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UpComing Events

Friday, March 4

Boys Region 1A game at 7 p.m. Milbank at Groton Area

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.



"Trust that in living true to yourself, you will attract people that support and love you, just as you are."

-Jaeda deWalt

Vender Fair

A vendor fair has been organized in Groton for March 26, 2022, at the Groton Community Center, from 10 am. – 3 p.m. A variety of crafters and vendors will be available. Proceeds from an auction table will be donated to Make-a-Wish Foundation.

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© 2022 Groton Daily Independent

GFP Commission Passes Resolution to Purchase Property for South Dakota Shooting Sports Complex

PIERRE, S.D. – The South Dakota Game, Fish and Parks (GFP) Commission at their March meeting passed a resolution to purchase the property from the South Dakota Parks and Wildlife Foundation (PWF) for the South Dakota Shooting Sports Complex.

"For more than a decade, I've lived within a half mile of a gun range near Watertown. In riding in the pasture there was never a safety issue or a noise issue, in fact the new gun range reduced the litter and made it much safer for my grandkids," stated Vice-Chairman Doug Sharp.

"Listening to the testimony today, we've heard more positive testimonies today than individuals opposed," said Stephanie Rissler, GFP Commissioner. "Hearing the positives, this is why I choose to support the resolution."

Commissioner Rissler's comments echoed Vice-Chairman Doug Sharp, who earlier discussed his positive experiences with the shooting range established Watertown.

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**Region 1A Boys
Basketball on
GDILIVE.COM**

NO TICKET REQUIRED! FREE TO WATCH



**GROTON AREA VS.
MILBANK IN GROTON
FRI., MAR. 04, 7:00**

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
Groton Ford
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

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This **FREE** event is
**OPEN TO
THE PUBLIC**



HPS is a small non-profit doing **BIG** things!
MISSION: to serve students, coaches & communities through **the power of faith & servant leadership** in 3 ways...
1.) Character Coaching
2.) Distracted Driving Presentations
3.) Therapy Dog Comfort Visits



GHS FCA brings an emotional & impactful presentation by:

Tim Weidenbach

Director of Higher Power Sports

Sunday, March 6th @ 3:30pm

United Methodist Church in Groton, SD

- **94%** of young drivers say they know it is dangerous to drive while using your phone, yet **70%** say they are able to use their phone without it impacting their ability to drive!

ALL ARE WELCOME to hear this engaging speaker,
as seen on **KELOLAND TV!**

Guest Speaker
Nicole J Phillips
The Kindness Podcast

*You're
Invited!*

RESET

womens conference

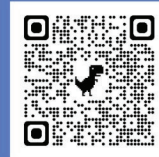
SATURDAY, MARCH 5
AT ROSE HILL CHURCH

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.

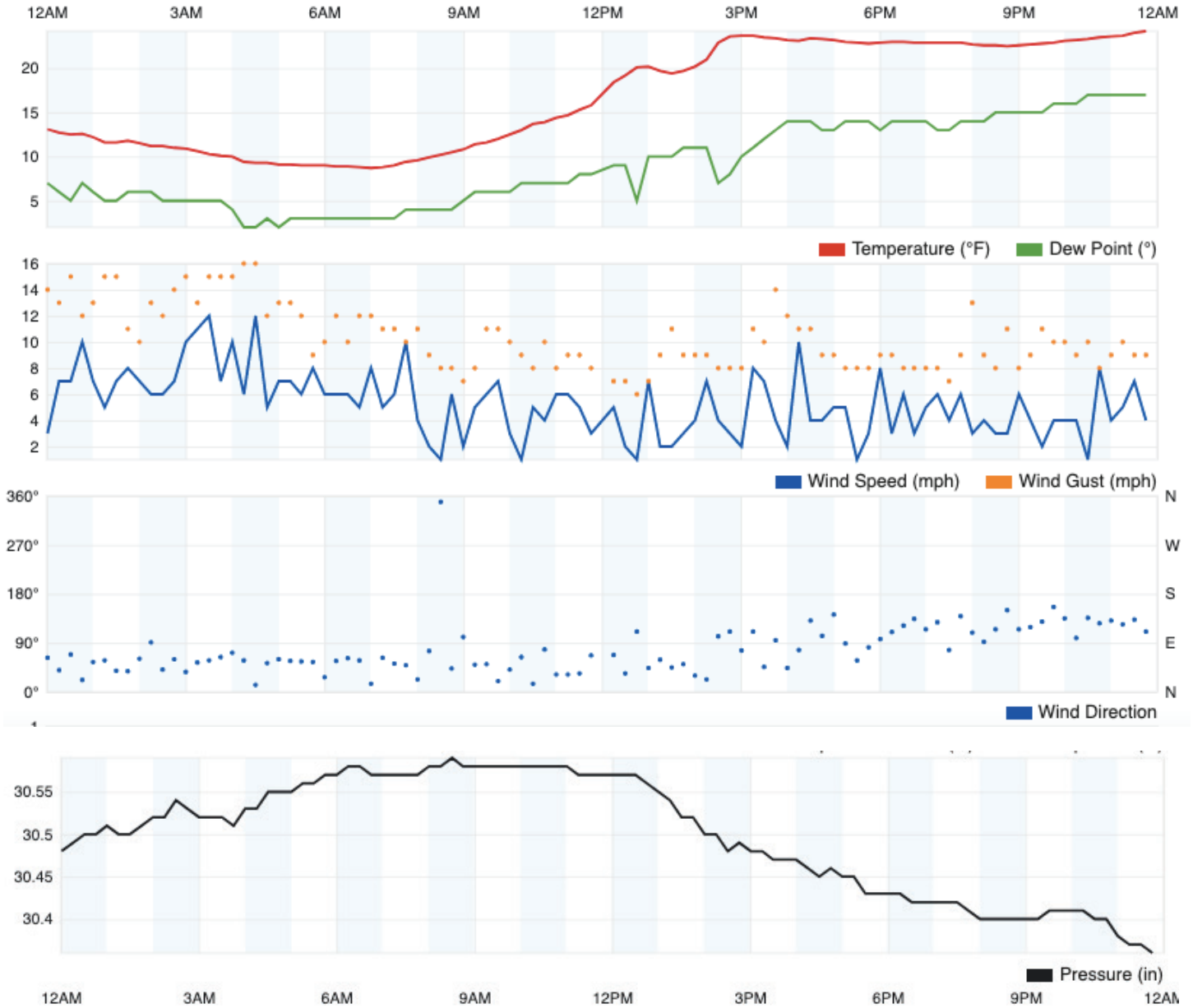
REGISTER FOR THIS FREE EVENT
ONLINE AT ROSEHILLEFC.COM



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Yesterday's Groton Weather Graphs



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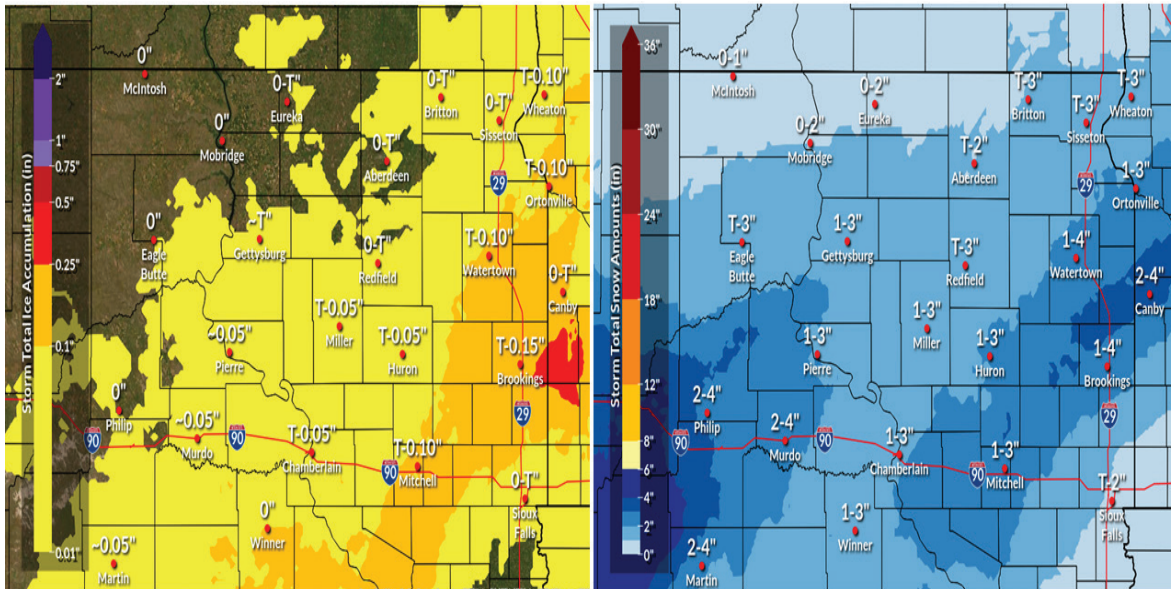
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Today	Tonight	Saturday	Saturday Night	Sunday
				
Mostly Cloudy	Cloudy then Slight Chance Freezing Drizzle	Blustery. Slight Chance Wintry Mix then Wintry Mix Likely	Blustery. Chance Snow then Mostly Cloudy	Mostly Cloudy
High: 39 °F	Low: 24 °F	High: 27 °F	Low: 16 °F	High: 26 °F

 **Storm System Accumulations** Updated: 3/4/2022 4:32 AM Central

Ice Accumulations

Snow Accumulations



Here are the potential ranges of ice and snow with this early spring storm system.

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Storm System Timeline

Updated: 3/4/2022 4:26 AM Central

Probability of Precipitation Forecast

	3/4 Fri				3/5 Sat								3/6 Sun			
	12pm	3pm	6pm	9pm	12am	3am	6am	9am	12pm	3pm	6pm	9pm	12am	3am	6am	9am
Aberdeen	4	9	8	11	18	20	20	21	47	70	48	48	5	5	4	4
Britton	5	8	8	9	17	20	20	20	35	66	58	58	7	7	4	4
Eagle Butte	2	5	7	16	20	20	41	64	73	66	13	13	2	2	4	4
Eureka	4	8	19	20	20	20	20	26	44	65	23	23	2	2	3	3
Gettysburg	2	5	7	10	18	20	23	39	54	69	27	27	2	2	4	4
Kennebec	2	2	5	6	16	20	40	73	100	98	30	30	2	2	5	5
McIntosh	4	9	19	20	20	20	26	39	47	46	8	8	2	2	2	2
Milbank	4	9	9	9	14	15	20	40	72	88	82	82	14	14	5	5
Miller	2	4	5	5	16	20	27	50	67	84	46	46	3	3	4	4
Mobridge	3	7	17	20	20	20	20	39	54	63	16	16	2	2	3	3
Murdo	2	2	5	7	16	20	52	87	100	85	19	19	3	3	7	7
Pierre	2	3	6	7	17	20	37	66	78	82	25	25	2	2	5	5
Redfield	3	5	5	5	16	20	20	36	55	76	57	57	5	5	5	5
Sisseton	5	10	12	13	15	17	20	23	48	78	72	72	11	11	4	4
Watertown	3	6	6	7	13	15	20	43	73	95	80	80	11	11	5	5
Wheaton	5	6	9	10	14	15	20	26	44	78	73	73	13	13	3	3

Freezing Drizzle Transition Snow



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

National Weather Service
Aberdeen, SD

We continue to watch this system as it gets closer to the area, with the potential for freezing drizzle, changing to freezing rain before ending up as snow. Expect travel issues with the system.

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Today in Weather History

March 4, 1994: Two to five inches of snow fell across northeast and part of central South Dakota from the 3rd into the 4th. This new snowfall, combined with the already deep and expansive snowpack and winds of 20 to 40 mph, brought widespread blowing and drifting snow. Visibilities were reduced to near zero at times, making travel treacherous. Snowdrifts blocked many roads. Many schools, as well as several highways, were closed. Several vehicles became stuck and had to be pulled out. Some snowfall amounts included 4 inches at Clear Lake, Britton, Waubay, and Wilmot; and 5 inches at Onida, Blunt, Highmore, Miller, and Milbank.

1873: The second inauguration of Ulysses S. Grant remains Washington, DC's, record cold March day. The low was 4 degrees, and by noon with the sunshine, the temperature was 16 degrees. Wind chills were around 30 degrees below zero. The 40 mph winds made his inaugural address inaudible to most on the platform with him.

1899: Cyclone Mahina, aka "The Bathurst Bay Hurricane" in Australia, was credited with having produced the highest storm surge on record in the world. The cyclone, with an estimated central pressure of 911 millibars or 26.90 inches of mercury, caused a 42.6-foot surge when it came ashore on the coast of northern Australia. The storm killed as many as 400 people and is currently Australia's deadliest cyclone.

1983: Brownsville, Texas recorded a high of 100 degrees, the earliest the city has ever hit the century mark.

