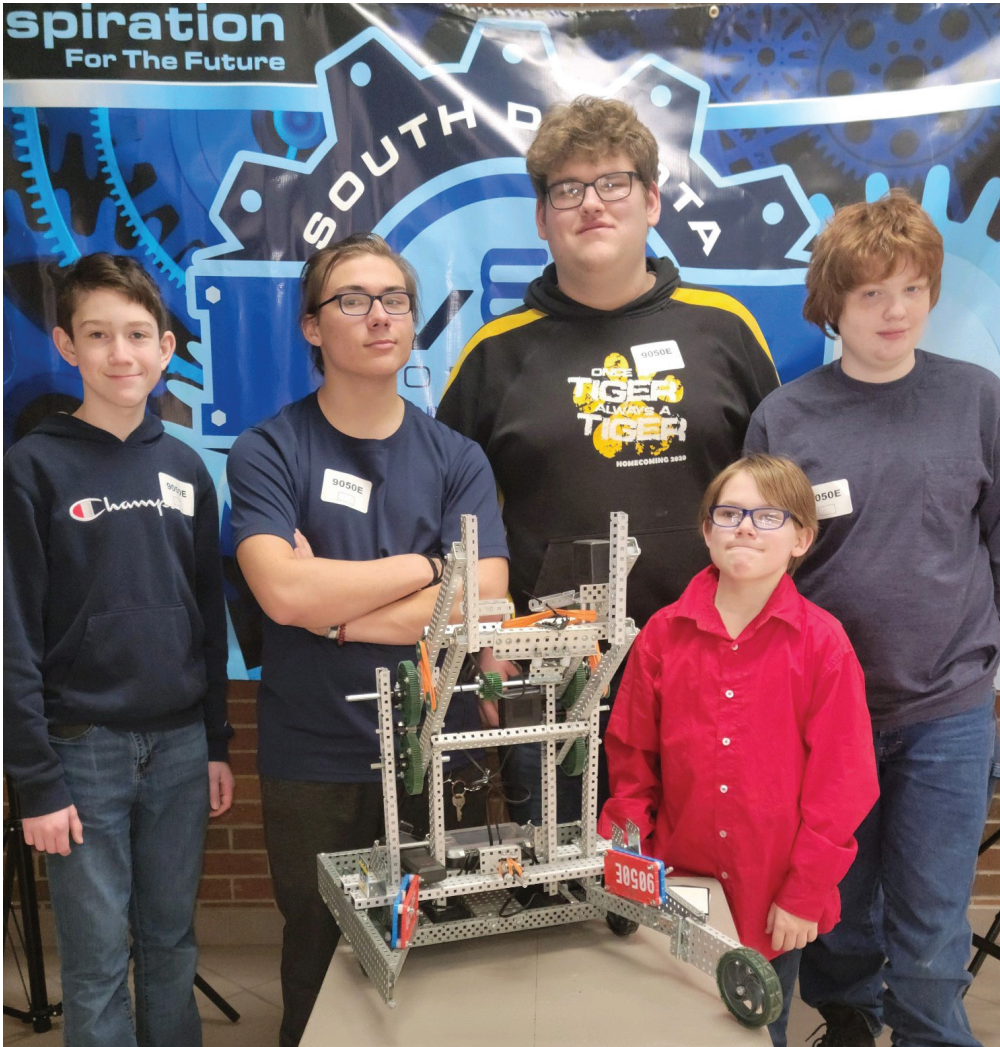
G-Force and Gear Heads were able to balance both robots on their platform during the best 2 out of 3 in the finals. This was win #1 for them in the finals. (Courtesy of Robotics Parents)



Gear Heads 9050B (Ethan Clark, Jack Dinger, Axel Warrington) (Courtesy of Robotics Parents)

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Galaxy 9050E (Brady Wienk, River Pardick, Corbin Weismantel, Isaac Higgins, and Destin Pardick) (Courtesy of Robotics Parents)

G-Force 9050A (Travis Townsend, Jace Kroll)
(Courtesy of Robotics Parents)



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G-Force and Gear Heads holding mobile goals during a match.

(Courtesy of Robotics Parents)



G-Force and Gear Heads after winning a match in the semi-finals. Travis and Jace's robot balance on the platform with mobile goals. (Courtesy of Robotics Parents)

Guest Speaker
Nicole J Phillips
The Kindness Podcast

*You're
Invited!*

RESET

womens conference

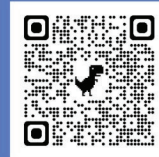
SATURDAY, MARCH 5
AT ROSE HILL CHURCH

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



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Girls Basketball Photos from Region 1A Game with Sisseton



Sydney Leicht
(Photo by Paul Kosel)



Kennedy Hansen
(Photo by Paul Kosel)

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Allyssa Locke looking to pass the ball to Kennedy Hansen.

(Photo by Paul Kosel)

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Aspen Johnson
(Photo by Paul Kosel)



Alyssa Thaler
(Photo by Paul Kosel)



Brooke Gengerke
(Photo by Paul Kosel)



Jerica Locke
(Photo by Paul Kosel)

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Jaedyn Penning
(Photo by Paul Kosel)



Gracie Traphagen
(Photo by Paul Kosel)




Book Drive held for Miller School

The Miller School lost most of its books recently due to a fire that happened in the school. The Groton Area Fellowship of Christian Athletes has spearheaded a book drive for the the Miller School. They have delivered the books to the Miller FCA. (Photo from GHS FCA Facebook page.)



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#1 - Groton Area High School

	1 Groton Area	17-3	3/1 6:00 PM CT
	8 Sisseton	9-11	

#2 - Groton Area High School

	4 Milbank	9-11	3/1 7:30 PM CT
	5 Florence/Henry	8-12	

#3 - Clark High School

	2 Clark/Willow Lake	13-7	3/1 7:30 PM CT
	7 Webster Area	8-12	

#4 - Clark High School

	3 Tiospa Zina	10-8	3/1 6:00 PM CT
	6 Redfield	8-12	

#5 -

#1 WINNER	3/4 TBD
#2 WINNER	

SODAK 16 QUALIFIER



#6 -

#3 WINNER	3/4 TBD
#4 WINNER	

SODAK 16 QUALIFIER

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Glimpses From Greenfield 2022—Week 7

With crossover day having come last Wednesday, we had a super-busy first couple days of the week. On Tuesday, we heard SB 126 on the floor. This bill has direct ties to our area. It goes back to the court battles over non-meandered waters and the injunctions that had been issued regarding some bodies of water in Day County. In 2017, as some of you will recall, the Legislature convened an interim study that worked diligently and issued its recommendations late in the spring. In early-mid June the Legislature met in special session and passed a compromise bill which sought to balance property owners rights with sportsmen's privileges and took into account decades upon decades of case law. Fast forward to this year. SB 126 sought to legislatively remove any judicial injunctions that existed in Day County. On the Senate floor, it was mentioned that the affected individuals could challenge this bill in court or they could seek to follow the process set forth in 2017. The whole issue is one of the most difficult and emotional matters that I have encountered in my 22 years in office. The craziest part of SB 126's journey is that it passed the Senate State Affairs Committee the previous week with a 7-0 vote. However, when it came to the floor, it failed with only 2 votes in favor and 33 against! Truly, much education/learning took place over the weekend and early last week, and the Senate decided not to poke the proverbial bear as it relates to this most-complex issue.

The Senate passed SB 159, which seeks to severely restrict the application of the death penalty. This same bill was defeated last year, but a lot of people flip-flopped, thus allowing it to pass 21-14. Until recent years, the issue of repealing the death penalty was brought forth about once every decade. More recently, it has been brought in some new rendition every year for about a decade. The language in this year's bill is carefully crafted to imply that it will be a narrow exception to current law. However, there are loopholes big enough to drive trucks through. If this bill passes, it will effectively end the potential to seek the death penalty in SD.

On the same front, SB 172 originally failed, but it was brought back on reconsideration. This bill would strike down life-in-prison sentences for young murderers who commit heinous acts. I actually mentioned these two bills last week, but it bears further notice. The reason it was so bizarre was because the same Senators who argued for us to be kinder-and-gentler as it related to people who bludgeon people to death and make them drink acid and break knives off in their victims...those SAME Senators then turned around and argued that a person who defends his or her life or those of other innocent bystanders should be arrested and should not be able to invoke self-defense or the "standing-one's-ground" principle. The whole world seems to be on-its-head! Logic and reason have left the building!

On the brighter side of things, SB 198 passed. This bill seeks to repeal and sets up the process for replacing the juvenile justice reform act of 2015 (SB 73 back then) that has proven so problematic for schools and counties. The 2015 legislation thrust higher costs on the locals, and it gave them very few options for effectively dealing with the problems caused by juvenile offenders. In most cases, the kids who committed crimes—in many cases, serious crimes that may have involved victims other than themselves—were just released back into the community and told to get back to school. Moreover, those arrested for drug crimes were told they had to undergo "compliance" checks to see whether they were keeping their noses clean, but there were no penalties for failed compliance checks. I personally asked a series of question of this nature in an appropriations meeting two or three years ago, and I was told there were no consequences for failed drug tests. This bill passed 22-13, and I am truly hopeful the House passes this and we find a new path forward for juvenile justice measures in SD. Our youth (both the perpetrators and the victims) and our schools and counties deserve a more hopeful and optimistic future than just an expectation that they can deal with problems at the local level without any real teeth in our juvenile statutes.

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The past couple weeks, I've mentioned the Physician Assistant scope-of-practice bill. In 2017, the Senate voted 35-0, and the House, 62-6, in favor of the Nurse Practitioner/Nurse Midwives bill scope-of-practice bill. In 2020, the Senate voted 34-1 (and then 33-0 after amendments), and the House voted 69-0 in favor of the certified registered nurse anesthetists' scope-of-practice bill. MANY of the very people who have voted FOR those previous two bills got all spun-up and/or confused now that the issue of the P.A. scope-of-practice measure was before us. In spite of yeoman's efforts, Senator Tobin fell short on SB 134 by a vote of 16-19. I'm not sure what to read into this. When the very people who have voted for similar measures all of a sudden go the other way with very little justification, it may suggest that if given the opportunity in future years, they will flip-flop on the other issues and try to further restrict medical professionals from practicing all across SD, but of greatest concern would be the rural reaches.

We took up a whole host of spending bills, but the two I'd like to touch on are the Lincoln Hall project at Northern State University and the shooting range northwest of Rapid City. The good people at NSU and the SD Board of Regents brought forth as one of the BOR's top three priorities the Lincoln Hall project which actually would result in both Lincoln and Briscoe Halls being demolished and a new academic building being constructed. In summary, Briscoe Hall was a dorm, but is no longer being utilized. Lincoln Hall began as a dorm, but was then retrofitted as an office building with a couple classrooms and a dining hall in the basement. Over the years, they have tried to improve the building, but the load-bearing columns that run from the foundation to the rooftop prove to be a huge barrier. Moreover, the building cannot be retrofitted to make it ADA-compliant. The proposal for new classroom space with enhance primarily the business and nursing programs offered on NSU's campus. Nursing is relatively new to NSU, but it is being offered through SDSU. This will allow additional slots at NSU, and coupled with many efforts across the state's education system, will help to address the nursing shortage across the state as best as we know how. It will also provide students with a much more education-friendly classroom setting. Rather than having to look around thick columns, they will have full view of their professor, their classmates, and the educational displays around the rooms. SB 44 passed 33-2. It is expected to hit a bump in the road on the House side, so we will see how things play out over the next two weeks.

That said, the same is true of the shooting range. After hearing SB 175 in Appropriations, I decided the bill was worthy of further consideration. Over the past several days, we've been hearing from an increasing number of people who are asking us to couple some state investment with monies available in the GF&P fund and the Pittman-Robertson fund (derived from federal taxes imposed on every fire-arms or ammunition transaction) in order to provide a world-class, state-of-the-art shooting range for people from all reaches in South Dakota to utilize. Obviously, this will be most accessible by people in the western part of the state, but it is anticipated it will become a destination for people on many fronts, including shooting sports competitions. There is fear of the unknown with regard to some of the adjacent landowners. I'm not about to downplay their concerns. The Secretary of GF&P acknowledges that it is incumbent upon him to allay fears and to get local buy-in. However, it must be noted that the GF&P has been meeting with the Meade Co Commission regularly for the past couple years in anticipation of this project being undertaken. SB 175 passed the Senate 28-7, and will head to a House who is predisposed to oppose this NRA-endorsed project.

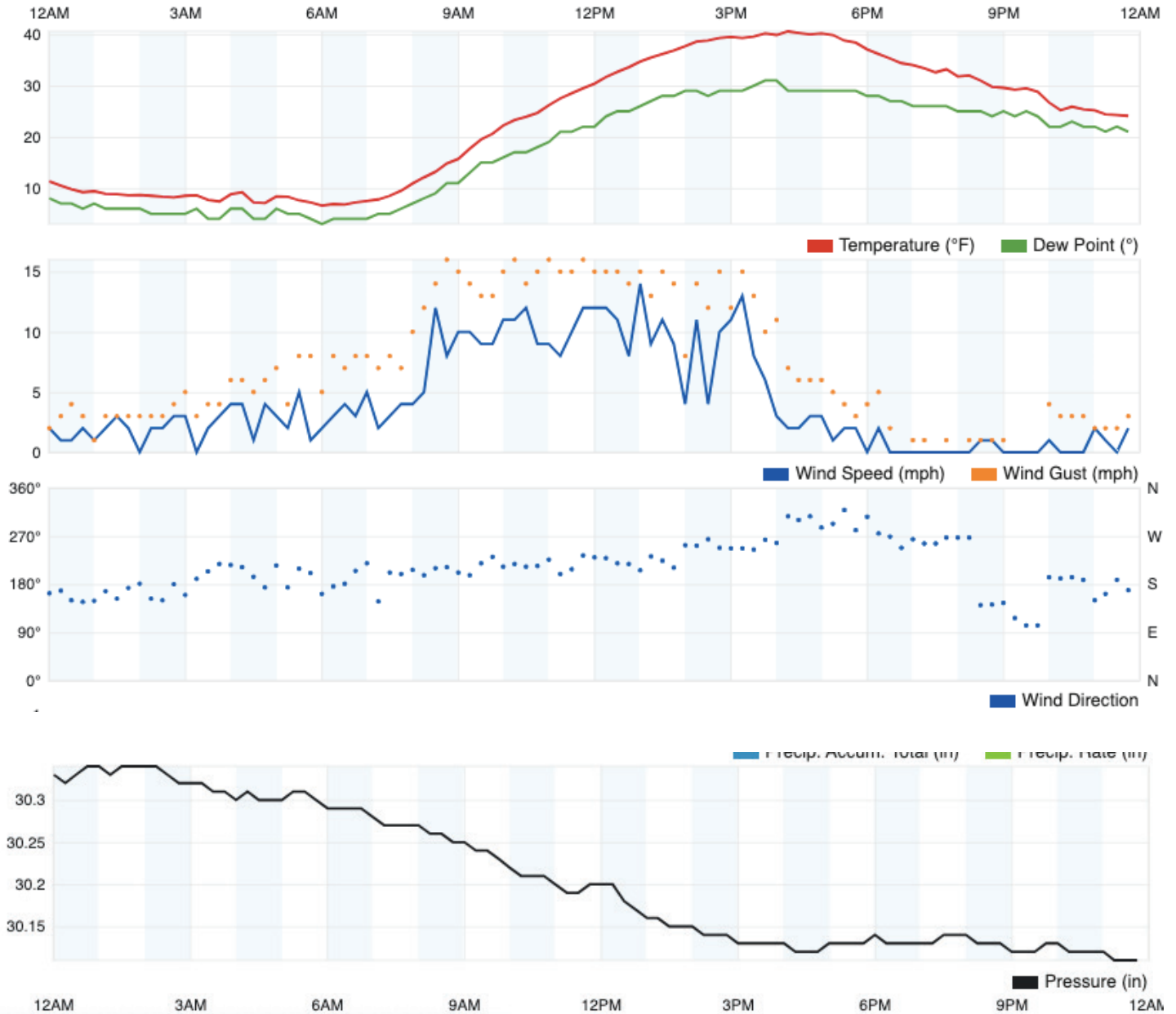
There's much more to say, but that will have to be for another day. Thank you for reading!

Brock

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Yesterday's Groton Weather Graphs




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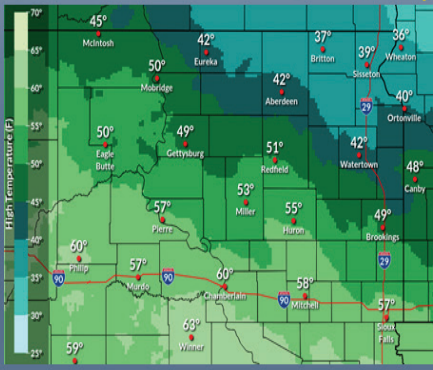
Today	Tonight	Tuesday	Tuesday Night	Wednesday
				
Patchy Fog then Partly Sunny	Mostly Cloudy	Mostly Cloudy	Mostly Cloudy	Blustery. Mostly Cloudy then Slight Chance Snow
High: 44 °F	Low: 24 °F	High: 36 °F	Low: 21 °F	High: 28 °F

NWS ABERDEEN  FEBRUARY 27


Warmer Monday



38 to 57°
warmest over southern South Dakota




Tuesday



Light wintry mix over far ne SD & w central MN

30 to 63°

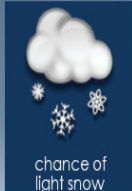
Wednesday



light wintry mix over n central SD

30 to 57°

Thursday



chance of light snow

20 to 40°

Mild air will remain in place through much of the work week. After a mostly sunny day Monday, clouds will be on the increase. There is a chance of a light wintry mix of precipitation Tuesday over far north-eastern South Dakota and into west central Minnesota. There is only a slight chance (20%) of a light wintry mix over north central South Dakota Wednesday. Chances for light snow will increase Wednesday night into Thursday morning. Even though there are a few mentions of snow, little more than a dusting of snow is expected through Thursday. We are looking at the potential for more widespread snow for the upcoming weekend.

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Today in Weather History

February 28, 2007: Another late February strong low-pressure area moving across the central plains spread heavy snow of 6 to 11 inches across northeast South Dakota and west-central Minnesota. Many schools and college classes were canceled, and many events were postponed. Road conditions became deplorable, with some accidents occurring along with ditched vehicles. The snow continued into the first day of March and ended between in the morning. Snowfall amounts included 6 inches at Aberdeen, 7 inches at Wilmot and Artichoke Lake, 8 inches at Conde, Watertown, and Milbank, 9 inches at Browns Valley and Wheaton, and 11 inches at Clark. This heavy snow event was followed by more snowfall along with blizzard conditions that developed across the area during the afternoon and evening of March 1st.

1792: Heavy snow collapsed the Ashley River Bridge in Charleston, South Carolina.

1900: A massive storm spread record snows from Kansas to New York State. Snow fell for over 24-hours in Toledo, Ohio. When it was all over, the 19 inches set a single storm record for the city. Topeka, Kansas, reported 18.7 inches of snow in 24 hours to set their record for most snow in 24 hours. Thirty-six inches of snow at Astoria, Illinois, set a new state 24-hour snowfall record. Northfield, Vermont, picked up 31 inches of snow. Snowfall totals ranged up to 17.5 inches at Springfield, Illinois, and 43 inches at Rochester, New York. Sixty inches fell in parts of the Adirondack Mountains of New York State.

1962: Wilmington, North Carolina, reached a high temperature of 85 degrees. This is the warmest temperature on record during February.

2007: A severe storm, named Xynthia, blows into France, Portugal, and Spain, smashing sea walls, destroying homes, polluting farmland with saltwater, and devastating the Atlantic coast's oyster farms. Winds reach about 125 mph on the summits of the Pyrenees and up to nearly 100 mph along the Atlantic Coast. Wind speeds of 106 mph are measured atop the Eiffel Tower in Paris. The hardest-hit area was in the Vendee and Charente-Maritime regions in southwestern France. The storm is blamed for 52 deaths in France. A Napoleonic sea wall collapsed off the coastal town of La'Aiguillon-sur-Mer. A mobile home park close to the sea wall was particularly hard hit.

1952 - An intense storm brought coastal sections of southeastern Massachusetts to a halt, stranding 3000 motorists on Lower Cape, and leaving ten thousand homes on the Cape without electricity. Winds gusting to 72 mph created mountainous snowdrifts of the 18 inches of snow which buried Nantucket and Hyannis. A barometric pressure reading of 29.02 inches was reported at the center of the storm. (The Weather Channel)

1987 - A powerful storm produced severe thunderstorms in Louisiana and Mississippi early in the day. About mid morning a monstrous tornado touched down near Moselle MS and grew to a width of two miles as it passed near Laurel MS. The tornado traveled a distance of 40 miles killing six persons, injuring 350 others, and causing 28.5 million dollars damage. The tornado swept homes right off their foundations, and tossed eighteen wheel trucks about like toys. Strong straight line winds associated with the powerful storm system gusted to 70 mph at Jonesboro AR and Carbondale IL. (The National Weather Summary) (Storm Data)

1988 - Thunderstorms in California produced severe weather during the early morning hours. Strong thunderstorm winds, gusting to 74 mph, downed trees in the Sacramento area. Unseasonably mild weather prevailed in the northwestern U.S. The afternoon high of 71 degrees at Portland OR was a February record. (The National Weather Summary) (Storm Data)

1989 - Thunderstorms in the southeast corner of the nation produced winds gusts to 58 mph at Fort Lauderdale FL, and a total of seven inches of rain. Heavy snow whitened parts of the Northern Plateau and the Northern Rockies, with ten inches reported at Marion MT. (The National Weather Summary) (Storm Data)

1990 - Showers and thunderstorms over the Southern Plains Region capped a record wet February for parts of Oklahoma. Totals for the month ranged up to 9.11 inches at McCurtain, with 4.63 inches reported at Oklahoma City. Snow and sleet fell across northern Oklahoma, with four inches reported at Freedom and Jefferson. Snow also spread across southern Kansas into Missouri and Arkansas, with six inches of snow reported at Harrison AR. In Alaska, February temperatures at Nome averaged 21 degrees below normal, ranging from -38 degrees to 29 degrees during the month. (The National Weather Summary) (Storm Data)

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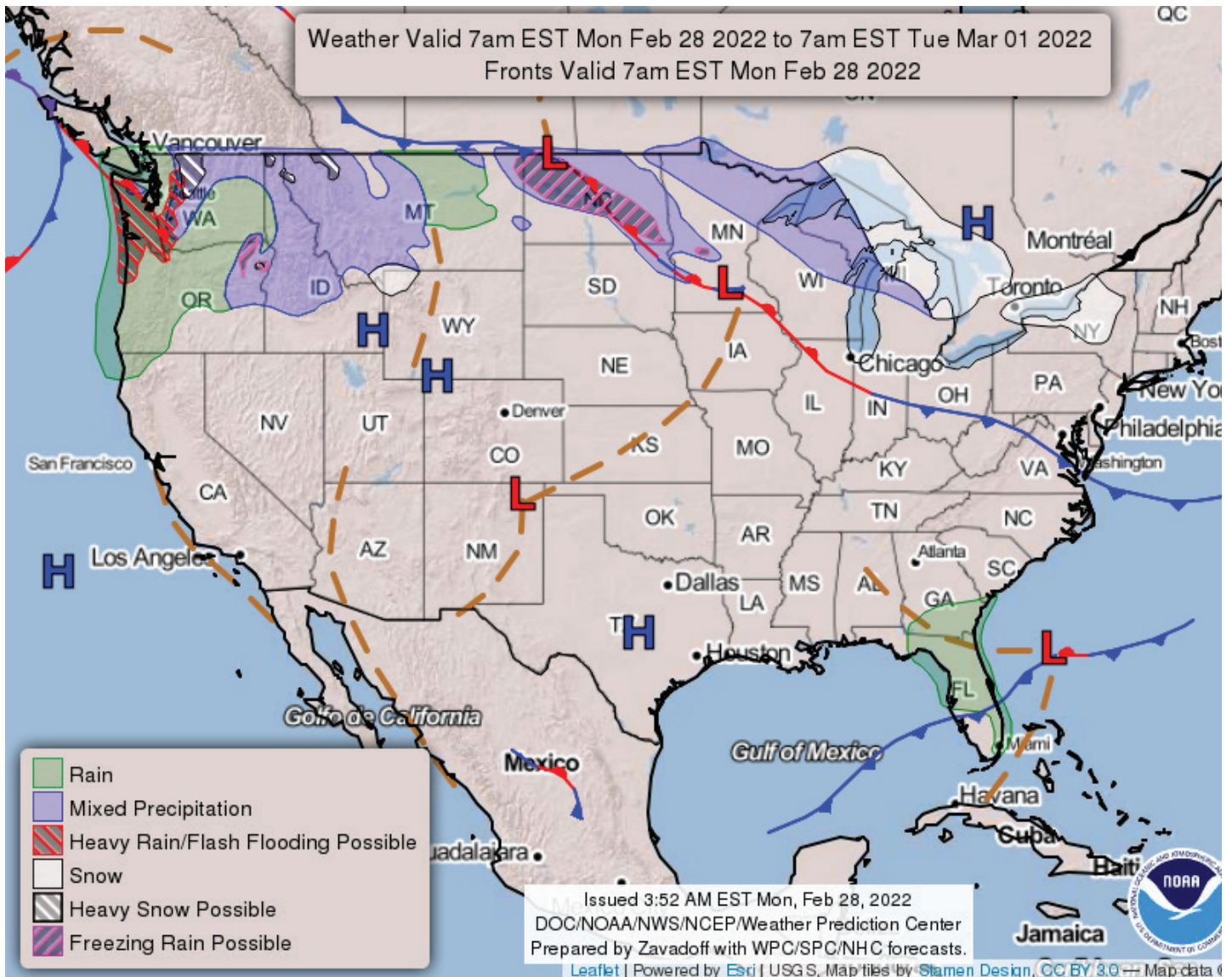
Yesterday's Groton Weather

High Temp: 41 °F at 4:19 PM
Low Temp: 6 °F at 6:01 AM
Wind: 17 mph at 8:34 AM
Precip: 0.00

Day length: 11 hours, 9 minutes

Today's Info

Record High: 59 in 1934
Record Low: -27 in 1962
Average High: 33°F
Average Low: 12°F
Average Precip in Feb.: 0.62
Precip to date in Feb.: 0.38
Average Precip to date: 1.17
Precip Year to Date: 0.97
Sunset Tonight: 6:19:25 PM
Sunrise Tomorrow: 7:08:30 AM



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Unfailing Love

In today's world "unfailing" and "love" are two words that, for most individuals, are left to one's imagination or personal interpretation. "Unfailing" for some would be interpreted as not giving up "until I get bored," or "until I find something more interesting to do," or "I've taken my turn, now it's up to someone else," or "let's try something more exciting!"

And the meaning of "love" for many is interpreted by the personal attractiveness of another and only lasts until someone more glamorous or interesting or challenging comes along. More often than not there is no personal cost involved in loving another or a willingness to be bothered or inconvenienced by another's needs. It does not have an enduring or eternal quality attached to it. It's for "this moment only" and "not to be counted on for the long haul."

With God it's different. The Psalmist wrote, "May Your unfailing love be my comfort, according to Your promise to Your servant." The little prefix "un" means "never giving out" or "inexhaustible" and makes a very powerful statement about the nature of His love.

We have no difficulty in believing that God loves us when everything in our world is "perfect" - every problem solved, every bill paid, and everyone in the family is healthy and smiling at one another. Life's good!

But then, tragedy strikes. Is life still good, is His love still unfailing, and will He now provide His comfort?

The answer is locked-up in the word "promise." We can search every verse until our eyes grow dim and hearts stop beating: if God said it, He meant it, and we can believe it.

Prayer: Thank You, Father, for the promise of Your unfailing love. We give ourselves to You for we know that, though others may fail us, You will not! In Jesus' Name, Amen.

Scripture For Today: May your unfailing love be my comfort, according to your promise to your servant. Psalm 119:76

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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

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News from the Associated Press

Standing Rock athlete takes stage on Native Heritage Day

By MICHAEL McCLEARY Sioux Falls Argus Leader

VERMILLION, S.D. (AP) — Just about a half-mile from the site of the main event, on the second floor of the University of South Dakota's Muenster University Center, about 100 students from tribal nations all over South Dakota crowded around a series of circular tables in a mix of red and white clothing — game day attire.

They were there for an admissions event, just one stop in a series of events planned for USD's Native American Heritage Day, an alumni and prospective student event geared toward honoring the Native community on South Dakota's campus presently as well as in the past and future.

USD's Director of Native Recruitment and Alumni Engagement John Little and Director of Native Student Services Megan Red Shirt-Shaw, who helped organize the event, have done plenty of engagement events like this in the past. But this one was different. It was planned around a basketball game.

"I've had multiple people who've told me, 'I want my kids, I want them to see this,'" Little said.

Before game time, the students walked down the road toward the Sanford Coyote Sports Center, where USD guard Mason Archambault waited in the tunnel of the stadium ahead of the Coyotes' matchup with Western Illinois, the Sioux Falls Argus Leader reported.

Archambault is enjoying a career year for the Coyotes, averaging 14.8 points while starting every game for a Coyotes team that head coach Todd Lee admitted to some surprise is better, statistically, on the offensive side than it was a season ago, when scoring was much more defined with guards A.J. Plitzuweit and Stanley Umude to run the show.

Archambault is a big part of that, stepping into the role of South Dakota's second-leading scorer after a limited role last year following his transfer from Gillette College. A member of the Standing Rock Sioux tribe, Archambault's rise to stardom has elevated one of USD's 11 Native athletes onto one of the most prominent stages the Coyotes could offer. And for this game, that led to almost double the ticket requests that Little and Red Shirt-Shaw were expecting.

Archambault is increasingly aware of this position, and even it was a strange feeling at first, he's prideful of it. The notoriety is a result of the success he's had this year. It's not often at South Dakota that a Native athlete has played such a prominent role in a team's success, Little said. Archambault thinks the number of Native athletes at USD could be higher, and he wants to be an advocate for those chasing their dreams in athletics and education.

"They just got to keep following their dreams and just never give up," Archambault said. "It may not be easy, but just keep fighting for your dream and you'll eventually get there one day."

Archambault's path to stardom wasn't a linear one. He was one of South Dakota's best high school players as a member of Rapid City Stevens on a path to follow the footsteps of his father, Russell Archambault, who played two years of Big Ten basketball at the University of Minnesota.

But Division-I opportunities weren't presented to Archambault immediately, and he enrolled at Gillette, a junior college. Though not there yet, Archambault was surrounded by soon-to-be Division-I players and, though they were older than he was, he was pleasantly surprised with his ability to match up with them in practices.

It all crystallized for him that Division-I, his main goal, was within the realm of possibility. When the Coyotes offered him an opportunity to represent his home state last year, he jumped on the opportunity.

"I had my eyes on this place since high school," Archambault said. "I decided to take (the offer) right away."

Archambault said being Native as well as South Dakota-born, the state's fans have embraced him from the start. But nothing could have prepared him for this season. Always a strong shooter, the game slowed for him this season, and he said he's felt comfortable attempting moves he hasn't tried since his junior

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college days.

It earned him a spot in the starting lineup on opening night and after a string of 20-point games midway through the season, his Mom posted a photo of him to Facebook. He scrolled through the comments: all well-wishes and congratulations. He hardly recognized anyone.

Every game brought a new string of notifications, he said. Kids direct messaged him, calling Archambault their favorite player. He posed for picture-after-picture ("I took a lot of pictures this year," he said) and someone even asked for his shoes (though hasn't yet followed through).

Archambault knew it would all hit him during the game and from the moment he heard his name called out repeatedly as he poured a cup of water from the Gatorade cooler behind the bench, he was pulled into the moment.