1909 - Though fair weather was forecast, President Taft was inaugurated amidst a furious storm. About ten inches of wet snow disrupted travel and communications. The storm drew much criticism against the U.S. Weather Bureau. (David Ludlum)

1953 - Snow was reported on the island of Oahu in Hawaii. (The Weather Channel)

1966 - A severe blizzard raged across Minnesota and North Dakota. The blizzard lasted four days producing up to 35 inches of snow, and wind gusting to 100 mph produced snow drifts 30 to 40 feet high. Bismarck ND reported zero visibility for 11 hours. Traffic was paralyzed for three days. (2nd-5th) (The Weather Channel)

1987 - Rain and high winds prevailed in the northwestern U.S. A wind gust to 69 mph at Klamath Falls OR was their highest in 25 years, and winds at the Ashland Ranger Station in the Siskiyou Mountains of northern California reached 85 mph. (The National Weather Summary) (Storm Data)

1988 - Snow and freezing rain made travel hazardous in Ohio and Indiana. A six car pile-up resulted near Columbus OH, with seven injuries reported. Up to two inches of ice glazed central Indiana. Up to ten inches of snow blanketed northern Ohio. (The National Weather Summary) (Storm Data)

1989 - Thunderstorms produced severe weather in the Lower Mississippi Valley. A strong (F-3) tornado injured five persons near Brownsville MS, and killed seven cows and two hogs in one pasture. Thunderstorm winds gusted to 90 mph at Canton MS. (The National Weather Summary) (Storm Data)

1990 - A Pacific cold front working its way across the western U.S. produced heavy snow over parts of Idaho, Nevada and Utah. Up to eleven inches of snow blanketed the valleys of northwest Utah, while 12 to 25 inches fell across the mountains of northern Utah. Up to six inches of snow blanketed the valleys of east central Nevada, while more than a foot of snow was reported in the high elevations. In Idaho, 6 to 8 inches of snow was reported around Aberdeen and American Falls. (The National Weather Summary) (Storm Data)

2004 - An F0 tornado 2 miles north of Muldrow breaks a record stretch of days without a reported tornado, 292 days.

2008 - Only two days after reaching 78 degrees, St. Louis receives nearly a foot of snow in seven hours, the biggest snowstorm in 15 years.

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Yesterday's Groton Weather

High Temp: 24 °F at 11:57 PM

Low Temp: 9 °F at 7:00 AM

Wind: 16 mph at 1:01 AM

Precip: 0.00

Day length: 11 hours, 21 minutes

Today's Info

Record High: 73 in 1905

Record Low: -23 in 1917

Average High: 35°F

Average Low: 14°F

Average Precip in Mar.: 0.10

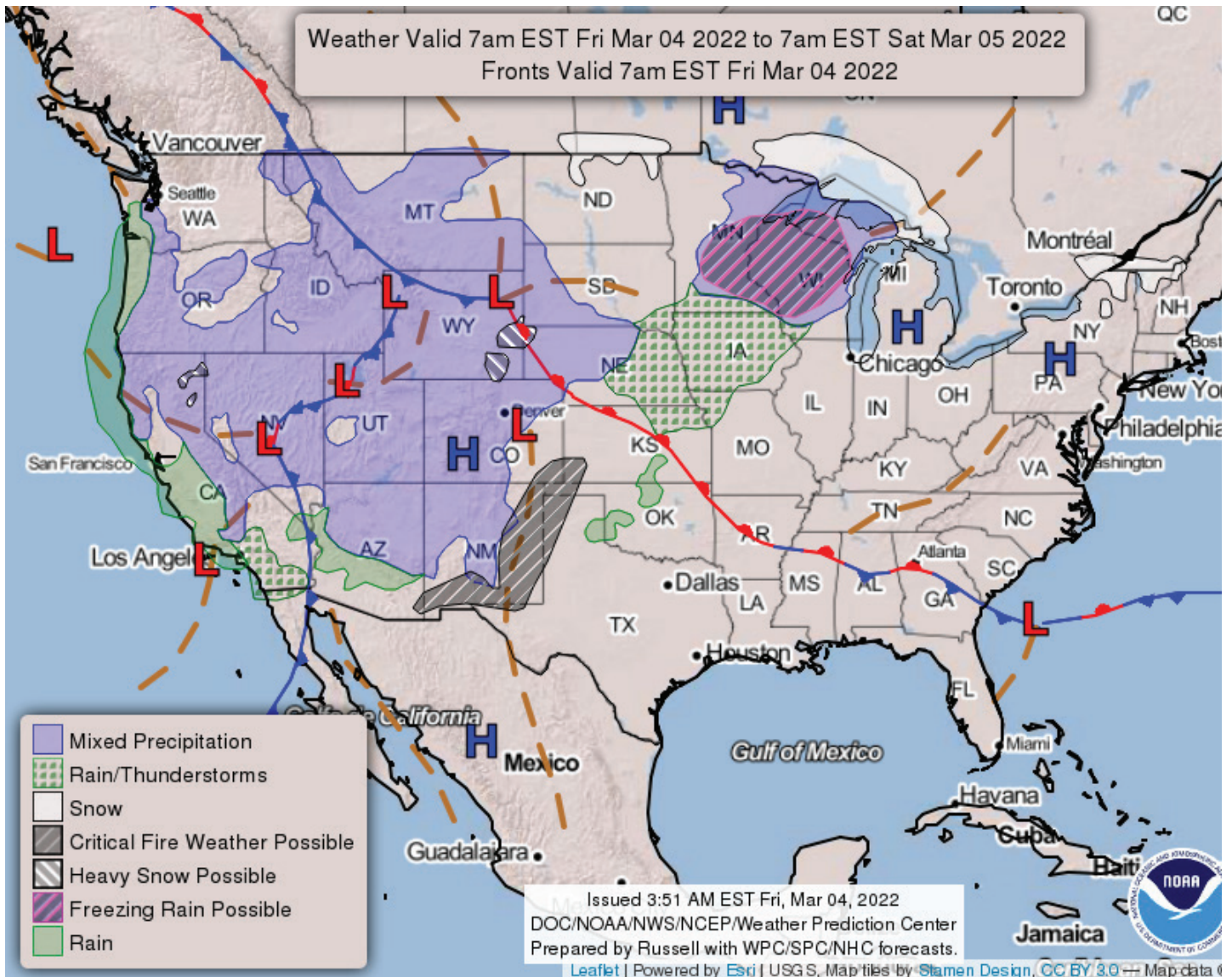
Precip to date in Mar.: 0.00

Average Precip to date: 1.27

Precip Year to Date: 0.97

Sunset Tonight: 6:24:55 PM

Sunrise Tomorrow: 7:01:19 AM



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WHO'S RIGHT?

If we want to be blessed by God, we must strive with all our hearts to live lives that are blameless and walk according to His laws. Those of us who keep His statutes, as well as those who seek God with all their heart, will also be blessed. The first two verses of Psalm 119 are very clear about whom God will bless.

The question then becomes: Where do we find God's laws and statutes? And how do we know if we are truly seeking God with all our heart? If we can know His laws and statutes, that is a beginning. But the questions that follow are, "Will they ever change? Is God one way today and another way tomorrow? Where's our assurance? What do we need to know and do to please Him?"

With all the power God has at His disposal, He can change anything and everything any time He chooses to. It's His universe. He created it. It serves His purpose.

But near the middle of Psalm 119, the author gives us all the assurance we need: "God's Word is established in heaven, and His faithfulness can be seen in the way He treats every generation." To further explain God's dependability, the author encourages us to consider the "earth." God created it and established the laws that govern it. Furthermore, the laws that God put into place have been constant since creation. Everything we know anything about depends on this fact. The seasons and stars, the oceans and tides validate this law consistently.

In verse 96 we find an amazing statement: When we look at the laws that men write, there is a limit to their longevity. God's laws, however, are "boundless!"

Prayer: We thank You, Lord, that we can depend on Your Word. And if we accept it and live it, we will be blessed! In Jesus' Name, Amen.

Scripture For Today: Your faithfulness continues through all generations; you established the earth, and it endures. Psalm 119:90

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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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The Groton Independent

Printed & Mailed Weekly Edition

Subscription Form

All prices listed include 6.5% Sales Tax

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News from the  Associated Press

Thursday's Scores

The Associated Press

GIRLS PREP BASKETBALL=

SDHSAA SoDak 16=

Class A=

State Qualifier=

Dakota Valley 63, Mt. Vernon/Plankinton 54

Hamlin 56, Belle Fourche 34

Lakota Tech 59, Flandreau 54

Red Cloud 50, Florence/Henry 44

Sioux Falls Christian 60, Sisseton 37

St. Thomas More 39, Vermillion 36

Wagner 36, Winner 33

West Central 54, Crow Creek 40

Class B=

State Qualifier=

Aberdeen Christian 46, Centerville 35

Aberdeen Roncalli 54, Bison 23

Corsica/Stickney 70, Bridgewater-Emery 33

DeSmet 57, Avon 44

Faith 47, Sully Buttes 44

Viborg-Hurley 48, Castlewood 36

Wall 50, Howard 25

White River 44, Herreid/Selby Area 32

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

SD lawmaker criticized for using derogatory term for woman

PIERRE, S.D. (AP) — A South Dakota lawmaker who is running for governor faced backlash Thursday from Gov. Kristi Noem and female legislators after he used a derogatory term for a woman during a speech on the House floor.

Republican Rep. Steve Haugaard described a woman whom he did not name but said was addicted to methamphetamine as a "wrung-out whore." At the time, Haugaard was speaking against a bill that would allow physician assistants and advanced nurse practitioners to recommend medical marijuana, which he described as a gateway drug.

Haugaard's use of the term drew an audible reaction from lawmakers on the floor, who called for a "point of order," and he was told to keep his comments to the bill at hand. Haugaard later apologized on the House floor.

He told reporters the comment "was intended to make the point of how devastating drugs are for so many people."

Haugaard said he knew the woman, though offered no further details, and said: "The reason I use those words is that's where she found herself. That's what she described to me."

But female lawmakers in both parties spoke out against Haugaard, a former House speaker who is mounting a Republican primary challenge against Noem as a more conservative option

"I doubted my ability to compose myself," Republican Rep. Tamara St. John posted on Twitter after Haugaard's comments. "I stand by the young women who struggle and have addiction problems."

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Democratic Rep. Erin Healy said that "a line was crossed on the House floor," adding that "misogyny" and "aggression towards women" shouldn't be allowed in the Legislature.

She said he should have been gavelled down after making the comment.

Noem said in a statement she was appalled by Haugaard's language and called on legislators to reprimand and censure him.

\$150 million of Noem's workforce housing stalls in House

PIERRE, S.D. (AP) — South Dakota Republican lawmakers are locked in a battle over a plan from Gov. Kristi Noem to send \$200 million to workforce housing after part of the proposal failed to pass the House Thursday.

House lawmakers spent hours debating a proposal to send \$150 million to the South Dakota Housing Development Authority for a loan program to pay for infrastructure construction around housing developments. But it failed by a single vote to get the two-thirds majority necessary for special appropriations bills, the Argus Leader reported.

The setback to Noem's proposal comes as she has sparred with a group of House Republicans who control the appropriations committee, which forms the state budget and evaluates other one-time spending projects. Lawmakers are debating how to spend roughly \$1 billion in federal funds for pandemic recovery, as well as other funds.

"We have a dysfunctional House Appropriations committee," the governor said at a news conference. "They're being way more political than they are governing, and that's a disservice to the process that we have here."

But Rep. Chris Karr, who chairs the committee, says the proposals are not good uses of taxpayer funds. Proponents of the housing plan still have other options to get the money through other bills.

Police arrest North Dakota man suspected in jail explosion

FAIRMOUNT, N.D. (AP) — A North Dakota man suspected of setting off an explosive device in a jail earlier this week was arrested Thursday after setting fire to his garage and barricading himself in a house.

The five-hour standoff ended without incident after the Red River Valley SWAT team was summoned from Fargo and Moorhead, Minnesota to help negotiate with the suspect after giving him a phone. No injuries were reported.

"It took a lot of time but they eventually got him to actually come out on his own," Richland County Sheriff Larry Leshovsky said, adding that it was the ending that police wanted. Police recovered weapons and possibly some more explosive devices in the residence, he said.

Fairmount is located next to the Minnesota border and about 10 miles from South Dakota.

Police had earlier obtained a search warrant for the suspect's home as part of the investigation into an explosion and fire Tuesday in the lobby of the Richland County Law Enforcement Center in Wahpeton, which is 15 miles north of Fairmount. Authorities said the device appeared to be poorly constructed.

Leshovsky said the suspect is known to have mental health issues. Authorities said he had earlier posted a message on social media saying that he's "upset over the whole world."

The Fairmount school went into lockdown and the streets were blocked off during the standoff.

South Dakota US House candidate withdraws over tweets

By STEPHEN GROVES Associated Press

PIERRE, S.D. (AP) — A Democratic candidate for South Dakota's only U.S. House seat said he is withdrawing his candidacy Thursday after coming under scrutiny for tweets he made from his personal account before he considered running for public office.

Ryan Ryder, an Air Force veteran and lawyer from Black Hawk, was running for the seat held by Republican Rep. Dusty Johnson.

The South Dakota Democratic Party said it requested that Ryder drop his candidacy. In one of Ryder's tweets, he suggested that he should make an animated video of Johnson's family getting killed.

"I am withdrawing from the race," Ryder told The Associated Press. When asked why, he said: "These tweets were a poor attempt at sarcasm (and) humor. And they crossed the line and I apologized to the state and the party and I don't want them to reflect badly on the party."

His campaign website was not publicly accessible Thursday.

In an earlier interview with the AP on Thursday, Ryder said he made the tweet in response to Johnson's vote in November against censuring Arizona Republican Rep. Paul Gosar for a violent cartoon video that depicted killing a character that looked like New York Rep. Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez.

Dakota News Now reported that many of Ryder's tweets over the last several years expressed a dislike for South Dakota Republican politicians. In one tweet, he made a remark about performing sexual acts to a picture of Gov. Kristi Noem.

Democratic state Rep. Jamie Smith, who is running for governor, distanced himself from Ryder on Thursday, saying he didn't know him or support him.

"I do not condone them in any way, shape or form," he said of the tweets. "It's not how I treat people. It's not what I do."

South Dakota GOP chair Dan Lederman said in a statement that Democrats should not have picked such a "contemptible candidate."

The South Dakota Democratic Party initially said it intends to stand behind Ryder. Chair Randy Seiler later said in a statement that Ryder's tweets "do not live up to the values of the South Dakota Democratic Party, and we do not support this type of language."