He bowed his head for the Lakota Honoring Song and the National Anthem draped in a Standing Rock Sioux tribal flag. His name was switched to the end of the starting lineup announcement, a fact that wasn't relayed to Archambault who ran out third as usual before being ushered back to the bench. When his first shot fell, a 3-pointer, the stadium erupted.

"He's such a special kid," Lee said. "You can see how proud he is from where he comes from... it's tremendous."

He scored 12 points in USD's 78-65 win. After the game, Archambault stuck around for a while. He knew this was coming — and he was excited for it. He was swarmed for people asking for photos, autographs. The whole time, Archambault grinned ear to ear.

"It just hits me sometimes," Archambault said. "Like, I got here."

Trial set for man charged with killing daughter's boyfriend

ABERDEEN, S.D. (AP) — A South Dakota man is set for trial in the death of his daughter's boyfriend in January 2020.

Jury selection is scheduled to begin Monday in the case of Jarrett Jones, who is charged with murder in the shooting death of 28-year-old Jon Schumacher. Authorities say surveillance video shows that Schumacher was shot once and fell to the ground, and then was shot a second time shortly after he reached toward his pocket.

Schumacher was dating Makayla Jones, the daughter of Jarrett Jones. On the evening before his death, Schumacher had been driving Jarrett Jones' truck and was arrested for drunken driving. Jones, 50, of Bath, eventually recovered the pickup and took it back to his shop, according to court documents.

When he was released from custody, Schumacher went to Jones' home to see Makayla in the early morning hours of Jan. 2, 2020. That's when the altercation ensued.

In reporting the incident, Jones claimed he feared Schumacher was going to harm his daughter and that he also felt threatened, the Aberdeen American News reported.

Defense attorney Marshall Lovrien has submitted motions to dismiss the case, one based on a new law that went into effect in 2021. It provides criminal immunity if a person uses deadly force in certain instances that include self-defense and defending another person.

Lawmaker: Time is right for Nebraska-South Dakota expressway

YANKTON, S.D. (AP) — A lawmaker is promoting construction of a long debated four-lane highway between Yankton and Norfolk, Nebraska, citing the recent availability of federal money.

Nebraska state Sen. Mike Flood has proposed a bill that would turn the 57-mile stretch of U.S. Highway 81 into an expressway. Flood said Norfolk was mistakenly overlooked on the state's 1988 expressway plan linking cities of 15,000 with the interstate. Norfolk's population is about 25,000.

In the latest census, Yankton has surpassed 15,000 residents, a figure that grows to about 20,000 residents when including the popular Lewis and Clark Lake area that comes with a steady traffic flow at certain times of the year.

Flood said the timing is right with the availability of federal pandemic relief funds and federal money for

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infrastructure projects, the Yankton Press and Dakotan reported.

Flood highlighted the changed traffic patterns of U.S. Highway 81 not only in terms of numbers but also types of vehicles.

"This is a safety issue for our communities. We have a number of fatalities on that stretch of highway," he said. "We have heavy truck traffic, and we have more people in boats, trailers and campers. We need to upgrade the roads."

The Nebraska Department of Transportation said the conversion to a four-lane facility is not in the planning stages at this time.

Flood cites two other factors for making the change. U.S. Highway 81, also known as the Meridian Highway or Pan American Highway, forms a link from Canada to Mexico. In addition, the Lewis and Clark Lake area sees about 2 million visitors a year.

UN: 500,000+ people have fled Ukraine since Russia invaded

By JAMEY KEATEN Associated Press

GENEVA (AP) — The U.N. refugee agency said Monday that more than 500,000 people have fled Ukraine since Russia invaded the country last week.

U.N. High Commissioner for Refugees Filippo Grandi gave the estimate in a tweet.

The latest and still growing count had 281,000 people entering Poland, more than 84,500 in Hungary, about 36,400 in Moldova, over 32,500 in Romania and about 30,000 in Slovakia, UNHCR spokeswoman Shabia Mantoo said.

The rest were scattered in unidentified other countries, she said.

Another train carrying hundreds of refugees from Ukraine arrived early Monday in the town of Przemysl in southeastern Poland.

In winter coats to protect them against near-freezing temperatures, with small suitcases, they lined up at the platform to the exit. Some waved at the cameras to show they felt relief to be out of the war zone. Many were making phone calls.

The welcome that Poland and Hungary are showing Ukrainians now is very different from the unwelcoming stance they have had toward refugees and migrants from the Middle East and Africa in recent years. Hungary built a wall to keep them out when a million people, many Syrians fleeing war, arrived in Europe in 2015.

Poland is now building its own wall with Belarus after thousands of mostly Middle Eastern migrants sought to enter from Belarus in past months. The EU accused Russia-backed Belarus of encouraging that migration surge to destabilize the EU. Some of those people denied entry into Poland died in forests.

But Ukrainians are viewed very differently by Poles and others because they are mostly Christian, and, for the Poles, fellow Slavs with similar linguistic and cultural roots.

Transcarpathia, Ukraine's westernmost region which borders Hungary, is also home to about 150,000 ethnic Hungarians, many of whom are also Hungarian citizens. While Russia's invasion has not yet extended to that area, which is separated from the rest of Ukraine by the Carpathian Mountains, many have decided not to wait for the situation to get worse.

Ruble plummets as sanctions bite, sending Russians to banks

By VLADIMIR ISACHENKOV, DAVID McHUGH and KEN SWEET Associated Press

MOSCOW (AP) — Ordinary Russians faced the prospect of higher prices and crimped foreign travel as Western sanctions over the invasion of Ukraine sent the ruble plummeting, leading uneasy people to line up at banks and ATMs on Monday in a country that has seen more than one currency disaster in the post-Soviet era.

The Russian currency plunged about 30% against the U.S. dollar Monday after Western nations announced moves to block some Russian banks from the SWIFT international payment system and to restrict Russia's use of its massive foreign currency reserves. The exchange rate later recovered ground after

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swift action by Russia's central bank.

People wary that sanctions would deal a crippling blow to the economy have been flocking to banks and ATMs for days, with reports in social media of long lines and machines running out.

Moscow's department of public transport warned city residents over the weekend that they might experience problems with using Apple Pay, Google Pay and Samsung Pay to pay fares because VTB, one of the Russian banks facing sanctions, handles card payments in Moscow's metro, buses and trams.

A sharp devaluation of the ruble would mean a drop in the standard of living for the average Russian, economists and analysts said. Russians are still reliant on a multitude of imported goods and the prices for those items are likely to skyrocket. Foreign travel would become more expensive as their rubles buy less currency abroad. And the deeper economic turmoil will come in the coming weeks if price shocks and supply-chain issues cause Russian factories to shut down due to lower demand.

"It's going to ripple through their economy really fast," said David Feldman, a professor of economics at William & Mary in Virginia. "Anything that is imported is going to see the local cost in currency surge. The only way to stop it will be heavy subsidization."

The Russian government will have to step in to support declining industries, banks and economic sectors, but without access to hard currencies like the U.S. dollar and euro, they may have to result to printing more rubles. It's a move that could quickly spiral into hyperinflation.

The ruble slide recalled previous crises. The currency lost much of its value in the early 1990s after the end of the Soviet Union, with inflation and loss of value leading the government to lop three zeros off ruble notes in 1997. Then came a further drop after a 1998 financial crisis in which many depositors lost savings and yet another plunge in 2014 due to falling oil prices and sanctions imposed after Russia seized Ukraine's Crimea peninsula.

Russia's central bank immediately stepped in to try to halt the slide of the ruble. It sharply raised its key interest rate Monday in a desperate attempt to shore up the currency and prevent a run on banks.

The bank hiked the benchmark rate to 20% from 9.5%. That followed a Western decision Sunday to freeze Russia's hard currency reserves, an unprecedented move that could have devastating consequences for the country's financial stability.

It was unclear exactly what share of Russia's estimated \$640 billion hard currency pile, some of which is held outside Russia, would be paralyzed by the decision. European officials said that at least half of it will be affected.

That dramatically raised pressure on the ruble by undermining financial authorities' ability to support it by using reserves to purchase rubles.

Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov described the new sanctions that included a freeze on Russia's hard currency reserves as "heavy," but argued Monday that "Russia has the necessary potential to compensate the damage."

The central bank ordered other measures to help banks cope with the crisis by infusing more cash into the financial system and easing restrictions for banking operations. At the same time, it temporarily barred non-residents from selling the government obligations to help ease the pressure on the ruble from panicky foreign investors trying to cash out of such investments.

The steps taken to support the ruble are themselves painful since raising interest rates can hold back growth by making it more expensive for companies to get credit.

The ruble sank about 30% against the U.S. dollar early Monday but steadied after the central bank's move. Earlier, it traded at a record low of 105.27 per dollar, down from about 84 per dollar late Friday, before recovering to 98.22.

Sanctions announced last week had taken the Russian currency to its lowest level against the dollar in history.

Ukraine slows Russian advance under shadow of nuclear threat

By YURAS KARMANAU, JIM HEINTZ, VLADIMIR ISACHENKOV and DASHA LITVINOVA Associated Press

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KYIV, Ukraine (AP) — Outgunned but determined Ukrainian troops slowed Russia's advance and held onto the capital and other key cities — at least for now. In the face of stiff resistance and devastating sanctions, President Vladimir Putin ordered Russia's nuclear forces put on high alert, threatening to elevate the war to a terrifying new level.

Explosions and gunfire that have disrupted life since the invasion began last week appeared to subside around Kyiv overnight, as Ukrainian and Russian delegations met Monday on Ukraine's border with Belarus. It's unclear what, if anything, those talks would yield.

Terrified Ukrainian families huddled in shelters, basements or corridors, waiting to find out. Exact death tolls are unclear, but the U.N. human rights chief said 102 civilians have been killed and hundreds wounded — warning that figure was likely a vast undercount — and Ukraine's president said at least 16 children were among the dead. More than 500,000 people have fled the country since the invasion, another U.N. official said Monday — among the millions who have left their homes.

Russia's Central Bank scrambled to shore up the tanking ruble Monday and the U.S. and European countries upped weapons shipments to Ukraine. While they hope to curb Putin's aggression after he unleashed Europe's biggest conflict since World War II, the measures also risked pushing an increasingly cornered Putin closer to the edge.

"I sit and pray for these negotiations to end successfully, so that they reach an agreement to end the slaughter, and so there is no more war," said Alexandra Mikhailova, weeping as she clutched her cat in a makeshift shelter in the strategic southeastern Ukrainian city of Mariupol. Around her, parents sought to console children and keep them warm.

In Kyiv, long lines formed outside supermarkets on Monday as residents were allowed out of bomb shelters and homes for the first time since a curfew imposed Saturday.

The relative lull in warfare Monday morning in Ukraine was unlikely to last.

Neighboring Belarus could send troops to help Russia as soon as Monday, according to a senior American intelligence official with direct knowledge of current U.S. intelligence assessments. The official spoke on condition of anonymity because he was not authorized to speak publicly.

U.S. officials say they believe the invasion has been more difficult, and slower, than the Kremlin envisioned, though that could change as Moscow adapts. The British Defense Ministry said Monday that the bulk of Putin's forces are about 30 kilometers (20 miles) north of Kyiv, their advance having been slowed by Ukrainian forces.

Western nations ramped up the pressure with a freeze on Russia's hard currency reserves, threatening to bring Russia's economy to its knees. Russians withdrew savings and sought to shed rubles for dollars and euros, while Russian businesses scrambled to protect their finances.

In addition to sanctions, the U.S. and Germany announced they will send Stinger missiles to Ukraine among other military supplies. The European Union — founded to ensure peace on the continent after World War II — is supplying lethal aid for the first time, including fighter jets.

EU defense ministers were to meet Monday to discuss how to get the pledged weaponry into Ukraine. Germany's defense minister said without elaborating that her country has "channels and possibilities" to do that, and a trainload of Czech equipment arrived Sunday. Blocking off those shipments will clearly be a key Russian priority.

It remains to be seen how much the weaponry will help Ukraine fend off Russia's vastly greater arsenal.

The increasingly erratic Putin made a clear link between ever-tightening sanctions and his decision Sunday to raise Russia's nuclear posture. He also pointed at "aggressive statements" by NATO as a reason for his move, a reference to his long-running stance that the U.S.-led alliance is an existential threat to Russia.

U.S. and British officials played down Putin's nuclear threat, and its practical meaning was not immediately clear. Russia and the United States typically have land- and submarine-based nuclear forces that are prepared for combat at all times, but nuclear-capable bombers and other aircraft are not.

A tiny sliver of hope emerged as talks began between Ukrainian and Russian officials Monday. Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy's office said it would demand an immediate cease-fire.

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While Ukraine sent its defense minister and other top officials, the Russian delegation is led by Putin's adviser on culture — an unlikely envoy for ending the war and a sign of how Moscow views the talks. It wasn't immediately clear what Putin is seeking in the talks or from the war itself.

Western officials believe Putin wants to overthrow Ukraine's government and replace it with a regime of his own, reviving Moscow's Cold War-era influence. His comments Sunday raised fears that the invasion of Ukraine could lead to nuclear war, whether by design or mistake.

In New York, the 193-member U.N. General Assembly scheduled an emergency session Monday on Russia's invasion.

With the Ukrainian capital besieged, the Russian military offered to allow residents to leave Kyiv via a safe corridor, raising fears a further onslaught is coming. The mayor of the city of nearly 3 million had earlier expressed doubt that civilians could be evacuated. Authorities have been handing out weapons to anyone willing to defend the city. Ukraine is also releasing prisoners with military experience who want to fight, and training people to make firebombs.

Battles also broke out in Ukraine's second-largest city, Kharkiv, and strategic ports in the country's south came under assault from Russian forces. Mariupol, a strategic port city on the Sea of Azov, is "hanging on," said Zelenskyy adviser Oleksiy Arestovich.

The Russian military claimed Monday it had taken full control of Ukraine's airspace after showering its air bases and air defense batteries with air and missile strikes. But a similar claim on the first day of the invasion turned out to be untrue, and U.S. officials said Sunday that Moscow has failed to fully control Ukrainian skies.

In Mariupol, where Ukrainians were trying to fend off attack, a medical team at a city hospital desperately tried to revive a 6-year-old girl in unicorn pajamas who was mortally wounded in Russian shelling.

During the rescue attempt, a doctor in blue medical scrubs, pumping oxygen into the girl, looked directly into the Associated Press video camera capturing the scene.

"Show this to Putin," he said angrily. "The eyes of this child, and crying doctors."

Their resuscitation efforts failed, and the girl lay dead on a gurney, covered by her blood-splattered jacket.

Nearly 900 kilometers (560 miles) away, Faina Bystritska was under threat in the city of Chernihiv.

"I wish I had never lived to see this," said Bystritska, an 87-year-old Jewish survivor of World War II. She said sirens blare almost constantly in the city, about 150 kilometers (90 miles) from Kyiv.

Among Western sanctions is a freeze on Russia's hard currency reserves, which Putin had built up in recent years to increase the country's economic independence. The unprecedented move could have devastating consequences for the country's financial system.

The U.S., European Union and Britain also agreed to block selected Russian banks from the SWIFT system, which facilitates moving money around thousands of banks and other financial institutions worldwide.

Russia-Ukraine War: What to know as Ukraine resists advance

By The Associated Press undefined

Ukrainian troops slowed Russia's advance on key cities, at least for now, while a Ukrainian delegation arrived at the border with Belarus on Monday for talks with Russian officials, though prospects looked uncertain at best.

European Union defense ministers were also to meet, to discuss how to get weaponry they have pledged into Ukraine.

Meanwhile, Western sanctions triggered by the invasion sent the ruble plummeting, leading Russians to line up at banks and ATMs.

The Russian military assault on Ukraine went into its fifth day after Russian President Vladimir Putin put his nuclear forces on increased alert, ratcheting up tensions yet further.

WHAT'S HAPPENING ON THE GROUND?

Kyiv's outgunned but determined troops slowed Russia's advance and held onto the capital and other key cities — at least for the time being.

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Explosions and gunfire that have disrupted life since the invasion began last week appeared to subside around Kyiv overnight. Long lines formed outside supermarkets Monday as residents were allowed out of bomb shelters and homes for the first time since a curfew imposed Saturday.

Exact death tolls are unclear, but Ukraine's president says at least 16 children have been killed and another 45 wounded, among hundreds, perhaps thousands, of other casualties. Millions have fled homes or the country.

U.S. officials say they believe the invasion has been more difficult, and slower, than the Kremlin envisioned, though that could change as Moscow adapts. The British Defense Ministry said Monday that the bulk of Putin's forces are about 30 kilometers (20 miles) north of Kyiv, their advance having been slowed by Ukrainian forces.

IS THERE ANY CHANCE FOR DIPLOMACY?

That's hard to tell. Ukrainian and Russian delegations met Monday on Ukraine's border with Belarus but it was unclear what, if anything, those talks would yield.

Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy's office said Kyiv's delegation would demand an immediate cease-fire.

While Ukraine sent its defense minister and other top officials, the Russian delegation is led by Putin's adviser on culture — an unlikely envoy for ending the war and a sign of how Moscow views the talks. It wasn't immediately clear what Putin is seeking in the talks or from the war itself.

Western officials believe Putin wants to overthrow Ukraine's government and replace it with a regime of his own, reviving Moscow's Cold War-era influence. His comments Sunday raised fears that the invasion of Ukraine could lead to nuclear war, whether by design or mistake.

The U.N.'s two major bodies — the 193-nation General Assembly and the more powerful 15-member Security Council — are holding separate meetings Monday.

The Security Council gave a green light Sunday for the first emergency session of the General Assembly in decades. It will give all U.N. members an opportunity to speak about the war Monday and vote on a resolution later in the week.

HOW MANY PEOPLE HAVE FLED?

The head of the United Nations refugee agency said that more than 500,000 people had fled Ukraine for neighboring countries since Russia's invasion started on Thursday.

The U.N. High Commissioner for Refugees, Filippo Grandi, gave the updated figure in a tweet. A day earlier, he had said that 368,000 people had crossed into Poland, Hungary, Romania, Moldova and other countries.

Shabia Mantoo, a UNHCR spokeswoman, said the latest and still growing count had 281,000 in Poland, more than 84,500 in Hungary, about 36,400 in Moldova, over 32,500 in Romania and about 30,000 in Slovakia.

The rest were scattered in unidentified other countries, she said.

WHAT IS THE EUROPEAN UNION DOING?

European Union defense ministers were to meet Monday to discuss how to get weaponry they have pledged into Ukraine.

Germany's defense minister said without elaborating that her country has "channels and possibilities" to do that, and a trainload of Czech equipment arrived Sunday. Blocking off those shipments will clearly be a key Russian priority.

That action comes on top of a raft of Western economic sanctions in which the EU has been a leading player, and the 27-nation bloc has agreed to close its airspace to Russian airlines.

WHAT ABOUT THE ECONOMIC FALLOUT?

The Russian currency plunged about 30% against the U.S. dollar on Monday after Western nations moved to block some Russian banks from the SWIFT international payment system and to restrict Russia's use of its massive foreign currency reserves. The ruble later recovered ground after swift action by Russia's central bank.

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People wary that sanctions would deal a crippling blow to the economy have been flocking to banks and ATMs for days, with reports on social media of long lines and machines running out.

Moscow's department of public transport warned city residents over the weekend that they might experience problems with using Apple Pay, Google Pay and Samsung Pay to pay fares because VTB, one of the Russian banks facing sanctions, handles card payments in Moscow's metro, buses and trams.

Economists and analysts said that a sharp devaluation of the ruble would mean a drop in the standard of living for the average Russian. Russians are still reliant on a multitude of imported goods and the prices for those items are likely to skyrocket.

Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov described the new sanctions as "heavy," but argued Monday that "Russia has the necessary potential to compensate the damage."

Live updates: Lithuania wants Russia probed for war crimes

By The Associated Press undefined

The latest developments on the Russia-Ukraine war:

VILNIUS, Lithuania — Lithuania says it wants the United Nations' highest court to investigate alleged war crimes and crimes against humanity committed by Russia and Belarus.

The Baltic country's Justice Minister Evelina Dobrovolska said the proposal was sent to The Hague, Netherlands-based International Criminal Court. The prosecutor has been asked to verify it and possibly launch an investigation, she said.

"In the face of such brutal aggression of the Putin regime against Ukraine, immediate action is needed," Dobrovolska said in a statement.

The proposal said the case was directed at "the responsibility of specific individuals" namely Russian President Vladimir Putin and Belarusian President Alexander Lukashenko.

On Saturday, Ukraine launched a case against Russia with the International Court of Justice accusing Moscow of planning genocide and asking the court to intervene to halt the invasion and order Russia to pay reparations.

SEOUL, South Korea – South Korea says it will ban exports of strategic materials to Russia, including weapons and missile-related technologies, and support international efforts to exclude major Russian banks from a key global payment system as it joins a global push to economically pressure Moscow over its invasion of Ukraine.

The plans drew an angry response from Russian Ambassador Andrey Kulik, who warned of a major setback in bilateral relations.

In a news conference, Kulick said Seoul's move could possibly jeopardize its aspirational plans to bring Russian gas through North Korea to South Korea's industrial hubs through cross-border pipelines. South Korea had described the plans as a possible peace project between the Koreas, but it never took off despite years of discussions between Seoul and Moscow amid tensions over the North's nuclear weapons program.

Meeting with business leaders on Monday, South Korean Trade Minister Yeo Han-koo said officials were planning to hold consultations with U.S. Commerce Department this week to seek exemptions that would minimize the impact of U.S. sanctions on South Korean companies.

GENEVA — The head of the United Nations refugee agency says more than a half a million people had fled Ukraine since Russia's invasion on Thursday.

Filippo Grandi of the UN High Commissioner for Refugees conveyed the latest update in a tweet Monday, saying more than 500,000 people had fled to neighboring countries.

Shabia Mantoo, a spokesperson for the Geneva-based agency, said she had no details about the numbers by country.

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BEIJING — China is criticizing the imposition of Western sanctions on Russia over the war in Ukraine, saying that will harm the chances of finding a political settlement.

Foreign Ministry spokesperson Wang Wenbin on Monday reiterated China's standard opposition to "unilateral sanctions that have no basis in international law," despite Beijing's own use of such measures against countries such as Lithuania over its stance on Taiwan.

"Facts have long proven that sanctions could not help solve problems but create new issues," Wang told reporters at a daily briefing. "It will not only result in a lose-lose or multi-lose situation economically, but also disrupt the process of political settlement."

China, along with India and the United Arab Emirates, abstained in Friday's 11-1 vote on a U.N. Security Council resolution demanding that Moscow immediately stop its attack on Ukraine.

GENÈVA — U.N. human rights chief Michelle Bachelet says her office has confirmed that 102 civilians, including 7 children, have been killed, and 304 others injured in violence in Ukraine since Thursday, as she cautioned that the tally was likely a vast undercount.

She cited updated U.N. figures that more than 420,000 people have fled the country in the last several days.

"Most of these civilians were killed by explosive weapons with a wide impact area, including shelling from heavy artillery and multi-launch rocket systems, and air strikes," Bachelet told the Human Rights Council in Geneva on Monday. "The real figures are, I fear, considerably higher."

The count by the office of the U.N. High Commissioner for Human Rights follows strict methodology and verification measures.

Bachelet said millions of people have been "forced to huddle in different forms of bomb shelters."

U.N. Secretary General Antonio Guterres told the council: "The escalation of military operations by the Russian Federation in Ukraine is leading to escalating human rights violations."

MOSCOW — The Kremlin has denied that the Russian military targeted populated areas in Ukraine despite abundant evidence that residential buildings, schools and hospitals have been hit during the Russian invasion.

Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov alleged Monday that civilian casualties have resulted from members of right-wing Ukrainian nationalist groups using civilians as shields and putting military equipment in populated areas. Peskov's claims couldn't be independently confirmed and they contradicted statements from Ukrainian officials who accused Russia of targeting civilians.

Peskov did not comment on Russian demands in planned talks with Ukrainian officials, saying it's necessary to allow negotiations to proceed before making public comment. He also declined to spell out Russian President Vladimir Putin's order to put Russian nuclear forces on high alert.

WARSAW, Poland — The prime ministers of the three Baltic states and Poland are calling on Facebook, YouTube, Twitter and Google to restrict the spread of misinformation by Russia about its invasion of Ukraine.

In a letter dated Sunday the prime ministers of Lithuania, Latvia, Estonia and Poland directly called on Mark Zuckerberg, Susan Wojcicki, Parag Agrawal and Sundar Pichai to take action immediately, saying the steps they've been taking so far are "not enough."

"The Russian government seeks to spread lies, confusion and doubt about what is happening and to undermine the morale and unity of the democratic world," the letter read.

Russia's "massive disinformation campaign" is to "justify to the world and to its own people its war of aggression and to hide the crimes that are being committed in its course," it said.

The prime ministers say that the online platform providers and tech companies "need to take a stand as authoritarian regimes seek to weaponize the openness of our societies to undermine peace and democracy."

KYIV, Ukraine — Ukraine's president says 16 Ukrainian children have been killed and another 45 have

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been injured in the Russian invasion.

President Volodymyr Zelenskyy said in a video message Monday that "every crime, every shelling by the occupiers bring our partners and us even closer."

He hailed the sanctions that the West slapped on Russia, saying they have brought the Russian currency down. Zelenskyy asked the European Union a special quick path to membership.

Zelenskyy said that over 4,500 Russian troops have been killed and called on Russian soldiers to lay down their guns and leave. "Don't trust you commanders, don't trust your propaganda, just save your lives," he said.

LONDON — Britain's defense secretary says President Vladimir Putin's announcement that he was putting Russia's nuclear forces on high alert was largely an effort to distract the world from the troubles facing his invasion of Ukraine.

Ben Wallace told the BBC that while he understood concerns about the warning, Britain has analyzed the statements and sees no evidence of a change in Russia's nuclear deployment or readiness to use the weapons.

"This is him reminding the world that he's got a (nuclear) deterrent...," Wallace said. "But secondly, it's part of a distraction as well. He's put it out there and we're all talking about it, rather than the lack of success they're currently having in Ukraine."

The comments came as the U.K. defense ministry said its intelligence showed that the bulk of Russia's forces were still 30 kilometers to the north of Kyiv. Logistical failures and staunch Ukrainian resistance continue to frustrate Russian advance, the ministry said.

Wallace said Britain takes Putin's warning "very, very seriously" and won't do anything that increases the chances for miscalculation on either side.

"But at the moment this is a battle of rhetoric that President Putin is deploying, and we just have to make sure we manage it properly," he said.

GENEVA — The U.N.'s top human rights body has agreed to hold an "urgent debate" on the situation in Ukraine.

The Human Rights Council opened its first meeting of the year by front-loading consideration of the matter in an emergency debate in the wake of Russia's invasion of Ukraine on Thursday.

The vote in the 47-member-state body was 29-5, with 13 abstentions.

Ukraine and Russia, as well as the other four permanent members of the U.N. Security Council, are current members.

The debate is expected to take place Thursday, part of the five-week Human Rights Council session that runs through April 1.

MADRID — Spain's foreign minister has called the Russian president's order to put the country's nuclear forces on high alert "one more sign of the absolute irrationality of Vladimir Putin."

"I hope they are simply words, but the mere fact of using those words, of using that threat, shows that Vladimir Putin's irrationality has reached an unimaginable point," José Manuel Albares told Spanish national radio on Monday.

Albares didn't clarify if Spain, like other European Union members, is ready to send weapons or other military aid to Ukraine, which is enduring the fifth day of invasion from Russia. The Spanish government sent 20 tons of humanitarian aid and military defensive gear over the weekend.

EU foreign policy chief Josep Borrell told private radio station Onda Cero that Putin's order was "irresponsible."

"Be alarmed, be alarmed, be alarmed!," Borrell said when asked about Putin's announcement during an interview in Spanish private radio Onda Cero. "It is absolutely irresponsible at this time to call for nuclear weaponry."

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PRZEMYSL, Poland — Trains continue to bring refugees fleeing war in Ukraine to safety in Poland and in other countries.

Poland's Border Guard says around 213,000 people have entered Poland from Ukraine since Thursday, when Russia waged war on Ukraine.

Another train carrying hundreds of refugees from Ukraine arrived early Monday in the town of Przemysl, in southeastern Poland.

In winter coats to protect them against near-freezing temperatures, with small suitcases, they lined at the platform to the exit. Some waved at the camera to show they felt relief to be out of the war zone. Many were making phone calls.

TOKYO — Former Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe says Japan should start discussing a possibility of seeking a NATO-style nuclear sharing arrangements as nuclear deterrence in the wake of Russian invasion of Ukraine.

"We should not put a taboo on discussions about the reality of how the world is kept safe," Abe said on a Fuji Television talk show Sunday. "We should firmly consider various options when we talk about how we can protect Japan and the lives of its people in this reality (of Ukraine)."

Abe, who bolstered Japan's military spending and capability during his eight year leadership and known for his hawkish stance, stepped down in 2020 but still remains highly influential and heads the largest faction of Japan's governing party.

Prime Minister Fumio Kishida on Monday told a parliamentary session that nuclear sharing isn't permissible because of Japan's non-nuclear principles. Kishida said last week possessing or using nuclear weapon is not an option for Japan.

ROME — The Vatican is offering its services for any negotiation aimed at ending the war in Ukraine.

Cardinal Pietro Parolin, the Vatican's No. 2 official, told several Italian newspapers in an interview published on Monday, that "even though what we feared and what we hoped wouldn't happen did happen, there is always space for negotiation."

He noted that the Holy See, "offering its willingness to facilitate dialogue with Russia, is always ready to help the parties to get back on that path."

On Friday, Pope Francis in an extraordinary step went to the Russian Embassy to the Holy See to meet with the Russian ambassador. The pontiff pressed for an end to fighting and a return to negotiations, Parolin noted.

While Orthodox Christians are predominant among the faithful in Ukraine, the Catholic Church has a discreet presence in that country through believers who follow the Eastern Rite of Catholicism.

PARIS — France's Minister for European Affairs says an EU ban on Russian state-owned channels Russia Today and Sputnik is an "absolute need."

Clement Beaune said on French radio Europe 1 that he has "no problem" with banning the channels because they are spreading "propaganda."

The European move was announced by EU Commission President Ursula von der Leyen on Sunday.

It comes as Russia's invasion of Ukraine has become a key campaign issue in France. The country's presidential election is scheduled in two rounds on April 10 and 24.

KYIV, Ukraine — Ukraine's defense industry conglomerate says the world's largest plane that was in regular operation was heavily damaged in fighting with Russian troops at the airport outside Kyiv where it was parked.

The Ukroboronprom company said in a statement that the Antonov-225 was "destroyed" but would be repaired. The An-225, which is operated by Ukroboronprom's subsidiary Antonov Airlines, is used to move exceptionally large cargos. Its arrivals and departures at overseas airports often attract aviation buffs to

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observe the lumbering plane with a 290-foot (84-meter) wingspan.

Only two planes have been built with larger wingspans — the Stratolaunch and the Hughes “Spruce Goose” — but each was used only for a single flight.

MOSCOW — The Russian military says that residents of the Ukrainian capital can use a safe corridor to leave the city if they want.

Russian Defense Ministry spokesman Maj. Gen. Igor Konashenkov said Monday that Kyiv residents can safely use a highway leading to Vasytkiv just southwest of the Ukrainian capital. The statement came as fighting raged in various parts of the Ukrainian capital, with Ukrainian authorities saying that they were fighting small groups of Russian forces in various sectors of the capital.

Konashenkov charged that Ukrainian “nationalists” were deploying military equipment using the city residents as shields, the allegations that can’t be independently verified. Despite Russian military claims that it wasn’t targeting populated areas, residential buildings, hospitals and schools have been hit all across Ukraine during the Russian invasion that began Thursday.