Associated Press writer Amy Forliti in Minneapolis contributed to this report.

SD Republican senators reject K-12 'divisive concept' ban

By STEPHEN GROVES Associated Press

PIERRE, S.D. (AP) — A Republican-controlled South Dakota Senate committee on Thursday dismissed Gov. Kristi Noem's proposal to ban public K-12 school curricula that compels people to feel "discomfort" based on their race.

The Senate Education Committee voted 4-3 to reject the proposal. The move, made by three Republicans and a Democrat, was a major blow to Noem's proposal, which she had touted as a repudiation of critical race theory. It could still be resurrected with widespread support in the full Senate.

The bill's text makes no mention of critical race theory — an issue that has in the last year morphed from an obscure academic discussion point on the left into a political rallying cry on the right. Instead, it lays out a list of "divisive concepts," including that individuals are "inherently responsible" for past actions or "should feel discomfort, guilt, anguish, or any other form of psychological distress on account" of their race.

The Republican governor has this year pushed a pair of bills, applying separately to universities and K-12 schools, as a way to ensure "students are not taught that they are responsible for (the) different actions of our ancestors."

The Senate committee this week listened to hours of debate, both from those who championed the bills and critics who say they would squelch classroom discussions on racism and history.

"Racism is alive and well in this state, and I think it would be more beneficial to talk about that," said Democratic Sen. Troy Heinert.

Republican senators opposed to the K-12 school bill argued that it was unnecessary because Noem can already influence classroom lessons by setting the state's educational standards. Other lawmakers warned against the Legislature and governor intruding into classroom discussions.

"I see government looking over the shoulders of teachers," Republican Sen. V.J. Smith said of the bill.

On Tuesday, the committee narrowly advanced the bill applying to public universities, and it was set for a vote in the Senate next week.

It would ban universities from making students or faculty members adhere to the “divisive concepts” or promoting them in required trainings. But it carves out an exception for academic courses.

Person of interest held in connection with suspicious death

SIOUX FALLS, S.D. (AP) — A person of interest is being held in the suspicious death of a 20-year-old Lincoln County woman, sheriff’s officials said.

According to authorities, Randi Gerlach was found dead in a residence south of Sioux Falls along Highway 11 Tuesday afternoon.

Multiple agencies, including the Lincoln County Sheriff’s Office and the South Dakota Department of Investigation, are working on the case.

A 22-year-old man was taken into custody in the Mitchell area following a traffic stop. He was taken to the Minnehaha County Jail and booked on an initial charge of violating a no contact order in Lincoln County.

Sheriff’s officials say more charges are possible as the investigation continues.

Gerlach’s family plans to hold a vigil Thursday at 7 p.m. at Dunham Park in Sioux Falls.

Only-in-winter stories pass on Ojibwe spiritual teachings

By GIOVANNA DELL’ORTO Associated Press

GRAND PORTAGE, Minn. (AP) — The two-dozen schoolchildren sat in a circle for about an hour, enthralled, as Gordon Jourdain regaled them with tales of the Creator and the origins of their Ojibwe people. As the session wound down, one boy raised his hand and asked, to a chorus of giggles, “How did girls come to be on the planet?”

The storyteller at first kept a serious face as he told them a full answer would take hours to recount. Then he cracked a broad smile.

“The first was Mother Earth, and isn’t she beautiful?” Jourdain enthused, urging them to look outside at the sunshine sparkling on 24 inches of pristine snow, among fir-covered hills overlooking a small bay on a frozen Lake Superior.

The classroom scene at Oshki Ogimaag charter elementary school in this far-northern Minnesota village highlighted the crucial role that oral storytelling plays in Ojibwe spiritual tradition, as is the case with other Native American peoples. Believed to be in itself a gift from the Creator, the ritual telling of creation, spirits and ceremonies helps keep cultural worldviews, ethical teachings and religious experiences alive across generations.

“In Ojibwe culture, storytelling is part of the fabric that connects us to one another, to the spirits that watch over us all,” said Anton Treuer, a professor of Ojibwe language and culture at Bemidji State University who has spent more than three decades working on revitalizing the language.

“Winter legends are the equivalent of Aesop’s Fables,” Treuer added. “Fun and accessible to children, but they also carry deeper messages about our view of the world.”

The late February snow on the ground outside the school was more than just a teaching point for Jourdain: Its presence was in fact vital, since Ojibwe tradition holds that many stories may be told only in winter.

That’s when the spirits featured in the tales are believed to be less active, as nature’s creatures, from majestic bears to lowly leeches, rest under a blanket of snow. The point is to avoid offending the spirits, which have powers.

“Our spirits are human-like. Just like people, you talk about them and they can take it the wrong way,” said Erik Redix, who teaches Ojibwe at the school and organized the storytelling session and another, public one later the same day at the community lodge across the street. They were the first in-person sessions since the pandemic hit, and attendees wore face masks.

The stories told that day in Grand Portage centered on the original man, Wenabozho, also called Nenabozho, and his family. They conveyed what Jourdain called the dichotomous nature of all beings, down to the ferocious winter wind that coats waters with ice but allows the fish and turtles underneath to survive.

Pacing inside the circle with animated gestures and alternating seamlessly between Ojibwe and Eng-

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lish, Jourdain, whose Ojibwe name is Maajigwaneyaash, told of Wenabozho's exploration of creation and adventures such as being gifted with fire. He also recounted humorous mishaps, such as the tale of how Wenabozho once challenged a far-away figure to see who could stand tallest for the longest time, only for it to be revealed upon closer inspection to be a tree.

"We learn from Wenabozho's mistakes, too," Redix said.

One tale in particular, of the beaver whose tail inspired Wenabozho to invent the canoe paddle, resonated deeply with the children in the village, which for centuries has been home to Ojibwe people and takes its name from a canoe portage widely used by European fur traders.

Organizers said there has been an increased push in recent years to hold such events in schools, lodges and even pandemic Zoom gatherings. That heightened urgency comes amid a realization that the ancestral teachings should be preserved alongside the Ojibwe language that they were first expressed in but is now the first tongue for only a few older tribal members.

"This is exactly how my grandmother taught me," said Jourdain, a native speaker of Ojibwe and member of the Lac La Croix First Nation in Ontario, who earned a doctorate in education and now directs a leading Ojibwe immersion institution in Wisconsin.

Indigenous religions and languages were historically suppressed in campaigns to forcibly assimilate Native children across North America, especially through boarding schools precisely because of their importance for cultural identity, said Sarah Dees, a professor of American religions at Iowa State University.

But they are seeing a resurgence everywhere from reservation schools to university programs and even online language platforms — an Ojibwe program launched this week as a partnership between Rosetta Stone and the Mille Lacs Band of Ojibwe in Minnesota.

"Stories are always reincorporated in the communities. They're really living," Dees said. "Those who keep the stories have such an important role in their communities."

For his part, Jourdain sees that role as imparting all his knowledge on earth before he returns to the spirit world, developing the next storytellers who will carry on the oral traditions.

"These kids' first language is English, but they have a blood memory and will want to learn these teachings," he said.

Mary Hannen came to the event at the lodge with her 6-year-old niece because, as she said, "we want to make sure the next generation will share our traditions."

As temperatures plummeted well below zero outside, where the only sound was the ice groaning on the frozen bay, the lodge echoed with peals of laughter and the kids' excited questions.

"I hope they're always proud of where they came from," Hannen said, "and be a community."

Associated Press religion coverage receives support through the AP's collaboration with The Conversation US, with funding from Lilly Endowment Inc. The AP is solely responsible for this content.

Best (and Worst) Housing Markets for Growth and Stability – 2022 Edition

Stephanie Horan, CEPF® undefined

Home prices shot up an average of roughly 17% during 2021 and continued to rise during the first month of this year, according to Freddie Mac data. This spike has led some researchers to hypothesize that the housing market could overheat, especially as the Federal Reserve looks to raise rates. However, most industry experts continue to think this possibility is unlikely. "While it's impossible to predict what the future holds, much of what caused last year's significant house price growth will continue into the next," licensed real estate broker Kris Lippi told SmartAsset.

In this study, SmartAsset investigated the housing markets that are best for growth and stability, comparing home value data in 400 metropolitan areas across the U.S. We looked at statistics from every quarter from the first quarter of 1997 through the fourth quarter of 2021. For details on our data sources

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and how we put all the information together to create our final rankings, read the Data and Methodology section below.

This is SmartAsset's eighth look at the best housing markets for growth and stability. Read the 2021 version of our study here.

Key Findings Austin-Round Rock-Georgetown ousts Midland for the top spot. Though Midland, Texas ranked as the top housing market for growth and stability in our 2020 and 2021 versions of this study, this year it moves down to third. Specifically, the 25-year average home price growth in Austin-Round Rock-Georgetown surpasses Midland by a margin of roughly 102%. Texas and Colorado housing markets rank well. Five of the top 10 housing markets for growth and stability are located in Texas and two are in Colorado. Home-buying expert Liz Hutz notes that "the two main drivers of price increases are economic growth and job creation." Cities in both Texas and Colorado rank well in our top boomtowns in America study, which looks at both of those factors. Michigan housing markets fall behind. Three of the five worst housing markets for growth and stability are in Michigan. They include Flint, Monroe and Detroit-Dearborn-Livonia. In all three areas, the home price index has an average annualized increase of 2.62% or less over the past 25 years. Best Housing Markets for Growth and Stability 1. Austin-Round Rock-Georgetown, TX

Moving up from the second spot, Austin-Round Rock-Georgetown, Texas ranks as the best metro area housing market for growth and stability in this year's study. Home prices increased nearly 368% from 1997 through the end of 2021, the highest increase among all 400 metro areas in our study. Meanwhile, there was a 0% chance that a home would suffer a 5% drop in price within 10 years of being purchased.

2. Boulder, CO

According to data from the Federal Housing Administration (FHA), the home price index in Boulder, Colorado rose by more than 277% from 1997 through 2021. Additionally, home prices in Boulder have been relatively stable during that 25-year period, with a 1% chance of a 5% or more drop in home price within a decade of buying.

3. Midland, TX

Part of western Texas, Midland has consistently ranked as one of the best housing markets for growth and stability in the last several editions of our study. This year, we found that Midland ties for first on stability and ranks 38th-best for growth, with a 25-year home price increase of more than 265%.

4. Rapid City, SD

With home prices rising almost 231% over the past 25 years, Rapid City, South Dakota ranks as the fourth-best housing market for growth and stability. Looking at quarterly home price index data, we found that the average home price in the area never dropped by 5% or more within a 10-year period from 1997 through 2021.

5. Fort Collins, CO

Fort Collins, Colorado claims the fifth spot in our rankings, moving up from sixth last year. The Fort Collins area saw home prices climb nearly 242% between 1997 and 2021, the 61st-highest growth rate in our study. The odds of a 5% price drop in Boulder within 10 years of a home's purchase were just 2%.

Worst Housing Markets for Growth and Stability 1. Flint, MI

Like last year, the Flint metro area ranks as the worst housing market for growth and stability. Using historical data, we found that the chance a home price dropped more than 5% in value within 10 years of purchase is 45% - the second-worst rate for this metric. Additionally, over the past 25 years, the average home price has increased less than 83% - the 25th-worst in our study.

2. Monroe, MI

About 40 miles south of Detroit, the Monroe metro area ranks as the second-worst housing market for growth and stability. There is a 44% chance of a significant price decline for home buyers and from 1997 through 2021, the average home price index increased by only 83.77%, or an annualized rate of return of less than 3%.

3. East Stroudsburg, PA

Part of the Poconos, East Stroudsburg's housing market ranks the worst for stability in our study and 62nd-worst for growth. The probability of an East Stroudsburg homeowner experiencing a significant price

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decline is 46% and the overall home price index increased by less than 103% over the past 25 years.

4. Detroit-Dearborn-Livonia, MI

Over the past 25 years, the average home price in Detroit-Dearborn-Livonia, Michigan rose by only 2.62% annually on average. This is significantly lower than the annualized increase for the top housing market in our study (Austin-Round Rock-Georgetown, Texas, at 6.37%). Additionally, Detroit-Dearborn-Livonia ties with Monroe for the third-worst housing market stability score.

5. Rockford, IL

Located in northern Illinois, Rockford ranks as the fifth-worst housing market for growth and stability across all 400 metro areas we considered. If you bought a home in the Rockford metro area between 1997 and 2021, there was a 39% chance the home would have lost at least 5% of its value within 10 years of its purchase. Home prices, meanwhile, rose just 67.25% in that timespan, 398th of the 400 metro areas studied.

Data and Methodology To rank the best and worst housing markets for growth and stability, we looked at data for 400 metro areas and specifically compared them across these two metrics:

Stability. This is the probability that homeowners experienced a significant price decline (5% or more) at any point in the 10 years after they purchased the home. Overall home price growth. The total growth in home prices during the time period we analyzed. All data comes from the Federal Housing Administration (FHA) and covers the 25-year period from the first quarter of 1997 through the fourth quarter of 2021.

We used these two metrics to create our final rankings. Areas received a score of 100 on the stability metric if there was a 0% chance of a significant price decline. The metro area with the highest chance of a significant price decline (46%) received a score of 0. Similarly, the metro area with the highest overall home price growth received a growth index score of 100 and the metro area with the lowest growth received a 0. We then averaged each metro area's scores over the two metrics, ranking from highest average score to lowest.

Home-Buying Tips Calculate the full costs. Though a mortgage is typically the largest expense for homeowners, other costs like property taxes and home insurance can add up. Our mortgage calculator shows the total monthly breakdown across the loan payment and additional fees. Consider consulting a financial advisor before going through the home-buying process. Finding the right financial advisor that fits your needs doesn't have to be hard. SmartAsset's free tool matches you with up to three financial advisors who serve your area, and you can interview your advisor matches at no cost to decide which one is right for you. If you're ready to find an advisor who can help you achieve your financial goals, get started now. Questions about our study? Contact us at press@smartasset.com

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The post Best (and Worst) Housing Markets for Growth and Stability - 2022 Edition appeared first on SmartAsset Blog.

Fire out at key Ukraine nuclear plant, no radiation released

By JIM HEINTZ, YURAS KARMANAU and MSTYSLAV CHERNOV Associated Press

KYIV, Ukraine (AP) — No radiation was released from a Russian attack at Europe's biggest nuclear power plant in Ukraine and firefighters have extinguished a blaze at the facility, U.N. and Ukrainian officials said Friday, as Russian forces pressed their campaign to cripple the country despite global condemnation.

The International Atomic Energy Agency's director-general, Rafael Mariano Grossi, said Friday the building hit by a Russian "projectile" at the Zaporizhzhia plant was "not part of the reactor" but instead a training center at the plant.

Nuclear officials from Sweden to China said no radiation spikes had been reported, as did Grossi. Ukrainian officials have said Russian troops took control of the overall site, but the plant's staff were continuing to ensure its operations. Grossi said the Ukrainians were in control of the reactor.

In the frenzied initial aftermath when the risk of a radiation release was not clear, the attack caused worldwide concern — and evoked memories of the world's worst nuclear disaster, at Ukraine's Chernobyl.

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Facing worldwide indignation over the attack, Russia sought to deflect blame. Without producing evidence, Defense Ministry spokesman Igor Konashenkov blamed arson rather than artillery fire. He claimed a Ukrainian "sabotage group" had occupied the training building at the plant, fired on a Russian patrol and set fire to the building as they left.

There had been conflicting reports earlier over which part of the Zaporizhzhia facility had been affected in the attack, with an official saying at one point that shells fell directly on the facility and set fire to a reactor not in operation as well as a training building. Grossi later said that the fire was in the training center.

The confusion itself underscored the dangers of active fighting near a nuclear power plant. It was the second time since the invasion began just over a week ago that concerns about a nuclear accident or a release of radiation materialized, following a battle at Chernobyl.

Grossi said only one reactor of six at Zaporizhzhia is currently operating, at about 60% capacity, and that two people at the site were injured in the fire. Ukraine's state nuclear plant operator Enerhoatom said three Ukrainian soldiers were killed and two wounded.

The plant fire came as the Russian military advanced on a strategic city on the Dnieper River near where the facility is located, and gained ground in their bid to cut the country off from the sea. That move would deal a severe blow to Ukraine's economy and could worsen an already dire humanitarian situation.

With the invasion in its second week, another round of talks between Russia and Ukraine yielded a tentative agreement to set up safe corridors to evacuate citizens and deliver humanitarian aid to the country, overturned by a war that has sent more than 1 million fleeing over the border and countless others sheltering underground. A handful of cities are without heat and at least one is struggling to get food and water.

In the center of the capital, Kyiv, frequent shelling could still be heard Friday, although more distant than in recent days, with loud thudding every 10 minutes resonating over the rooftops.

The West has heaped sanctions on Russia, and most of the world lined up to demand Russia withdraw its troops in a vote in the U.N. General Assembly this week. In the latest show of international opposition to the invasion, the U.N.'s top human rights body voted 32-2 on a resolution that would among other things set up a panel of experts to monitor human rights in Ukraine. Only Russia and Eritrea opposed; there were 13 abstentions.

The attack on the nuclear facility led to phone calls between Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy and U.S. President Joe Biden and other world leaders. The U.S. Department of Energy activated its nuclear incident response team as a precaution.

British Prime Minister Boris Johnson called for an emergency meeting of the U.N. Security Council to raise the issue of Russia's attack on the plant.

In an emotional speech in the middle of the night, Zelenskyy said he feared an explosion that would be "the end for everyone. The end for Europe. The evacuation of Europe."

But most experts saw nothing to indicate an impending disaster.

"The real threat to Ukrainian lives continues to be the violent invasion and bombing of their country," the American Nuclear Society said in a statement.

Russian President Vladimir Putin's forces have brought their superior firepower to bear over the past few days, launching hundreds of missiles and artillery attacks on cities and other sites around the country and making significant gains in the south.

The Russians announced the capture of the southern city of Kherson, a vital Black Sea port of 280,000, and local Ukrainian officials confirmed the takeover of the government headquarters there, making it the first major city to fall since the invasion began just over a week ago.

A Russian airstrike on Thursday destroyed a power plant in Okhtyrka, leaving the northeastern city without heat or electricity, the head of the region said on Telegram.

"We are trying to figure out how to get people out of the city urgently because in a day the apartment buildings will turn into a cold stone trap without water, light or electricity," Dmytro Zhyvytskyy said.

Another strategic port, Mariupol on the Azov Sea, was "partially under siege," and Ukrainian forces are pushing back efforts to surround the city, Ukrainian presidential adviser Oleksiy Arestovich said Friday.

"The humanitarian situation is tense," he told reporters, adding that Ukrainian authorities are in talks

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with Russian representatives and international organizations to set up humanitarian corridor to evacuate residents and supply food.

Battles in the area have knocked out the city's electricity, heat and water systems, as well as most phone service, officials said. Food deliveries to the city were also cut.

Associated Press video from the port city Thursday showed the assault lighting up the darkening sky above deserted streets and medical teams treating civilians, including a 16-year-old boy who could not be saved. The child was playing soccer when he was wounded in the shelling, according to his father, who cradled the boy's head on the gurney and cried.

Ukraine's defense minister said Friday that the flagship of its navy has been scuttled at the shipyard where it was undergoing repairs in order to keep it from being seized by Russian forces. Oleksii Reznikov said on Facebook that the commander of the frigate Hetman Sahaidachny decided to flood the ship.

"It is hard to imagine a more difficult decision for a courageous soldier and crew," Reznikov said.

Ukraine's state emergency agency issued mass text messages Friday with advice on what to do in case of an explosion: Lie on the ground and cover your head with your hands; use available shelter; do not rush to leave the shelter; help the wounded; do not enter damaged buildings.

Overall, the outnumbered, outgunned Ukrainians have put up stiff resistance, staving off the swift victory that Russia appeared to have expected. But Russia's seizure of the Crimean Peninsula in 2014 gives it a logistical advantage now in the country's south, with shorter supply lines that smoothed the offensive there, said a senior U.S. defense official, speaking on condition of anonymity.

Ukrainian leaders called on the people to defend their homeland by cutting down trees, erecting barricades in the cities and attacking enemy columns from the rear. In recent days, authorities have issued weapons to civilians and taught them how to make Molotov cocktails.

At the second round of talks between Ukrainian and Russian delegations Thursday, Putin warned Ukraine it must quickly accept the Kremlin's demand for its "demilitarization" and declare itself neutral, renouncing its bid to join NATO.

The two sides said they tentatively agreed to allow cease-fires in areas designated safe corridors, and that they would seek to work out the necessary details quickly. A Zelenskyy adviser also said a third round of talks will be held early next week.

The Pentagon set up a direct communication link to Russia's Ministry of Defense earlier this week to avoid the possibility of a miscalculation sparking conflict between Moscow and Washington, according to a U.S. defense official who spoke on condition of anonymity because the link had not been announced.

Karmanau reported from Lviv, Ukraine. Chernov reported from Mariupol, Ukraine. Sergei Grits in Odesa, Ukraine; Francesca Ebel, Josef Federman and Andrew Drake in Kyiv; and other AP journalists from around the world contributed to this report.

Follow the AP's coverage of the Ukraine crisis at <https://apnews.com/hub/russia-ukraine>

Live updates: Japan sends defense supplies to Ukraine

By The Associated Press undefined

The latest developments on the Russia-Ukraine war:

TOKYO — Japan is sending bulletproof vests, helmets and other defense supplies to Ukraine to help the country fight Russia's invasion.

It is a rare move by Japan, which has a principle of not shipping defense supplies to countries in conflict.

Chief Cabinet Secretary Hirokazu Matsuno told reporters Friday that shipping and other logistical details are being finalized after a decision by the National Security Council.

Bulletproof vests, helmets, tents, as well as generators, food, winter clothes and medical supplies will be delivered by Self-Defense Force aircraft, Matsuno said.

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The planned shipment comes after a request from Ukraine. Japan, because of its pacifist principles, is supplying only non-lethal goods, Matsuno said.

"(Russia's) unilateral change of status quo by force, which is absolutely unallowable, is an act that shakes the foundation of international order," he said. "International society is sticking together and taking unprecedented steps to support Ukraine."

WARSAW, Poland — Polish security services say they have arrested a Spanish citizen on suspicion of spying for Russia.

Security services spokesman Stanislaw Zaryn said the man, who was born in Russia but holds a Spanish passport, was arrested on the night of Feb. 27 at a hotel in Przemysl, in southeastern Poland, and had journalist status.

Przemysl, near Poland's border with Ukraine, is one of the main points where hundreds of thousands of Ukrainian refugees arrive as they flee Russia's invasion.

Also, thousands of additional U.S. troops recently deployed to Poland to strengthen NATO's eastern flank are stationed in the area.

The man allegedly was collecting information that was sensitive to Poland's security and defense, Zaryn told The Associated Press.

The man is accused of spying for Russia. If convicted, he could get up to 10 years in prison.

BERLIN — Austria's former chancellor Wolfgang Schuessel has quit his post on the supervisory board of Russian oil firm Lukoil.

The Austria Press Agency quoted Schuessel on Friday saying that while he had always backed "constructive relations" between Russia and the European Union, the Russian invasion of neighbor Ukraine had "crossed a red line."

Schuessel said he had worked to help produce a statement by Lukoil this week that called for an end to the conflict.

COPENHAGEN, Denmark — With Europeans unnerved by a Russian attack on a nuclear power plant in Ukraine, Norwegian health authorities want municipalities to review iodine preparedness for children under 18, pregnant and breastfeeding women.

"Although no emissions from nuclear power plants in Ukraine have been reported, the risk of accidents and incidents is higher than normal due to the war in the country," deputy health director Espen Rostrup Nakstad said Friday.

Since 2017, iodine tablets have been recommended as a contingency measure by the Directorate for Radiation Protection and Nuclear Safety (DSA) and the Norwegian Directorate of Health, the latter said in a statement.

It added that approximately 2.2 million tablets are stored in the municipalities for this purpose. In addition, people between the ages of 18 and 40 are recommended to buy iodine tablets at pharmacies as self-preparedness.

"In the current situation, it is not relevant to use iodine tablets, but we still want the municipalities to be sure that they are available at short notice if there is a need for it," Rostrup Nakstad said.

Recent reports say sales of iodine tablets in Denmark, Sweden and Finland have increased sharply since Russia's invasion of Ukraine.

GENEVA — The U.N.'s top human rights body has voted overwhelmingly to appoint a three-person panel of experts to monitor human rights in Ukraine, where Russian forces are invading.

The Human Rights Council voted 32-2, with 13 abstentions, to pass a resolution that was presented by many Western countries and others who have spoken out against Moscow's attack on its neighbor.

Only Russia and Eritrea opposed the resolution, with China abstaining.

The vote Friday was the culmination of an urgent debate called by Ukraine, during which most council

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members lambasted Russia.

Many Western envoys sported blue or yellow ties, scarves, jackets or ribbons on their lapels, in a reference to the colors of the Ukrainian flag. Far-flung countries such as Gambia and Malaysia spoke out against the invasion.

The result testified to growing international isolation of Russia: On Monday, five countries — including China — had voted against Ukraine's effort to convene the urgent debate.

Ukraine's ambassador Yevheniia Filipenko, her eyes red with emotion, told delegates after the vote: "I thank all those who voted for the right course."

BERLIN — Chancellor Olaf Scholz says Germany and its partners have determined there is currently no risk to the public from a fire at a Ukrainian nuclear plant.

Speaking to reporters during a visit to German troops Friday, Scholz said Germany had immediately performed measurements and exchanged information with other nations following the incident at the Zaporizhzhia plant, where Russian forces attacked late Thursday.

Scholz said the incident shows how dangerous the situation in Ukraine is.

Scholz said it is "completely clear" that NATO will not participate in the conflict in Ukraine, where the country's president wants a no-fly zone to be imposed.

"Together we are ensuring that nobody attacks NATO territory," Scholz said, noting that the alliance has positioned additional troops in its eastern member states for this purpose.

WARSAW, Poland — Poland's pharmaceutical authorities say customers are asking whether they should take iodine to protect against radiation, after a nuclear plant in neighboring Ukraine was targeted by invading Russian troops.

Tomasz Lelenc, spokesman for Poland's Main Pharmaceutical Chamber, said Friday that pharmacists and doctors are advising against that, because iodine may cause more harm than good if used without consulting a doctor.

The United Nations atomic watchdog said there has been no release of radiation at the Zaporizhzhia nuclear plant after a building on the site was hit by Russian shelling.

But the development has alarmed Poles. Sale of iodine solution had already surged last week, after Russian troops took control of Ukraine's idled Chernobyl nuclear plant, where there was an accidental meltdown in 1986.

After Chernobyl, many people in Poland, especially the young, took iodine, as some experts claimed it could shield against radiation.

VIENNA — The head of the UN atomic agency says a Ukrainian nuclear plant was hit by a Russian "projectile" but that the building it struck was a training center and there has been no release of radiation.

Initial reports were unclear about what part of the plant was affected by a fire that broke out after the shelling late Thursday, amid Russia's invasion of Ukraine.

International Atomic Energy Agency Director-General Rafael Mariano Grossi said Friday that the building was "not part of the reactor."

He said Ukrainians are still in control of the reactor and the fire has been extinguished.