Konashenkov also announced new land gains, saying Russian troops have taken control of the area around the Zaporizhzhia nuclear plant in the south, noting that the plant was safe and the radiation levels in the area have remained normal.

MOSCOW — Russia’s Central Bank has sharply raised its key rate from 9.5% to 20% in a desperate attempt to shore up the plummeting ruble and prevent the run of banks amid crippling Western sanctions over the Russian war in Ukraine.

The bank’s action follows the Western decision Sunday to freeze its hard currency reserves in an unprecedented move that could have devastating consequences for the country’s financial stability. It was unclear exactly what share of Russia’s estimated \$640 billion hard currency coffers will be paralyzed by the move, but European officials said that at least half of it will be affected.

The move will dramatically raise pressure on the ruble by undermining the financial authorities’ ability to conduct hard currency interventions to prevent the ruble from sinking further and triggering high inflation. The ruble has sharply dived in early Monday trading.

The Central Bank also ordered a slew of measures to help the banks cope with the crisis by infusing more cash into the system and easing restrictions for banking operations. At the same time, it temporarily barred non-residents from selling the government obligations to help ease the pressure on ruble from panicky foreign investors eager to cash out.

MOSCOW — Russia’s investigative agency says it has opened a probe into allegations of torture of Russian prisoners of war by members of Ukrainian forces.

The Investigative Committee, the main state criminal investigation agency, said Monday that the probe will track down people responsible for torturing Russian prisoners.

The move followed the claim by Russian Defense Ministry spokesman Maj. Gen. Igor Konashenkov, who pointed at alleged incidents in which Ukrainian forces tortured Russian prisoners and vowed to track all the culprits down and bring them to justice. He didn’t provide details or evidence to back the claim.

Russian officials have sought to cast members of Ukraine’s right-wing groups as “neo-Nazis.”

Konashenkov also acknowledged for the first time that the Russian military has suffered casualties in the attack on Ukraine but hasn’t named any numbers and claimed that the Russian losses are “much smaller” compared to the Ukrainian.

SAN FRANCISCO — Security officials at Meta, the company formerly known as Facebook, said they identified an increase in attempts to hack the accounts of public figures in Ukraine, including a journalist, members of the Ukrainian military and at least one politician. Separately, they said the company disrupted a misinformation network run by people in Russia and Ukraine.

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The hacking attempts originated from a group known to security experts as Ghostwriter, said Nathaniel Gleicher, Meta's head of security policy. That group generally tries to break into the social media accounts of its targets and then post misinformation as if it had originated with the targets themselves. The company observed several attempts to get people to post videos that allegedly showed Ukrainian soldiers surrendering, Gleicher said.

The relatively small misinformation network, by contrast, ran several false websites that masqueraded as news outlets and published claims that the West was betraying Ukraine. It also created fictitious personas that posed as news editors, an aviation expert and the author of a scientific publication. Meta security teams took down about 40 fake accounts, pages and groups involved in this operation, none of which appeared to have significant followings.

UNITED NATIONS — The two major bodies in the United Nations will hold separate meetings Monday on Russia's invasion of Ukraine.

The meetings of the 193-nation General Assembly and the more powerful 15-member Security Council reflect widespread demands for a cease-fire and escalating concern for the millions of Ukrainians caught up in the war.

The Security Council gave a green light Sunday for the first emergency session of the General Assembly in decades. It will give all U.N. members an opportunity to speak about the war and vote on a resolution that U.S. Ambassador Linda Thomas-Greenfield said would "hold Russia to account for its indefensible actions and for its violations of the U.N. Charter."

French Ambassador Nicolas De Riviere announced the Security Council meeting on the humanitarian impact of Russia's invasion, a session sought by French President Emmanuel Macron to ensure the delivery of aid to people in need in Ukraine.

Both meetings follow Russia's veto of a Security Council resolution demanding that Moscow immediately stop its attack on Ukraine and withdraw all troops. The vote Friday was 11-1, with China, India and the United Arab Emirates abstaining.

MANILA, Philippines — Southeast Asian countries have expressed deep concern over the hostilities in Ukraine and called for dialogue but did not condemn the Russian invasion despite calls for a tougher stance against Moscow's aggression.

The foreign ministers of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations issued a statement Monday calling "on all relevant parties to exercise maximum restraint and make utmost efforts to pursue dialogues through all channels" before the situation gets out of control.

"It is the responsibility of all parties to uphold the principles of mutual respect for the sovereignty, territorial integrity and equal rights of all nations," the regional bloc said.

WASHINGTON — A senior U.S. intelligence official says Belarus is expected to send troops into Ukraine as soon as Monday to fight alongside Russian forces that invaded Ukraine last week.

Belarus has been providing support for Russia's war effort, but so far has not taken a direct part in the conflict.

The American official has direct knowledge of current U.S. intelligence assessments and says the decision by Belarus' leader on whether to bring Belarus further into the war depends on talks between Russia and Ukraine happening in the coming days. The official spoke anonymously to discuss the sensitive information.

Russian forces have encountered strong resistance from Ukraine defenders, and U.S. officials say they believe the invasion has been more difficult, and slower, than the Kremlin envisioned, though that could change as Moscow adapts.

— James LaPorta

BERLIN — The United Nations' nuclear watchdog says missiles have hit a radioactive waste disposal

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site in the Ukrainian capital of Kyiv, but there are no reports of damage to the buildings or indications of a release of radioactive material.

In a statement late Sunday, International Atomic Energy Agency Director General Rafael Grossi says Ukrainian authorities informed his office about the overnight strike. He says his agency expects to soon receive the results of on-site radioactive monitoring.

The report came a day after an electrical transformer at a similar disposal facility in the Ukrainian city of Kharkiv was damaged.

UN climate report: 'Atlas of human suffering' worse, bigger

By SETH BORENSTEIN AP Science Writer

Deadly with extreme weather now, climate change is about to get so much worse. It is likely going to make the world sicker, hungrier, poorer, gloomier and way more dangerous in the next 18 years with an "unavoidable" increase in risks, a new United Nations science report says.

And after that watch out.

The UN Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change report said Monday if human-caused global warming isn't limited to just another couple tenths of a degree, an Earth now struck regularly by deadly heat, fires, floods and drought in future decades will degrade in 127 ways with some being "potentially irreversible."

"The cumulative scientific evidence is unequivocal: Climate change is a threat to human well-being and planetary health," says the major report designed to guide world leaders in their efforts to curb climate change. Delaying cuts in heat-trapping carbon emissions and waiting on adapting to warming's impacts, it warns, "will miss a brief and rapidly closing window of opportunity to secure a liveable and sustainable future for all."

Today's children who may still be alive in the year 2100 are going to experience four times more climate extremes than they do now even with only a few more tenths of a degree of warming over today's heat. But if temperatures increase nearly 2 more degrees Celsius from now (3.4 degrees Fahrenheit) they would feel five times the floods, storms, drought and heat waves, according to the collection of scientists at the IPCC.

Already at least 3.3 billion people's daily lives "are highly vulnerable to climate change" and 15 times more likely to die from extreme weather, the report says. Large numbers of people are being displaced by worsening weather extremes. And the world's poor are being hit by far the hardest, it says.

More people are going to die each year from heat waves, diseases, extreme weather, air pollution and starvation because of global warming, the report says. Just how many people die depends on how much heat-trapping gas from the burning of coal, oil and natural gas gets spewed into the air and how the world adapts to an ever-hotter world, scientists say.

"Climate change is killing people," said co-author Helen Adams of King's College London. "Yes, things are bad, but actually the future depends on us, not the climate."

With every tenth of a degree of warming, many more people die from heat stress, heart and lung problems from heat and air pollution, infectious diseases, illnesses from mosquitoes and starvation, the authors say.

The report lists mounting dangers to people, plants, animals, ecosystems and economies, with people at risk in the millions and billions and potential damages in the trillions of dollars. The report highlights people being displaced from homes, places becoming uninhabitable, the number of species dwindling, coral disappearing, ice shrinking and rising and increasingly oxygen-depleted and acidic oceans.

Some of these risks can still be prevented or lessened with prompt action.

"Today's IPCC report is an atlas of human suffering and a damning indictment of failed climate leadership," United Nations Secretary-General Antonio Guterres said in a statement. "With fact upon fact, this report reveals how people and the planet are getting clobbered by climate change."

The panel of more than 200 scientists puts out a series of these massive reports every five to seven years, with this one, the second of the series, devoted to how climate change affects people and the

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planet. Last August the science panel published a report on the latest climate science and projections for future warming, branded "code red" by the United Nations.

Climate scientist Katharine Hayhoe of The Nature Conservancy, who wasn't part of the latest report, calls it the "Your House is on Fire" report.

"There's real existential threats," report co-chair Debra Roberts of South Africa told The Associated Press.

Since the last version of this impacts panel's report in 2014, "all the risks are coming at us faster than we thought before," said report co-author Maarten van Aalst, a climate scientist for the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies, mentioning floods, droughts and storms. "More of it will get really bad much sooner than we thought before."

"Every bit of warming matters. The longer you wait... the more you will pay later," said report co-chair Hans-Otto Poertner of Germany told the AP in an interview.

By 2050, a billion people will face coastal flooding risk from rising seas, the report says. More people will be forced out of their homes from weather disasters, especially flooding, sea level rise and tropical cyclones.

If warming exceeds a few more tenths of a degree, it could lead to some areas becoming uninhabitable, including some small islands, said report co-author Adelle Thomas of the University of Bahamas and Climate Analytics.

And eventually in some places it will become too hot for people to work outdoor, which will be a problem for raising crops, said report co-author Rachel Bezner Kerr of Cornell University.

Some of these climate change harms have been warned about for years, even decades, and have become reality, now written in the past and present tenses. Others are still warnings about future woes fast approaching.

Monday's 36-page summary, condensed from more than 1,000 pages of analysis, was written by scientists and then edited line-by-line by governments and scientists with that final summary approved by consensus Saturday during a two-week virtual conference that occurred while Russia invaded Ukraine. In the final hours, a Ukrainian delegate made an impassioned plea that the war not overshadow the climate change report, some authors said.

Study authors said much of Africa, parts of Central and South America and South Asia are "hot spots" for the worst harms to people and ecosystems.

The report has a new emphasis on the mental health toll climate change has taken, both on people displaced or harmed by extreme weather and on people's anxiety level, especially youths worried about their futures.

If the world warms just another nine-tenths of a degree Celsius from now (1.6 degrees Fahrenheit), the amount of land burned by wildfires globally will increase by 35%, the report says.

And the rest of the living world won't be spared either, with the report warning of climate change extinctions. Already two species — the mammal Bramble Cays melomys in Australia and Central America's golden toad — have gone extinct because of climate change. But much more will come with every bit of warming, said Poertner, the German co-chair.

One of the biggest changes in the report from previous versions emphasizes how crucial a key temperature threshold is scientifically and for people and how exceeding it, even if only a few decades, can cause permanent damage.

In the 2015 Paris agreement, the world adopted a goal of limiting warming to 1.5 degrees Celsius (2.7 degrees Fahrenheit) since pre-industrial times, which was then further cemented when a special IPCC report in 2018 showed massive harms beyond that 1.5 degree mark. This new report found that threshold is even more important, but scientists do note that the world does not fall off a cliff after that mark.

Because the world is already 1.1 degrees (2 degrees Fahrenheit) warmer than pre-industrial time and emissions are still rising, not falling, the vast majority of future scenarios show temperatures are on track to shoot well above 1.5 degrees, hitting the mark in the 2030s. So some officials began to count on going over that threshold and coming back down a decade or so later with still-to-be-proven expensive

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technology to suck carbon out of the air or by some other means.

Monday's report says that if that overshoot happens, "then many human and natural systems will face additional severe risks... some will be irreversible, even if global warming is reduced."

Countries need to do more to adapt to warming, with rich countries needing to do a better job giving financial help to poorer nations to adjust to climate change caused mostly by the developing world, the report says. But there are limits to what adapting can accomplish and sometimes — like in the case of sea walls — technical fixes to lessen harms in one place will make it worse somewhere else, the report says.

Amid all the danger signs, experts said they want to shy away from doom.

"Fear is not a good advisor and never is," German vice chancellor and minister for climate and economy Robert Habeck told the AP. "Hope is the right one."

Hayhoe said what's needed is realism, action and hope.

"It's really bad and there's a good chance that it will get worse," Hayhoe said. "But if we do everything we can, that will make a difference. Our actions will make the difference... That's what hope is."

Europe welcomes Ukrainian refugees — others, less so

By RENATA BRITO Associated Press

BARCELONA, Spain (AP) — They file into neighboring countries by the hundreds of thousands — refugees from Ukraine clutching children in one arm, belongings in the other. And they're being heartily welcomed, by leaders of countries like Poland, Hungary, Bulgaria, Moldova and Romania.

But while the hospitality has been applauded, it has also highlighted stark differences in treatment given to migrants and refugees from the Middle East and Africa, particularly Syrians who came in 2015. Some of the language from these leaders has been disturbing to them, and deeply hurtful.

"These are not the refugees we are used to... these people are Europeans," Bulgarian Prime Minister Kiril Petkov told journalists earlier this week, of the Ukrainians. "These people are intelligent, they are educated people. ... This is not the refugee wave we have been used to, people we were not sure about their identity, people with unclear pasts, who could have been even terrorists..."

"In other words," he added, "there is not a single European country now which is afraid of the current wave of refugees."

Syrian journalist Okba Mohammad says that statement "mixes racism and Islamophobia."

Mohammad fled his hometown of Daraa in 2018. He now lives in Spain, and with other Syrian refugees founded the first bilingual magazine in Arabic and Spanish. He said he wasn't surprised by the remarks from Petkov and others.

Mohammad described a sense of *déjà vu* as he followed events in Ukraine. Like thousands of Ukrainians, he also had to shelter underground to protect himself from Russian bombs. He also struggled to board an overcrowded bus to flee his town. He also was separated from his family at the border.

"A refugee is a refugee, whether European, African or Asian," Mohammad said.

When it comes to Ukraine, the change in tone of some of Europe's most extreme anti-migration leaders has been striking — from "We aren't going to let anyone in" to "We're letting everyone in."

Those comments were made only three months apart by Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orban. In the first, in December, he was addressing migrants and refugees from the Middle East and Africa seeking to enter Europe via Hungary. In the second, this week, he was addressing people from Ukraine.

And it's not just politicians. Some journalists are also being criticized for how they are reporting on and describing Ukrainian refugees. "These are prosperous, middle-class people," an Al Jazeera English television presenter said. "These are not obviously refugees trying to get away from areas in the Middle East... in North Africa. They look like any European family that you would live next door to."

The channel issued an apology saying the comments were insensitive and irresponsible.

CBS news also apologized after one of its correspondents said the conflict in Kyiv wasn't "like Iraq or Afghanistan that has seen conflict raging for decades. This is a relatively civilized, relatively European" city.

When over a million people crossed into Europe in 2015, support for refugees fleeing wars in Syria, Iraq

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and Afghanistan was much greater. Of course, there were also moments of hostility — such as when a Hungarian camerawoman was filmed kicking and possibly tripping migrants along the country's border with Serbia.

Still, back then, Germany's chancellor, Angela Merkel, famously said "Wir schaffen das" or "We can do it," and the Swedish prime minister urged citizens to "open your hearts" to refugees.

Volunteers gathered on Greek beaches to rescue exhausted families crossing on flimsy boats from Turkey. In Germany, they were greeted with applause at train and bus stations.

But the warm welcome soon ended after EU nations disagreed over how to share responsibility, with the main pushback coming from Central and Eastern European countries like Hungary and Poland. One by one, governments across Europe toughened migration and asylum policies, doubling down on border surveillance, earning the nickname of "Fortress Europe."

Just last week, the U.N. High Commissioner for Refugees denounced the increasing "violence and serious human rights violations" across European borders, specifically pointing the finger at Greece.

And last year hundreds of people, mainly from Iraq and Syria but also from Africa, were left stranded in a no man's land between Poland and Belarus as the EU accused Belarusian President Alexander Lukashenko of luring thousands of foreigners to its borders in retaliation for sanctions. At the time, Poland blocked access to aid groups and journalists. More than 15 people died in the cold.

Meanwhile, in the Mediterranean, the European Union has been heavily criticized for funding Libya to intercept migrants trying to reach its shores, helping to return them to abusive — and often deadly — detention centers.

"There is no way to avoid questions around the deeply embedded racism of European migration policies when we see how different the reactions of national governments and EU elites are to the people trying to reach Europe," Lena Karamanidou, an independent migration and asylum researcher in Greece, wrote on Twitter.

Jeff Crisp, a former head of policy, development and evaluation at UNHCR, agreed that race and religion influenced treatment of refugees. Like many, he was struck by the double standard.

"Countries that had been really negative on the refugee issue and have made it very difficult for the EU to develop coherent refugee policy over the last decade, suddenly come forward with a much more positive response," Crisp noted.

Much of Orbán's opposition to migration is based on his belief that to "preserve cultural homogeneity and ethnic homogeneity," Hungary should not accept refugees from different cultures and different religions.

Members of Poland's conservative nationalist ruling party have also consistently echoed Orbán's thinking on migration to protect Poland's identity as a Christian nation and guarantee its security, they say, arguing that large Muslim populations could raise the risk of terror threats.

But none of these arguments has been applied to their Ukrainian neighbors, with whom they share historical and cultural ties. Parts of Ukraine today were once also parts of Poland and Hungary. Over 1 million Ukrainians live and work in Poland and hundreds of thousands more are scattered across Europe. Some 150,000 ethnic Hungarians also live in Western Ukraine, many of whom have Hungarian passports.

"It is not completely unnatural for people to feel more comfortable with people who come from nearby, who speak the (similar) language or have a (similar) culture," Crisp said.

But as more and more people scrambled to flee as Russia advanced, several reports emerged of non-white residents of Ukraine, including Nigerians, Indians and Lebanese, getting stuck at the border with Poland. Unlike Ukrainians, many non-Europeans need visas to get into neighboring countries. Embassies from around the world were scrambling to assist their citizens struggling to get through chaotic border crossings out of Ukraine.

Videos shared on social media posted under the hashtag #AfricansinUkraine allegedly showed African students being held back from boarding trains out of Ukraine — to make space for Ukrainians.

In Poland, Ruchir Kataria, an Indian volunteer, told the Associated Press on Sunday that his compatriots got stuck on the Ukrainian side of the border crossing leading into Medyka, Poland. In Ukraine, they were initially told to go to Romania hundreds of kilometers away, he said, after they had already made long

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journeys on foot to the border, not eating for three days. Finally, on Monday they got through.

The United Nations Refugee Agency has urged "receiving countries (to) continue to welcome all those fleeing conflict and insecurity — irrespective of nationality and race."

In Somaliland, COVID brings 'cutters' door to door for girls

By CARA ANNA Associated Press

HARGEISA, Somalia (AP) — Safia Ibrahim's business was in trouble. COVID-19 had taken hold in Somaliland, in the Horn of Africa. The 50-year-old widow with 10 children to support set out door to door on the capital's outskirts, a razor at hand, taking advantage of the lockdown to seek work with a question: Have your daughters been cut?

Her business is female circumcision, learned at the age of 15, performed hundreds of times and now being passed along to her daughters. She congratulates young girls upon completing the procedure: "Pray for me, I've made you a woman now."

She believes her work keeps girls pure for marriage. "This is our Somali culture. Our great-grandmothers, grandfathers — all of them used to practice," she said, even though she now knows there's no medical or even religious reason for the removal of external genitalia, which can cause excessive bleeding, problems with urination and childbirth, infections and even death. But it remains legal in Somaliland, so Ibrahim will continue until authorities tell her to stop.

Her story echoes through Muslim and other communities in a broad strip across Africa south of the Sahara, as well as some countries in Asia. In many places, COVID-19 brought stark challenges to efforts by health workers and activists to stop what they along with the United Nations and others call female genital mutilation.

This story is part of a yearlong series on how the pandemic is impacting women in Africa, most acutely in the least developed countries. The Associated Press series is funded by the European Journalism Centre's European Development Journalism Grants program, which is supported by the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation. The AP is responsible for all content.

Government officials, health workers and advocates say instances of FGM rose alarmingly during the pandemic in Somaliland and other parts of Africa as lockdowns kept girls out of school, making them vulnerable to "cutters" like Ibrahim, and economic pressures led impoverished parents to give their daughters in marriage, for which FGM often remains a cultural expectation, if not a demand.

In the early months of the pandemic, the U.N. Population Fund warned that disruptions to prevention programs could lead to 2 million cases over the next decade that otherwise might have been averted, and that progress toward the global goal of ending FGM by 2030 would be badly affected.

Hard data are lacking on the increase in FGM cases, but officials point to anecdotal evidence, local surveys and the observations of medical and advocacy groups. In Somaliland, an arid region that separated from Somalia three decades ago and seeks recognition as an independent country, community assessments by government workers and aid groups found that FGM rose during the six-month pandemic lockdown. Advocacy groups say they've also seen increases in Kenya, Tanzania, Sudan and Somalia.

Sadia Allin, Somalia director for the Plan International nongovernmental organization, said she was alarmed when an FGM practitioner came asking about her daughters in Somaliland's capital, Hargeisa.

"I asked her what she wanted to do with the girls. She said, 'I want to cut them,' and that was the shock of my life," Allin said. "I did not expect that something like that can happen in this age and time, because of the awareness and the work that we have been doing."

She said their survey found that 61% of residents of Hargeisa and Somaliland's second-largest city, Burao, believed that FGM was increasing under the lockdown.

Mothers give in and allow their girls to be cut, Allin said, "because the social pressure is greater than the pain."

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FGM often is still performed in homes. Ibrahim demonstrated the procedure for The Associated Press in her branch-barred courtyard. Using the palm of a female translator's hand to stand as a girl's genital area, she held a syringe just above the skin and pretended to inject anesthetic — a relatively new addition to her routine.

Then, with a razor blade, she swiped at where the girl's clitoris would be. Further slashes and the labia were gone. Finally, with needles and thread, she pretended to sew up the girl's opening, leaving a small hole for urine and the menstrual blood that would begin in the years to come.

Somaliland, with a population of well over 3 million, already had the highest rate of FGM in the world before the pandemic, according to the U.N. children's agency, with 98% of girls undergoing it between ages 5 and 11. The majority undergo the most severe kind, being sewn up until marriage, as opposed to the less severe kinds where the clitoris is cut or the clitoris and labia are removed.

Thorns have been used in place of needle and thread in the most basic of such procedures in rural areas. Before marriage, some rural women are still placed on a sheet and inspected so witnesses can confirm that she has remained "sealed."

In Somaliland, COVID-19 hit as activists and officials said they were gaining momentum in securing an anti-FGM policy, a government position backed by the country's Cabinet. They call it a crucial step toward a law barring FGM for good. That would bring Somaliland in line with regional neighbors such as Djibouti or, more recently, Sudan.

The work has never been easy. Somaliland's president, Muse Bihi Abdi, has said he wants to make the practice illegal. But many religious authorities, along with others in the conservative society, have pushed back.

Some claim progress in promoting a less harsh kind of FGM, or in making sure it's performed by health workers in a medical setting. But activists say even when performed by a health worker with sterile medical tools, FGM is damaging and a violation against a minor.

The tensions were clear in the Somaliland capital on Feb. 6, when government and civil society leaders gathered to mark the International Day of Zero Tolerance for FGM, a U.N.-sponsored awareness event.

Former first lady Edna Adan Ismail — the first person in Somaliland to speak out publicly against FGM, almost five decades ago — gave a fiery speech in favor of banning the practice entirely. But the government's religious affairs minister, Abdirizak Hussein Ali Albani, would not go so far. He acknowledged that the most severe type of FGM can damage a girl's reproductive organs but said the least severe type that nicks at the clitoris should remain optional.

His comment reflected the thinking of many in Somaliland's powerful religious community, who feel they are making a concession to anti-FGM efforts.

Women are Allah's original creation and nothing in Islam says to cut them, the minister acknowledged, but he said society must also protect them. He compared the least severe type of FGM to the shaving of armpits, the pass of a blade.

Increasingly, women and some men in Somaliland's younger, more educated generation are speaking out publicly to counter such religious and cultural beliefs. Some are traumatized by their own experience and have begun to explore the relatively new practice in Somaliland of mental health counseling, even discussing the effects of FGM on sexual pleasure.

Others who speak out are health workers who have seen FGM's sometimes fatal complications — girls who bleed to death and young women who struggle to deliver their first children. Some develop fistulas, or tears that allow urine or feces to leak.

One young nurse in Hargeisa, 23-year-old Hana Ismail, was moved to write a poem about it. At the zero-tolerance event, she recited it: "I have a mark that can never be erased," she began, later describing how a knife had to be used to make way for childbirth, a life "that managed to get in."

Ismail said she speaks with every patient about the practice and the need to stop it, defying the hush around the subject that lingers even now.

Somaliland's half-light existence as an unrecognized state has complicated its pandemic response. Vac-

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cines from the global COVAX initiative must come via the government in Somalia, which claims Somaliland but by some measures has the weakest health system in the world. Somaliland's pandemic data, too, is combined with Somalia's by the World Health Organization, though Somaliland's health ministry in December reported more than 8,300 cases and more than 580 deaths.

But now that Somaliland's COVID-19 lockdown has ended and vaccines have begun to arrive, the minister for social affairs and activists expect that the anti-FGM policy newly submitted to the Cabinet of ministers will be approved.

They hope an anti-FGM law will follow, but another challenge presents itself, one unique in Africa: Every lawmaker in Somaliland is a man.

Still, the minister for social affairs, Mustafe Godane Cali Bile, believes there is momentum. National television even aired a religious debate about the practice in recent days, giving a rare public glimpse of religious leaders who are against the practice completely.

The anti-FGM policy should be approved within weeks, the minister said, "and we're hoping the practice will be illegal by the end of the year."

Even a hard-won law, however, is expected to face backlash in a society where FGM has been part of life for generations. Ismail, the former first lady who runs a hospital in Hargeisa and put forward anti-FGM legislation two decades ago, was blunt about the fight that remains.

"It is not legislation that will stop it," she said. "Because if legislation would stop it, it would have stopped it in Sudan, and it has not. It would have stopped it in Djibouti, and it has not.

"Whatever women say, whatever we say, at the end of the day there's some imam who says, 'Oh, this is wrong.' Those few words wipe out all the efforts that have been done."

But Ismail is no longer alone as a reformer. Elsewhere in Hargeisa, women are questioning the roles society expects them to play. Shouting and laughing one recent evening, they took to a soccer field at the only sports center strictly for women in Somaliland.

The center is run by 32-year-old Amoun Aden Ismail, who recounted the challenges of having a groundbreaking tournament canceled in 2020 because the sports ministry declared it against the Islamic religion, and of being accused of wanting to turn women into men. It's not easy, she said.

She is against FGM and speaks openly about the practice with her club's members. "Some girls ask, 'How does FGM go?'" she recalled. "Some ask how normal vaginas look like." At first, the girls laughed at her explanations, accompanied by illustrations. "But I told them it's just part of life. You have to love your body, protect it."

Club member Muhubo Ibrahim, a 25-year-old health worker who plays defender, is passionate about preventing further generations of girls from being cut. "The day my mother did it to me, I said, 'I won't forgive you, forever,'" she recalled.

That didn't last, and later her mother confided, "I believe now I made a mistake." She has since encouraged Ibrahim to do what she likes with her own daughters when the time comes.

MLB: It's deadline day to save opening day, 162-game season

By RONALD BLUM AP Baseball Writer

JUPITER, Fla. (AP) — Major League Baseball negotiations to end the lockout are extending to the limit. Management says a deal must be reached by the end of Monday's negotiations to salvage a March 31 start to the regular season and a 162-game schedule.

With that in mind, the sides are scheduled to meet starting at 10 a.m., three hours earlier than usual. This will be the eighth straight day of talks at Roger Dean Stadium, the vacant spring training home of the Miami Marlins and St. Louis Cardinals.

The lockout is in its 89th day. MLB has not fixed an exact time to the deadline, which leads to the possibility of bargaining sessions stretching into the wee hours if both sides see a deal within reach.

Sides were still far apart, but pressure is increasing. Players would lose \$20.5 million in salary for each day of the season that is canceled, according to a study by The Associated Press, and the 30 teams

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would lose large sums that are harder to pin down.

Monday was picked as a deadline because MLB Commissioner Rob Manfred says at least 28 days of training are needed before the season starts. The union has not said whether it agrees, and baseball has shortened spring training to as few as three weeks in the past.

Baseball's ninth work stoppage started Dec. 2. Spring training games were to have begun Saturday and already have been canceled through March 7.

Just three players attended the talks Sunday: Max Scherzer, Andrew Miller and Marcus Semien. Scherzer left the ballpark before bargaining broke for the night.

Players and owners did not meet directly.

Deputy Commissioner Dan Halem telephoned union chief negotiator Bruce Meyer on Sunday morning and asked for a 1-on-1 session in place of the scheduled larger group gathering.

That started a series of four short meetings characterized as an exchange of ideas that gave the union and MLB a better idea of the tradeoffs it would take to reach the endpoint of bargaining that began last spring and resulted in the sport's first work stoppage since 1995.

Players and teams enter deadline day far apart on many key issues and unresolved on others. The most contentious proposals involve luxury tax thresholds and rates, the size of a new bonus pool for pre-arbitration players, minimum salaries, salary arbitration eligibility and the union's desire to change the club revenue sharing formula.

In addition, MLB has tied the elimination of direct free-agent compensation to players agreeing to higher luxury tax rates and still wants to expand the playoffs to 14 teams rather than the union's preference for 12. MLB also has kept its proposal for an international amateur draft on the table.

Not since Aug 30, 2002, has MLB come this close to losing regular-season games to labor strife. The union was set to strike at 3:20 p.m., but roughly 25 consecutive hours of meetings and caucuses culminated in an agreement at 11:45 a.m.

Bargaining has not had that type of frequency this year, but has gained momentum since talks shifted from New York to Florida last week.

MLB is offering to raise the luxury tax threshold from \$210 million last season to \$214 million this year, increasing it to \$220 million by 2026. Teams also want higher tax rates, which the union says would tend to act like a salary cap.

Players have asked for a \$245 million threshold this year, rising to \$273 million by the final season.

The union wants to expand arbitration to include the top 35% by service time of players with at least two seasons of major league service and less than three, up from the 22% cutoff in place since 2013.

The union proposed the pre-arbitration pool have \$115 million distributed to 150 players, and management wants \$20 million to be split among 30.

Analysis: Ukraine war tests growing China-Russia partnership

By KEN MORITSUGU Associated Press

BEIJING (AP) — Three weeks ago, the leaders of China and Russia declared that the friendship between their countries "has no limits" as they met in Beijing on the eve of the Winter Olympics. But that was before Russia's invasion of Ukraine, a gambit that is testing just how far China is willing to go.

The nuclear-armed neighboring giants have grown closer in recent years, raising the specter of an alliance of authoritarian states that could challenge a U.S.-led democratic West in a new Cold War. Yet China has much to lose in such a scenario, and President Xi Jinping has spoken out against the "Cold War mentality" of those who portray his country's rise as a threat.

The emergence of a China-Russia axis is far from a foregone conclusion. Trade with Europe and the United States is a major driver of China's economic growth, even as its estrangement with the U.S. and its appetite for energy have led it to deepen ties with Russia.

"The ongoing conflict in Ukraine will reveal whether there is a deeper bond or whether the relationship is essentially transactional," Anthony Saich, a China expert said in a Q&A posted on the website of

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Harvard University's Ash Center for Democratic Governance and Innovation.

He outlined three possible actions that would indicate "China has thrown its lot in with Russia." These include Beijing using a veto, rather than an abstention, of any U.N. resolution to criticize Russia's actions; recognition of a puppet regime in Ukraine put in place by Russia; and a refusal to call the attack an invasion even after civilian deaths are clearly confirmed.

China, along with India and the United Arab Emirates, already abstained from voting on a U.N. Security Council resolution Friday demanding Russia stop its attack on Ukraine. Russia vetoed it. China abstained again on another vote on Sunday, though it was a procedural one not open to veto.

"The two abstentions show that China has adopted a more prudent attitude than before amid the extremely broad criticism and protest of the world against Russia's all-round attacks," said Shi Yinhong, an international relations expert at Renmin University of China.

Li Fan, a Russian studies professor at Renmin, said that China and Russia have "a neighborly, friendly strategic partnership" but that China isn't taking sides in the current crisis. "It is not that China supports Russia's military operation," she said.

Russia's move to put its nuclear forces on high alert Sunday, escalating the crisis, may make China more cautious.

This balancing act helps explain Beijing's sometimes contradictory positions on Russia's invasion of Ukraine and the assiduous efforts of officials to avoid getting pinned down on certain questions — including whether they call what's happening an invasion.

China has said that the sovereignty and territorial integrity of all nations must be respected — a stance that runs counter to an invasion — while also opposing sanctions on Russia and blaming the U.S. and NATO's eastward expansion for being the root cause of the crisis.

"China is trying to have its cake on Ukraine and eat it too," Asia Society president and former Australian Prime Minister Kevin Rudd wrote in a post on the Asia Society Policy Institute website. He noted that China has lifted import restrictions on Russian wheat, which could offset some of the economic pain of sanctions.

For many of those imposing sanctions, China's actions amount to support for the invasion.

"You don't go and throw a lifeline to Russia in the middle of a period when they're invading another country," Australia's current Prime Minister Scott Morrison said.

In a series of calls with European counterparts late last week, Foreign Minister Wang Yi said "the present situation is something we do not want to see." He called for talks to end the crisis, but he withheld from criticizing Russia.

It is unclear whether Putin sought Xi's support when he came to Beijing for the opening ceremony of the Winter Olympics on Feb. 4. The Russian leader's attendance was a face-saving event for Xi after the U.S. announced a diplomatic boycott over China's human rights record and many major countries didn't send representatives.

A joint statement was issued after Xi and Putin met that declared "friendship between the two states has no limits, there are no 'forbidden' areas of cooperation."

Without mentioning Ukraine, the Russo-Chinese statement clearly opposed NATO expansion and coalitions that "intensify geopolitical rivalry" — a likely reference to U.S. President Joe Biden's efforts to strengthen ties with other democratic nations in the face of China's rise.

It accused unnamed "actors" of advocating unilateral approaches and resorting to force to address international issues, which could apply not only to the U.S. wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, but also Russia's war in Ukraine.

The communique also declared the "new inter-state relations between Russia and China are superior to political and military alliances of the Cold War era."

Harvard's Saich called the statement "a dramatic step forward in the relationship" but added it is premature to consider it a definitive alliance.

Half a century ago, in the midst of the Cold War, it was China and the United States who found common cause against Russia. This month marks the 50th anniversary of President Richard Nixon's groundbreak-

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ing 1972 trip to China.

At the time, China's ties with the Soviet Union had soured, and its leaders were worried about a Soviet invasion. Fifty years later, the relationship among the three great powers has changed in hard-to-imagine ways. U.S.-China ties are on the rocks, and Beijing and Moscow are reaching out to each other instead.

Mexico's efforts paltry in face of nearly 100,000 missing

By MARÍA VERZA Associated Press

NUEVO LAREDO, Mexico (AP) — For the investigators, the human foot -- burned, but with some fabric still attached -- was the tipoff: Until recently, this squat, ruined house was a place where bodies were ripped apart and incinerated, where the remains of some of Mexico's missing multitudes were obliterated.

How many disappeared in this cartel "extermination site" on the outskirts of Nuevo Laredo, miles from the U.S. border? After six months of work, forensic technicians still don't dare offer an estimate. In a single room, the compacted, burnt human remains and debris were nearly 2 feet deep.

Uncounted bone fragments were spread across 75,000 square feet of desert scrubland. Twisted wires, apparently used to tie the victims, lie scattered amid the scrub.

Each day, technicians place what they find -- bones, buttons, earrings, scraps of clothing -- in paper bags labeled with their contents: "Zone E, Point 53, Quadrant I. Bone fragments exposed to fire."

They are sent off to the forensic lab in the state capital Ciudad Victoria, where boxes of paper bags wait their turn along with others. They will wait a long time; there are not enough resources and too many fragments, too many missing, too many dead.

At the Nuevo Laredo site -- to which The Associated Press was given access this month -- the insufficiency of investigations into Mexico's nearly 100,000 disappearances is painfully evident. There are 52,000 unidentified people in morgues and cemeteries, not counting places like this one, where the charred remains are measured only by weight.

And people continue to disappear. And more remains are found.

"We take care of one case and 10 more arrive," said Oswaldo Salinas, head of the Tamaulipas state attorney general's identification team.

Meanwhile there is no progress in bringing the guilty to justice. According to recent data from Mexico's federal auditor, of more than 1,600 investigations into disappearances by authorities or cartels opened by the attorney general's office, none made it to the courts in 2020.

Still, the work goes on at Nuevo Laredo. If nothing else, there is the hope of helping even one family find closure, though that can take years.

That's why a forensic technician smiled amid the devastation on a recent day: She had found an unburnt tooth, a treasure that might offer DNA to make an identification possible.

When Jorge Macías, head of the Tamaulipas state search commission, and his team first came to the Nuevo Laredo site, they had to clear brush and pick up human remains over the final 100 yards just to reach the house without destroying evidence. They found a barrel tossed in a trough, shovels and an axe with traces of blood on it. Gunfire echoed in the distance.

Nearly six months later, there are still more than 30,000 square feet of property to inspect and catalog.

The house has been cleared, but four blackened spaces used for cremation remain. In what was the bathroom, it took the technicians three weeks to carefully excavate the compacted mass of human remains, concrete and melted tires, said Salinas, who leads work at the site. Grease streaks the walls.

Macías found the Nuevo Laredo house last August when he was looking for more than 70 people who had disappeared in the first half of the year along a stretch of highway connecting Monterrey and Nuevo Laredo, the busiest trade crossing with the United States.

The area was known as kilometer 26, a point on the highway and the invisible entrance to the kingdom of the Northeast cartel, a splinter of the Zetas. There are small shops with food and coffee. Men sell stolen gasoline and drugs. Strangers are filmed with cell phones. The power poles lining the highway farther

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north have been blasted with large-caliber weapons.

Most who disappeared here were truck drivers, cabbies, but also at least one family and various U.S. citizens. About a dozen have been found alive.

Last July, Karla Quintana, head of the National Search Commission, said the disappearances appeared to be related to a dispute between the Jalisco New Generation cartel, which was trying to enter the area, and the Northeast cartel, which wanted to keep them out. It's not clear if the victims were smugglers of drugs or people, if some were abducted mistakenly or if the goal was simply to generate terror.

The phenomenon of Mexico's disappearances exploded in 2006 when the government declared war on the drug cartels. For years, the government looked the other way as violence increased and families of the missing were forced to become detectives.

It wasn't until 2018 -- the end of the last administration -- that a law passed, laying the legal foundations for the government to establish the National Search Commission. There followed local commissions in every state; protocols that separated searches from investigations, and a temporary and independent body of national and international technical experts supported by the U.N. to help clear the backlog of unidentified remains.

The official total of the missing stands at 98,356. Even without the civil wars or military dictatorships that afflicted other Latin American countries, Mexico's disappeared are exceeded in the region only by war-torn Colombia. Unlike other countries, Mexico's challenge still has no end: authorities and families search for people who disappeared in the 1960s and those who went missing today.

President Andrés Manuel López Obrador's government was the first to recognize the extent of the problem, to talk of "extermination sites" and to mount effective searches.

But he also promised in 2019 that authorities would have all the resources they needed. The national commission, which was supposed to have 352 employees this year, still has just 89. And Macías' state commission has 22 positions budgeted, but has only filled a dozen slots. There the issue isn't money; the difficulty is finding applicants who pass background checks.

Disappearances are considered the perfect crime because without a body, there's no crime. And the cartels are expert at ensuring that there is no body.

"If a criminal group has total control of an area they do what we call 'kitchens,' because they feel comfortable" burning bodies openly, Macías said. "In areas that are not theirs and where the other side could easily see the smoke, they dig graves."

In 2009, at the other end of the border, a member of the Tijuana cartel confessed to having "cooked" some 300 victims in caustic lye. Eight years later, a report from a public university investigation center showed that what officially had been a jail in the border city of Piedras Negras, was actually a Zetas command center and crematorium.

Perhaps the largest such site was yet another border setting near the mouth of the Rio Grande called "the dungeon," in territory controlled by the Gulf cartel. The memory still stirs Macías. The first time he went he saw "pelvis, skulls, femurs, everything just lying there and I said to myself, 'It can't be.'"

Authorities have recovered more than 1,100 pounds of bones at the site so far.

According to the Tamaulipas state forensic service, some 15 "extermination sites" have been found. There are also burial sites: In 2010, graves containing 191 bodies were found along one of the main migratory routes through Tamaulipas to the border. In 2014, 43 students disappeared in the southern state of Guerrero. Only three have been identified from pieces of burnt bones.

Most of the extermination sites have been found by family members who follow up leads themselves with or without the support and protection of authorities. Such search groups exist in nearly every state.

For the families, the discoveries inspire both hope and pain.

"It brings together a lot of emotions," said a woman who has been searching for her husband since 2014 and two brothers who disappeared later. Like thousands of relatives across Mexico, she has made the search for her loved ones her life. "It makes you happy to find (a site), but at the moment you see things the way they are, you nosedive."

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The woman, who requested anonymity because of safety concerns, was present for the discovery of two sites last year. When she entered the Nuevo Laredo location with Macías, she could only cry.

A few months earlier, she had found the site in central Tamaulipas where she believes her loved ones are. That day, accompanied by the state search commission and escorted by the National Guard, they entered the brush in search of a drug camp.

"I'm not well psychologically after that," she said as she showed photos of the deep graves where burnt remains were buried, some wrapped in barbed wire. They recovered around a thousand teeth, she said.

On a recent day in Nuevo Laredo, gloved hands sifted through the dirt, separating out bits of bone: a piece of a jaw, a skull fragment, a vertebra.

The work is hard. The forensic technicians clear brush and then dig. Some days the temperature hovers around freezing, others it's above 100 degrees. They wear head-to-toe white protective suits and are constantly guarded.

Security is a concern, and so authorities have separated the search function from the investigations -- the cartels appear less concerned with those just looking for bones, though anything they find could eventually become evidence in a prosecution. Each day before dusk, they are escorted to a safe house and don't leave except to return the next day to the site.

When cartel violence exploded in Tamaulipas in 2010, the capital's morgue had space for six bodies. In a single massacre that year, a cartel killed 72 migrants. In those days, the Interamerican Commission of Human Rights denounced serious negligence in Tamaulipas's forensic work.

Pedro Sosa, director of the state's forensic services, said that their way of working changed radically in 2018 with the establishment of the identification team. But it's not enough. "A single forensic anthropologist in the whole state is not compatible with all of this work."

It can take four months for the Nuevo Laredo remains to be cleaned, processed and arrive to the genetic lab. It can take longer if something urgent emerges like in January of last year, when nearly 20 people -- mostly migrants -- were incinerated in an attack near the border.

Even if they manage to extract DNA, identification isn't assured because the profile will only automatically be crossed with a state database.

It could be years before the profile is added to one of the national databases. In 2020, the federal auditor said that that system had only 7,600 registered disappeared and 6,500 registered dead.

Though the federal law calls for a system in which various databases can interact, that doesn't exist, said Marlene Herbig, of the International Committee of the Red Cross. Each state or federal database of fingerprints or genetic profiles is like an island, despite calls for bridges to connect them.

No one can estimate how much money is needed or how many years it could take to see significant results in Mexico's efforts to locate and identify the disappeared.

Herbig offered a clue: A similar effort mounted on the island of Cyprus took 10 years to identify 200 disappeared in the conflict between Greece and Turkey during the latter half of the last century. And there are many thousands more missing in Mexico than there were in Cyprus.

"This issue is a monster," Macías said.

On cusp of Biden speech, a state of disunity, funk and peril

By CALVIN WOODWARD and ZEKE MILLER Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — In good times or bad, American presidents come to Congress with a diagnosis that hardly differs over the decades. In their State of the Union speeches, they declare "the state of our union is strong" or words very much like it.

President Joe Biden's fellow Americans, though, have other ideas about the state they're in and little hope his State of the Union address Tuesday night can turn anything around.

America's strength is being sharply tested from within — and now from afar — as fate, overnight, made Biden a wartime president in someone else's conflict, leading the West's response to a Russian invasion of Ukraine that makes all the other problems worse.

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The state of the union is disunity and division. It's a state of exhaustion from the pandemic. It's about feeling gouged at the grocery store and gas pump. It's so low that some Americans, including prominent ones, are exalting Russian President Vladimir Putin in his attack on a democracy.

Measures of happiness have hit a bottom, with fewer Americans saying they are very happy in the 2021 General Social Survey than ever before in five decades of asking them.

This is what a grand funk looks like.

Biden will step up to the House speaker's rostrum to address a nation in conflict with itself. The country is litigating how to keep kids safe and what to teach them, weary over orders to wear masks, bruised over an ignominious end to one war, in Afghanistan, and suddenly plenty worried about Russian expansionism. A speech designed to discuss the commonwealth will be delivered to a nation that is having increasing difficulty finding much of anything in common.

Even now, a large segment of the country still clings to the lie that the last election was stolen.

THAT 'M' WORD

Four decades ago, President Jimmy Carter confronted a national "crisis of confidence" in a speech describing a national malaise without using that word. But Vice President Kamala Harris did when she told an interviewer last month "there is a level of malaise" in this country.

Today's national psyche is one of fatigue and frustration — synonyms for the malaise of the 1970s. But the divides run deeper and solutions may be more elusive than the energy crisis, inflation and sense of drift of that time.

Take today's climate of discourse. It's "so cold," said Rachel Hoopes, a charity executive in Des Moines, Iowa, who voted for Biden. "It's hard to see how him talking to us can break through when so many people can't talk to each other."

It's as if Americans need group therapy more than a set-piece speech to Congress.

"We have to feel good about ourselves before we can move forward," historian Doris Kearns Goodwin told Stephen Colbert on "The Late Show."

Yet in the immediate aftermath of Russia's attack last week, a long-absent reflex kicked back in as members of Congress projected unity behind the president, at least for the moment, in the confrontation with Moscow. "We're all together at this point," Senate Minority Leader Mitch McConnell, R-Ky., said, "and we need to be together about what should be done."

Politics didn't stop at the water's edge but it paused. Though not at Mar-a-Lago's ocean edge in Florida, where Donald Trump praised Putin's "savvy," "genius" move against the country that entangled the defeated American president in his first impeachment trial.

PICK YOUR POISON

White House officials acknowledge that the mood of the country is "sour," but say they are also encouraged by data showing people's lives are better off than a year ago. They say the national psyche is a "trailing indicator" and will improve with time.

Biden, in his speech, will highlight the improvements from a year ago — particularly on COVID and the economy — but also acknowledge that the job is not yet done, in recognition of the fact that many Americans don't believe it.

A year into Biden's presidency, polling indeed finds that he faces a critical and pessimistic public. Only 29% of Americans think the nation is on the right track, according to the February poll from The Associated Press-NORC Center for Public Affairs Research.

In December's AP-NORC poll, most said economic conditions are poor and inflation has hit them on food and gas. After two years of a pandemic that has killed more than 920,000 in the U.S., majorities put masks back on and avoided travel and crowds in January in the sweep of the omicron variant. Now, finally, a sustained drop in infections appears to be underway.

Most Americans are vaccinated against COVID-19, but debates over masks and mandates have torn apart communities and families.

With Biden so hemmed in by hardened politics, it's difficult to imagine a single speech altering the pub-

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lic's perception, said Julia Helm, 52, a Republican county auditor from the suburbs west of Des Moines.

"He's got a lot of stuff on his plate," she said. "You know what could change how people feel? And pretty fast? What they pay at the pump. I hate to say it. But gas prices really are the barometer."

Biden suggested last summer that high inflation was a temporary inconvenience. But it's snowballed in recent months into a defining challenge of his presidency, alongside, now, the threat of geopolitical instability from Russia's attack on its neighbor.

Consumer prices over the past 12 months jumped 7.5%, the highest since 1982, as many pay raises were swallowed up and dreams of home ownership or even a used car became prohibitively expensive.

Inflation was a side effect of an economy running hot after the economically devastating first chapters of the pandemic, when Biden achieved the kind of growth that Presidents Barack Obama and Trump could not deliver.

The prime engine for both the gains and the inflation appears to be Biden's \$1.9 trillion coronavirus relief package, which pushed down the unemployment rate to a healthy 4% while boosting economic growth to 5.7% last year — the best performance since 1984.

SINKING POLLS

Still, voters have largely overlooked those gains as inflation bit. The February AP-NORC poll found that more people disapproved than approved of how Biden is handling his job as president, 55% to 44%.

That was a reversal from early in his presidency. As recently as July, about 60% said they approved of Biden in AP-NORC polls.

After four years of Trump's provocations from the White House, Hoopes, 38, the Des Moines charity executive, finds Biden to be a "nonthreatening" leader, a "decent person, someone it seems you could talk to."

"He seems to be a quiet decision-maker," she said. "But I don't know if that's good or bad for him or the country right now."

The most she could say about Biden's State of the Union speech is that "it can't hurt."

That's about the most that historians say about it, too.

THE SPEECH

If State of the Union addresses are remembered at all, it's generally because feathers were ruffled on a night of tradition and forced comity: Obama admonishing the Supreme Court justices seated in front of him for their ruling on campaign finance laws in 2010; Justice Samuel Alito mouthing "not true" in response, House Speaker Nancy Pelosi, D-Calif., ripping up Trump's speech in disgust in 2020.

In 2009, Rep. Joe Wilson, R-S.C., was reprimanded by fellow Republicans and lacerated by Democrats for shouting "you lie" at Obama when he spoke to Congress about his health care plan.

"Inaugural addresses sometimes do have an impact because they are big picture, far horizon speeches," said political scientist Cal Jillson of Southern Methodist University. "State of the Unions rarely do because they tend to be listy rather than thematic."

Among presidents of the last half century, Ronald Reagan, Bill Clinton, George W. Bush, Obama and Trump repeatedly declared "the state of our union is strong" while Bush's father took a pass and Gerald Ford confessed: "I must say to you that the state of the union is not good."

Trump being Trump and Clinton being Clinton, both additionally claimed that the state of the union had never been stronger than on the nights they said it.

Whatever diagnostic phrase Biden chooses, his task is to promote an agenda and plausibly claim credit for positive developments over the last year "without a 'mission accomplished' moment," Jillson said. "That's delicate. It's delicate to claim credit for the economic recovery ... and still acknowledge people's pains and fears."

Biden comes to Congress with some missions actually accomplished, like his historic infrastructure package, as well big dreams deferred.

He still wants to "Build Back Better." In the funk of these times, Americans just seem to want someone to wake them up when it's all over.

2022 midterm elections: What to know ahead of Texas' primary

By PAUL J. WEBER Associated Press

AUSTIN, Texas (AP) — The 2022 midterm election season opens Tuesday in Texas, where voters will pick their nominees for governor, attorney general, congressional seats and more.

With the next state primaries not coming until May, Texas will be far ahead in offering the first glimpse of whether embracing former President Donald Trump remains a litmus test for Republicans and what messages are sticking for Democrats.

Of particular interest are congressional primaries in two districts where the incumbents are threatened. Democratic Rep. Henry Cuellar is facing a progressive challenger just weeks after FBI agents raided his home. Republican Rep. Van Taylor is seen as vulnerable in his GOP-dominant district for criticizing the Jan. 6 insurrection and voting to certify Trump's loss in the 2020 election.

Statewide, Attorney General Ken Paxton is looking to survive a Republican primary challenge while under the cloud of an FBI investigation over corruption allegations.

What to watch as the Texas primary unfolds:

WHAT ISSUES ARE DRIVING THE TEXAS RACES?

Republican candidates in Texas are increasingly moving to the right, and some haven't stopped questioning the legitimacy of the 2020 presidential election — despite a broad coalition of top government and industry officials calling it the "most secure in American history."

That makes Texas' primary an early test of Trump's sustained influence on the party and how much discredited claims of widespread voter fraud will motivate Republican voters this year. One survey by Hearst Newspapers of Texas GOP congressional candidates found dozens who dispute the outcome of President Joe Biden's victory.

The primary also marks six months since Texas put in place the most restrictive abortion law in the U.S. in nearly 50 years. Democrats have said abortion rights will be a centerpiece of their national strategy in the 2022 midterms, but the issue has not been at the forefront in Texas' primary.

ARE THE FIRST SHAKE-UPS IN CONGRESS AHEAD?

Cuellar and Taylor are facing tough primaries in their districts.

Cuellar, a nine-term incumbent and one of the most conservative Democrats in Congress, has long bucked his party by voting against abortion rights and gun control. That record has again put him in a tough reelection against progressive challenger Jessica Cisneros, who first ran against Cuellar two years ago.

Cisneros, a former intern of Cuellar's, came within 4 percentage points of an upset in 2020. Cuellar could be more vulnerable this time after FBI agents searched his home in January as part of an investigation that relates to the former Soviet Republic of Azerbaijan.

Cuellar has denied wrongdoing and hasn't been charged with a crime.

A Cisneros win deep in South Texas would rank among the biggest upsets to date for the party's progressive wing. It could also entice Republicans to mount a sudden and more serious run at flipping the district.

For Republicans, Taylor is on the defense after his vote to create an independent commission to investigate the Jan. 6 insurrection by a mob of Trump supporters. His predicament shows how the GOP has diminished the gravity of the Capitol attack and sought to assign blame elsewhere.

IS THE TEXAS GOVERNOR'S RACE SET?

For months, Republican Gov. Greg Abbott and Democrat Beto O'Rourke have been looking past the primaries and campaigning against each other.

Abbott set his sights on a third term with Trump's endorsement, a formidable \$56 million in campaign funds and his signature on a long list of divisive new laws — on guns, abortion and immigration — that have steered Texas hard to the right.

But that didn't insulate him from challengers on the far right, including former Florida congressman Allen West, the one-term tea party firebrand. West and other primary rivals leaned into anger within the GOP base over Abbott's handling of the COVID-19 pandemic, including an early mask mandate.

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But there are scarce signs of a close race. If Abbott avoids a primary runoff by garnering more than 50% of the vote, his victory would demonstrate broad support within the GOP and keep him in the conversation of potential 2024 presidential candidates.

O'Rourke, coming off an early exit in the 2020 presidential race, has shown he can still draw a crowd in Texas and quickly raise money. He has no serious competition on Tuesday, though his performance along the U.S.-Mexico border will be closely watched.

During O'Rourke's 2018 run for U.S. Senate, he underperformed in South Texas in both the primary and general election. Republicans are making a strong push in that region after Trump flipped some border counties in 2020. High GOP turnout along the border during Tuesday's primary could be a warning sign for Democrats.

IS A TRUMP ALLY IN TROUBLE IN THE TEXAS PRIMARY?

The most heated statewide primary is the attorney general's race.

Paxton, seeking his third term in office, led a failed lawsuit to overturn the 2020 election and has been dogged by securities fraud charges and an FBI investigation into corruption allegations. He has broadly denied wrongdoing.

He carries Trump's endorsement and has become one of the nation's most prominent state attorneys general by bringing cases against the Biden administration and Big Tech.

His challengers, including Texas Land Commissioner George P. Bush and U.S. Rep. Louie Gohmert, are running on a message of restoring order to an office that has experienced upheaval under Paxton.

Bush, a son of former Florida Gov. Jeb Bush and a grandson of former President George H.W. Bush, has spent the final days of the race expressing confidence that he will force a May runoff. He's the only member of the Bush family still in public office.

WHAT WILL VOTING IN TEXAS BE LIKE?

Primary turnout is typically low in Texas, and this year so far has been no exception: Early voting has hovered in the low single digits among the state's 17 million registered voters.

But this primary is also the first test of a GOP-engineered election overhaul that Texas Republicans muscled through the state Capitol last year. At least 17 other states this year will also hold elections under tougher rules, some driven by Trump's unfounded claims about the 2020 election.

The rushed rollout of new rules for Texas' early primary has led to thousands of mail ballot applications and actual ballots getting returned for not including new identification requirements.

Secretary of State John Scott has said voters are still learning the rules and expects Texas' later elections to run smoother. But local officials are worried that the issues could result in some voters not casting a ballot.

Many Capitol riot cases could hinge on 1st trial's outcome

By MICHAEL KUNZELMAN Associated Press

The Justice Department launched one of the largest and most complex criminal investigations in its history after a mob of Donald Trump supporters stormed the U.S. Capitol over a year ago. Now it's time for a jury to hear some of the government's evidence about the unparalleled attack on American democracy.

The first trial for one of the hundreds of Capitol riot prosecutions starts this week, with jury selection scheduled to begin on Monday for the case against Guy Wesley Reffitt. The Texas man is charged with bringing a gun onto Capitol grounds, interfering with police officers guarding the building, and threatening his teenage children if they reported him to authorities.

Reffitt's trial could be a bellwether for many other Capitol riot cases. A conviction would give prosecutors more leverage in plea talks with rioters facing the most serious charges. An acquittal may lead others to wait for their own day in court.

Reffitt "truly is the canary in the coal mine," said Gregg Sofer, a former federal prosecutor who served as U.S. attorney for the Western District of Texas from October 2020 to February 2021.

"It'll really be interesting to see how strong a case the government has and whether or not they're

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relying on evidence that, when pushed and tested, stands up. It's going to have a huge impact going forward," added Sofer, now a partner at a law firm.

Reffitt is a member of a militia-style group called the "Texas Three Percenters," according to prosecutors. The Three Percenters militia movement refers to the myth that only 3% of Americans fought in the Revolutionary War against the British.

On Jan. 6, 2021, Reffitt was armed with a handgun in a holster on his waist, carrying zip-tie handcuffs and wearing body armor and a helmet equipped with a video camera when he and others charged at police officers on the west side of the Capitol, according to prosecutors.

"This action caused the police line guarding the building to retreat closer to the building itself; soon after this, law enforcement was overwhelmed, and rioters flooded the building," prosecutors wrote in a court filing.

Reffitt retreated only after an officer pepper sprayed him in the face, prosecutors said.

Prosecutors believe Reffitt took at least two firearms with him to Washington: an AR-15 rifle and a Smith & Wesson pistol. When FBI agents searched Reffitt's home in Wylie, Texas, they found a handgun in a holster on a nightstand in the defendant's bedroom. Prosecutors say photos and video of Reffitt during the riot show a handgun holster on his right hip, with what appears to be a silver object inside the holster.

On the morning of Jan. 6, Reffitt said he planned to "do the recon and then come back for weapons hot" and sent messages about meeting at a "rendezvous point," according to prosecutors.

"These messages, along with the weapons that Reffitt carried and the gear he wore, make clear that the defendant did not come to D.C. with the intention to engage in peaceful activity," prosecutors wrote.

The siege resulted in the deaths of five people, including a police officer. The Justice Department says more than 235 rioters have been charged with assaulting or impeding law enforcement, injuring over 100 officers. Rioters caused over \$1 million in damage to the Capitol.

The Justice Department says its investigation has generated an unprecedented volume of evidence, with hundreds of thousands of documents and thousands of hours of videos to share with defense attorneys. Shared files total more than nine terabytes of information and would take over 100 days to view, the department says.

More than 750 people have been charged with federal crimes related to the riot. Over 200 of them have pleaded guilty, mostly to misdemeanors carrying a maximum sentence of six months' imprisonment. More than 100 riot defendants have been sentenced. And at least 90 others have trial dates this year.

Philadelphia-based defense attorney Justin Danilewitz, who was a federal prosecutor in New Jersey from 2012 to 2017, said a conviction in Reffitt's case may lead to a flurry of guilty pleas by other riot defendants.

"And that can benefit defendants on occasion because it's better than the alternative if the alternative is a conviction following a trial," Danilewitz added.

An acquittal could inspire other defendants to "dig in their heels" and either push for a better plea offer from prosecutors or gamble a trial of their own, he said.

"It will also be interesting to see what the defense strategy is in the face of this very compelling evidence," Danilewitz said.

Defense attorney William Welch has said there is no evidence that Reffitt damaged property, used force or physically harmed anybody. In a May 2021 court filing, Welch said none of the videos or photos shows a gun in Reffitt's possession at the Capitol.

"In fact, neither of the police officers interviewed by the government said anything about a firearm," he wrote.

Reffitt has been jailed since his arrest in Texas less than a week after the riot. He faces five counts: obstruction of an official proceeding, being unlawfully present on Capitol grounds while armed with a firearm, transporting firearms during a civil disorder, interfering with law enforcement officers during a civil disorder, and obstruction of justice.

The obstructing justice charge stems from threats that he allegedly made against his son, then 18, and daughter, then 16, after returning home from Washington. Reffitt told his children to "choose a side or

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die" and said they would be traitors if they reported him to law enforcement, prosecutors said.

"He predicted future political violence in statements both to his family and to fellow militia members, bragged to fellow militia members about his involvement in the riot, recruited other rioters into the militia, and ordered bear spray and riot shields to his home to prepare for further violence," prosecutors wrote.

Messages recovered from Reffitt's cellphone indicate he planned to join an armed insurrection on Jan. 6 and intended to occupy the Capitol, prosecutors said.

"We had thousands of weapons and fired no rounds yet showed numbers. The next time we will not be so cordial," he wrote, according to prosecutors.

Presiding over Reffitt's trial is U.S. District Judge Dabney Friedrich, who was nominated by President Donald Trump in 2017. Friedrich already has sentenced nine rioters who pleaded guilty.

Prosecutors expect to call about a dozen witnesses, including three Capitol police officers who interacted with Reffitt and an officer who was in charge of the U.S. Capitol Police command center.

Jurors will see videos that captured Reffitt's confrontation with police. Prosecutors also have audio recordings of Reffitt talking about the riot inside his home after returning home.

"We made a point. That was a historic day," Reffitt said during one of the recorded conversations, according to prosecutors. "And guess what? I'm not done yet. I got a lot more to do. That's the beginning."

Reffitt's son, daughter and a fellow Texas Three Percenter group member also are listed as government witnesses. The group member traveled with Reffitt to Washington and back to Texas between Jan. 4 and Jan. 8, 2021.

"During the drive (to Washington), Reffitt talked about 'dragging those people out of the Capitol by their ankles' and installing a new government," prosecutors wrote.

A court filing that refers to the other militia member by the initials "R.H." says the man will tell jurors he was given immunity from prosecution in exchange for his testimony.

Welch has said Reffitt worked as a rig manager and as a consultant in the petroleum industry before COVID-19 restrictions effectively shut down his business.

High court to weigh limits to EPA efforts on climate change

By MARK SHERMAN Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — The Supreme Court is hearing a case its conservative majority could use to hobble Biden administration efforts to combat climate change.

The administration already is dealing with congressional refusal to enact the climate change proposals in President Joe Biden's Build Better Back plan.

Now the justices, in arguments Monday, are taking up an appeal from 19 mostly Republican-led states and coal companies over the Environmental Protection Agency's authority to limit carbon dioxide emissions from power plants.

The court took on the case even though there is no current EPA plan in place to deal with carbon output from power plants, a development that has alarmed environmental groups. They worry that the court could preemptively undermine whatever plan Biden's team develops to address power plant emissions. Biden has pledged to cut greenhouse gas emissions in half by the end of the decade.

A broad ruling by the court also could weaken regulatory efforts that extend well beyond the environment, including consumer protections, workplace safety and public health. Several conservative justices have criticized what they see as the unchecked power of federal agencies.