The Ukrainian state nuclear company said three Ukrainian troops were killed and two wounded in the Russian attack.

The UN says only one reactor at the plant is operating, at about 60% of capacity.

MOSCOW — Russia's state media regulator Roskomnadzor is blocking access to the websites of five international media organizations.

State news agency RIA Novosti reported Friday that the blocked websites include those of the BBC, Voice of America and Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty.

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The sites were blocked for hosting what Roskomnadzor told RIA was "false information" about Russian military actions in Ukraine, including reports of attacks on civilians and the Russian military's losses.

The five named organizations, also including Latvia-based Russian-language website Meduza and German broadcaster Deutsche Welle, are among the largest foreign news outlets with Russian-language news operations.

On the early afternoon in Moscow, the BBC Russian service and Radio Free Europe Russian-language content were not reachable, but Voice of America content remained accessible.

BERLIN — UNICEF says that about 500,000 children have been forced to flee their homes in Ukraine over the past week due to Russia's invasion, calling the exodus "unprecedented in scale and speed."

"If the violence (doesn't) stop, many, many more children will be forced to flee their country in a very short space of time," James Elder, a spokesman for the United Nations Children's Fund, said Friday. "And we fear many more will be killed."

He said UNICEF is sending large amounts of humanitarian supplies to Ukraine to help those in need and also providing emergency training to pediatricians who are being sent to the region.

"They're preparing for a mass casualty of children," he said, adding that the training included a triage system for treating children.

The International Organization for Migration said Friday that so far 1.25 million people have fled Ukraine, including almost 80,000 third-country nationals.

LONDON — Google is suspending sales of online ads in Russia after the country's communications regulator demanded the tech giant stop spreading through its advertising what Moscow called false information about the Russian military in Ukraine.

The company said late Thursday that the suspension covers YouTube, search and display ads.

Google is one of the world's biggest sellers of online ads.

The Russian regulator, Roskomnadzor, issued several notices to Google this week warning the company about spreading false information or demanding it ease restrictions on YouTube channels operated by Russian media.

Separately, Airbnb CEO Brian Chesky tweeted that the short-stay booking site is suspending all operations in Russia and its neighboring ally Belarus. Chesky did not elaborate.

KYIV, Ukraine — Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy wants a no-fly zone to be imposed over his country in the wake of Russian shelling of Europe's largest nuclear plant.

The attack on the Zaporizhzhia plant did not produce elevated radiation levels, but Zelenskyy on Friday evoked the 1986 Chernobyl nuclear plant explosion and fire to raise alarm about further attacks.

The plant "could be like six Chernobyls. The Russian tanks knew what they were shelling ... This is terror on an unprecedented level," he said.

Any attempt by European air forces to impose a no-fly zone would likely severely escalate the conflict.

Zelenskyy also called on Russian civilians to express outrage about the plant attack.

"Radiation does not know where the Russian border is," he said.

BERLIN — The shelling of a large Ukrainian nuclear power plant by invading Russian forces has brought a chorus of outrage from top European officials.

European leaders on Friday expressed dismay and anger at the incident, with Italian Premier Mario Draghi condemning the strike on the nuclear plant as "an attack against everyone."

Estonian Prime Minister Kaja Kallas said that "attacking nuclear facilities is a criminal act to terrorize the public."

Latvian Foreign Minister Edgars Rinkevics on Twitter called the shelling "insane."

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German Foreign Minister Annalena Baerbock accused the Kremlin of attacking its neighbor Ukraine with "undiminished force and brutality, carrying out wanton destruction, besieging entire cities and trying to grind down the civilian population."

Speaking ahead of a meeting of European Union foreign ministers in Brussels, Baerbock said efforts would continue to put political and economic pressure on Russian President Vladimir Putin and to isolate Russia for as long as the war continues.

"With his war against Ukraine (Putin) is also driving his own country into ruin," Baerbock said.

TOKYO — Japanese electronics company Panasonic Group says it has stopped shipments to Russia because of logistical and other challenges.

The Osaka-based company said Friday it is donating about 20 million yen (\$174,000) to the Polish Red Cross, in support of those who evacuated from Ukraine, and to Peace Winds Japan, an NGO that gives aid to Ukraine.

"We hope that the world will return to peace and security as soon as possible," the company said in a statement expressing condolences for the victims.

Panasonic makes household gadgets that are exported around the world. Panasonic also has research and energy businesses.

MOSCOW — The Russian parliament has passed a bill introducing sentences of up to 15 years in prison for intentionally spreading "fake" information about military action.

Russian state news agencies reported Friday the passing of the bill in the third and final reading.

The development came amid a crackdown by Russian authorities on independent media and criticism of last week's invasion of Ukraine.

The bill now heads to the upper house of parliament, whose approval is expected to be a formality, before President Vladimir Putin can sign it into law.

Duma Speaker Vyacheslav Volodin says it may enter into force as early as Saturday.

Spreading what Russian authorities deem to be false information is punishable by up to three years in prison, or 15 years if it is deemed to have "severe consequences." The bill also bans calling for sanctions to be implemented against Russia.

Less than two hours after the bill was passed, news website Znak said it was shutting down, citing "the large number of restrictions which have appeared recently affecting the work of media in Russia."

Russia's top independent radio station Ekho Moskvyy was closed Thursday and independent TV station Dozhdh ceased operations after receiving a threat of closure from the authorities.

BRUSSELS — NATO Secretary-General Jens Stoltenberg has condemned Russia's attack on a nuclear power plant in southeast Ukraine and is urging Russian President Vladimir Putin to pull his invading troops out of the country.

Stoltenberg says the shelling of the Zaporizhzhia nuclear plant "just demonstrates the recklessness of this war, the importance of ending it, and the importance of Russia withdrawing all its troops and engaging in good faith in diplomatic efforts."

Russian forces have seized control of the nuclear site, the largest of its kind in Europe.

Stoltenberg's remarks came before he chaired a meeting Friday of U.S. Secretary of State Antony Blinken and his NATO counterparts to take stock of the West's response to Russia's invasion of Ukraine.

Blinken is set to meet later Friday with foreign ministers from the European Union.

BERLIN — The head of the International Committee of the Red Cross says the humanitarian group is "seeing a devastating humanitarian crisis unfold in Ukraine."

Peter Maurer called Friday for all parties in the conflict to adhere to the rules of war, sparing civilians from military operations and allowing them safe passage.

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Maurer said Red Cross teams are "receiving a flood of calls from people desperate for safety." "Casualty figures keep rising while health facilities struggle to cope," he said. "Civilians staying in underground shelters tell us that they fled shells falling directly overhead. They have no extra clothes, supplies or their needed medication. They need assistance now."

COPENHAGEN, Denmark — Norway's Prime Minister Jonas Gahr Støre said the Russian shelling that led to a fire at Europe's biggest nuclear plant was "in line with madness."

The fire was put out early Friday and Ukrainian officials said that radiation levels in the area weren't at dangerous levels.

If there were a leak, "it will take about 48 hours before it arrives in Norway," Gahr Støre told Norwegian broadcaster NRK.

In Lithuania, President Gitanas Nausėda described the attacks by Russian forces on Ukraine's nuclear power plants as "nuclear terrorism" and called for an immediate international response to "Russia's nuclear crimes."

The world learned of the 1986 Chernobyl disaster in the Soviet Union only after heightened radiation was detected in Sweden. Norway, which neighbors Sweden, was also able to measure higher-than-normal level of radioactivity 36 years ago.

In recent days, there have been reports that sales of iodine tablets in Sweden and Denmark have increased sharply since Russia's invasion of Ukraine, with authorities saying there is no reason for people to be taking iodine tablets linked to events in Ukraine.

BEIJING — China says it is "seriously concerned about the safety and security" of nuclear facilities in Ukraine following a blaze at Europe's biggest nuclear plant ignited by Russian artillery fire.

Foreign Ministry spokesperson Wang Wenbin told reporters Friday that China will continue to follow developments at the Zaporizhzhia plant in the city of Enerhodar and "calls on all parties concerned to maintain calm and restraint, prevent further escalation of the situation and ensure the safety of the nuclear facilities concerned."

"China attaches great importance to nuclear safety and is seriously concerned about the safety and security situation of nuclear facilities in Ukraine," Wang said.

The spokesperson's comments marked a rare Chinese sign of unease over the war in Ukraine, in which Beijing has largely sided with its neighbor and close security partner Russia. Chinese leader Xi Jinping hosted Russian President Vladimir Putin in early February, after which the sides issued a lengthy joint statement pledging mutual support.

China has abstained on votes at the United Nations on sanctioning Russia and demanding the withdrawal of Russian troops, and blamed the unprovoked Russian invasion on NATO's eastern advance and a lack of attention to Russia's security concerns.

LONDON — Britain's deputy prime minister says Russia's shelling of a nuclear power plant is an example of the ever more brutal tactics Russian President Vladimir Putin is resorting to as his invasion of Ukraine faces greater resistance than expected.

Dominic Raab's comments came after shelling triggered a fire at the Zaporizhzhia power plant overnight. U.K. Prime Minister Boris Johnson has called for an emergency meeting of the U.N. Security Council to discuss the attack.

"It was clearly a reckless bombardment of a very sensitive and precarious and dangerous facility," Raab told Sky News on Friday. "And the fact that the Russians kept bombarding it after there was the fire and the Ukrainian emergency rescue team were trying to get to that makes it doubly reprehensible." _____

SKOPJE, North Macedonia — North Macedonia's parliament has adopted a declaration condemning Russia's invasion of Ukraine and calling on Moscow to immediately stop its "unprovoked military aggression."

The 120-member parliament voted 100-3 in favor of the resolution. Two lawmakers from the small left-wing party Levitsa and a member of a small ethnic Serbian party voted against it.

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North Macedonia traditionally has had friendly ties with Russia, but Moscow vehemently opposed the country's accession to NATO in 2020.

Approved late Thursday, the resolution is "a small act of solidarity that strongly condemns the unprovoked military aggression against Ukraine," said Monika Zajkova, a lawmaker of the Liberal Democratic party, which proposed the motion.

"If the world does not stop it immediately, we will witness a huge disaster and loss of human lives," she said.

CANBERRA, Australia: Australia's foreign minister says 45 million Australian dollars (\$33 million) have been frozen in an Australian financial institution under new sanctions in response to the Russian invasion of Ukraine.

Foreign Minister Marise Payne on Friday declined to identify the institution or who owned the money.

Australia has imposed sanctions against more than 350 Russian individuals including President Vladimir Putin. Australia has also targeted with sanctions 13 Belarus entities and individuals including Defense Minister Viktor Khrenin.

KYIV, Ukraine — Ukrainian authorities said Friday that a fire at Europe's biggest nuclear plant ignited by Russian shelling has been extinguished, and that Russian forces have taken control of the site.

The regional military administration said in a statement that the fire at the Zaporizhzhia plant in Enerhodar was extinguished, and that there is damage to the compartment of reactor No. 1 but it does not affect the safety of the power unit.

No information was immediately available about casualties.

The military administration said Russian forces took control of the site and that operational personnel are ensuring its safe operation.

Earlier, plant officials had said that shelling hit an administrative building and reactor No. 1.

The town mayor and state emergency service also said the fire was extinguished.

KYIV, Ukraine — A Russian air strike on Thursday destroyed the power plant in Okhtyrka, leaving the city without heat or electricity, the head of the region said on Telegram. In the first days of the war, Russian troops attacked a military base in the city, located between Kharkiv and Kyiv, and officials said more than 70 Ukrainian soldiers were killed.

"We are trying to figure out how to get people out of the city urgently because in a day the apartment buildings will turn into a cold stone trap without water, light or electricity," Dmytro Zhyvytskyy said.

LONDON — The office of British Prime Minister Boris Johnson says he will seek an emergency U.N. Security Council meeting after Russian troops in Ukraine attacked a nuclear power plant and sparked a fire.

Johnson's office says he spoke to Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy in the early hours of the morning. He says Britain will raise the issue immediately with Russia and close partners.

Johnson's office says he and Zelenskyy agree Russia must immediately cease attacking and allow emergency services unfettered access to the plant. The two agree a ceasefire is essential.

"The Prime Minister said the reckless actions of (Russian President Vladimir) Putin could now directly threaten the safety of all of Europe," Johnson's office said in a statement. "He said (the United Kingdom) would do everything it could to ensure the situation did not deteriorate further."

Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau says he also spoke with Zelenskyy about the attacks on the power plant.

"These unacceptable attacks by Russia must cease immediately," he said on Twitter.

KYIV — Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy says he has informed the leaders of the U.S., Britain, the European Union and the International Atomic Energy Agency about the dire threat of nuclear disaster

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after Russian troops shelled a nuclear power plant.

"If there is an explosion – that's the end for everyone. The end for Europe. The evacuation of Europe," he said in an emotional speech in the middle of the night.

"Only urgent action by Europe can stop the Russian troops. Do not allow the death of Europe from a catastrophe at a nuclear power station," he said

He's calling on politicians and citizens to pressure Russian leadership to stop Russian troops.

WASHINGTON — Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy updated U.S. President Joe Biden about the fire at a nuclear power station shelled by Russian troops.

The White House said Biden and Zelenskyy urged Russia to cease its military activities in the area and allow firefighters and emergency responders to access the site.

Biden also got another update on the situation from the undersecretary for nuclear security at the U.S. Department of Energy and the administrator of the U.S. National Nuclear Security Administration.

VIENNA — The International Atomic Energy Agency said on Twitter that it's been informed by Ukraine's nuclear regulator that "there has been no change reported in radiation levels" at a nuclear power station shelled by Russian troops.

The agency says Director General Rafael Mariano Grossi was in touch with Ukraine Prime Minister Denys Shmygal and the Ukrainian regulator and operator about the situation at the Zaporizhzhia plant.