Those concerns were evident in the court's orders throwing out two Biden administration policies aimed at reducing the spread of COVID-19. Last summer, the court's 6-3 conservative majority ended a pause on evictions over unpaid rent. In January, the same six justices blocked a requirement that workers at large employers be vaccinated or test regularly and wear a mask on the job.

West Virginia Attorney General Patrick Morrisey, speaking at a recent event in Washington, cast the power plant case as about who should make the rules. "Should it be unelected bureaucrats, or should it be the people's representatives in Congress?" Morrisey said. West Virginia is leading the states opposed

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to broad EPA authority.

But David Doniger, a climate change expert with the Natural Resources Defense Council, said the Supreme Court's consideration of the issue is premature, a view shared by the administration.

He said the administration's opponents are advancing "horror stories about extreme regulations the EPA may issue in the future. The EPA is writing a new rule on a clean slate."

The power plant case has a long and complicated history that begins with the Obama administration's Clean Power Plan. That plan would have required states to reduce emissions from the generation of electricity, mainly by shifting away from coal-fired plants.

But that plan never took effect. Acting in a lawsuit filed by West Virginia and others, the Supreme Court blocked it in 2016 by a 5-4 vote, with conservatives in the majority.

With the plan on hold, the legal fight over it continued. But after President Donald Trump took office, the EPA repealed the Obama-era plan. The agency argued that its authority to reduce carbon emissions was limited and it devised a new plan that sharply reduced the federal government's role in the issue.

New York, 21 other mainly Democratic states, the District of Columbia and some of the nation's largest cities sued over the Trump plan. The federal appeals court in Washington ruled against both the repeal and the new plan, and its decision left nothing in effect while the new administration drafted a new policy.

Adding to the unusual nature of the high court's involvement, the reductions sought in the Obama plan by 2030 already have been achieved through the market-driven closure of hundreds of coal plants.

The Biden administration has no intention of reviving the Clean Power Plan, one reason Solicitor General Elizabeth Prelogar, the administration's top Supreme Court lawyer, argues the court should dismiss the case.

Some of the nation's largest electric utilities, serving 40 million people, are supporting the Biden administration along with prominent businesses that include Apple, Amazon, Google, Microsoft and Tesla.

A decision is expected by late June.

Live updates: US official: Belarus may join Ukraine invasion

By The Associated Press undefined

The latest on the Russia's invasion of Ukraine:

WASHINGTON — A senior U.S. intelligence official says Belarus is expected to send troops into Ukraine as soon as Monday to fight alongside Russian forces that invaded Ukraine last week.

Belarus has been providing support for Russia's war effort, but so far has not taken a direct part in the conflict.

The American official has direct knowledge of current U.S. intelligence assessments and says the decision by Belarus' leader on whether to bring Belarus further into the war depends on talks between Russia and Ukraine happening in the coming days. The official spoke anonymously to discuss the sensitive information.

Russian forces have encountered strong resistance from Ukraine defenders, and U.S. officials say they believe the invasion has been more difficult, and slower, than the Kremlin envisioned, though that could change as Moscow adapts.

— James LaPorta

CLEVELAND — Russia has apparently rendered Facebook largely unusable across leading Russian telecommunications providers amid rising friction between Moscow and the social media platform.

The London-based internet monitor NetBlocks reports that Facebook's network of content-distribution servers in Russia was so badly restricted Sunday that "content no longer loads, or loads extremely slowly making the platforms unusable."

Russian telecoms regulator Roskomnadzor on Friday announced plans to "partially restrict" access to Facebook. That same day, Facebook's head of security policy had said the company was barring Russian state media from running ads or otherwise profiting on its platform anywhere in the world.

Facebook says it has also refused a request by the Kremlin not to run fact checks related to Russia's invasion of Ukraine on the platform for users inside Russia.

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NetBlocks reported earlier that access to Twitter was similarly restricted Saturday. That was a day after Twitter said it was temporarily halting ads in both Ukraine and Russia.

The Twitter and Facebook restrictions can be circumvented inside Russia using VPN software, just as users do in mainland China.

TOKYO — Asian stock prices have fallen after Western nations moved to tighten sanctions against Russia and as President Vladimir Putin escalated tensions by ordering Russian nuclear forces on high alert.

U.S. futures fell, with the contract for the S&P 500 down 2.5% early Monday. The stock markets in Tokyo, Hong Kong and Shanghai declined while Sydney was higher.

Russia's invasion of Ukraine has caused markets to swing wildly, given the potential impact on inflation, energy supplies and other areas. The Russian ruble has weakened sharply but was steady early Monday at 83.86 to the dollar.

Japan joined moves by the U.S. and Western nations to impose sanctions on Russia, including blocking some Russian banks from the SWIFT global payment system.

BERLIN — The United Nations' nuclear watchdog says missiles have hit a radioactive waste disposal site in the Ukrainian capital of Kyiv, but there are no reports of damage to the buildings or indications of a release of radioactive material.

In a statement late Sunday, International Atomic Energy Agency Director General Rafael Grossi says Ukrainian authorities informed his office about the overnight strike. He says his agency expects to soon receive the results of on-site radioactive monitoring.

The report came a day after an electrical transformer at a similar disposal facility in the Ukrainian city of Kharkiv was damaged.

Such facilities typically hold low-level radioactive materials such as waste from hospitals and industry, but Grossi says the two incidents highlight a "very real risk." He says if the sites are damaged there could be "potentially severe consequences for human health and the environment."

CANBERRA, Australia — Australia will provide lethal military equipment to Ukraine to help the Ukrainians resist the Russian invasion.

The Australian government's announcement Monday gave no details on what material it may be sending. The move follows an offer on Friday of non-lethal military equipment, medical supplies and a \$3 million contribution to a NATO trust fund for support of the besieged country.

Australia has imposed sanctions on more than 350 Russian individuals, including Russian President Vladimir Putin since Thursday.

Australia has also targeted with sanctions 13 individuals and entities in Belarus, including that country's defense minister, Viktor Khrenin. Belarus is supporting Russia in its war with Ukraine.

TORONTO — The two largest media companies in Canada are dropping Russian state TV channel RT from their cable offerings.

Rogers spokesman Andrew Garas says Russia Today will no longer be available on its channel lineup as of Monday.

The Bell media company also is removing RT.

Canadian Heritage Minister Pablo Rodriguez is commending the action, saying Russia has been conducting warfare in Ukraine since 2014 and information warfare across the world. He says RT is the propaganda arm of Russian President Vladimir Putin's regime that spreads disinformation.

FRANKFURT, Germany — An Austria-based subsidiary of Russia's state-owned Sberbank has been ruled likely to fail after depositors fled due to the impact of Russia's invasion of Ukraine.

The European Central Bank said early Monday that the bank had 13.6 billion euros in assets at the end

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of last year, but has experienced "significant deposit outflows" due to "geopolitical tensions."

The ECB says Vienna-headquartered Sberbank Europe AG "is likely to be unable to pay its debts or other liabilities as they fall due." The bank is a fully owned subsidiary of Russia's Sberbank, whose majority shareholder is the Russian government.

Europe's bank resolution board separately says it has imposed a payments ban on money owed by the bank and a limit on how much depositors can withdraw. The board will decide on further steps, which could include restructuring, selling or liquidating the bank.

Sberbank Europe operates 185 branches and has more than 3,933 employees.

KYIV, Ukraine — Ukraine's Interior Ministry says 352 Ukrainian civilians have been killed during Russia's invasion, including 14 children. It says an additional 1,684 people, including 116 children, have been wounded.

The ministry's statement Sunday does not give any information on casualties among Ukraine's armed forces.

Russia has claimed that its troops are targeting only Ukrainian military facilities and says that Ukraine's civilian population is not in danger.

Russia has not released any information on casualties among its troops. The Russian Defense Ministry acknowledged on Sunday only that Russian soldiers have been killed and wounded, without giving any numbers.

RIO DE JANEIRO — Brazilian President Jair Bolsonaro says his government will remain neutral regarding Russia's invasion of Ukraine.

Bolsonaro said he had a two-hour long conversation with Russian President Vladimir Putin on Sunday to talk about the war and assured Russia's leader that Brazil will keep a neutral position. However, Brazil's foreign ministry later said Bolsonaro did not speak to Putin on Sunday, but rather was referring to his two-hour meeting with the Russian during a visit to Moscow earlier this month.

Brazil's ultra conservative president said Sunday that he does not want to "bring the consequences of the conflict" to Brazil.

Bolsonaro says that Russia has no intention of carrying out any massacres and that in some regions of Ukraine "90% of the people want to get closer to Russia."

The Brazilian president also criticized Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy, saying people "entrusted the fate of the nation to a comedian."

WASHINGTON — The U.S. for the first time has approved the direct delivery of Stinger missiles to Ukraine as part of a package approved by the White House on Friday.

The exact timing of delivery is not known, but officials say the U.S. is currently working on the logistics of the shipment. The officials agreed to discuss the development only if not quoted by name.

The decision comes on the heels of Germany's announcement that it will send 500 Stinger missiles and other weapons and supplies to Ukraine.

The high-speed Stingers are very accurate and are used to shoot down helicopters and other aircraft. Ukrainian officials have been asking for more of the powerful weapons.

The Baltic states have also been providing Ukraine with Stingers since January, and in order to do that had to get U.S. permission.

TORONTO — Canada will send an additional \$25 million worth of defensive military equipment to Ukraine in an effort to help the country defend against Russia's invasion.

Foreign Affairs Minister Melanie Joly says the equipment includes helmets, body armor, gas masks and night-vision gear.

She says it will be routed through Poland to get there as quickly as possible.

Anand says Canada will offer up cybersecurity experts who can help Ukraine "defend its networks against

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cyber attacks that are increasingly forming part of modern-day warfare.”

UNITED NATIONS -- The U.N. Security Council has voted for the 193-member General Assembly to hold an emergency session on Russia’s invasion of Ukraine on Monday.

The vote on Sunday to authorize an emergency meeting was 11 in favor, Russia opposed, and China, India and the United Arab Emirates abstaining. That was the exact same vote on a resolution Friday demanding that Moscow immediately stop its attack on Ukraine and withdraw all troops. But in that case, Russia used its veto and the resolution was defeated.

Ukrainian U.N. Ambassador Sergiy Kyslytsya asked for the General Assembly meeting to be held under the so-called “Uniting for Peace” resolution, initiated by the United States and adopted in November 1950 to circumvent vetoes by the Soviet Union during the Korean War.

That resolution gives the General Assembly the power to call emergency meetings when the Security Council is unable to act because of the lack of unanimity among its five veto-wielding permanent members -- the United States, Russia, China, Britain and France.

MOSCOW — The U.S. Embassy in Moscow urged American citizens in Russia to think about leaving the country immediately on Sunday, as some airlines halt flights there and some countries close their skies to Russian aircraft.

“U.S. citizens should consider departing Russia immediately via commercial options still available,” the Embassy said in a statement on its website.

U.S. officials in recent weeks have urged Americans not to travel to Russia, and warned that the U.S. government could not help in any evacuation of Americans from there.

An earlier alert recommended Americans develop contingency plans about how to leave the country if necessary.

The European Union was among those announcing Sunday they were closing their airspace to Russian flights

NEW YORK CITY — New York Gov. Kathy Hochul signed an executive order on Sunday forbidding her state from doing business with Russia. The order includes canceling its investments in Russia.

During a press conference in Albany, the governor said her state would also welcome refugees from the besieged country. Hochul said New York is home to the largest Ukrainian population in the United States.

“If you need a place to stay, you want to come over here, we will help you become integrated into our community,” she said.

The economic sanctions follow those issued by President Joe Biden to help siphon resources from the Russian government, which launched its long-expected invasion of Ukraine last Thursday.

It remains to be seen how Hochul’s move will aid the effort to severely squeeze the Russian economy in the global effort to get Russian President Vladimir Putin to retreat.

KYIV, Ukraine — As Russian troops draw closer to the Ukrainian capital, Kyiv’s mayor is both filled with pride over his citizens’ spirit and anxious about how long they can hold out.

In an interview with The Associated Press on Sunday, after a grueling night of Russian attacks on the outskirts of the city, Mayor Vitali Klitschko said there were no plans to evacuate civilians if Russian troops managed to take Kyiv.

“We can’t do that, because all ways are blocked,” he said. “Right now we are encircled.”

When Russian troops invaded Ukraine on Thursday, the city of 2.8 million people initially reacted with concern but also a measure of self-possession. However, nerves started fraying when grocery stores began closing and the city’s famously deep subway system turned its stations into bomb shelters.

The mayor confirmed to the AP that nine civilians in Kyiv had been killed so far, including one child.

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NEW YORK — Some early signs are emerging of significant economic consequences to Russia following its invasion of Ukraine three days ago. While official quotes for the Russian ruble were unchanged at roughly 84 rubles to the dollar, one online Russian bank, Tinkoff, was giving an unofficial exchange rate of 152 rubles over the weekend.

Videos from Russia showed long lines of Russians trying to withdraw cash from ATMs, while the Russian Central Bank issued a statement calling for calm, in an effort to avoid bank runs. Reports also showed that Visa and Mastercard were no longer being accepted for those with international bank accounts.

"Banks and credit card companies dealing with Russia are going into lock down mode given the fast pace and increasing bite of the sanctions," said Amanda DeBusk, a partner with Dechert LLP.

Russia may have to temporarily close bank branches or declare a national bank holiday to protect its financial system, analysts said.

"If there's a full-scale banking panic, that's a driver of crisis in its own right," said Adam Tooze, a professor of history at Columbia University and Director of the European Institute. "A rush into dollars by the Russian general population moves things into an entirely new domain of financial warfare."

MOSCOW — The Russian military said Sunday that some of its troops were killed and some were wounded in Ukraine -- admitting for the first time that it had suffered casualties since the Russian invasion.

Russian Defense Ministry spokesman Maj. Gen. Igor Konashenkov said Sunday "there are dead and wounded among our comrades," without offering any numbers, but adding that Russia's losses were "many times" fewer than those of Ukraine's forces.

It was the first time Russian military officials mentioned casualties on their side. Ukraine has claimed that its forces killed 3,500 Russian troops. Konashenkov also said that since the start of the attack Thursday, the Russian military have hit 1,067 Ukrainian military facilities, including 27 command posts and communication centers, 38 air defense missile system and 56 radar stations.

Konashenkov's claims and Ukraine's allegations that its forces killed thousands of Russian troops can't be independently verified.

KYIV, Ukraine — Hundreds of people protested Russia's invasion of Ukraine in Belarus on Sunday. The protests came despite the fact that the authoritarian Belarusian government has sided with Moscow.

The anti-war rallies spanned at least 12 Belarusian cities, and human rights advocates reported that more than 170 people have been arrested. In the capital of Minsk, demonstrators marched in different parts of the city carrying Ukrainian flags. A large pile of flowers kept growing at the building of Ukraine's Embassy.

JERUSALEM — Around 2,500 Ukrainian Jews have asked to immigrate to Israel and take citizenship since the onset of Russia's invasion, a quasi-governmental organization says.

The Jewish Agency for Israel, which handles immigration matters, said that it has received over 5,000 inquiries about immigration to Israel. Around half have requested to immigrate immediately, the agency said.

Ukraine is home to a Jewish community of around 43,000. But approximately 200,000 Ukrainians are eligible for immigration under Israel's Law of Return, which extends the right to citizenship to anyone with one Jewish grandparent.

TORONTO — Canada is joining many European countries in closing its airspace to all Russian aircraft as the West ramps up pressure on Russia for invading Ukraine.

Transport Minister Omar Alghabra said Sunday that Canada will hold Russia accountable for its unprovoked attacks.

Most European countries have either announced they are closing their airspace or said they intend to do so. So far Spain, Greece, Serbia and Turkey are among the few left that haven't joined in the move against Russia.

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BRUSSELS — The European Union's top migration official says more than 300,000 Ukrainians fleeing war have entered the 27-nation bloc in recent days and is warning that Europe must be ready for millions to arrive.

EU Home Affairs Commissioner Ylva Johansson is urging the bloc's interior ministers meeting on Sunday to trigger a special protection mechanism set up 20 years ago to help deal with influxes of refugees.

"We have to prepare for even bigger numbers, and we have to prepare for the support that we need to give to the Ukrainians fleeing," she told reporters at the EU meeting in Brussels.

The protection system was set up in the wake of the wars in former Yugoslavia and Kosovo, when thousands of people were forced to flee their homes. It has never been used. It provides residence permits for a fixed time, the possibility of jobs, accommodation, social welfare, medical treatment and education for children.

ATHENS — Authorities say Greece is sending ammunition, assault rifles and missile launchers to Ukraine in response to a request by Ukraine's government.

The military aid was decided at a meeting Sunday morning between Prime Minister Kyriakos Mitsotakis and senior defense officials.

A C-130 plane with the equipment has arrived in Poland, and a second one will arrive later, a Defense Ministry official said.

Two more planes carrying humanitarian aid such as blankets and food have also left Athens International Airport for Poland, the spokesman said.

GENEVA — The World Health Organization is warning that oxygen supplies – important for the fight against COVID-19 and other illnesses – are reaching a "very dangerous point" in Ukraine due to transportation difficulties in the wake of Russia's military invasion, jeopardizing thousands of lives.

"The majority of hospitals could exhaust their oxygen reserves within the next 24 hours. Some have already run out. This puts thousands of lives at risk," said WHO Director-General Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus and WHO Europe regional director Dr. Hans Kluge in a joint statement Sunday afternoon in Europe.

They said electricity and power shortages, and the danger of ambulances getting caught in the crossfire, were increasing the risks to patients.

TOKYO — Japanese Prime Minister Fumio Kishida says Japan has decided to join the United States and European nations in cutting key Russian banks from the SWIFT international financial messaging system to step up sanctions against Russia for its invasion of Ukraine.

Japan will also freeze assets of Russian President Vladimir Putin and other top Russian officials, while sending \$100 million in emergency humanitarian aid to Ukraine, Kishida told reporters.

"The Russian invasion of Ukraine is a unilateral attempt to change the status quo and the act shakes the foundation of the international order. It's an outright violation to international law and we strongly denounce the act," Kishida said.

In a statement welcoming new sanctions from Japan, White House Press Secretary Jen Psaki said the US and its allies "will continue working closely together to impose further severe costs and make Putin's war of choice a strategic failure."

MOSCOW — From Moscow to Siberia, Russians have taken to the streets again on Sunday to protest Russia's invasion of Ukraine. Demonstrators marched in city centers, chanting "No to war."

Protests against the invasion started on Thursday and have continued for four days in a row, despite police swiftly moving to detain hundreds of people each day.

In St. Petersburg, where dozens gathered in the city center, police in riot gear grabbed protesters and dragged some to police vans, even though the demonstration was peaceful.

According to the OVD-Info rights group that tracks political arrests, by Sunday afternoon police detained at least 356 Russians in 32 cities over anti-war demonstrations.

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KYIV, UKRAINE — The office of Ukraine's president has confirmed that a delegation will meet with Russian officials as Moscow's troops draw closer to Kyiv.

Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy office said Sunday on the Telegram messaging app that the two sides would meet at an unspecified location on the Belarusian border and did not give a precise time for the meeting.

The meeting news came shortly after President Vladimir Putin ordered Russian nuclear forces put on high alert in response to what he called "aggressive statements" by leading NATO powers.

BERLIN — Approximately 100,000 people have turned out in Berlin to protest Russia's invasion of Ukraine and show solidarity with the Ukrainian people.

Police said large crowds have filled the area originally planned for the demonstration, around the Brandenburg Gate in central Berlin, and that they were allocating additional space to accommodate the protesters.

Sunday's protest was peaceful, including many families with children. People waved yellow and blue Ukrainian flags to show their support. Some carried placards with slogans such as "Hands off Ukraine" and "Putin, go to therapy and leave Ukraine and the world in peace."

MOSCOW — President Vladimir Putin has ordered Russian nuclear deterrent forces put on high alert amid tensions with the West over his invasion of Ukraine.

Putin asserted at a meeting with his top officials on Sunday that leading NATO powers had made "aggressive statements" along with the West imposing hard-hitting financial sanctions against Russia, including the president himself.

The alert means Putin has ordered Russia's nuclear weapons prepared for increased readiness to launch. He told the Russian defense minister and the chief of the military's General Staff to put the nuclear deterrent forces in a "special regime of combat duty."

WARSAW, Poland -- While countries like Poland and Hungary have welcomed fleeing Ukrainians, some foreign citizens seeking to leave Ukraine have reported difficulties at the Polish border.

An Indian volunteer in Poland said Sunday some Indian citizens seeking to flee Ukraine into Poland are stuck at the border leading into Medyka, Poland, and unable to cross.

The Indian Embassy in Kyiv said Sunday that Indian citizens are being evacuated from Ukraine to Romania and Hungary. But some have arrived at the border with Poland apparently unaware of this and are stuck.

Ruchir Kataria, the volunteer, told The Associated Press that the Indians seeking to cross at Medyka were told in broken English: "Go to Romania." But they had already made long journeys on foot to the border, and have no way to reach the border with Romania hundreds of kilometers away.

BERLIN — German Chancellor Olaf Scholz says Germany is committing 100 billion euros (\$112.7 billion) to a special fund for its armed forces, raising its defense spending above 2% of its GDP.

Scholz told a special session of the Bundestag in Berlin on Sunday that it was clear "we need to invest significantly more in the security of our country, in order to protect our freedom and our democracy."

Germany had come under criticism for not investing adequately in its defense budget and not doing enough to respond to Russia's invasion of Ukraine.

On Saturday evening, the German government announced it would be sending weapons and other supplies directly to Ukraine to help troops against invading Russia forces.

BUDAPEST, Hungary — Russia's President Vladimir Putin has temporarily lost his most senior official position in world sports.

The International Judo Federation on Sunday cited "the ongoing war conflict in Ukraine" for suspending Putin's honorary president status.

The Russian president is a keen judoka and attended the sport at the 2012 London Olympics.

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The judo federation is rare among Olympic sports bodies for using the word “war” to describe Russia’s invasion of Ukraine ordered by Putin since Thursday. Others have used phrases such as “escalation of conflict.”

A Kremlin-supporting oligarch and longtime friend of Putin, Arkady Rotenberg, remains on the IJF executive committee as development manager.

TEL AVIV, Israel — Israel’s prime minister says the country is sending 100 tons of humanitarian aid to assist civilians caught up in the fighting in Ukraine.

Naftali Bennett told a meeting of his Cabinet Sunday that the aid includes medical equipment and medicine, tents, sleeping bags and blankets.

Bennett did not comment on a report by Israeli public broadcaster Kan which said that Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy asked the Israeli leader to mediate talks on ending the crisis with Russia. Bennett’s office confirmed there had been a call but declined to comment on the report. The Ukrainian embassy could not immediately be reached for comment.

Bennett has treaded carefully in his public comments on Russia’s invasion. He has voiced support for Ukrainian civilians but has stopped short of condemning Russia. Israel relies on Russia for security coordination in Syria, where Russia has a military presence and where Israel frequently strikes hostile targets.

KYIV, Ukraine — Ukraine’s president says his country is ready for peace talks with Russia but not in Belarus, which was a staging ground for Moscow’s 3-day-old invasion.

Speaking in a video message Sunday, President Volodymyr Zelenskyy named Warsaw, Bratislava, Istanbul, Budapest or Baku as alternative venues. He said other locations are also possible but made clear that Ukraine doesn’t accept Russia’s selection of Belarus.

The Kremlin said Sunday that a Russian delegation had arrived in the Belarusian city of Homel for talks with Ukrainian officials. Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov said the delegation includes military officials and diplomats.

“The Russian delegation is ready for talks, and we are now waiting for the Ukrainians,” Peskov said.

MOSCOW — The Kremlin says a Russian delegation has arrived in the Belarusian city of Homel for talks with Ukrainian officials.

Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov said the delegation includes military officials and diplomats. “The Russian delegation is ready for talks, and we are now waiting for the Ukrainians,” Peskov said.

There was no immediate comment from Ukrainian officials, who previously expressed their own readiness for peace talks with Russia but haven’t mentioned any specific details on their location and timing.

Russia invaded Ukraine on Thursday, and its troops are closing in on the capital, Kyiv, and making significant gains along the country’s coast.

KYIV, Ukraine — Ukrainian authorities say Russian troops have entered Ukraine’s second-largest city of Kharkiv and fighting is underway in the streets.

Oleh Sinehubov, the head of the Kharkiv regional administration, said Sunday that Ukrainian forces were fighting Russian troops in the city and asked civilians not to leave their homes.

Russian troops approached Kharkiv, which is located about 20 kilometers (12.4 miles) south of the border with Russia, shortly after Moscow launched its invasion of Ukraine on Thursday. But until Sunday, they remained on its outskirts without trying to enter the city while other forces rolled past, pressing their offensive deeper into Ukraine.

Videos on Ukrainian media and social networks showed Russian vehicles moving across Kharkiv and a light vehicle burning on the street.

KYIV, Ukraine — The Ukrainian president’s office said Russian forces blew up a gas pipeline in Kharkiv,

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the country's second-largest city.

The State Service of Special Communication and Information Protection warned that the explosion, which it said looked like a mushroom cloud, could cause an "environmental catastrophe" and advised residents to cover their windows with damp cloth or gauze and to drink plenty of fluids.

Ukraine's top prosecutor, Iryna Venediktova, said the Russian forces have been unable to take Kharkiv, where a fierce battle is underway.

The city of 1.5 million is located 40 kilometers (25 miles) from the Russian border.

GENEVA — The United Nations says it has confirmed at least 240 civilian casualties, including at least 64 people killed, in the fighting in Ukraine that erupted since Russia's invasion on Thursday — though it believed the "real figures are considerably higher" because many reports of casualties remain to be confirmed.

The U.N. Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs relayed the count late Saturday from the U.N. human rights office, which has strict methodologies and verification procedures about the toll from conflict.

Putin puts nuclear forces on high alert, escalating tensions

By YURAS KARMANAU, JIM HEINTZ, VLADIMIR ISACHENKOV and DASHA LITVINOVA Associated Press KYIV, Ukraine (AP) — President Vladimir Putin dramatically escalated East-West tensions by ordering Russian nuclear forces put on high alert Sunday, while Ukraine's embattled leader agreed to talks with Moscow as Putin's troops and tanks drove deeper into the country, closing in around the capital.

Citing "aggressive statements" by NATO and tough financial sanctions, Putin issued a directive to increase the readiness of Russia's nuclear weapons, raising fears that the invasion of Ukraine could lead to nuclear war, whether by design or mistake.

The Russian leader is "potentially putting in play forces that, if there's a miscalculation, could make things much, much more dangerous," said a senior U.S. defense official, speaking on condition of anonymity to discuss rapidly unfolding military operations.

Putin's directive came as Russian forces encountered strong resistance from Ukraine defenders. Moscow has so far failed to win full control of Ukraine's airspace, despite advances across the country. U.S. officials say they believe the invasion has been more difficult, and slower, than the Kremlin envisioned, though that could change as Moscow adapts.

Amid the mounting tensions, Western nations said they would tighten sanctions and buy and deliver weapons for Ukraine, including Stinger missiles for shooting down helicopters and other aircraft.

Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy's office, meanwhile, announced plans for a meeting with a Russian delegation at an unspecified location on the Belarusian border.

It wasn't immediately clear when the meeting would take place, nor what the Kremlin was ultimately seeking, either in those potential talks on the border or, more broadly, from its war in Ukraine. Western officials believe Putin wants to overthrow Ukraine's government and replace it with a regime of his own, reviving Moscow's Cold War-era influence.

The fast-moving developments came as scattered fighting was reported in Kyiv. Battles also broke out in Ukraine's second-largest city, Kharkiv, and strategic ports in the country's south came under assault from Russian forces.

By late Sunday, Russian forces had taken Berdyansk, a Ukrainian city of 100,000 on the Azov Sea coast, according to Oleksiy Arestovich, an adviser to Zelenskyy's office. Russian troops also made advances toward Kherson, another city in the south of Ukraine, while Mariupol, a port city on the Sea of Azov that is considered a prime Russian target, is "hanging on," Arestovich said.

With Russian troops closing in around Kyiv, a city of almost 3 million, the mayor of the capital expressed doubt that civilians could be evacuated. Authorities have been handing out weapons to anyone willing to defend the city. Ukraine is also releasing prisoners with military experience who want to fight, and train-

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ing people to make firebombs.

In Mariupol, where Ukrainians were trying to fend off attack, a medical team at a city hospital desperately tried to revive a 6-year-old girl in unicorn pajamas who was mortally wounded in Russian shelling.

During the rescue attempt, a doctor in blue medical scrubs, pumping oxygen into the girl, looked directly into the Associated Press video camera capturing the scene.

"Show this to Putin," he said angrily. "The eyes of this child, and crying doctors."

Their resuscitation efforts failed, and the girl lay dead on a gurney, her jacket spattered with blood.

Nearly 900 kilometers (560 miles) away, Faina Bystritska was under threat in the city of Chernihiv.

"I wish I had never lived to see this," said Bystritska, an 87-year-old Jewish survivor of World War II. She said sirens blare almost constantly in the city, about 150 kilometers (90 miles) from Kyiv.

Chernihiv residents have been told not to switch on any lights "so we don't draw their attention," said Bystritska, who has been living in a hallway, away from any windows, so she could better protect herself.

"The window glass constantly shakes, and there is this constant thundering noise," she said.

Meanwhile, the top official in the European Union outlined plans by the 27-nation bloc to close its airspace to Russian airlines and buy weapons for Ukraine. The EU will also ban some pro-Kremlin media outlets, said European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen.

The U.S. also stepped up the flow of weapons to Ukraine, announcing it will send Stinger missiles as part of a package approved by the White House on Friday. Germany likewise plans to send 500 Stingers and other military supplies.

Also, the 193-member U.N. General Assembly scheduled an emergency session Monday on Russia's invasion.

Putin, in ordering the nuclear alert, cited not only statements by NATO members but the hard-hitting financial sanctions imposed by the West against Russia, including Putin himself.

"Western countries aren't only taking unfriendly actions against our country in the economic sphere, but top officials from leading NATO members made aggressive statements regarding our country," Putin said in televised comments.

U.S. defense officials would not disclose their current nuclear alert level except to say that the military is prepared all times to defend its homeland and allies.

White House press secretary Jen Psaki told ABC that Putin is resorting to the pattern he used in the weeks before the invasion, "which is to manufacture threats that don't exist in order to justify further aggression."

The practical meaning of Putin's order was not immediately clear. Russia and the United States typically have land- and submarine-based nuclear forces that are on alert and prepared for combat at all times, but nuclear-capable bombers and other aircraft are not.

If Putin is arming or otherwise raising the nuclear combat readiness of his bombers, or if he is ordering more ballistic missile submarines to sea, then the U.S. might feel compelled to respond in kind, said Hans Kristensen, a nuclear analyst at the Federation of American Scientists.

Earlier Sunday, Kyiv was eerily quiet after explosions lit up the morning sky and authorities reported blasts at one airport. A main boulevard was practically deserted as a strict curfew kept people off the streets. Authorities warned that anyone venturing out without a pass would be considered a Russian saboteur.

Terrified residents hunkered down in homes, underground garages and subway stations in anticipation of a full-scale Russian assault. Food and medicine were running low, Kyiv Mayor Vitali Klitschko said.

"Right now, the most important question is to defend our country," Klitschko said.

In downtown Kharkiv, 86-year-old Olena Dudnik said she and her husband were nearly thrown from their bed by the pressure blast of a nearby explosion.

"We are suffering immensely," she said by phone. "We don't have much food in the pantry, and I worry the stores aren't going to have anything either, if they reopen." She added: "I just want the shooting to stop, people to stop being killed."

Russia's failure thus far to win full control of Ukraine's airspace is a surprising lapse that has given out-

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gunned Ukrainian forces a chance to slow the advance of Russian ground forces. Normally, gaining what the military calls air superiority is one of the first priorities for an invading force.

But even though Russian troops are being slowed by Ukrainian resistance, fuel shortages and other logistical problems, a senior U.S. defense official said that will probably change. "We are in day four. The Russians will learn and adapt," the official said.

The number of casualties from Europe's largest land conflict since World War II remained unclear amid the confusion.

Ukraine's Interior Ministry said Sunday that 352 Ukrainian civilians have been killed, including 14 children. It said an additional 1,684 people, including 116 children, have been wounded.

Russian Defense Ministry spokesman Maj. Gen. Igor Konashenkov gave no figures on Russia's dead and wounded but said Sunday his country's losses were "many times" lower than Ukraine's.

About 368,000 Ukrainians have arrived in neighboring countries since the invasion started Thursday, according to the U.N. refugee agency.

Along with military assistance, the U.S., European Union and Britain also agreed to block selected Russian banks from the SWIFT system, which moves money around thousands of banks and other financial institutions worldwide. They also moved to slap restrictions on Russia's central bank.

Russia's economy has taken a pounding since the invasion, with the ruble plunging and the central bank calling for calm to avoid bank runs.

Russia, which massed almost 200,000 troops along Ukraine's borders, claims its assault is aimed only at military targets, but bridges, schools and residential neighborhoods have also been hit.

A shelling, a young girl, and hopeless moments in a hospital

By MSTYSLAV CHERNOV Associated Press

MARIUPOL, Ukraine (AP) — In the port city of Mariupol, where Ukrainians are trying to fend off a Russian advance, an ambulance raced into a city hospital Sunday, carrying a 6-year-old girl mortally injured in Russian shelling.

She was pale. Her brown hair was pulled back with a rubber band. Her bloody pyjama pants were decorated with cartoon unicorns. She was brought in with her wounded father, his head bloodied and bandaged.

A medical team pumped her chest, fighting desperately to revive her. Her mother stood outside the ambulance, weeping.

"Take her out! Take her out! We can make it!" a hospital worker shouted, pushing a gurney to the ambulance.

The girl was raced inside and doctors and nurses huddled around her. One gave her an injection. Another tried to revive her with a defibrillator. A nurse wept. A doctor in blue medical scrubs, pumping oxygen into her, looked straight at the camera of an Associated Press videojournalist who had been allowed inside.

"Show this to Putin," he said angrily. "The eyes of this child, and crying doctors."

The girl, whose name was not immediately known, could not be saved. The doctor reached gently over her face to close her eyes.

Her body was left alone in the room, covered by her brightly colored polyester jacket, now spattered with blood.

Euro backlash as FIFA refuses to expel Russia from football

By ROB HARRIS AP Global Soccer Writer

LONDON (AP) — FIFA drew a swift backlash from European nations for not immediately expelling Russia from World Cup qualifying on Sunday and only ordering the country to play without its flag and anthem at neutral venues under the name of its federation — the Football Union of Russia.

Protesting against FIFA's response to Russia's invasion of Ukraine, Poland said it would still refuse to play the country in a World Cup playoff semifinal, which is scheduled for March 24.

"Today's FIFA decision is totally unacceptable," Polish football federation president Cezary Kulesza

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tweeted. "We are not interested in participating in this game of appearances. Our stance remains intact: Polish National Team will NOT PLAY with Russia, no matter what the name of the team is."

The unanimous ruling by the FIFA Bureau, featuring the six regional football confederation presidents, said the Russian flag and anthem can't be associated with the team playing as "Football Union of Russia (RFU)."

"FIFA will continue its ongoing dialogue with the IOC, UEFA and other sport organizations to determine any additional measures or sanctions," FIFA said in a statement, "including a potential exclusion from competitions, that shall be applied in the near future should the situation not be improving rapidly."

The decision adopts the Court of Arbitration for Sport ruling before the invasion of Ukraine, punishing Russia's cover-up of the investigation into state-sponsored doping. It meant the Russians had to compete at the last two Olympics as the ROC team — Russian Olympic Committee. FIFA had stalled implementing the ban on Russia competing under the country's name until a potential qualification the World Cup.

The winner of the Russia-Poland playoff is due to host Sweden or the Czech Republic on March 29 to decide who advances to the Nov. 21-Dec. 18 World Cup in Qatar.

Swedish federation president Karl-Erik Nilsson, the senior UEFA vice president, told the website Fotbollskanalen that he was not satisfied with the FIFA decision with a "sharper stance" expected. The Czechs said the FIFA compromise did not change their decision not to play Russia.

FIFA said it had engaged with the three associations and would remain in "close contact to seek to find appropriate and acceptable solutions together."

Separately, the English Football Association announced that its national teams would refuse to play Russia for the "foreseeable future." Russia has qualified for the Women's European Championship which is being hosted by England in June.

The English FA said the decision was taken "out of solidarity with the Ukraine and to wholeheartedly condemn the atrocities being committed by the Russian leadership."

The RFU's president is Aleksandr Dyukov, who is chief executive of a subsidiary of state-owned energy giant Gazprom and also sits on the UEFA executive committee.

In France, the football federation president Noël Le Graët told the Le Parisien daily Sunday that he was leaning toward excluding Russia from the World Cup.

"The world of sport, and in particular football, cannot remain neutral," said Le Graët, who sits on the ruling FIFA Council and has recently been a close ally of the governing body's president, Gianni Infantino.

A strict reading of FIFA's World Cup regulations would even make the Polish, Swedish and Czech federations liable to disciplinary action and having to pay fines and compensation if they wouldn't play Russia.

In 1992, however, FIFA and UEFA removed Yugoslavia from its competitions following United Nations sanctions imposed when war broke out in the Balkans.

The FIFA Bureau, which is chaired by Infantino, includes UEFA President Aleksander Ceferin.

UEFA on Friday pulled the 2022 Champions League final from St. Petersburg, moving it to Paris, and said Russian and Ukrainian teams in its competitions must play home games in neutral countries. UEFA allowed Spartak Moscow to continue playing in the second-tier Europa League's round of 16.

As Russia's war on Ukraine entered a fourth day on Sunday, Russian President Vladimir Putin temporarily lost his most senior official position in world sports. The International Judo Federation cited "the ongoing war conflict in Ukraine" for suspending Putin's honorary president status.

The Russian president is a keen judoka and attended the sport at the 2012 London Olympics.

There was an abrupt resignation on Sunday from the Russian who is president of the European Judo Union, with Sergey Soloveychik referencing the "heartache that we see the people in brotherly countries die" but backing his country.

"No one doubts that my heart belongs to judo," he said. "But it is equally true that it belongs to my homeland, Russia. We, judoka, must always be loyal to our principles."

In Putin's other favorite sport, ice hockey, Latvian club Dinamo Riga withdrew Sunday from the Russian-owned and run Kontinental Hockey League citing the "military and humanitarian crisis."

On Sunday, FINA announced the cancellation of the world junior swim titles which were scheduled from

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Aug. 23-28 in Kazan. FINA said it was looking for a replacement host for the event.

"FINA remains extremely concerned with the continuing war in Ukraine and following ongoing consultation with athletes and stakeholders from the aquatics family, FINA can now confirm that the 8th FINA World Junior Swimming Championships and FINA will not be holding any future events in Russia if this grave crisis continues," the FINA statement said.

New York to lift statewide school mask mandate by March 2

By BOBBY CAINA CALVAN Associated Press

NEW YORK (AP) — New York's statewide masking requirement in schools will be lifted by March 2, Gov. Kathy Hochul said Sunday, citing a dramatic drop in COVID-19 infections and new federal guidelines.

Hours later, New York City Mayor Eric Adams said he's considering lifting vaccine mandates on restaurants, bars and theaters by early next week if infections and hospitalizations continue their downward trend.

A mask mandate on the city's approximately 1 million schoolchildren could also be lifted, Adams said in a statement. The decision won't come until Friday, following a full week of classes after students in the country's largest school system return from a weeklong vacation, he said.

The pair of announcements signaled an important turning point for the city and state, once an epicenter of the global pandemic.

"The day has come," Hochul said at a press conference in Albany.

New guidance from the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention says most Americans can now safely take a break from wearing masks, including students in schools.

"That is why I feel very confident that this is the time to lift the mask requirements," Hochul said.

As of Saturday, state officials said the 7-day average for new cases was fewer than 1,671 for the first time since late July. Other metrics have also fallen rapidly, including hospitalizations and deaths.

The CDC guidelines for other indoor spaces aren't binding, meaning cities and institutions even in areas of low risk may set their own rules. Hochul said counties and cities could keep their own mandates in place, and parents could still choose to send their kids to school in masks.

The new rules also apply to children 2 years and older in childcare facilities.

Hochul said Adams was consulted before her announcement, including a conversation earlier Sunday.

Despite criticism over the state's pandemic measures, Hochul said she remained resolute in sticking with experts and health data as her guide and "not let criticism and politics intervene in this decision-making."

Earlier this month, Hochul let a broad mask mandate for most indoor settings expire, but said the schools requirement would remain in place. She had promised to revisit the schools question by the first week of March.

The broad mask mandate was implemented during a COVID-19 surge fueled by the omicron variant in December.

Masks are still required in some places, including public transit, homeless shelters, jails and prisons, adult care facilities and healthcare settings.

Andrew Rigie, executive director of the NYC Hospitality Alliance, said lifting the vaccine requirements would be a positive step for restaurants, bars and theaters.

"We need to continue to be smart and safe, and also modify mandates as COVID risks are reduced. So this will be welcome news to many restaurants and bars, although I wouldn't be surprised if some businesses want to voluntarily keep it in place." Andrew Rigie, executive director, NYC Hospitality Alliance, said in a text message to The Associate Press.

The mayor has been hoping to begin lifting restrictions, but said his decisions, like those of the governor, would be influenced by key metrics.

"New York City's numbers continue to go down day after day," Adams said. "So as long as COVID indicators show a low level of risk and we see no surprises this week, on Monday, March 7 we will also lift Key2NYC requirements," he said.

The Key2NYC program was put in place last August to put pressure on New Yorkers to get vaccinated

— or risk losing their access to many of the city's attractions like museums and theaters, as well as being shut out of restaurants and bars.

Kyiv mayor proud of citizens' spirit, anxious about future

By FRANCESCA EBEL Associated Press

KYIV, Ukraine (AP) — As Russian troops draw closer to the Ukrainian capital, Kyiv's mayor is filled with pride over his citizens' spirit yet anxious about how long they can hold out.

In an interview with The Associated Press on Sunday, after a grueling night of Russian attacks on the outskirts of the city, Mayor Vitali Klitschko was silent for several seconds when asked if there were plans to evacuate civilians if Russian troops managed to take Kyiv.

"We can't do that, because all ways are blocked," he finally said, speaking in English. "All ways are blocked and right now we are encircled — everywhere is Russians and we don't have a way to evacuate the people. And everyone who had plans to evacuate himself already moved."

The AP was not able to immediately verify the mayor's report that Kyiv was surrounded, and his spokesperson later tweeted that the mayor had misspoken.

Klitschko himself later backed away from his earlier assessment, saying on his Telegram channel that "In the evening, Russian Internet publications spread information with reference to me that Kyiv is allegedly surrounded and evacuation of people is impossible. ... Do not believe lies! Trust information only from official sources."

When Russian troops invaded Ukraine on Thursday, the capital city of 2.8 million people initially reacted with concern but also a measure of self-possession. However, nerves started fraying when grocery stores began closing and the city's famously deep subway system turned its stations into bomb shelters.

The mayor confirmed to the AP that nine civilians in Kyiv had been killed so far, including one child.

A Klitschko-ordered curfew began about sundown on Saturday and is to extend until at least 8 a.m. Monday. His order pointedly stated that any unauthorized person outside during this time could be considered a saboteur.

"We are hunting these people, and it will be much easier if nobody is on the street," Klitschko explained, saying that six Russian saboteurs were killed Saturday night.

Russian troops' advance on the city has been slower than many military experts had expected but the overall Russian military advantage is well-known to all.

"I just talked to the president (Volodymyr Zelenskyy). Everybody is not feeling so well," Klitschko said, adding that city government employees were in shock but not depressed. "We show our character, our knowledge, our values."

In the last few days, long queues of people — both men and women — were spotted waiting to pick up weapons throughout the Ukrainian capital after authorities decided to distribute arms freely to anybody ready to defend the city. There are concerns, however, about arming nervous civilians with little military experience amid warnings of Russian saboteurs disguised as Ukrainian police or journalists.

"To be honest, we don't have 100% control," said Klitschko. "We built this territorial defense (system) in a short amount of time — but these are patriotic people."

"Right now, the most important question is to defend our country," he added.

Responding to a question about the city's capacity to replenish dwindling stocks of food and medicine, Klitschko's view darkened, however.

"We are at the border of a humanitarian catastrophe," he said. "Right now, we have electricity, right now we have water and heating in our houses. But the infrastructure is destroyed to deliver the food and medication."

Then, in the same breath, he rallied like the world heavyweight boxing champion he once was.

"That's why the message for everyone is support Ukraine together ... we are strong," he said. "Every Ukrainian is proud to be independent, proud to be Ukrainian, and we are proud to have our own country."

EXPLAINER: Does Putin's alert change risk of nuclear war?

By ROBERT BURNS AP National Security Writer

WASHINGTON (AP) — Russian President Vladimir Putin's implied threat to turn the Ukraine war into a broader nuclear conflict presents President Joe Biden with choices rarely contemplated in the atomic age, including whether to raise the alert level of U.S. nuclear forces.

This turn of events is all the more remarkable for the fact that less than a year ago, Putin and Biden issued a statement at their Geneva summit that seemed more in keeping with the idea that the threat of nuclear war was a Cold War relic. "Nuclear war cannot be won and must never be fought," they agreed.

Putin on Sunday told his top defense and military officials to put nuclear forces in a "special regime of combat duty," but it was not immediately clear how that might have changed the status of Russian nuclear forces, if at all. Russia, like the United States, keeps its land-based intercontinental ballistic missiles, or ICBMs, on a high state of readiness at all times, and it is believed that Russian submarine-based nuclear missiles, like America's, are similarly postured.

Putin indicated he was responding to economic sanctions imposed by the United States and other Western nations in recent days for his invasion of Ukraine, as well as "aggressive statements regarding our country," which he did not further explain.

The Biden administration was assessing Putin's move, which it said unnecessarily escalates an already dangerous conflict. In fact, Putin's words amount to the kind of threat rarely heard even during the Cold War period, when vastly larger nuclear arsenals of the United States and the former Soviet Union threatened the world with nuclear Armageddon.

HOW DOES THIS CHANGE THE RISK OF NUCLEAR WAR?

U.S. officials, while disturbed by Putin's words, indicated they did not know what he intends. But it is so rare for an American or Russian leader to issue an implied nuclear threat, particularly in the current context of the war in Ukraine, that the risk of it going nuclear cannot be dismissed. In Russia, like in the United States, the president has sole authority to order a nuclear strike.

The United States and Russia have the two largest nuclear arsenals in the world, by far. They include weapons that can be delivered by aircraft, submarine and land-based ballistic missiles. The only time in history that nuclear weapons have been used in combat was when the United States twice bombed Japan in August 1945, and at that point the U.S. had a global monopoly on nuclear weapons. The Soviet Union successfully tested its first bomb in 1949.

Daryl Kimball, executive director of the Arms Control Association, said Putin's order to put his nuclear forces on higher alert was regrettable but not a complete surprise given his previous implied threats against any nation that tried to stop him in Ukraine.

"Inserting nuclear weapons into the Ukraine war equation at this point is extremely dangerous, and the United States, President Biden, and NATO must act with extreme restraint" and not respond in kind, Kimball said. "This is a very dangerous moment in this crisis, and we need to urge our leaders to walk back from the nuclear brink."

WHAT DOES IT MEAN TO PUT NUCLEAR WEAPONS ON ALERT?

According to U.S. nuclear doctrine, the weapons' alert level is central to their role in deterring attack. The idea is that being prepared to respond on short notice makes an enemy less likely to attack in the first place and risk retaliation that would do incalculable damage.

A counterargument is that having ICBMs, which the Pentagon calls the most responsive portion of its nuclear arsenal, on high alert during a crisis compresses a president's decision-making room and leaves open the possibility of ordering them launched in response to a false alarm. The 400 deployed U.S. ICBMs are armed at all times.

Some arms control experts have argued for taking ICBMs off high alert by separating the missiles from their nuclear warheads. But in a crisis, perhaps like the one implied by Putin's alert order Sunday, a decision to re-arm the missiles would be taken as an escalatory move that could make the crisis even worse.

During the Cold War, U.S. and Russian weapons were not only more numerous but also in a higher state of readiness. President George H.W. Bush in 1991 took the historic step of ordering U.S. nuclear-capable

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strategic bombers off alert as part of a broader move to reverse the nuclear arms race. The bombers have remained off alert ever since.

HOW HAS THE UNITED STATES RESPONDED TO PUTIN SO FAR?

There is no evidence that the Biden administration has reciprocated in any sense to Putin's announcement that he was ordering his nuclear forces in a "special regime of combat duty" — perhaps in part because it was unclear what that means in practical terms.

Nor was there word from Washington of evidence that Putin had taken worrying steps such as loading nuclear weapons on all or a portion of Russia's nuclear-capable air fleet or sending additional ballistic missile submarines to sea.

In addition to his strategic nuclear force, Putin has at least a couple thousand so-called nonstrategic nuclear weapons, such as shorter-range ballistic and cruise missiles. They are called nonstrategic because they cannot reach U.S. territory. But that is little comfort for the countries in Europe that are within range of those weapons. The United States has about 200 nonstrategic weapons in Europe; they are bombs that would be delivered by Europe-based aircraft.

For years, some U.S. officials have worried that Putin, if faced with the prospect of losing a war in Europe, might resort to the use of nonstrategic nuclear weapons, thinking it would quickly bring the conflict to an end on his terms.

EU shuts airspace to Russian airlines, will buy Ukraine arms

By EMILY SCHULTHEIS and LORNE COOK Associated Press

BRUSSELS (AP) — The European Union agreed Sunday to close its airspace to Russian airlines, spend hundreds of millions of euros on buying weapons for Ukraine and ban some pro-Kremlin media outlets in its latest response to Russia's invasion, EU officials said.

That and Germany's announcement earlier in the day that it would almost triple its defense budget this year underscored how Russia's invasion of Ukraine was rewriting Europe's post-World War II security and defense policy in ways that were unthinkable only a few weeks ago.

In what he described as "a defining moment for European history," EU foreign policy chief Josep Borrell said that the bloc's 27 foreign ministers had greenlighted the unprecedented support for Ukraine and that those actions would take effect within hours.

"We have decided to use our capacities to provide lethal arms, lethal assistance, to the Ukrainian army by a value of 450 million (euros) (\$502 million) ... and 50 more million (\$56 million) for non-lethal supplies, fuel, protective equipment," Borrell told reporters.

Borrell said EU defense ministers will discuss Monday how to convert the funds into useful military materiel and ensure that it reaches the Ukrainian armed forces. He said Poland has agreed to act as a hub to distribute the arms and equipment.

The EU ministers also agreed to add several more people and organizations to a growing list of sanctions. Those included Russian oligarchs whose money, Borrell said, is important for the Russian economy, as well as other key officials, notably those spreading disinformation. Russian President Vladimir Putin and Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov have already seen their assets in Europe frozen.

In a separate announcement, Germany's leader said the country would commit 100 billion euros (\$113 billion) to a special armed forces fund and keep its defense spending above NATO's target of 2% of GDP.

Anti-war protesters, meanwhile, took to the streets in Berlin, Rome, Prague, Istanbul and elsewhere — even Russian cities like Moscow and St. Petersburg and in a dozen Belarusian cities — to demand an end to the war, the largest ground offensive on the continent since WWII.

According to the OVD-Info rights group, Russian police detained at least 2,063 Russians in 48 cities over anti-war demonstrations on Sunday alone. Human rights advocates reported that more than 170 people had been arrested in the Belarusian protests. In Minsk, a large pile of flowers kept growing in front of Ukraine's embassy.

Tens of thousands of people massed Sunday in front of Berlin's Brandenburg Gate, with some carrying posters with slogans such as "Hands off Ukraine," "Tanks to Windmills" and "Putin, go to therapy and

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leave Ukraine and the world in peace.”

The EU’s plan to fund weapons would help to buy air defense systems, anti-tank weapons, ammunition and other military equipment to Ukraine’s armed forces. It would also supply things like fuel, protective gear, helmets and first aid kits.

European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen said beyond the weapons purchases, EU nations would shut down European airspace for Russians.

“We are proposing a prohibition on all Russian-owned, Russian registered or Russian-controlled aircraft. These aircraft will no more be able to land in, take off or overfly the territory of the EU,” she said.

She said the EU will also ban “the Kremlin’s media machine. The state-owned Russia Today and Sputnik, as well as their subsidiaries, will no longer be able to spread their lies to justify Putin’s war and to sow division in our union.”

Von der Leyen added that the EU will also target Belarus President Alexander Lukashenko for supporting Russia’s military campaign in Ukraine.

“We will hit Lukashenko’s regime with a new package of sanctions,” she said.

German Chancellor Olaf Scholz’s announcement of new defense funding is hugely significant for Germany, which has come under criticism from the United States and other NATO allies for not investing adequately in its defense budget.

“It’s clear we need to invest significantly more in the security of our country, in order to protect our freedom and our democracy,” Scholz told a special session of the Bundestag in Berlin.

Scholz said the 100 billion euro fund (\$113 billion) was currently a one-time measure for 2022. Still, Scholz indicated Germany will exceed the 2% of GDP threshold going forward, signaling an overall future increase in defense spending.

A day earlier, Germany announced another major policy shift, saying it will send weapons and other supplies directly to Ukraine, including 500 Stinger missiles, which are used to shoot down helicopters and warplanes, and 1,000 anti-tank weapons.

Israel announced it was sending 100 tons of humanitarian aid — medical equipment and medicine, tents, sleeping bags and blankets — to help civilians in Ukraine. Israel also offered itself as a potential mediator during a phone call between Israeli Prime Minister Naftali Bennett and Putin, the Kremlin and Israel said. Bennett spoke also Friday with Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy, who is Jewish.

As Greece sent more military aid, Turkish officials termed Russia’s invasion a “war,” a categorization that could lead Ankara to close down the Turkish straits to Russian warships, which Ukraine requested earlier this week. The 1936 Montreux Convention gives Turkey the right to bar “belligerent states” from using the Dardanelles and the Bosphorus during wartime but provides an exception for Black Sea vessels to return to port.

On the sanctions front, Japan joined the United States and European nations in cutting key Russian banks from the SWIFT international financial banking system. Japan will also freeze assets of Putin and other top Russian officials, while sending \$100 million in emergency humanitarian aid to Ukraine, Prime Minister Fumio Kishida told reporters.

Catholic and Orthodox religious leaders, meanwhile, prayed Sunday for peace, voiced solidarity with Ukrainians and denounced the Russian invasion.

At the Vatican, Ukrainian flags fluttered in St. Peter’s Square as Pope Francis delivered his weekly Sunday blessing and appealed for global solidarity for “the suffering people of Ukraine.”

“Those who make war forget humanity,” Francis said. He refrained from citing Russia by name, in apparent deference to his hopes of keeping dialogue open with the Russian Orthodox Church.

Also Sunday, the Ecumenical Patriarch of Constantinople described Russia’s invasion as “beyond every sense of law and morality” and pleaded for an end to the war.

Patriarch Bartholomew is considered the spiritual leader and first among equals of Eastern Orthodox Christians worldwide. He granted the independence of the Orthodox Church of Ukraine, which severed it in 2019 from the Russian church to which it had been tied since 1686. The Russian Orthodox Church severed relations with him as result.

Germany's move to help arm Ukraine signals historic shift

By EMILY SCHULTHEIS Associated Press

VIENNA (AP) — Germany's stunning decision to send anti-tank weapons and surface-to-air missiles to Ukraine — abandoning its long-held refusal to export weapons to conflict zones — is nothing less than a historic break with its post-World War II foreign policy.

"A new reality," Chancellor Olaf Scholz called it in an uncharacteristically rousing speech Sunday to a special session of parliament. The typically low-key Chancellor Scholz said Russia's invasion of Ukraine required a dramatically different response from Germany than in the past.

"With his invasion of Ukraine on Thursday, President Putin created a new reality," Scholz told the Bundestag, his speech repeatedly greeted by applause, particularly his condemnations of the Russian leader. "This reality demands a clear answer. We've given one."

Scholz said Germany is sending anti-tank weapons and surface-to-air missiles to Ukraine. He also said the country is committing 100 billion euros (\$113 billion) to a special fund for its armed forces and will raise its defense spending above 2 percent of GDP, a measure on which it had long lagged.

Germany's about-face served as a potent example of just how fundamentally Russia's war in Ukraine is reshaping Europe's post-World War II security policy.

Germany's foreign policy has long been characterized by a strong aversion to the use of military force, an approach German politicians explain as rooted in its history of military aggression against its neighbors during the 20th century.

While a strong U.S. ally and NATO member, post-war Germany has attempted to maintain good ties with Moscow, a policy also driven by business interests and Germany's energy needs.

"Many of the things that Olaf Scholz said would have been unthinkable even months ago," said Marcel Dirsus, a nonresident fellow at the University of Kiel's Institute for Security Policy. "It's become very clear that Russia has simply gone too far, and as a result, Germany is now waking up."

Still, until this weekend, the German government had balked at sending weapons to Ukraine, even as it faced growing international criticism for its hesitation.

But then, a series of announcements starting Saturday evening rocked traditional notions of German policy.

It began with word from the government that it would allow the shipment of 400 German-made anti-tank weapons from the Netherlands to Ukraine, something it had thus far refused to do.

Shortly afterwards, the chancellor's office went further and said it would send its own weapons, including 1,000 anti-tank weapons and 500 "Stinger" surface-to-air missiles, directly to Ukraine. It also committed to targeted bans on Russian banks from the SWIFT global financial system, which German leaders had expressed reluctance to do.

On Sunday, the breaks with the past continued, with Scholz committing to greater defense spending.

The developments were all the more notable considering they followed another historic decision last week, when Germany took steps to halt the process of certifying the Nord Stream 2 gas pipeline from Russia.

Germany's reluctance to send German-made weapons to Ukraine had earned the country criticism from NATO allies in recent weeks. Although Germany is one of the world's top weapons exporters — it exported arms worth 9.35 billion euros in 2021 — it has long had a policy of not sending lethal weapons to conflict zones. Until Saturday, German leaders had refused to send anything other than 5,000 helmets to aid Ukraine.

Scholz's Sunday announcement about defense spending will, at least for the time being, put to rest the oft-repeated criticism that Germany is not adequately contributing to its own and NATO's defense.

The country was a favorite target of former U.S. President Donald Trump for its failure to spend 2 percent of its GDP on defense, a target for NATO members. According to NATO figures, Berlin spent around 1.53 percent of GDP in 2021, or almost \$65 billion. Its budget has grown annually for several years.

In balking at new spending, Berlin always insisted that Germany was investing enough to fulfill any NATO

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military requirements. Officials also noted that by spending that kind of money, Berlin's defense budget would surpass that of Russia, and possibly make its own European neighbors nervous.

NATO countries slashed their military budgets in the 1990s after the Cold War, but they were spurred back into action when Russia annexed Ukraine's Crimean Peninsula in 2014. That year, the allies pledged to halt the cuts and move toward spending 2 percent of GDP by 2024.

German officials backed up their policy U-turn by calling it a necessary adjustment to a new normal.

"We cannot leave Ukraine defenseless against the aggressor who is bringing death and devastation to this country," Annalena Baerbock, Germany's foreign minister, said Sunday. "If our world is different, then our politics must be different as well."

The decisions were met with praise by many of the Ukrainian leaders and European allies that had been most critical of Germany in recent weeks.

"Keep it up, Chancellor @OlafScholz!" Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy tweeted Saturday night after the news of weapons shipments. "Anti-war coalition in action!"

Ukrainians return from abroad to fight Russian invasion

By MONIKA SCISLOWSKA and RAFAL NIEDZIELSKI Associated Press

MEDYKA, Poland (AP) — While hundreds of thousands of Ukrainians flee their country, some Ukrainian men and women are returning home from across Europe to help defend their homeland in the face of Russia's invasion.

Poland's Border Guard said Sunday that some 22,000 people have crossed into Ukraine since Thursday, when Russia invaded the country.

At the checkpoint in Medyka, in southeastern Poland, many stood in a line early Sunday to cross into Ukraine.

"We have to defend our homeland. Who else if not us?" said a moustachioed man in front of a group of some 20 Ukrainian truck drivers walking to the checkpoint to enter Ukraine. They came from across Europe to return to Ukraine.

Another man in the group said: "The Russians should be afraid. We are not afraid."

Members of the group declined to give their names, or only gave only their first names, citing their security and that of their families.

Denis, 28, who has spent six months working at construction sites in Poland, said he was returning to Ukraine where his "everything" is.

"I'm on my own here in Poland. Why should I be here? So I go, for the homeland," said Denis, with a small Ukrainian blue-and-yellow national flag on his winter jacket.

"I want to go back to join the army, to fight. We will see, we hope we will win," he said.

In the nearby city of Przemysl, Janiel, 27, was also preparing to return. An engineer by education, he has been working in construction in Wroclaw, Poland, but could not remain knowing his homeland was being attacked.

"I talked to my parents and I cried. And I just decided to myself that I can't watch that and I can't just stay in Poland as Russians destroy our independence, destroy our cities, kill our citizens, kill our children, kill our elderly people," he told the AP in English.

Before the recent exodus, there were at least 1 million Ukrainians in Poland, working or studying. The women often work as nannies and caretakers for the elderly across the European Union, and in many cases leave their children back in Ukraine with grandparents or other relatives.

Lesia, 36, from Lviv, spoke to the AP just before entering the checkpoint building, following her brother into Ukraine.

"I am afraid, but I am a mother and want to be with my children. What can you do? It's scary but I have to," she said.

Another young woman, Alina, said she was returning to get her children and take them out of Ukraine.

"We have to, we Ukrainians have to take our children away ... to allow our boys to fight," she said.

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On Ukraine's side of the border, a man was directing those arriving to a place where cars and buses were waiting to take them onward.

The Czech Republic, which borders Poland to the southwest, is planning to support Ukrainian families living in the country whose men decide to return home to fight.

The Ministry of Labor and Social Affairs is preparing bonuses to families who would lose income if "the men need to join the (Ukrainian) army," Minister Marian Jurecka said.

There are about 200,000 Ukrainian workers in the Czech Republic, the majority of them men.

Czech railways said Ukrainian men traveling back to Ukraine can take any train free of charge. They need to travel through Poland or Slovakia to reach Ukraine.

Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy has stayed in the capital, Kyiv, boosting the morale of Ukrainian fighters as Russian troops were closing in on the city and huge explosions lit up the sky early Sunday. Zelenskyy has banned men of military age, 18 to 60, from leaving the country. Ukrainian authorities have also called on foreign volunteers to come and fight in Ukraine's defense.

In Israel, the media reported that the Ukrainian Embassy there had posted a call for anyone willing to join the fight against Russia to travel to Ukraine. The invitation, marked "Urgent" on embassy Facebook page, was later removed, the reports said.

Israeli leaders are cautious in how they speak of Russia's aggression against Ukraine. The country is home to hundreds of thousands of people with roots in Ukraine or Russia, or in both countries, and has sought good ties with both Moscow and Kyiv.

At least 368,000 people have fled Ukraine into Poland and other neighboring countries in the wake of the Russian invasion, the U.N. refugee agency, the UNHCR, said Sunday.

Poland's border Guard said some 156,000 people have entered from Ukraine since Thursday, when the invasion started, while some 22,000 have gone in the opposite direction.