Grossi "appeals for halt of use of force and warns of severe danger if reactors hit," the IAEA said in another tweet.

The agency says Ukraine told it the fire hasn't affected "essential" equipment and plant personnel are taking mitigatory actions.

An official in Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy's office, not authorized to speak publicly and speaking on condition of anonymity, says the reactors have not yet been damaged and radiation levels are normal.

ENERHODAR, Ukraine — Russian troops in Ukraine are shelling Europe's largest nuclear power station.

"We demand that they stop the heavy weapons fire," Andriy Tuz, spokesperson for the plant in Enerhodar, said in a video posted on Telegram. "There is a real threat of nuclear danger in the biggest atomic energy station in Europe."

The plant accounts for about one quarter of Ukraine's power generation.

Tuz told Ukrainian television that shells were falling directly on the Zaporizhzhia plant and had set fire to one of the facility's six reactors. That reactor is under renovation and not operating, but there is nuclear fuel inside, he said.

Firefighters cannot get near the fire because they are being shot at, Tuz said.

A live-streamed security camera linked from the homepage of the nuclear power plant showed what appeared to be armored vehicles rolling into the facility's parking lot and shining spotlights on the building where the camera was mounted. There are then what appear to be bright muzzle flashes from vehicles and then nearly simultaneous explosions in the surrounding buildings. Smoke then rises and drifts across the frame.

SEOUL, South Korea – South Korea says it won an exemption from recently expanded U.S. sanctions against Russia in exchange for strengthening its own export restrictions against the country over an escalating invasion of Ukraine.

South Korea's Ministry of Trade, Industry and Energy confirmed the agreement on Friday after Trade Minister Yeo Han-koo traveled to Washington this week for meetings with senior U.S. officials.

The Biden administration last week announced a series of sanctions aimed at cutting off Russia's access to foreign technology products like semiconductors, lasers, aircraft and communications equipment in

response to its invasion of Ukraine.

To enforce the measures, Washington has imposed a regulation called the foreign direct product rule, which allows American officials to restrict the sales of foreign-made products to Russia from any country if the items are produced with U.S. technology.

The South Koreans had sought an exemption from the regulation to minimize the impact of U.S. sanctions on major South Korean companies, whose technology exports drive the country's trade-dependent economy.

South Korea had already banned the export of strategic materials to Russia and joined international efforts to cut off key Russian banks from global payment systems. U.S. officials also told their South Korean counterparts that consumer goods such as smartphones, passenger cars and washing machines aren't subject to American sanctions as long as they are used by private Russian citizens or companies and not military users.

Follow AP's coverage of the tensions between Russia and Ukraine at <https://apnews.com/hub/russia-ukraine>

EXPLAINER: How dangerous was Russia's nuclear plant strike?

By DAVID RISING Associated Press

BANGKOK (AP) — Europe's largest nuclear power plant was hit by Russian shelling early Friday, sparking a fire and raising fears of a disaster that could affect all of central Europe for decades, like the 1986 Chernobyl meltdown.

Concerns faded after Ukrainian authorities announced that the fire had been extinguished, and while there was damage to the reactor compartment, the safety of the unit was not affected.

But even though the Zaporizhzhia nuclear plant is of a different design than Chernobyl and is protected from fire, nuclear safety experts and the International Atomic Energy Agency warn that waging war in and around such facilities presents extreme risks.

One major concern, raised by Ukraine's state nuclear regulator, is that if fighting interrupts power supply to the nuclear plant, it would be forced to use less-reliable diesel generators to provide emergency power to operating cooling systems. A failure of those systems could lead to a disaster similar to that of Japan's Fukushima plant, when a massive earthquake and tsunami in 2011 destroyed cooling systems, triggering meltdowns in three reactors.

The consequence of that, said Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy, would be widespread and dire.

"If there is an explosion, that's the end for everyone. The end for Europe. The evacuation of Europe," he said in an emotional speech in the middle of the night, calling on nations to pressure Russia's leadership to end the fighting near the plant.

"Only urgent action by Europe can stop the Russian troops. Do not allow the death of Europe from a catastrophe at a nuclear power station."

WHAT HAPPENED?

After taking the strategic port city of Kherson, Russian forces moved into the territory near Zaporizhzhia and attacked the nearby city of Enerhodar to open a route to the plant late Thursday.

It was not immediately clear how the power plant was hit, but Enerhodar Mayor Dmytro Orlov said a Russian military column had been seen heading toward the nuclear facility and that loud shots were heard in the city.

Later Friday, Ukrainian authorities said Russia had taken over the nuclear plant.

Plant spokesman Andriy Tuz told Ukrainian television that early Friday morning, shells fell directly on the facility and set fire to one of its six reactors.

Initially, firefighters were not able to get near the flames because they were being shot at, Tuz said.

After speaking with Ukrainian authorities on Friday, Rafael Grossi, the director general of the IAEA, the U.N.'s nuclear watchdog, said a building next to the reactors was hit and not a reactor itself.

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"All of the safety systems of the six reactors at the plant were not affected at all and there has been no release of radioactive material," he said.

"However, as you can imagine, the operator and the regulator have been telling us that the situation naturally continues to be extremely tense and challenging."

Earlier this week, Grossi already had warned that the IAEA was "gravely concerned" with Russian forces conducting military operations so close nearby.

"It is of critical importance that the armed conflict and activities on the ground around Zaporizhzhia nuclear power plant and any other of Ukraine's nuclear facilities in no way interrupts or endangers the facilities or the people working at and around them," he said.

WHAT COULD HAVE HAPPENED?

The reactor that was hit was offline, but still contains highly radioactive nuclear fuel. Four of the other six reactors have now been taken offline, leaving only one in operation.

The reactors at the plant have thick concrete containment domes, which would have protected them from external fire from tanks and artillery, said Jon Wolfsthal, who served during the Obama administration as the senior director for arms control and nonproliferation at the National Security Council.

At the same time, a fire at a nuclear power plant is never a good thing, he said.

"We don't want our nuclear power plants to come under assault, to be on fire, and to not have first responders be able to access them," he said.

Another danger at nuclear facilities are the pools where spent fuel rods are kept to be cooled, which are more vulnerable to shelling and which could cause the release of radioactive material.

Perhaps the biggest issue, however, is the plant's power supply, said Najmedin Meshkati, an engineering professor at the University of Southern California who has studied both the Chernobyl and Fukushima disasters, raising a concern also voiced by Wolfsthal and others.

The loss of off-site power could force the plant to rely on emergency diesel generators, which are highly unreliable and could fail or run out of fuel, causing a station blackout that would stop the water circulation needed to cool the spent fuel pool, he said.

"That is my big — biggest concern," he said.

David Fletcher, a University of Sydney professor in its School of Chemical and Biomolecular Engineering, who previously worked at UK Atomic Energy, noted that even shutting down the reactors would not help if the cooling system failed in such a way.

"The real concern is not a catastrophic explosion as happened at Chernobyl but damage to the cooling system which is required even when the reactor is shut down," he said in a statement. "It was this type of damage that led to the Fukushima accident."

WHAT CONCERNS REMAIN?

Ukraine is heavily reliant on nuclear energy, with 15 reactors at four stations that provide about half the country's electricity.

In the wake of the attack on Zaporizhzhia, U.S. President Joe Biden, British Prime Minister Boris Johnson and others called for an immediate end to the fighting there.

Following a conversation with Ukrainian Prime Minister Denys Shmyhal, IAEA Director Grossi appealed to all parties to "refrain from actions" that could put Ukraine's nuclear power plants in danger.

Shmyhal called on western nations to close the skies over the country's nuclear plants.

"It is a question of the security of the whole world!" he said in a statement.

Ukraine is also home to the former Chernobyl nuclear plant, where radioactivity is still leaking, which was taken by Russian forces in the opening of the invasion after a fierce battle with the Ukrainian national guards protecting the decommissioned facility.

In an appeal to the IAEA for help earlier this week, Ukrainian officials said that Chernobyl staff have been held by the Russian military without rotation and are exhausted.

Grossi earlier this week appealed to Russia to let the Chernobyl staff "do their job safely and effectively."

During fighting on the weekend, Russian fire also hit a radioactive waste disposal facility in Kyiv and a similar facility in Kharkiv.

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Both contained low-level waste such as those produced through medical use, and no radioactive release has been reported, but Grossi said the incidents should serve as a warning.

"The two incidents highlight the risk that facilities with radioactive material may suffer damage during the armed conflict, with potentially severe consequences," he said.

James Acton, the co-director of the Nuclear Policy Program at the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, said the simple key to keeping the facilities safe was to immediately end any military operations around them.

"Under normal circumstances, the likelihood of a reactor losing power and of the emergency diesel generators being damaged and of not being repaired adequately quickly is very, very small," Acton said.

"But in a war, all of these different failures that would have to happen for a reactor to become damaged and meltdown — the likelihood of all of those happening becomes much more likely than it does in peacetime."

Mitsuru Fukuda, a professor at Nihon University in Tokyo and expert on crisis management and security, said the Zaporizhzhia attack raises broader questions for all countries.

"Many of us did not expect a respected country's military would take such an outrageous step," he said. "Now that (Russian President Vladimir) Putin has done it, not only Ukraine but the international community, including Japan, should reevaluate the risk of having nuclear plants as potential wartime targets."

Associated Press writers Lynn Berry and Michael Biesecker in Washington, Jon Gambrell in Dubai, United Arab Emirates, and Mari Yamaguchi in Tokyo contributed to this report.

War in Ukraine complicates path home for American detainees

By ERIC TUCKER Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — The already challenging path to bringing home Americans jailed in Russia and Ukraine is likely even more complicated now with a war overwhelming the region and increasingly hostile relations between the United States and the Kremlin.

Marine veteran Trevor Reed and corporate security executive Paul Whelan are each serving lengthy prison sentences in Russia, but their families have long held out hope for some sort of deal — including a possible prisoner exchange — that could get their loved ones home.

Now, though, that seems a much harder ask.

"I can't help but think that this is not going to help Trevor get released sooner, obviously," Reed's mother, Paula Reed, said in an interview with The Associated Press.

The war with Ukraine has not only occupied global attention, but it has also led to punishing economic sanctions by the U.S. and escalating Russian aggression in the face of international condemnation over its invasion. Though the conflict has not closed off avenues for bringing home Reed and Whelan, the prospect of concessions by either side anytime soon is eclipsed by the likelihood of continued antagonism by Russia.

"If this becomes long and drawn out, and they take over Ukraine, then the Western countries and the United States are going to be at odds with Russia for a long time," said Reed's father, Joey Reed. "That could lead to additional charges against our son, if he lives, and keep him there indefinitely, which is not uncommon in Russia."

He said he was particularly concerned about a loss of communications between the two superpowers that could foreclose any possibility of the U.S. government getting him home.

"We've been told that even during the Cold War, they kept channels open. Even Kennedy was able to talk to Khrushchev during the Cuban missile crisis," Reed said. "Anyone that's advocating for closing embassies and cutting them off, that's a gigantic mistake when two major nuclear powers are not speaking and are at odds with each other."

State Department principal deputy press spokeswoman Jalina Porter, asked by the AP Thursday about how the war affected the cases of all three men, said only that the administration's top priority is the "safety and security of all Americans," including Reed and Whelan.

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"This is something that the secretary works on day in and day out," she said.

Reed, who is from Texas, was sentenced to nine years in prison in 2020 on charges that he assaulted police officers who were driving him to a police station after picking him up following a night of heavy drinking at a party. He has struggled with health issues behind bars, most recently coughing up blood this week, his father said.

He is regarded by the U.S. government as a wrongful detainee, as is Whelan, a Michigan corporate security executive sentenced in 2020 to 16 years in prison on espionage-related charges that his family says are entirely bogus.

Whelan's sister, Elizabeth, said she's been "doom-scrolling" news about the war on Twitter like everyone else, concerned about the impact of the war on her brother and the possibility of another "Iron Curtain" falling in the region.

She said the U.S. could use the conflict as a fresh opportunity to press for the release of Reed and Whelan by making it a condition of any lifting of the sanctions against Russia, though it is not clear that that would happen.

"I can't imagine that all of these oligarchs whose families are now being affected, whose assets and goods are now being affected, wouldn't consider the release of Paul and Trevor a very small price to pay in order to get some relief themselves," Whelan said.

Ukraine, meanwhile, is holding North Dakota farmer Kurt Groszhans, accused in a plot to assassinate a current member of the country's political cabinet. His family and supporters say the charges are trumped up, and were designed to silence Groszhan's own allegations of government corruption in Ukraine.

Kristi Magnusson, Groszhan's sister, said in a statement provided to AP that she was concerned that the State Department was not "advocating for his release because it would be inferring that Ukraine is engaged in corrupt activities right at a time when State is focused on being as supportive as possible of Ukraine against the Russians.

"We support the Ukrainian people against Russia as well, but our brother is a sitting duck in that prison and we need him to be released so at least he can try to survive on his own," she added.

Unlike Reed and Whelan, the U.S. has not designated Groszhans as a wrongful detainee.

Follow Eric Tucker on Twitter at <http://www.twitter.com/etuckerAP>.

China seeks to unify public in support for Russia

By ZEN SOO Associated Press

SINGAPORE (AP) — As the West condemns Russia, President Vladimir Putin has vocal supporters in China, where the ruling Communist Party tells its people they are fellow targets of U.S.-led harassment. "If Russia is destroyed, we will be next. This is for sure," said Wang Yongchun, a retiree in Beijing. "The United States wants to dominate the world."

Such comments reflect the stance of a ruling party that is the closest thing Putin has to a major ally: The war should stop but the United States is to blame.

President Xi Jinping's government has tried to distance itself from Russia's offensive but avoided criticizing Moscow. The government has offered to act as mediator and denounced trade and financial sanctions against Russia.

Ruling party control of all Chinese media and intensive internet censorship make it hard to gauge public opinion. But what the party allows online and requires media to publish make clear what it wants the public to think.

Media outlets were told last week to post only pro-Russian content and to censor anti-Russian or pro-Western views, according to a copy of instructions posted on the social media account of the newspaper Beijing News. The post was later deleted.

Online and in social media, expressions of sympathy for Ukraine and support for Russia appear but not criticism of Moscow.

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"When a war begins, is it not the children of ordinary people who serve as cannon fodder?" said a post signed Da Ke Ming Yi on the Weibo social media platform. "Those who died were the children of ordinary people."

A letter signed by five professors from prominent universities that criticized Russia for attacking a weaker neighbor appeared briefly on social media before being deleted.

"We stand against unjust wars," said the academics from schools including Tsinghua University in Beijing, alma mater of many ruling party leaders.

Comments posted by nationalists criticized the professors for failing to stick to the ruling party's official position of neutrality.

The ruling party has spent decades using school textbooks and the entirely state-controlled media to nurture a sense of nationalist grievance. It accuses the United States of trying to block China's rise to its rightful position of global leadership.

State media repeat Beijing's position that the United States and its European allies are to blame for the Ukraine war because they failed to respond to Russian concerns that its democratic neighbor should be barred from joining NATO, the Western military alliance.

That echoes Chinese complaints that Washington and its allies are interfering in its domestic affairs and issues of national sovereignty, including its claim over Taiwan, territorial disputes in the South China Sea, and in Xinjiang, the far-western region where China has been accused of detaining over a million Uyghurs.

Russia's attack, as a historical event, "is not a good one," but "people think the conflict between Russia and Ukraine is because the United States stirred up trouble," said Zheng Bowen, a 38-year-old engineer.

The state-run newspaper Capital News exhorted the public to line up with the ruling party: "The nation's attitude is our attitude."

"China has always upheld a fair and responsible attitude, calling on all parties to exercise restraint and ease the situation, and return to dialogue and negotiation," it said.

However, the newspaper appeared to support Putin's demand that Ukraine become a neutral buffer between Russia and Europe and give up the possibility of NATO membership.

"Ultimately, Ukraine should be a bridge between East and West, rather than a frontier of confrontation between major powers," the Capital News said.

Comments online have called for China to support Russia by purchasing its exports of oil, gas and other goods.

"Let the Russian Embassy sell their goods on livestream. Let's show them China's buying power," said a comment signed Bao Zou Guang Xiao Pang on Weibo. It received 42,000 likes.

A separate comment advocating that China maintain normal trade with Russia, an implicit rejection of sanctions, received nearly 80,000 likes.

Social media platforms have urged users to act responsibly and say they have removed thousands of postings about the attack on Ukraine.

Douyin, a short-video service operated by the Chinese owner of TikTok, said it deleted more than 3,500 videos and 12,100 comments due to "vulgar, war belittling, sensationalist and unfriendly comments."

The popular WeChat message service also complained about "vulgar posts" that it said have a "negative impact on cyberspace."

It said some users "took the opportunity to publish bad information about international current affairs," including comments belittling the war such as crass jokes about "gaining course credits by going to Ukraine and fighting in the war" and asking "Ukrainian beauties to come to China," the platform said.

WeChat's post was later shared by a unit of China's internet watchdog, the Cyberspace Administration of China.

Weibo said it removed more than 4,000 posts that were vulgar and ridiculed war. It said more than 10,000 accounts were closed.

"Peaceful environments do not come easily," the company said in a social media post. It called on users to "maintain an objective and rational attitude" and take part in discussion "in a reasonable manner."

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AP video producer Olivia Zhang in Beijing contributed to this report.

EXPLAINER: Weapons used in the Russia-Ukraine war

MOSCOW (AP) — The Russian invasion of Ukraine is the largest conflict that Europe has seen since World War II, with Russia conducting a multi-pronged offensive across the country.

The Russian military has pummeled wide areas in Ukraine with airstrikes and has conducted major rocket and artillery bombardments, resulting in large numbers of casualties.

Here is a look at some of the weapons being used in the conflict.

WARPLANES AND MISSILES

The Russian military has used warplanes and Kalibr (Caliber) cruise missiles to hit facilities throughout the country.

The Kalibr is a precision weapon, but Ukrainian military facilities and government buildings apparently targeted by those missiles in Kyiv and Kharkiv are located close to residential areas, resulting in civilian casualties.

The same applies to missiles carried by Russian warplanes, which targeted military infrastructure in strikes that also involved collateral damage.

To hit key targets, the Russian military also has used Iskander missiles that have a range of up to 500 kilometers (around 300 miles) and carry a much more powerful warhead that can destroy big buildings and some fortified facilities. Some Iskander missiles were reportedly fired from the territory of Russian ally Belarus, which has served as a staging ground for the Russian invasion.

ROCKET AND ARTILLERY

Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy and other officials have accused the Russian military of indiscriminately shelling residential buildings, schools and hospitals around the country.

Images from Ukraine's second-largest city of Kharkiv that were verified by The Associated Press showed what appeared to be a barrage of Russian rockets hitting residential buildings in an attack that killed and wounded scores of civilians.

The Soviet-designed Grad (Hail), Smerch (Tornado) and Uragan (Hurricane) multiple rocket launchers are designed to fire a salvo of powerful rockets to destroy concentrations of troops or military equipment. Their use against populated areas inevitably causes heavy casualties and major damage to civilian infrastructure.

The Russian military also has a wide range of powerful Soviet-designed artillery units, which were bizarrely named after flowers, such as self-propelled 203-mm Peony and 152-mm Hyacinth and Acacia self-propelled howitzers.

Moscow has claimed it was only targeting military bases and infrastructure, but the AP has documented massive damage to civilian infrastructure and residential areas in Kyiv, Kharkiv and numerous other cities and towns across Ukraine. Russian officials have alleged that Ukrainian forces have widely deployed heavy weapons in residential areas to use civilians as shields, a claim that couldn't be independently verified.

The U.N. human rights chief, Michelle Bachelet, speaking at the Human Rights Council in Geneva on Thursday, said "most civilian casualties were caused by the use of heavy artillery, multi-launch rocket systems and air strikes in populated areas, with concerning reports of use of cluster munitions striking civilian targets." She didn't specify which side may have used them.

CLUSTER MUNITIONS AND THERMOBARIC WEAPONS

Ukrainian officials have accused Russia of using cluster munitions, accusations the Kremlin has denied. Such weapons are designed to target enemy troops and weapons over a broad area, and their use in populated areas inevitably would lead to mass casualties among civilians.

Cluster bombs, rockets and artillery shells open in the air, releasing submunitions, or "bomblets," that are dispersed over a large area and simultaneously hit multiple targets.

Beyond the initial impact, bomblets have a high rate of failure to explode, posing a long-time threat of killing and maiming people for a long time after they were fired.

Thermobaric weapons consist of a fuel container and two separate explosive charges, with the first

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detonating to disperse the fuel particles and the second igniting the dispersed fuel and oxygen in the air, creating a blast wave of extreme pressure and heat that creates a partial vacuum in an enclosed space. That makes the weapon particularly deadly for people in an enclosed space.

The Pentagon has said that Russian mobile launchers for thermobaric weapons were spotted inside Ukraine, but couldn't confirm their use.

UKRAINE'S ARSENAL

The Ukrainian military has relied on the same assortment of Soviet-built multiple rocket launchers and howitzers that the Russian military has.

It doesn't possess sophisticated long-range precision weapons like Russia's Iskander ballistic missiles and Kalibr cruise missiles.

The Ukrainian military has Soviet-era Tochka-U short-range ballistic missiles, which have a powerful warhead but poor precision compared to the latest Russian weapons.

In addition to its aging Soviet-made arsenals, Ukraine has received large shipments of Western weapons, such as U.S.-made Javelin anti-tank missiles and shoulder-launched Stinger anti-aircraft missiles. Ukrainian officials said the country's military has used them to inflict heavy casualties to the invading Russian forces.

The Ukrainian military also has used Bayraktar drones supplied by Turkey before the conflict. It has released a video showing an attack by Bayraktar against a Russian military convoy.

Follow the AP's coverage of the Ukraine crisis at <https://apnews.com/hub/russia-ukraine>

Months after pledge, India yet to submit emissions targets

By ANIRUDDHA GHOSAL AP Science Writer

NEW DELHI (AP) — Four months after India announced its "net-zero" target at the United Nations climate conference in Glasgow, the country has yet to submit its targets for cutting greenhouse emissions, underscoring the difficulty of overhauling energy policy amid a growing population.

When asked about the delay during an unrelated event in the capital New Delhi on Tuesday, Indian environment minister Bhupender Yadav downplayed it, saying that several ministries were still discussing the matter to chart out a roadmap.

India's Ministry of Environment, which drafts the targets and submits them to the UN Climate Agency, and the country's top federal official in the Ministry of Power, did not respond to requests for comment this week.

"We don't have time anymore" to wait for all countries to start reducing emissions, said New Climate Institute scientist Niklas Höhne, who tracks emission pledges for Climate Action Tracker.

Höhne added that it would be useful if India specified targets achievable with its own resources and formulated a clear plan for what could be achieved with financial help from other nations.

During November's conference in Glasgow, Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi said his nation would stop adding greenhouse gases to the atmosphere by 2070 -- two decades after the U.S., and 10 years after China. He said that India would increase its current capacity for non-fossil fuel electricity to 500 gigawatts and use energy from clean sources to meet half of its needs. Modi also said that India would cut carbon emissions by a billion tons compared with the previous target and reduce the carbon intensity of its economy by 45%.

Since these 2030 targets for cutting greenhouse gas emissions haven't yet been submitted to the U.N. climate agency, they can't yet be counted towards the global effort.

India is not the only country to be slow to turn in targets. The 2015 Paris agreement on climate, which India signed, required countries to submit their climate targets, called Nationally Determined Contributions, by the end of 2020. Many nations missed that deadline. The more urgent deadline was to get submission in before the November negotiations in Glasgow and most nations did. Of the five top emitting nations, only India has not submitted its plans.

The delays underscore the challenges that India faces in achieving these goals. A parliamentary commit-

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tee calculated that India would require over \$20 billion in investment to meet its clean energy targets while only half of that was available — prompting the opposition to ask the government whether it formulated a clear roadmap before committing internationally.

India's role is key for the world's climate targets. It has the third-highest emissions in the world, after China and the United States, and its energy needs are expected to grow faster than any other country in the coming decades. At the same time, historically it has contributed least to the world's cumulative emissions among the group of 20 industrial nations known as the G20.

The typical American, for instance, uses 16 times more electricity than the average Indian, according to data from the World Bank.

Many in the South Asian country of 1.4 billion residents still live in poverty and its leaders have consistently argued that it needs the "carbon space" to grow. Even in the most optimistic scenario, some of India's future energy needs will have to be met through coal -- the single biggest source of greenhouse gas emissions.

This was partly why the country had demanded a last-minute change to crucial language during the U.N. climate conference to "phase down" rather than "phase out" coal power. India said that developing countries were "entitled to the responsible use of fossil fuels" for their growth and blamed "unsustainable lifestyles and wasteful consumption patterns" of rich countries for the current climate catastrophe.

In any case, India faces the same reality that other nations do: Unless emissions are drastically reduced, large parts of the world will become uninhabitable due to climate shocks like deadly fires, floods, and unlivable heat, a new U.N. report said Monday. The country lost \$87 billion in 2020 because of natural disasters like cyclones, floods and droughts, according to the World Meteorological Organization.

At Glasgow, Modi had stressed that India's goals couldn't be achieved without adequate climate finance, a stand that India has long reiterated, and called for rich countries to provide \$1 trillion in help.

The lack of finance is a vital stumbling block, said Harjeet Singh, an advisor with the Climate Action Network International. He said that if he were to put himself in the shoes of a finance minister of a developing country like India, "How do I do it if I don't see a stream of funding? Rich countries are failing in their commitment."

Singh said that there was some hope in the plan announced by the U.S., Britain, France and Germany to provide \$8.5 billion in loans and grants over five years to help South Africa phase out coal, a source of 90% of its electricity. But he added that it remained to be seen if that money would make it to those most impacted.

India's opposition parliamentarians criticized the government for not consulting with chief ministers or state leaders before announcing India's net-zero targets in December in the parliament. Parliamentarian Kanimozhi Karunanidhi said that India had only a fraction of the solar energy needed to meet what had been promised at Glasgow.

"I want to know how can we achieve so much? What we've done is nothing compared to what we've promised to the world," said Karunanidhi, from Thoothukkudi in southern India.

__ Associated Press climate and environmental coverage receive support from several private foundations. See more about AP's climate initiative here. The AP is solely responsible for all content.

Horrific déjà vu in Ukraine for those who fled other wars

By AJ NADDAFF and CHRISTOPH NOELTING Associated Press

NUREMBERG, Germany (AP) — When Russia launched its war on Ukraine, a Syrian student in the city of Kharkiv joined the exodus of people fleeing the onslaught. It was the third time that 24-year-old Orwa Staif, who grew up in the suburbs of Damascus, was being displaced by war and crises.

For Staif, it was a jarring *déjà vu*: columns of people, many on foot, carrying what few belongings they could, desperate to escape bombs and missiles. He had seen it all before, in his native Syria.

"The same sounds of bombs that I heard in 2013, I heard now in Kharkiv. I told my friends 'I can't believe I'm reliving the same experience,'" Staif told The Associated Press in Germany, where he has since reunited with his family.

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According to the United Nations, more than 1 million people have fled Ukraine following Russia's invasion, the swiftest refugee exodus this century. They fled to neighboring countries, with Poland taking in the highest number.