Sorting fact, disinformation after Russian attack on Ukraine

KYIV, Ukraine (AP) — Associated Press journalists around Ukraine and beyond are documenting military activity during Russia's invasion. With disinformation rife and social media amplifying military claims and counterclaims, determining exactly what is happening is difficult. Here's a look at what could be confirmed Sunday.

WHAT ARE THE LATEST DEVELOPMENTS?

Huge explosions lit up the sky early Sunday south of the capital, Kyiv, where people hunkered down in homes, underground garages and subway stations in anticipation of a full-scale assault by Russian forces.

Flames billowed into the air before dawn from an oil depot near an air base in Vasylykiv where there has been intense fighting, according to the town's mayor. President Volodymyr Zelenskyy's office said another explosion came from the civilian Zhuliany airport.

Videos posted on Ukrainian media and social networks showed Russian vehicles moving across Kharkiv and Russian troops roaming the city in small groups. One showed Ukrainian troops firing at the Russians and damaged Russian light utility vehicles abandoned nearby.

Russia claims its assault on Ukraine is aimed only at military targets, but bridges, schools and residential neighborhoods have been hit.

ANNOUNCED BY RUSSIAN AUTHORITIES:

— President Vladimir Putin ordered Russian nuclear forces put on high alert in response to what he called "aggressive statements" by leading NATO powers. The directive to put Russia's nuclear weapons in an increased state of readiness for launch raised fears that the crisis could boil over into nuclear warfare, whether by design or mistake.

— The Russian military said it blocked strategic cities along Ukraine's coast as it pushed its offensive in the south. They said Russian troops fully blocked the city of Kherson on the Black Sea and the port of Berdyansk on the Azov Sea and that Russian forces also took control of an air base near Kherson and the city of Henichesk on the Azov Sea.

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ANNOUNCED BY UKRAINIAN AUTHORITIES:

— Ukraine says about 3,500 Russian troops have been killed during the invasion of Ukraine. Ukraine's U.N. ambassador, Sergiy Kyslytsya, tweeted Saturday that Ukraine appealed to the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) "to facilitate repatriation of thousands of bodies of Russian soldiers." An accompanying chart claimed 3,500 Russian troops have been killed.

— Russian forces blew up a gas pipeline in Kharkiv, the country's second-largest city. Ukrainian authorities warned the explosion could cause an environmental catastrophe and advised residents to cover their windows with damp cloth or gauze and to drink plenty of fluids.

— Ukraine's top prosecutor, Iryna Venediktova, said Russian forces were unable to take Kharkiv, where a fierce battle was underway. The city of 1.5 million is located 40 kilometers (25 miles) from the Russian border.

— Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy's office said Ukrainian and Russian officials sides would meet for talks at an unspecified location on the Belarusian border.

ANNOUNCED BY OFFICIALS ELSEWHERE:

— Laetitia Courtois, ICRC's permanent observer to the U.N., told The Associated Press that it could not confirm the Ukrainian claim that 3,500 Russian troops were killed because the situation in Ukraine was "a limitation for our teams on the ground."

— The United Nations' refugee agency said about 368,000 Ukrainians have arrived in Poland, Moldova and other neighboring countries since the invasion started Thursday.

Volunteers extend help to thousands of refugees from Ukraine

By STEPHEN McGRATH Associated Press

SIRET, Romania (AP) — Sitting with her teenage daughter in a hotel foyer in northern Romania, 38-year-old Viktoriya Smishchkyk breaks down in tears as she recounts her departure from Ukraine.

"I could hear the sound of the fighting outside, it was very scary," Smishchkyk, who is from Vinnitsya in central Ukraine, told The Associated Press from a hotel that is offering free accommodation to refugees.

"We left all our belongings behind, but they are material things — less important than the lives of our children," she said.

Smishchkyk and her daughter are among hundreds of thousands of people who have fled Ukraine since Russian launched its attack on Thursday. The U.N. refugee agency said Sunday about 368,000 people have fled the country, many into bordering nations like Romania, Poland, Hungary, Moldova, and Slovakia.

Amid the horrors and chaos, volunteers from far and wide are showing support by extending help to those whose lives are being shattered by war.

At Romania's Siret border crossing, where thousands of Ukrainians have entered, government workers race to distribute basic amenities donated from all across the country. Meanwhile, people and businesses are pooling resources to provide the refugees with everything they need.

Stefan Mandachi, a businessman who lives in Suceava, a city about 50 kilometers (30 miles) south of the Siret border, has converted a large ballroom at the hotel he owns into a refugee reception center and is offering private hotel rooms for free to the displaced.

Scores of mattresses are laid out on the ballroom's floor, donated clothes are piled high and young children run around.

"I feel the need to help, it's my duty to help," said Mandachi, who is also offering free food for Ukrainian refugees from his fast food chain. "I have locals who speak Ukrainian — we are united to help them."

For Vasiliu Radu, a 34-year-old emergency service worker at the Siret border, the outpouring of support from volunteers has made him proud of his fellow citizens. "It's more important these days, in these situations of war and instability — that people must help each other," Radu said.

But not everyone trying to flee Ukraine is receiving the help they need.

Some Indian citizens seeking to flee into Poland were stuck at the border Sunday and were unable to cross, according to Ruchir Kataria, an Indian volunteer in Poland who is trying to help them.

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Kataria, who has been in cell phone contact with Indians stuck at the border crossing into Medyka, and a smaller group at Poland's Krakowiec border, told the AP that the Indians trying to cross at Medyka were told in broken English: "Go to Romania."

But the group had already made long journeys on foot to the border, not eating for three days, and had no way to reach the border with Romania which is hundreds of kilometers away.

In Poland's southeast city of Przemysl, just a few kilometers from a border crossing with Ukraine, hundreds of people waited in a parking lot to help refugees who were being bussed in from the border by authorities.

"I am very happy that I have come and I want to thank all the people who are organizing this," a young Ukrainian girl, who had just arrived, said. "This feels really nice that people are waiting for us in your country."

Moldova, which shares a long border with Ukraine, is also seeing a massive influx of refugees. Authorities said that since Thursday, 70,080 Ukrainian citizens have entered the small nation of about 3.5 million.

Moldova's President Maia Sandu, who visited a northern border crossing Sunday, urged people to remain calm and vigilant and thanked volunteers for their work.

"In these difficult days, I am proud of the citizens of our country, who have shown solidarity and humanity and have offered our neighbors a helping hand when needed," Sandu said.

Jacob Sontea, a Nigerian student who was based in Kharkiv in eastern Ukraine, arrived by train at Hungary's border Sunday with his family. Border authorities escorted them into the European Union country, which had until now been notorious for strongly opposing any type of immigration from the Middle East, Asia, and Africa.

"It was becoming chaotic in the city of Kharkiv ... It was dangerous, so we had to leave because this is the only choice we had," he said.

Back at the hotel in Suceava, Smishchkyk tries to catch her breath as she glances tearfully at the ceiling. "They are still there," she said. "Our relatives, brothers, sisters, cousins. It is just very difficult to process."

Qatar deploys ex-spies to blunt German's World Cup criticism

By ALAN SUDERMAN and CIARAN FAHEY Associated Press

DIEZ, Germany (AP) — As head of the German soccer federation, Theo Zwanziger was among his sport's most prominent critics of the decision to award the 2022 World Cup to Qatar. He publicly attacked the energy-rich Gulf nation's human rights record. He questioned the wisdom of staging the world's most popular sporting event in searing desert heat.

"The infinite wealth of this small country of Qatar spreads almost like a cancer through football and sport," Zwanziger once said. A member of FIFA's executive committee, he urged world soccer's governing body to reverse its 2010 decision.

The Qatari government was so concerned by Zwanziger's criticism that it took action. It paid more than \$10 million to a company staffed by former CIA operatives for a multi-year covert influence operation codenamed "Project Riverbed," according to internal company documents reviewed by The Associated Press.

The records indicate that the goal of the operation was to use spycraft to silence Zwanziger. It failed.

"It's a very, very strange feeling when you're involved in sport and committed to the values of sport, to be followed and influenced," Zwanziger told the AP in an interview last week.

The Qatar World Cup, now scheduled to start in November, is the culmination of more than a dozen years of effort and untold billions spent to help propel the tiny desert nation onto the world stage.

The endeavor has long been dogged by allegations of corruption and wrongdoing. U.S. prosecutors said in 2020 that bribes were paid to FIFA executive committee members to gain their votes. Qatar has denied any wrongdoing.

Documents reviewed by AP provide new details about Qatar's efforts to win and hold onto the tournament, specifically the country's work with former CIA officer Kevin Chalker and company, Global Risk

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Advisors. The documents build on AP's previous reporting about Chalker's work for Qatar.

Qatari officials did not respond to requests for comment.

Chalker acknowledged in a statement that GRA did work on a Project Riverbed, but said it was only "a media monitoring project staffed by interns and supervised by one full-time employee, who were responsible for reading and summarizing news articles."

"The AP's reporting for this article is based on false information from unidentified sources," Chalker's statement said.

Chalker's spokesman David Wells said he was not at liberty to say who the client was for Project Riverbed or provide other details, like how long it ran or the name of the employees who worked for on it. Chalker's attorney, Brian Ascher, said Zwanziger was never the subject of a covert influence campaign by GRA.

The records reviewed by AP indicate otherwise.

"The primary objective of Project Riverbed was to neutralize the effectiveness of Theo Zwanziger's criticism of the 2022 Qatar World Cup and his attempts to compel FIFA to take the World Cup from Qatar," a GRA document reviewed by the AP said.

The AP reviewed hundreds of pages of documents from Chalker's companies, including a final report, memos and budget documents. Multiple sources with authorized access provided the documents to the AP. The sources said they were troubled by Chalker's work for Qatar and requested anonymity because they feared retaliation.

The AP took several steps to verify the documents' authenticity. That includes confirming details of various documents with different sources, such as former Chalker associates, and examining electronic documents' metadata, or digital history, where available, to confirm who made the documents and when.

The Riverbed documents highlight the muscular spying efforts that private contractors like Chalker can provide to wealthy countries like Qatar that lack a robust intelligence agency of their own. It's a trend that has prompted some members of Congress to propose new controls on what kind of work U.S. intelligence officials can do post-retirement.

Elliott Broidy, a one-time fundraiser for former U.S. President Donald Trump, is suing Chalker and has accused him of mounting a widespread hacking and spying campaign at Qatar's direction. Broidy has alleged in court filings that Chalker and GRA targeted Zwanziger with a covert influence campaign like the one described in the documents reviewed by the AP. Chalker's legal team has argued the lawsuit is meritless, and a judge dismissed Broidy's overall complaint, while leaving the door open for the case to continue.

Project Riverbed ran from January 2012 to mid-2014 and "successfully employed complex traditional intelligence tradecraft to target individuals within Zwanziger's circle of influence and modify sentiment associated with the Qatar World Cup," according to one document summarizing the Riverbed effort reviewed by the AP.

In reality, this amounted to creating an "influencer network" made up of people close to the German soccer official who would pass on views to him that were favorable toward Qatar hosting the World Cup. To do this, GRA would send a "source" or "throwaway" to speak to the influencers in a way they would not suspect was a concerted messaging campaign, according to internal documents.

"These various interactions lasted seconds, minutes, or hours," the report said. "Regardless of the time invested, the interaction always portrayed a consistent message: the 2022 World Cup in Qatar was good for business, brought together the Middle East and the West, and was good for the world."

GRA said in a report that there were "thousands" of these interactions with Zwanziger's network, and that it employed a "multi-pronged approach" focused on four targets – FIFA and its associates, the German soccer federation and associates, the international football community and Zwanziger's own family -- who would then unwittingly pass the pro-Qatar message on to Zwanziger.

"This is certainly something that goes well beyond any lobbying we expected," Zwanziger's attorney, Hans-Jörg Metz, told the AP.

Given his key role in soccer's governing bodies, Zwanziger was a ripe target. A lawyer by trade, he was

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highly respected for leading reforms of the German soccer federation, one of the biggest sports associations in the world.

When it came to the subject of Qatar hosting the World Cup, he had strong opinions and did not hold back on sharing them, even going so far as to question morals of FIFA officials amid allegations of vote-buying and corruption.

"I could never understand this decision. It's one of the biggest mistakes ever made in sport," Zwanziger said in a 2013 interview.

Zwanziger was not the only high-level FIFA official that was the target of Qatar-funded spying.

Chalker also helped oversee spying on former FIFA executive committee member Amos Adamu during the 2010 World Cup in Johannesburg, according to new records reviewed by the AP. That effort involved using multiple surveillance teams to follow and secretly photograph Adamu and people he met with for several days, the new records show. The effort also included obtaining Adamu's cell phone records and recruiting a hotel security guard and a local journalist as sources, the records show.

Adamu, who has twice been banned by FIFA for unethical conduct, declined to comment.

Chalker denied ever being involved in an effort to spy on Adamu.

For Project Riverbed, Chalker hired case officers and project managers in Germany and London, including some who had previously worked for the CIA, the documents show.

The GRA records are full of opaque, florid language seemingly plucked from the pages of a spy novel: GRA would set up "Cover for Action" entities that could be used by GRA staff to work undercover, as well as "White" and "Black" — official and non-official — offices to handle administrative tasks. Broidy has also alleged in his lawsuit that such efforts at subterfuge were used against Zwanziger.

GRA's records said Project Riverbed was initially approved for a \$27 million budget and that Qatar had been late with payments and did not provide all of the funds. The lack of money led to staff turnover and wasted expenditures, such as legal and administrative fees for setting up offices that were never used, the documents say.

Despite the fiscal constraints, GRA said Riverbed was a success.

The executive report said the project had "softened Zwanziger's criticism" and altered the German lawyer's "sentiment to a point where he is no longer a threat to Qatar's retention of the 2022 World Cup."

"Zwanziger now believes Qatar should retain the 2022 World Cup so that the international community will become more aware of migrant workers' conditions in Qatar and push for extensive reform of Qatari human and workers' rights," GRA says in its executive summary.

The company was wrong.

"Riverbed came to the conclusion: we've now brought Zwanziger to our side. Inwardly, of course, I never was," Zwanziger said in the interview with AP.

In a radio interview with a German station in June 2015 — a year after the supposed completion of "Project Riverbed" — Zwanziger repeated his claim that Qatar is "a cancer of world football."

It prompted the Qatar Football Association to file a civil lawsuit against Zwanziger in a bid to stop him from making such comments in future. The case was dismissed by Düsseldorf's regional court, which ruled Zwanziger was within his right to free speech.

Zwanziger had more legal difficulties later when he and members of the German 2006 World Cup organizing committee faced corruption probes in Frankfurt and Switzerland. Zwanziger denied any wrongdoing and in August 2019 accused Swiss prosecutors of deliberately misinterpreting evidence. The Swiss trial ended in April 2020 without a judgment.

Zwanziger said it's vindicating to now learn that he was the target of a failed manipulation campaign.

'Saturday Night Live' opens with tribute to Ukraine

NEW YORK (AP) — "Saturday Night Live" normally kicks off each show with some humor, but the comedy sketch series opened with a tribute performance to Ukraine amid the ongoing Russian invasion.

The Ukrainian Chorus Dumka of New York performed a "Prayer for Ukraine" during the opening of "SNL"

on Saturday. Cast members Kate McKinnon and Cecily Strong introduced the choir.

The choir sang the melancholy tune in front of a live audience and a table of candles that spelled the name of Ukraine's capital city, Kyiv.

Russian troops launched an attack on Ukraine this week. The ongoing invasion involves explosions and airstrikes on the city.

Nearly half of Biden's 500M free COVID tests still unclaimed

By RICARDO ALONSO-ZALDIVAR Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — Nearly half of the 500 million free COVID-19 tests the Biden administration recently made available to the public still have not been claimed as virus cases plummet and people feel less urgency to test.

Wild demand swings have been a subplot in the pandemic, from vaccines to hand sanitizer, along with tests. On the first day of the White House test giveaway in January, COVIDtests.gov received over 45 million orders. Now officials say fewer than 100,000 orders a day are coming in for the packages of four free rapid tests per household, delivered by the U.S. Postal Service.

Still, the White House sees the program as a step toward a deeper, yet more elastic, testing infrastructure that will accommodate demand surges and remain on standby when cases wane. "We totally intend to sustain this market," Dr. Tom Inglesby, testing adviser to the COVID-19 response team, told The Associated Press. "We know the market is volatile and will come up and down with surges in variants."

The White House says Americans have placed 68 million orders for packages of tests, which leaves about 46% of the stock of tests still available to be ordered.

Testing will become more important with mask requirements now easing, say some independent experts. "If infection control is still our priority, testing is central," said Dr. Leana Wen, a former Baltimore health commissioner and commentator on the pandemic. "Four tests per household for one family will only last you one time. There should be enough tests for families to test twice a week."

Inglesby maintains that the pieces are falling into place to accommodate that.

Private insurers are now required to cover eight free rapid tests per person, per month. Medicare coverage will start in the spring. The administration has also been making free at-home tests available through libraries, clinics and other community venues. Capacity for the more accurate PCR tests performed by labs has been built up. The White House recently put out a request to industry for ideas on how to sustain and expand domestic testing for the rest of this year.

Wen says people still need a guide for when to test and how often. "Right now it is still unclear," she said.

President Joe Biden's pivot to testing came under duress as the omicron variant gained force just before Christmas. Tests were frustratingly hard to come by, and expensive. The White House is sensitive to criticism that help may have come too late.

"There is no question some people found out they were positive from taking one of these tests and were able to keep other people from getting infected," said Tim Manning, supply coordinator for the COVID-19 response team.

Around mid-December, with omicron projections grimmer by the day, White House officials began discussing how to make free tests available for anyone who wanted one. But if the government started siphoning up tests on the market, that would just make the shortage worse.

"A critical thing to us was that anything we did had to be done in a way did not create a shortage at retail to the general public," Manning said.

The White House enlisted the Pentagon and parts of the Health and Human Services Department that had worked on the Trump administration's vaccine development effort to distribute vaccines. Logistics experts scoured the globe for available tests. The Postal Service was designated to take the orders and deliver them.

That part proved to be a good call, said Hana Schank, an expert on government technology projects with the New America think-tank. The Postal Service already had a database of every address in the

land, and the means to deliver.

"At the federal level the only people who have a database connected to a fulfillment engine would be the Post Office," she said.

The project took less than a month to get ready, Manning said. "We said this is not online retail," he said. "This is emergency response, so we have to go as fast as possible."

To make sure it wasn't just the tech savvy who would end up getting free tests, the administration targeted a share of deliveries to people in low-income areas. The White House worked with service organizations to get the word out.

"We prioritized the processing of orders to the highest social vulnerability zip codes in the country," testing adviser Inglesby said.

One of the service groups was the National Association of Community Health Workers, whose members help people navigate the health care system. Executive director Denise Smith said the group was able to use its website to link more than 630,000 people to COVIDtests.gov.

Overall about 20% to 25% of the tests have gone to people in distressed areas, officials said.

Now that demand is way down, it's unclear what will happen to the White House giveaway program. Allowing repeat orders is one possibility.

Smith says groups like hers should get any surplus. "We know where the people are," she said.

Although the program is still in its infancy, analyst Lindsey Dawson of the Kaiser Family Foundation believes its legacy may lie in familiarizing more people with testing. "It may get someone comfortable with utilizing the tests, thinking about how they might use testing in their lives," she said.

Savita Sharaf, a retiree from the Maryland suburbs outside the nation's capital, said she ordered her free tests around the middle of January and got them in early February. She's tried to conserve them, for added peace of mind. In the stores, she couldn't find tests for less than \$25.

"I'm so relieved because I can immediately test myself," Sharaf said. "If we had a high vaccination rate, it would be a little easier to say let up on this program. But I feel we have to watch for the next month or two, to see what happens."

Should a sex trafficking defense apply in a homicide case?

By TODD RICHMOND Associated Press

MADISON, Wis. (AP) — On a June night in 2018, 17-year-old Chrystul Kizer put a .38-caliber pistol in her book bag and took an Uber from Milwaukee to Kenosha.

She walked into Randall Volar's home. She had met Volar on a sex trafficking website and for the past year he had been molesting her and selling her as a prostitute, according to court documents.

Kizer would tell detectives later that Volar, 34, tried to touch her. She pulled out her gun, told him to sit in a chair and shot him in the head. She then burned his house down and stole his BMW, according to court documents.

What looks like a clear-cut case of criminal homicide could actually be legal under a Wisconsin law that absolves sex trafficking victims of crimes related to being trafficked. The state Supreme Court is poised to decide whether Kizer can argue that immunity extends to murder in a case that could help define the scope of sex trafficking victims' immunity in dozens of states across the country.

Kizer, now 21, wants to argue at trial that her actions were justified under a law then-Gov. Jim Doyle signed in 2008 that absolves sex trafficking victims of "any offense committed as a direct result" of being trafficked. But a Kenosha County judge ruled Kizer can't raise that argument, saying that extending the law to cover homicide would be absurd.

Anti-violence groups have flocked to Kizer's defense, arguing in legal briefs that trafficking victims feel trapped and may feel they have to take matters into their own hands.

Oral arguments are scheduled for Tuesday. The high court isn't being asked to decide whether Kizer is guilty, only if she can argue at trial that the law protects her from criminal liability. The decision won't legally bind other states with similar immunity laws for trafficking victims. But it could create a baseline

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for prosecutorial and defense strategies in similar cases and affect how victims respond to abuse, legal experts said.

"If we're living in a civilized society, it begs the question, are we going to give immunity to people who are sexually abused to kill their abusers?" said Julius Kim, a defense attorney and former Milwaukee County assistant district attorney. "The implications can be devastating. Attorneys general across the country are going to pay attention to see how this plays out."

Nearly 40 states have passed laws over the last decade that provide sex trafficking victims some level of criminal immunity, according to Legal Action of Wisconsin, which provides legal assistance for low-income people. The laws came as legislators began to understand that traffickers exploit their victims and that states should prioritize rehabilitation and help rather than punishment.

The extent of immunity varies among states. California, Kentucky, Montana and North Dakota, for example, extend immunity to non-prostitution-related crimes, according to a court brief the Harvard Law School Gender Justice Clinic and 12 other anti-violence groups filed supporting Kizer.

Other states limit immunity to prostitution-related offenses, according to the coalition. Wisconsin, Iowa, Oklahoma, South Carolina and Wyoming place no limits on immunity but defendants must show the crimes were related to being trafficked.

Kizer's attorneys allege in court filings that Kenosha police suspected Volar was trafficking children for sex several months before he was killed. The attorneys allege he filmed himself sexually assaulting numerous children. Police arrested Volar in February 2018 and seized evidence of sexual assault and child pornography from his home but later released him and no charges were filed, according to the filings.

Her attorneys went on to say she was 16 when she met Volar. Kizer told the Washington Post in a 2019 interview from jail that she met Volar on Backpage.com, a website known to facilitate sex trafficking that the federal government has since shut down. She said she needed money for snacks and school. Volar sexually molested her and trafficked her through the website to others, she told the Post.

According to the criminal complaint, Volar paid for an Uber to bring Kizer from Milwaukee to his home in Kenosha in June 2018. The house caught fire that night. Police discovered Volar's body slumped in a chair in the house. He had been shot and his BMW was missing.

Kizer told detectives that she got a gun to protect herself. She said she was tired of Volar touching her and shot him because a tote blocked the door and she was afraid she couldn't leave, the complaint said. Asked about the fire, Kizer said she watched the television show "Criminal Minds" and decided to start the fire. She told detectives she jumped out a window and drove off in the BMW.

Prosecutors charged her with first-degree intentional homicide, arson, car theft and illegal possession of a firearm. She would face a mandatory life sentence if convicted on the homicide count.

Kizer spent two years in jail before she was released in June 2020 after community groups raised her \$400,000 bail.

Her attorneys planned to invoke the sex trafficking immunity law at trial but Kenosha County Circuit Judge David Wilk refused to allow it, finding immunity extends only to trafficking-related charges, such as restraining someone, extortion, sex acts or slave labor.

Kizer's attorney, public defender Katie York, persuaded a state appellate court to overturn Wilk's ruling this past June. That court found that immunity applies to any offense that is a direct result of being trafficked.

The state Department of Justice appealed to the state Supreme Court. Assistant Attorney General Timothy Barber argued in briefs that the shooting wasn't a direct result of trafficking because it was premeditated. The day before Volar was killed Kizer texted a friend saying "I'm going to get a BMW" and told her boyfriend she intended to shoot Volar, the prosecutor argued. Kizer's argument that she shot Volar to escape a sexual assault holds no water since she shot him while he was sitting in a chair, Barber added.

"Kizer is asking this Court to interpret (the immunity law) in a manner that creates a broader defense based on trafficking status than someone could assert in any other self-defense context," Barber wrote.

York declined to comment for this story. But she argued in briefs that Wilk's interpretation of the immunity statutes undermines the purpose of the law and Kizer should be allowed to make her case at trial.

Kate Mogulescu, an associate professor of clinical law at Brooklyn Law School who specializes in sex

trafficking laws and consulted with one of the parties that filed briefs supporting Kizer, said in a telephone interview that it should be an easy call for the Supreme Court to let a jury consider the context surrounding Volar's death.

"Somehow when it's a trafficking victim that's trying to provide additional information and context to what happened in their case, that shouldn't be allowed? That doesn't make any sense," Mogulescu said.

Ukraine invasion spotlights the delicate state of democracy

By TED ANTHONY AP National Writer

The secretary-general of the United Nations opened the most recent annual meeting of Earth's leaders with a bleak assessment of the planet's state of affairs. Humanity, he said, faced "a moment of truth."

"Peace. Human rights. Dignity for all. Equality. Justice. Solidarity. Like never before, core values are in the crosshairs," Antonio Guterres said. "A sense of impunity is taking hold."

Guterres' message to the U.N. General Assembly takes on even more relevance with the Russian military's invasion of Ukraine. Those things he outlined? They are bedrock principles of democracy — a once-on-the-upswing method of human governance that in recent years has been taking body blows across the world.

Vladimir Putin's invasion advances the anti-democratic trend — one that has seen strongmen, some elected, prod their nations toward dictatorship and ignore once-solid democratic norms. In doing so, they are collectively pounding at the door of democracy's always-delicate house.

The invasion is "surely a watershed moment for the future of global democracy," says Stephen E. Hanson, a professor of government at William & Mary College in Virginia and author of "Post-Imperial Democracies," which in part examines Russia after the Soviet Union dissolved.

In recent years, the ascent of a group of what some consider dictators within democracies — Putin, Rodrigo Duterte of the Philippines, Jair Bolsonaro of Brazil, Narendra Modi of India, Viktor Orbán of Hungary — has gradually chipped away at the outer boundaries of democratic systems while still talking the talk of democratic principles. Appearing democratic, it seems, is the new democracy.

In the United States, Donald Trump has produced similar concerns, stoked by his ongoing claims of a stolen election. That has helped inspire efforts to change state laws to limit access to polls, and to stock election administration roles with allies, stoking fears that a free and fair vote may be overturned in a nation that was, until recently, a beacon for the world's democracies.

The rub: Each of these leaders has been chosen by their people — or, at least, by democratic-style systems. "Globally, populists that undermine democratic norms have gained more traction in elections over the past 20 years," says Douglas Page, a political scientist at Gettysburg College in Pennsylvania.

This gradual rebranding of democracy for the 21st century has been exacerbated by leaders of more traditionally authoritarian governments who call their systems democratic, too. Even China's Xi Jinping, never a democrat, has maneuvered his nation's hybrid of communist tenets and market economy into a personality-driven rule that is presented as a form of democracy.

So when Putin orders the invasion of Ukraine in a manner that tacitly invokes democratic principles even as he circumvents them, he offers up a face of democracy as viewed through a glass, darkly. Experts say this is designed to give him cover as a democratic leader at home while allowing him to do pretty much what he wants elsewhere.

"The space he holds on the democratic scale, he is not a full-blown authoritarian leader. He doesn't have the same means available to oppress his people. He still has democratic elements, even though they're vanishing," says Stefanie Kasperek, an assistant professor of government at Franklin & Marshall College in Pennsylvania who studies international political institutions.

Not that Putin has worried excessively about appearing democratic. At home, he has spent years harshly stamping out both public dissent and political opposition, targeting rivals and jailing opposition party leader Alexei Navalny, whom the Kremlin declared a terrorist last month. Nevertheless, says Kasperek, "There are democratic elements that he can't fully ignore."

That was illustrated Tuesday when Russia's upper legislative house, the Federation Council, voted

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unanimously to allow Putin to use military force outside the country. Yet the ask — largely pro forma, given Putin's level of authority — gave him cover to say that his actions were endorsed by democratic systems within his own nation.

"Democracy led to Putin being in power in the first place and has served him considerably as a tool to keep power," Crystal Brown, a political and social scientist at Worcester Polytechnic Institute in Massachusetts who studies the effect of institutions on global political systems, said in an email.

Why is the appearance of democracy — or, at least, the surface reliance on it even when a leader's actions seem undemocratic — so important? It's a complex question.

In Putin's case, while his through-line may be a glorious re-aggregation of the Soviet Union, he is playing to a domestic audience that includes many who turned their back on that same communist-era collection of republics — and in some cases did so using democracy as a North Star. To them, the principle is important.

So Putin deploys raw power externally, in everything from his approach in Crimea to the online attacks on U.S. elections — and thus is able to flout the West, which holds itself up as democracy's standard-bearer. Internally, he is constrained by the support he needs from those inside Russia wary of dictatorial authority being used against them.

This two-pronged approach to democracy — making a show of upholding the very tenets one is violating — is hardly limited to Putin. It has played out in other nations, with sometimes chaotic outcomes.

In the United States, for example, Trump's baseless allegations of fraud in the 2020 election won by Joe Biden — an attempt to wipe away a democratic process — helped fuel the rage that produced the Jan. 6, 2021 attack on the U.S. Capitol by supporters trying to overturn the outcome. Through it, Trump insisted he was the champion of democracy, not the one getting in its way.

"Everywhere these men make the same basic argument: The 'neoliberal' order merely pretends to be democratic, when in fact it is run by representatives of the 'deep state' who conspire to steal from ordinary people and undermine social order through the destruction of traditional moral values," Hanson says.

"They portray themselves as the unique saviors of the traditional nation, and demand unconditional personal loyalty from all who serve them," he said in an email. "That such a recipe for the destruction of democratic institutions has proven to be so potent around the world is one of the most remarkable developments of the early 21st century."

What, then, might the unfolding of the Ukraine saga mean for democracy writ large? Biden insists the outcome is certain: "In the contest between democracy and autocracy, between sovereignty and subjugation, make no mistake: Freedom will prevail," Biden said in an address Thursday.

He made it sound obvious. But given recent years' events — including those leading up to his inauguration — reality is less definitive. Democracy doesn't always prevail. And even when it does take hold, its permanence isn't guaranteed — a lesson that, just like during the Cold War, goes far beyond what's happening in eastern Europe right now.

"The world does not want to enter into a large-scale conflict. That gives a lot of leeway for leaders to push those boundaries of democratic appearance without actually being democratic," Kasperek says. "It's effectively a game of chicken."

In that metaphor, democracy itself is the car. But the problem with a game of chicken quickly becomes obvious: Eventually, inevitably, you crash.

After Brazil mudslides, grief and faith among the ruins

By DAVID BILLER Associated Press

PETROPOLIS, Brazil (AP) — Every day, Alex Sandro Condé leaves the shelter where he has been staying since deadly landslides devastated his poor, mountainside neighborhood and seeks out others who have suffered loss. He doesn't have to look hard.

Condé can't even walk a block without stopping to place his hand on someone's shoulder and offer a hug, a kind word, spiritual counsel. That's how great the grief is in Alto da Serra — Sierra Heights in

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English — which he had called home for all his 42 years and considered “the best place on Earth.”

A devout evangelical Christian, Condé sees it as his divine mission to be strong in the aftermath of the disaster so others can lean on him. He says God directed him to offer comfort, compassion and assistance to others and, fortified by his faith and Scripture, help heal the stricken community.

“Whomever you see needing help, you go help. I’m keeping you on your feet,” Condé said he was told by the Lord. “God is giving me the right words to bring encouragement to every person who needs it.”

One day about a week after the landslide, he was walking through the streets when he came across a shirtless man, whom he knew. They had lost a common friend, and Condé threw his arms around the man. For a time, they rested their heads on each other’s shoulders.

Across the street, Condé spotted another man, Adalto da Silva. On the day of the slide, da Silva had been hurrying down the mountain with his 21-year-old son when the mud caught them; the son slipped away and was swept to his death. Downhill, da Silva’s wife had tried to keep their 6-year-old daughter safe between her legs, he said; their bodies were found in the mud, still in that embrace.

Condé sat da Silva down on a chair, then knelt before him and held his shoulders. They spoke for a long period, staring into one another’s eyes, and Condé told him he felt his pain. Da Silva cried.

There’s always someone else in need of comfort: The Feb. 15 slides destroyed dozens of homes in Sierra Heights and killed more than 200 people citywide.

Condé is tireless, a man always in motion. There’s so much to do, not only consoling the bereaved but also finding a new home for his family. Staying busy keeps him from being idle, which would mean dwelling on his own grief.

One of Condé’s childhood friends was Thiago das Graças. They were closer than brothers, though they must have looked like an odd duo: Thiago was 6 feet tall, bearded and beefy, while Condé is short and wiry, weighing in at just 125 pounds. Das Graças raised birds and taught Condé the hobby.

They labored side by side at a workshop silk-screening designs onto T-shirts. Also employed there were Condé’s actual brother, Ivan — the two had been mending their strained relationship — and Condé’s eldest son, Kaíque, 18, working his first job and happily saving up for a car.

They were all together at the shop the day that 10 inches of rain dumped on Petropolis in just three hours, the most intense downpour in 90 years of recordkeeping.

They saw on social media that parts of the city had flooded, but when the rain eased a little, Condé made a dash for home. Kaíque stayed behind, watching soccer on his phone with his uncle. Shortly before Condé arrived, rain resumed falling with nightmarish intensity.

“I’d never felt any rain on my body like that,” he said. “You could see something different was happening.”

Minutes later, Condé heard a rumble like distant thunder and then a roar, far louder and closer. The brick home’s metal roof started rattling, and he rushed outside. A wall of dirt was careening toward him carrying tree trunks, rocks, roofing and rebar.

He tried to dip back inside, but the door — on which Kaíque long ago painted the words “JESUS 100%” — was jammed. Condé crouched and braced himself, thinking, “I’m going to die buried.”

Seconds later, silence. He stood and saw the torrent had passed mere feet from the house. What moments ago had been a dense cluster of multistory homes was now a broad, muddy gash strewn with wreckage. He sprinted to the workshop and found it, too, had been swallowed.

Condé phoned his wife, Gabriela, who was with their younger boy, 14-year-old Piter, at the bus terminal. People there were standing on seats to keep clear of floodwaters. Condé told her not to come home — their eldest son was dead.

Searchers pulled Kaíque’s body from the mud two days later, and Condé threw himself into serving others. That included daily visits to another shelter where a friend who was severely injured by the slide was staying.

On a recent day, sitting on the floor and leaning against the wall, the friend could barely move his legs.

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He was covered with wounds, and blood blotted a bandage on his head. Condé helped him into a wheelchair so he could be brought to the bathroom.

"Every day I come here to help," Condé said. "I can't stay in the shelter (where his family is). There, I'll start remembering my son."

He said he didn't want his wife and other son to see him sad.

"I can't give that image to them. I need to give strength to them, for us to keep living," he said. "Not just for them, but for other friends."

Only returning at night, walking alone, did he allow himself to access the pain, and he recalled three passersby once saw him weeping.

Approaching the shelter, he took deep breaths to steady himself, then went inside to be with his family.

When the morgue called to say Kaíque's body had been cleared for release, Condé caught a ride to meet his wife there. Friends called out condolences as the car drove past heavy machinery still digging out areas buried by the slide.

Condé spoke of everything but the impending burial.

He pointed out the landslide he had seen on social media that afternoon in the workshop. Driving past detritus that a swollen river had left in front of stately homes, he recalled the first time he saw a river overflow.

He scrolled through photos on his phone of Sierra Heights residents who were lost: Ms. Selma who had practically raised neighborhood boys of his generation. Solange and Eli, who hosted barbecues. And his brother, and his best friend. They had planned to take a fishing trip with their families next month and already paid a deposit for a rental home near the beach.

Arriving at the morgue, Condé reassured his bereft sister-in-law that Kaíque had obeyed the Lord's commandments and thus been granted salvation. He shared the same thoughts with the funeral service representative while making burial arrangements. The woman, Elisângela Gomes, later marveled at his poise.

"I believe his faith, his prayers and his will to help his fellow man left helpless like him has kept him strong," Gomes said. "There wasn't anyone as confident in God as Mr. Alex."

At the cemetery, Condé remained collected as he carried the coffin to a steep hillside of sparse grass and fresh graves. Condé later said he imagined at the time that more heavy rains could shear off that hillside, unearthing all the coffins buried there and washing them to the bottom.

Lowering Kaíque into the ground, he turned away and squeezed his eyes shut. He put his arm around his wife's shoulder, and they stood in reverence for a few minutes. He thanked Kaíque for the time they had together.

The following night, at a friend's house, Condé felt God's presence and wept unabashedly — "to wash the soul," he said.

Condé took Piter back to Sierra Heights. He wanted the boy to see the landslide's aftermath, how it had ripped the community apart and where Kaíque had died.

"This is the last time we'll come here," Condé told Piter as they wended their way up its serpentine alleys.

From a neighbor's roof, they surveyed the scene below: teams of soldiers still searching for bodies in the mud, debris and relics of shattered homes.

On the way back downhill, they came across a woman lugging a mattress. Condé put a hand on her arm. Those who are baptized will be saved, he told the woman, and urged her to look to God for strength.

"My God is keeping me on my feet. He ... is very strong," Condé told her. "And who am I to question God's sovereignty? Me, a mere mortal, who He put here, and I'm going to complain or question what He did? What the believer needs to have is certainty of salvation."

Then Condé shouldered the woman's mattress and carried her burden all the way down.

EXPLAINER: How is Russia-Ukraine war linked to religion?

By PETER SMITH Associated Press

Ukraine's tangled political history with Russia has its counterpart in the religious landscape, with Ukraine's majority Orthodox Christian population divided between an independent-minded group based in Kyiv and another loyal to its patriarch in Moscow.

But while there have been appeals to religious nationalism in both Russia and Ukraine, religious loyalty doesn't mirror political fealty amid Ukraine's fight for survival.

Even though Russian President Vladimir Putin justified his invasion of Ukraine in part as a defense of the Moscow-oriented Orthodox church, leaders of both Ukrainian Orthodox factions are fiercely denouncing the Russian invasion, as is Ukraine's significant Catholic minority.

"With prayer on our lips, with love for God, for Ukraine, for our neighbors, we fight against evil - and we will see victory," vowed Metropolitan Epifany, head of the Kyiv-based Orthodox Church of Ukraine.

"Forget mutual quarrels and misunderstandings and ... unite with love for God and our Motherland," said Metropolitan Onufry, head of the Ukrainian Orthodox Church, which is under the Orthodox patriarch of Moscow but has broad autonomy.

Even that seemingly united front is complicated. A day after posting Onufry's message on Thursday, his church's website began publishing reports claiming its churches and people are being attacked, blaming one attack on the representatives of the rival church.

The division between Ukraine's Orthodox bodies has reverberated worldwide in recent years as Orthodox churches have struggled with how and whether to take sides. Some U.S. Orthodox hope they can put such conflicts aside and unite to try to end the war, while also fearing the war could exacerbate the split.

WHAT IS THE RELIGIOUS LANDSCAPE OF UKRAINE?

Surveys estimate a large majority of Ukraine's population is Orthodox, with a significant minority of Ukrainian Catholics who worship with a Byzantine liturgy similar to that of the Orthodox but are loyal to the pope. The population includes smaller percentages of Protestants, Jews and Muslims.

Ukraine and Russia are divided by a common history, both religiously and politically.

They trace their ancestry to the medieval kingdom of Kievan Rus, whose 10th century Prince Vladimir (Volodymyr in Ukrainian) rejected paganism, was baptized in Crimea and adopted Orthodoxy as the official religion.

In 2014, Putin cited that history in justifying his seizure of Crimea, a land he called "sacred" to Russia.

While Putin says Russia is the true heir to Rus, Ukrainians say their modern state has a distinct pedigree and that Moscow didn't emerge as a power until centuries later.

That tension persists in Orthodox relations.

Orthodox churches have historically been organized along national lines, with patriarchs having autonomy in their territories while bound by a common faith. The Ecumenical Patriarch of Constantinople is considered first among equals but, unlike a Catholic pope, doesn't have universal jurisdiction.

WHO GOVERNS UKRAINE'S ORTHODOX CHURCHES TODAY?

That depends how to interpret events of more than 300 years ago.

With Russia growing in strength and the Constantinople church weakened under Ottoman rule, the Ecumenical Patriarch in 1686 delegated to the Patriarch of Moscow the authority to ordain the metropolitan (top bishop) of Kyiv.

The Russian Orthodox Church says that was a permanent transfer. The Ecumenical Patriarch says it was temporary.

For the past century, independent-minded Ukrainian Orthodox have formed separate churches which lacked formal recognition until 2019, when current Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew recognized the Orthodox Church of Ukraine as independent of the Moscow patriarch — who fiercely protested the move as illegitimate.

The situation in Ukraine was murkier on the ground.

Many monasteries and parishes remain under Moscow's patriarch, though exact statistics are difficult

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to find, said John Burgess, author of "Holy Rus': The Rebirth of Orthodoxy in the New Russia." On the village level, many people may not even know about their parish's alignment, Burgess said.

DOES THIS SCHISM REFLECT THE POLITICAL SPLIT BETWEEN THE TWO COUNTRIES?

Yes, though it's complicated.

Ukraine's former president, Petro Poroshenko, drew a direct link: "The independence of our church is part of our pro-European and pro-Ukrainian policies," he said in 2018.

But current President Vladimir Zelinskyy, who is Jewish, has not put the same emphasis on religious nationalism. On Saturday, he said he had spoken to both Orthodox leaders as well as top Catholic, Muslim and Jewish representatives. "All leaders pray for the souls of the defenders who gave their lives for Ukraine and for our unity and victory. And that's very important," he said.

Putin has tried to capitalize on the issue.

In his Feb. 21 speech seeking to justify the imminent invasion of Ukraine with a distorted historical narrative, Putin claimed without proof that Kyiv was preparing for the "destruction" of the Ukrainian Orthodox Church of the Moscow Patriarchate.

But the reaction of the Metropolitan Onufry, who compared the war to the "sin of Cain," the biblical character who murdered his brother, indicates that even the Moscow-oriented church has a strong sense of Ukrainian national identity.

By comparison, Moscow Patriarch Kirill has called for peace but has not laid blame for the invasion.

The Ukrainian Orthodox Church under the Moscow Patriarchate has long had extensive autonomy. Plus, it's increasingly Ukrainian in character.

"Regardless of church affiliation ... you have a lot of new clergy who grew up in independent Ukraine," said Alexei Krindatch, national coordinator of the U.S. Census of Orthodox Christian Churches. "Their political preferences are not necessarily correlated with the formal jurisdictions of their parishes," said Krindatch, who grew up in the former Soviet Union.

WHERE DO THE CATHOLICS FIT IN?

Ukrainian Catholics are based mainly in western Ukraine.

They emerged in 1596 when some Orthodox Ukrainians, then under the rule of the Catholic-dominated Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth, submitted to the authority of the pope under an agreement that allowed them to keep distinctive practices such as their Byzantine liturgy and married priests.

Orthodox leaders have long denounced such agreements as Catholic and foreign encroachment on their flocks.

Ukrainian Catholics have an especially strong history of resistance to persecution under czars and communists.

"Every time Russia takes over Ukraine, (the) Ukrainian Catholic Church is destroyed," said Mariana Karapinka, head of communications for the Ukrainian Catholic Archeparchy of Philadelphia.

Ukrainian Catholics were severely repressed by the Soviets, with several leaders martyred. Many Ukrainian Catholics continued to worship underground, and the church has rebounded strongly since the end of communism.

With that kind of history, Ukrainian Catholics may have a strong reason to resist another takeover by Moscow. But they're not alone, Karapinka said. "Ukrainian Catholics were not the only group persecuted by the Soviets," she said. "So many groups have reason to resist."

Recent popes have tried to thaw relations with the Russian Orthodox Church even while defending the rights of Ukrainian and other Eastern Rite Catholics.

But after the Russian invasion, Pope Francis visited the Russian Embassy on Friday to personally "express his concern about the war," the Vatican said, in an extraordinary papal gesture that has no recent precedent.

HOW HAS THE ORTHODOX SCHISM REVERBERATED BEYOND UKRAINE?

The Russian Orthodox Church decided to "break the Eucharistic communion" with the Ecumenical Patriarch of Constantinople in 2018 as he moved to recognize an independent church in Ukraine. That means members of Moscow- and Constantinople-affiliated churches can't take communion at the other's churches.

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The disputes have spread to Eastern Orthodox churches in Africa, where the Russian Orthodox have recognized a separate set of churches after Africa's patriarch recognized the Ukraine church's independence.

But many other churches have sought to avoid the fray. In the U.S., with multiple Orthodox jurisdictions, most groups still cooperate and worship with each other.

The war may provide a point of unity among U.S. churches but may further test relations, said the Very Rev. Alexander Rentel, chancellor of the Orthodox Church in America, which has Russian roots but is now independent of Moscow.

"This split that took place in world Orthodoxy was a difficult event for the Orthodox Church to process," he said. "Now it's only going to become more difficult because of this war."

Biden's Russia sanctions may let Moscow profit from oil, gas

By JOSH BOAK Associated Press

There is a glaring carve-out in President Joe Biden's sanctions against Russia: Oil and natural gas from that country will continue to flow freely to the rest of the world and money will keep flowing into Russia.

Following Russia's invasion of Ukraine, Biden defended his decision to preserve access to Russian energy in order "to limit the pain the American people are feeling at the gas pump." But some academics, lawmakers and other analysts say that excluding an industry at the heart of the Russian economy essentially limits the sanctions and could embolden Russian President Vladimir Putin.

"Energy exports are the whole game," said Columbia University historian Adam Tooze, an expert on finance and European politics. Politicians in the United States and Europe chose to "carve out the one sector that might truly be decisive. I don't think Russia is blind to what is going on and it must indicate to them that the West does not really have the stomach for a painful fight over Ukraine."

As part of a broader international push, Biden announced sanctions on Thursday that target Russian banks and the country's elites, and restrict the export of vital technologies that are key for the military and economic development. The U.S. and its European allies intensified the sanctions on Saturday by announcing plans to freeze the reserves of Russia's central bank and block certain financial institutions from the SWIFT messaging system for international payments.

But the rules issued by the Treasury Department allow Russian energy transactions to keep going through nonsanctioned banks that are not based in the U.S. And administration officials stress that the sanctions are designed to minimize any disruptions to the global energy markets.

U.S. crude oil prices closed Friday just below \$92 a barrel, right where they were in the days before Russia's invasion of Ukraine. Still, gasoline prices at the pump are up more than 33% from a year ago to a national average of \$3.57 a gallon, according to AAA.

Inflation, at a 40-year peak and fueled in large part by gas prices, has hurt Biden politically with voters heading into the November elections.

The sanctions created a possible trade-off for the president between his political interests at home and abroad. By invading Ukraine, Russia has potentially fed into the supply chain problems and inflation that have been a crucial weakness for Biden, who now is trying to strike a balance between penalizing Putin and sparing American voters.

Biden specifically highlighted the Russian energy carve-outs as a virtue because they would help to protect U.S. families and businesses from higher prices.

"Our sanctions package we specifically designed to allow energy payments to continue," he said.

Those domestic politics — which also apply to many European leaders — produced a set of sanctions that Sen. Pat Toomey, R-Pa., on Thursday said he fears "will be inadequate to deter Putin from further aggression."

"The administration is intentionally leaving the biggest industry in Russia's economy virtually untouched," Toomey said. "The sanctions imposed on Russian banks, while welcome, may not isolate the Russian financial system from international activity. That's why the U.S. should impose crippling sanctions on Russia's oil and gas sector."

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But Biden also needs to consider the needs of his European allies. Natural gas from Russia accounts for one-third of Europe's consumption of the fossil fuel. Restricting the world's largest exporter of natural gas and second-largest exporter of oil, after Saudi Arabia, could hurt the unity that U.S. officials say is key to confronting Putin.

This dependence on Russia could limit the potential devastation of sanctions.

"It would definitely be more damaging to Russia if the energy sector was included in the sanctions package," Mark Finley, a fellow in energy and global oil at Rice University's Baker Institute for Public Policy, said in an emailed statement. "Oil royalties & taxes generally account for about 40% of Russian federal government revenues."

Finley noted that Russia has relied on oil and natural gas revenues in recent years to build its stockpile of foreign reserves above \$600 billion, specifically so it could insulate itself from financial sanctions. But that financial cushion may ultimately be at risk from the added U.S. and European sanctions.

Should there be a loss of oil and natural gas from Russia, the U.S. appears unable to quickly increase production of oil and natural gas, while OPEC-plus countries have yet to publicly commit to substantially more production.

Domestic oil and gas companies are dealing with tight supplies of rigs, sand, truckers and laborers needed to drill for oil and gas, said Jen Snyder, managing director at Enverus, an energy analytics firm. She noted that one supplier said its most modern and efficient rigs are all contracted out through the end of the year.

"All these constraints can be bridged, but it takes time," Snyder added.

Natural gas supplies in Europe have been extremely tight. But gas producers in the U.S. cannot quickly export more gas into the global market. That's because to ship natural gas overseas, it has to be cooled and converted into liquefied natural gas at LNG export facilities, and in the U.S. those facilities are operating at capacity.

In the face of sanctions over Putin's 2014 invasion of the Crimean Peninsula in Ukraine, the country's elites and insider corporations learned to adapt, often transferring their assets into newly created shell entities with a clean record. Those strategies are now being put to the test, though access to oil has been a consistent loophole that other countries in a similar predicament exploited in the past with Russia's help.

Putin's government has helped tutor other U.S. adversaries such as Iran and Venezuela on how to circumvent Washington's controls, said Marshall Billingslea, who helped set sanctions policy for the Trump administration.

"Sanctions enforcement is inherently a cat and mouse game and they've had eight years, ever since Crimea, to set up alternative mechanisms to keep hard currency flowing to the regime," Billingslea said.

West unleashes SWIFT bans, more crushing penalties on Russia

By ZEKE MILLER, RAF CASERT, ELLEN KNICKMEYER and KEN SWEET Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — The United States and European nations agreed Saturday to impose the most potentially crippling financial penalties yet on Russia over its unrelenting invasion of Ukraine, going after the central bank reserves that underpin the Russian economy and severing some Russian banks from a vital global financial network.

The decision, announced as Ukrainian forces battled Saturday to hold Russian forces back from Ukraine's capital and residents sheltered in subway tunnels, basements and underground garages, has potential to spread the pain of Western retaliation for President Vladimir Putin's invasion to ordinary Russians far more than previous rounds of penalties.

"Putin embarked on a path aiming to destroy Ukraine, but what he is also doing, in fact, is destroying the future of his own country," EU Commission President Ursula von der Leyen said.

The European Union, United States, United Kingdom and other allies have steadily stepped up the intensity of their sanctions since Russia launched the invasion late last week.

While U.S. and European officials made clear they still were working out the mechanics of how to imple-

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ment the latest measures, and intend to spare Russia's oil and natural gas exports, the sanctions in total potentially could amount to some of the toughest levied on a nation in modern times. If fully carried out as planned, the measures will severely damage the Russian economy and markedly constrain its ability to import and export goods.

The U.S. and European allies announced the moves in a joint statement as part of a new round of financial sanctions meant to "hold Russia to account and collectively ensure that this war is a strategic failure for Putin."

The central bank restrictions target access to the more than \$600 billion in reserves that the Kremlin has at its disposal, and are meant to block Russia's ability to support the ruble as it plunges in value amid tightening Western sanctions.

The ruble and Russia's stock market both declined sharply immediately after Russia launched military action in Ukraine on Thursday. The ruble recovered slightly but is still down more than 6 percent from before Putin's announcement, trading at nearly 84 rubles to the dollar.

U.S. officials said Saturday's steps were framed to send the ruble into "free fall" and promote soaring inflation in the Russian economy.

The decline of the ruble would likely send inflation soaring, which would hurt everyday Russians and not just the Russian elites who were the targets of the original sanctions. The resulting economic disruption, if Saturday's measures are as harsh as described, could leave Putin facing political unrest at home.

Analysts predicted intensifying runs on banks by Russians, and falling government reserves as Russians scrambled to sell their targeted currency for safer assets.

The U.S. officials noted that previously announced sanctions have already had an impact on Russia, bringing its currency to its lowest level against the dollar in history and giving its stock market the worst week on record.

Saturday's move also includes cutting key Russian banks out of the SWIFT financial messaging system, which daily moves countless billions of dollars around more than 11,000 banks and other financial institutions around the world.

The fine print of the sanctions was still being ironed out over the weekend, officials said, as they work to limit the impact of the restrictions on other economies and European purchases of Russian energy.

Allies on both sides of the Atlantic also considered the SWIFT option in 2014, when Russia invaded and annexed Ukraine's Crimea and backed separatist forces in eastern Ukraine. Russia declared then that kicking it out of SWIFT would be equivalent to a declaration of war. The allies — criticized ever after for responding too weakly to Russia's 2014 aggression — shelved the idea back then. Russia since then has tried to develop its own financial transfer system, with limited success.

The U.S. has succeeded before in persuading the Belgium-based SWIFT system to kick out a country — Iran, over its nuclear program. But kicking Russia out of SWIFT could also hurt other economies, including those of the U.S. and key ally Germany.

Only rarely has the West and its allies fired a full salvo of its available financial weapons on a country. Iran and North Korea, two previous targets, had far smaller roles in the world economy, while Russia, with its enormous petroleum reserves, plays a much bigger role in global trade, and parts of Europe depend on its natural gas.

The disconnection from SWIFT announced by the West on Saturday is partial, leaving Europe and the United States room to escalate penalties later. Officials said they had not fully settled on which banks would be cut off.

Announcing the measures in Brussels, the EU Commission president, von der Leyen, said she would push the bloc to "paralyze the assets of Russia's Central bank" so that its transactions would be frozen. Cutting several commercial banks from SWIFT "will ensure that these banks are disconnected from the international financial system and harm their ability to operate globally," she added.

"Cutting banks off will stop them from conducting most of their financial transactions worldwide and effectively block Russian exports and imports," she added.

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Getting the EU on board for sanctioning Russia through SWIFT had been a tough process since EU trade with Russia amounted to 80 billion euros, about 10 times as much as the United States, which had been an early proponent of such measures.

Germany specifically had balked at the measure since it could hit them hard. But Foreign Minister Annalena Baerbock said in a statement that "after Russia's shameless attack ... we are working hard on limiting the collateral damage of decoupling (Russia) from SWIFT so that it hits the right people. What we need is a targeted, functional restrictions of SWIFT."

As another measure, the allies announced a commitment "to taking measures to limit the sale of citizenship — so-called golden passports — that let wealthy Russians connected to the Russian government become citizens of our countries and gain access to our financial systems."

The group also announced the formation this week of a trans-Atlantic task force to ensure that these and other sanctions on Russia are implemented effectively through information sharing and asset freezes.

"These new sanctions, which include removing several Russian banks from SWIFT and sanctioning Russia's central bank, are likely to cause serious damage to the Russian economy and its banking system," said Clay Lowery, executive vice president of the Institute of International Finance. "While details on how the new sanctions affect energy are still emerging, we do know that sanctions on its central bank will make it more difficult for Russia to export energy and other commodities."

Rachel Ziemba, an adjunct senior fellow at the Center for a New American Security, said that even without a complete SWIFT ban, "these measures will still be painful to Russia's economy. They reinforce the measures already taken earlier this week by making transactions more complicated and difficult."

Ziemba says how much pain the sanctions render on the Russian economy will depend on which banks are restricted and which measures are taken to restrict the ability of the Central Bank to operate.

"Regardless, these sort of escalating sanctions, removing banks from SWIFT, restricting the Central Bank, this will all make it more difficult to get commodities from Russia and will increase the pressure on the financial market."

Meantime, the U.S. Embassy in Russia is warning Americans of multiple reports of non-Russian credit and debit cards being declined in Russia. In a tweet Saturday night, the American Embassy said the problem appears to be related to recent sanctions, imposed on Russian banks following the Russian invasion of Ukraine. The embassy says U.S. citizens in Russia should be prepared with alternate means of payment should cards be declined. It also reminded U.S. citizens that the State Department advises against travel to Russia.

Fence being reinstalled around US Capitol for Biden speech

By MICHAEL BALSAMO Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — Fencing installed around the U.S. Capitol for months after the January 2021 insurrection will be put back up before President Joe Biden's State of the Union address on Tuesday as concern grows about potential demonstrations or truck convoys snarling traffic in the nation's capital.

Capitol Police Chief Tom Manger said in a statement Sunday that the fence will be erected around the Capitol building for the speech and is being put up "out of an abundance of caution," in consultation with the Secret Service.

The move comes as officials in Washington prepare for trucker convoys that are planning protests against pandemic restrictions beginning this week. The Pentagon has already approved the deployment of 700 unarmed National Guard troops to be used to assist with traffic control during potential demonstrations.

Modeled after recent trucker protests in Canada, separate truck convoys have been planned through online forums. Many have different starting points, departure dates and routes, though some are scheduled to arrive in time for the State of the Union address. Others may arrive afterward.

Manger said his force's "mission to protect the United States Congress, the Capitol, and the legislative process remains unwavering." Manger said.

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The fence had been a stark symbol of the fear many in the Capitol felt after the mob pushed its way past overwhelmed police officers, broke through windows and doors and ransacked the Capitol as Congress was voting to certify Joe Biden's electoral win. It remained up for several months.

The U.S. Capitol Police Board had approved a plan to briefly reinstall the fence for a rally in September that was organized to support people who remained jailed in connection with the insurrection. Law enforcement officers and members of the media vastly outnumbered the protesters and only a few incidents were reported.

Manger said Capitol Police have also requested additional assistance from outside law enforcement agencies before Tuesday's address, in addition to the request for help from the National Guard.

Metropolitan Police Department Chief Robert Contee has said his department is closely monitoring the shifting information and would be devoting additional policing in a rolling state of heightened alert over the next few weeks.

Today in History

By The Associated Press undefined

Today in History

Today is Monday, Feb. 28, the 59th day of 2022. There are 306 days left in the year.

Today's Highlight in History:

On Feb. 28, 1993, a gun battle erupted at a religious compound near Waco, Texas, when Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco and Firearms agents tried to arrest Branch Davidian leader David Koresh on weapons charges; four agents and six Davidians were killed as a 51-day standoff began.

On this date:

In 1844, a 12-inch gun aboard the USS Princeton exploded as the ship was sailing on the Potomac River, killing Secretary of State Abel P. Upshur, Navy Secretary Thomas W. Gilmer and several others.

In 1849, the California gold rush began in earnest as regular steamship service started bringing gold-seekers to San Francisco.

In 1911, President William Howard Taft nominated William H. Lewis to be the first Black Assistant Attorney General of the United States.

In 1953, scientists James D. Watson and Francis H.C. Crick announced they had discovered the double-helix structure of DNA.

In 1972, President Richard M. Nixon and Chinese Premier Zhou Enlai issued the Shanghai Communique, which called for normalizing relations between their countries, at the conclusion of Nixon's historic visit to China.

In 1975, 42 people were killed in London's Underground when a train smashed into the end of a tunnel.

In 1996, Britain's Princess Diana agreed to divorce Prince Charles. (Their 15-year marriage officially ended in August 1996; Diana died in a car crash in Paris a year after that.)

In 2009, Paul Harvey, the news commentator and talk-radio pioneer whose staccato style made him one of the nation's most familiar voices, died in Phoenix at age 90.

In 2013, Benedict XVI became the first pope in 600 years to resign, ending an eight-year pontificate. (Benedict was succeeded the following month by Pope Francis.)

In 2014, delivering a blunt warning to Moscow, President Barack Obama expressed deep concern over reported military activity inside Ukraine by Russia and warned "there will be costs" for any intervention.

In 2018, Walmart announced that it would no longer sell firearms and ammunition to people younger than 21 and would remove items resembling assault-style rifles from its website. Dick's Sporting Goods said it would stop selling assault-style rifles and ban the sale of all guns to anyone under 21.

In 2020, the number of countries touched by the coronavirus climbed to nearly 60. The Dow Jones Industrial Average finished the week 12.4% lower in the market's worst weekly performance since the 2008 financial crisis.

Ten years ago: Republican Mitt Romney won presidential primary victories in Arizona and Michigan. Sen.

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Olympia Snowe, R-Maine, announced she would not seek reelection, citing what she called the increasingly polarized climate of Washington. Matt Kenseth won his second Daytona 500, holding off Dale Earnhardt Jr. in a post-midnight victory after rain had postponed the start of the race for the first time in its 54-year history from Sunday to Monday.

Five years ago: Heralding a "new chapter of American greatness," President Donald Trump issued a broad call for overhauling the nation's health care system and significantly boosting military spending in an hourlong speech to a joint session of Congress. Amazon's cloud-computing service, Amazon Web Services, experienced a five-hour outage in its eastern U.S. region, causing unprecedented and widespread problems for thousands of websites and apps.

One year ago: New York Gov. Andrew Cuomo acknowledged for the first time that some of his behavior with women "may have been insensitive or too personal" and said he would cooperate with a sexual harassment investigation led by the state's attorney general. Former President Donald Trump, addressing a conservative conference in Florida in his first public speech since leaving office, encouraged everyone to get vaccinated against COVID-19. "Nomadland" and "Borat Subsequent Moviefilm" took the top film honors at the Golden Globe Awards, capping a night that featured homebound winners accepting their awards.

Today's Birthdays: Architect Frank Gehry is 93. Singer Sam the Sham is 85. Actor-director-dancer Tommy Tune is 83. Hall of Fame auto racer Mario Andretti is 82. Actor Kelly Bishop is 78. Actor Stephanie Beacham is 75. Writer-director Mike Figgis is 74. Actor Mercedes Ruehl is 74. Actor Bernadette Peters is 74. Former Energy Secretary Steven Chu is 74. Actor Ilene Graff is 73. Nobel Prize-winning economist Paul Krugman is 69. Comedian Gilbert Gottfried is 67. Basketball Hall of Famer Adrian Dantley is 67. Actor John Turturro is 65. Rock singer Cindy Wilson is 65. Actor Rae Dawn Chong is 61. Actor Maxine Bahns is 53. Actor Robert Sean Leonard is 53. Rock singer Pat Monahan is 53. Author Daniel Handler (aka "Lemony Snicket") is 52. Actor Tasha Smith is 51. Actor Rory Cochrane is 50. Actor Ali Larter is 46. Country singer Jason Aldean is 45. Actor Geoffrey Arend is 44. Actor Melanie Chandra (TV: "Code Black") is 38. Actor Michelle Horn is 35. MLB relief pitcher Aroldis Chapman is 34. Actor True O'Brien is 28. Actor Madisen Beaty is 27. Actor Quinn Shephard is 27. Actor Bobb'e J. Thompson is 26.