In 2013, rebels fighting to topple Syrian autocrat Bashar Assad were in Staif's hometown of Douma, at the doorstep of the capital, Damascus. Airstrikes, shelling and street fighting were common.

His father defected from the army and the family was forced to leave Syria. Like so many other families, they scattered — some went to the United Arab Emirates, some to Germany. Staif went to neighboring Lebanon, where he graduated from high school.

In 2019, the situation in Lebanon deteriorated dramatically, with the economy crashing and people taking to the streets in mass protests. Poverty and inflation soared in an unprecedented economic collapse.

Staif's father advised him to go study in Ukraine, where getting a visa — at least in theory — was easier than in other places. Staif succeeded and moved to Ukraine the following year, in February 2020.

When Russia invaded last week, pummeling Ukrainian cities with airstrikes and shelling — including Kharkiv, Ukraine's second-largest city — many piled into trains and cars to the city of Lviv in western Ukraine, before heading to the Polish border. Staif managed to get on a train for a 16-hour journey to Lviv, and from there continued on foot toward Poland.

Over the weekend, the line of traffic stretched for 30 kilometers (19 miles), backed up with cars and people. The unlucky ones without transportation had to make the trip on foot. Women, the elderly and children were among the masses — along with some foreigners, mostly students from other countries.

"This journey is so tough. I can say ten years of displacement. Whenever I get used to a place, I get new acquaintance with my friends and then I leave everything and go," Staif said.

"It's so hard and so disappointing for me and I hate it... It's the war wherever I am. Crises all over the world and those places that I've been.

A Yemeni student of mechanical engineering, a young woman evacuated from Kabul when the Taliban seized Afghanistan and others share much of Staif's story.

Mohammad Shamiri, 23, from Yemen's capital of Sanaa, arrived in Ukraine four years ago to study mechanical engineering at the Kharkiv National Automobile and Highway University.

"I never imagined this could happen here," in Europe, Shamiri said.

While escaping Ukraine, the sound of war and bombing was much more intense, he added. In Yemen, where a Saudi-led coalition has been fighting since 2015 against Iran-backed Houthi rebels who overran Sanaa, the bombardment was more intermittent.

Shamiri said he walked for 20 hours with a friend, a fellow Yemeni, carrying bags in subfreezing cold. Temperatures dropped to 17 degrees Fahrenheit (minus 8 degrees Celsius). Like Staif, he described spending a night outside, in the open.

At the border, guards gave Ukrainians priority in leaving the country, pushing back and beating non-Ukrainians, he said. Shamiri was hit with a baton and saw people tasered, he said. When he tried to film this with his smart phone, a border guard grabbed the phone and made him delete all photos and videos.

After finally crossing over, he arrived at a hospital in Krakow, Poland, where he and his friend are now being treated.

For Masouma Tajik, a 23-year-old from Afghanistan, solidarity amongst neighboring states has been unique in this war. She had been in Ukraine for about six months since being evacuated from Kabul, escaping the Taliban, before she had to flee again.

After spending a night sleeping on the floor of a cold church in Lviv, she was connected to Polish volunteers via a WhatsApp solidarity group, and one crossed the border to pick her up and bring her over.

"Many things happened that reminded me of Kabul. But the kindness that I was seeing on this journey was remarkable," she said. "In Afghanistan, you saw neighboring countries like Iran, Uzbekistan and Pakistan close their borders to Afghans."

Tajik said she had no trouble at the border, and despite having an expired 15-day visa, the guards gave her a warm smile and let her through.

"When I left Afghanistan and went to Ukraine, they welcomed me warmly and I felt the home that I

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had lost," she said. "I hate war. I am tired of it. It has taken people from me who are dear to me. I cannot afford to lose more."

Fellow Afghan refugee, Jawad Akmal, remembers speeding to the Kabul airport one night in August, escorted by Ukrainian Special Forces. He said his relief was enormous when he boarded the plane to Kyiv along with his family. His wife, he later found out, was pregnant with their sixth child.

They were waiting to be resettled in Canada, their final destination, but after six months living in a Kyiv hotel room, he found himself in the middle of another war, unable to find food for his children and afraid he would be arrested with expired documents before he could make the police understand he was a refugee.

It was easier in Afghanistan, he said.

"At least that was my country, a place where I could talk to people in my own language, to ask for help to find shelter for me and my family," he said over the phone from Kyiv, just hours before they left for Poland, traveling for more than a day on a bus crowded with fleeing Ukrainians.

Staif recalled walking all evening and night from Lviv, reaching the Polish border before dawn. People slept in the street. They ran out of food and water. The images are forever in his mind, he said, "people, in the thousands, all headed to the border, Ukrainian women and children."

From Poland, Staif flew to Prague, the Czech Republic, where his family picked him up in a car and brought him to Nuremberg, Germany.

"I loved Ukraine, I loved the country. Everything was perfect for me until the Russians came," Staif said. "For me, this isn't a happy ending," he added, even though he was grateful to be reunited with his family.

The software engineering student said he was supposed to finish his last year of studies in Ukraine. "Now I don't know."

"I might have to start all over again," he said.

Naddaff reported from Beirut. Associated Press writer Kathy Gannon in Islamabad contributed.

Tearful goodbyes at Kyiv train station during war in Ukraine

KYIV, Ukraine (AP) — A woman crouches down in the doorway of a blue and yellow train at a station in Kyiv, Ukraine's embattled capital city. Her husband stands on the platform below and cranes his neck up for a kiss that both hope will not be their last.

As the train door closes, the woman holds up their 2-year-old son and he smiles and presses his tiny hand against the smudged window to wave goodbye to his father, who is staying behind to fight the Russian invaders.

Nearby, a grandmother reaches out to bid farewell to her daughter and grandson, who are on the train headed toward the border with Poland. She backs toward a wall of the train station and is soon overcome with emotion. She places her hands over her mouth, squeezes her eyes shut tight and lets the tears fall.

These are the goodbyes that have been repeated across Ukraine in the week since Russia invaded and began pounding the country's cities with bombs. The UN says the fighting has sent more than 1 million people fleeing the country, a number that is already the swiftest exodus of refugees this century and one that could soon skyrocket even further.

Those leaving are overwhelmingly women and children. Ukrainian men have been ordered to stay and fight in the war.

At the train station in Kyiv crowds of people carrying luggage stand in the cold as they wait for their chance to board a train. Mothers hold children bundled in winter jackets and stocking caps, some clutching onto stuffed animals. Men help the elderly get to the train, even using a luggage cart to carry one woman with crutches.

Up and down the platform there are tearful embraces.

Once on the train, many of those leaving press their faces against the windows for a last glimpse at those staying behind. One woman reaches her hand out the door for a fleeting brush of a loved one's cheek.

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Purdue Pharma deal has families deflated, angry but hopeful

By JOHN SEEWER and DAVE COLLINS Associated Press

For those who lost loved ones in the opioid crisis, making sure the family behind OxyContin maker Purdue Pharma paid a price was never just about money. What many wanted was a chance to confront the Sackler family face to face, to make them feel their pain.

While some may get that chance — at least by video — under a tentative settlement reached Thursday that also would force the Sacklers to pay out billions, the families still are coming away feeling empty, conflicted and angry yet again. There's a bit of hope mixed in, too.

Nothing, though, will bring back any of the lives lost or hold the Sacklers fully accountable, in their eyes.

"I'd like to see the Sacklers bleed all they can, but the bigger picture for me is what they're doing to clean up the mess," said Vicki Meyer Bishop of Clarksburg, Maryland, who lost her 45-year-old son, Brian Meyer, in 2017. "We're all so very worried about the next generation and the next child who will be lost."

The Sacklers, whose wealth has been estimated in court filings at over \$10 billion, will get to hang on to a chunk of their vast fortune and be protected from current and future civil lawsuits over opioids.

The deal announced Thursday, which must be approved by a federal bankruptcy judge, requires the Sacklers to pay as much as \$6 billion, with \$750 million for victims and their survivors. Most of the rest will go to state and local governments to fight the crisis. They also must give up ownership of their company, with the new entity's profits going toward fighting opioid addiction through treatment and education programs.

Some of the survivors of the opioid crisis and relatives of those who died will receive payments. But most will get just a few thousand dollars — not even enough to reimburse the cost of a funeral — and many more who have not filed claims already will be shut out altogether.

"These families do need to get something," said Beth Schmidt, who started a support group in Sykesville, Maryland, after her son Sean died in 2013, one of 13 lost in their town in little over a year. "We have families that can't afford to bury their children. They're choosing cremation because it's less expensive. They shouldn't have to do that."

The agreement also recommends that the victims be allowed to directly share their heartache with Sackler family members by videoconference at a hearing scheduled for Wednesday.

Meyer Bishop would love to face the Sacklers and show them a picture of her son that's "so big they couldn't look away."

"It's what I see before I fall asleep every night," she said. "I don't even know if that would touch them. I don't think it would."

The Sacklers have been cast as the leading villains in the country's opioid crisis by activists who point to their lack of remorse and long-running efforts to shield their wealth while maintaining a lavish lifestyle. Their role in the epidemic was spotlighted in Hulu's miniseries "Dopesick."

A half-million Americans have died from opioids over the past two decades, a toll that includes victims of prescription painkillers like OxyContin and Vicodin and illicit drugs such as heroin and fentanyl.

"Everyday this goes on, we lose all of these people," said Lynn Wencus, of Wrentham, Massachusetts, whose son Jeff died of an overdose in 2017. "If states use the money the way it's supposed to be, then we will be saving lives."

It bothers her that more money won't end up in the hands of the families, but she also knows nothing would make up for what she and so many others have lost.

"Even if I got a billion dollars, it's not going to bring back my son," she said.

In one of the hardest-fought provisions in the settlement, the Sacklers will be protected from future opioid lawsuits. While they weren't given immunity from criminal charges, there have been no indications they will face any.

Allowing the Sacklers to avoid any more lawsuits or jail time is a dangerous message to send to the pharmaceutical industry or any other business, said activists who have fought for Purdue owners and company officials to be charged with crimes.

"What makes me most angry is they're getting away with it," said Tim Kramer, of Waterford Township,

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Michigan. "They've got more money than God, so it's not going to hurt them. I'd like to see them go to prison, and a regular prison, not one of those resort prisons."

His common law wife, LeeRae Conn, was 46 when she overdosed in 2018. He found out she was addicted soon after they met a decade earlier.

"No matter what she did, no matter what I did, she couldn't get off it," he said. "She tried."

Sackler family members have never unequivocally offered an apology, but on Thursday issued a statement of regret about the toll of OxyContin.

The settlement comes more than two years after the Stamford, Connecticut-based company filed for bankruptcy while facing some 3,000 lawsuits that accused it of fueling the crisis by aggressively pushing sales of its signature painkiller.

An earlier settlement fell apart last year, but this time the Sacklers agreed to add another \$1 billion and accepted other terms.

"It's money, but there's still no accountability," said Liz Fitzgerald, of Southington, Connecticut, who said she wanted to hear a public apology.

She lost two adult sons, who first used OxyContin in high school, to overdoses in 2013 and 2017.

"My three children have lost two brothers, and I think that a lot more needs to be done to support families because of the traumatic PTSD. They just destroyed our lives," she said.

"I have a granddaughter who lost her dad. No money in the world is going to bring back her dad," Fitzgerald said. "How do you tell a 10-year child that your dad's gone and not even understanding addiction? It's just horrific."

Associated Press writers Geoff Mulvihill and Susan Haigh contributed to this report.

Voter turnout sagging in troubled voting rights hub of Selma

By JAY REEVES Associated Press

SELMA, Ala. (AP) — Fewer and fewer people are voting in Selma, Alabama. And to many, that is particularly heartbreaking.

They lament that almost six decades after Black demonstrators on the city's Edmond Pettus Bridge risked their lives for the right to cast ballots, voting in predominantly Black Selma and surrounding Dallas County has steadily declined. Turnout in 2020 was under 57%, among the worst in the state.

"It should not be that way. We should have a large voter turnout in all elections," said Michael Jackson, a Black district attorney elected with support from voters of all races.

Thousands will gather March 6 for this year's re-enactment of the bridge crossing to honor the foot soldiers of that "Bloody Sunday" in 1965. Downtown will resemble a huge street festival during the event, known as the Selma Bridge Crossing Jubilee, with thousands of visitors, blaring music and vendors selling food and T-shirts.

Another Selma event, less celebratory and more activist, was held last year by Black Voters Matter. The aim was to boost Black power at the ballot box.

But the issues in Selma — a onetime Confederate arsenal, located about 50 miles (80 kilometers) west of Montgomery in Alabama's old plantation region — defy simple solutions.

Some cite a hangover from decades of white supremacist voter suppression, others a 2013 Supreme Court ruling that gutted key provisions of federal voting law to allow current GOP efforts to tighten voting rules. Some Black voters, who tend to vote Democratic, simply don't see the point in voting in a state where every statewide office is held by white Republicans who also control the Legislature.

Then there is what some describe as infighting between local leaders, and low morale in a crime-ridden town with too many pothole-covered streets, too many abandoned homes and too many vacant businesses. All are considered factors that helped lead to a 13% decline in population over the last decade in a town where more than one-third live in poverty.

Despite visits from presidents, congressional leaders and celebrity luminaries like Oprah Winfrey — and

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even the success of the 2014 historical film drama "Selma" by Ava DuVernay — Selma never seems to get any better.

Resident Tyrone Clarke said he votes when work and travel allow, but not always. Many others don't because of disqualifying felony convictions or disillusionment with the shrinking town of roughly 18,000 people, he said.

"You have a whole lot of people who look at the conditions and don't see what good it's going to do for them," Clarke said. "You know, 'How is this guy or that guy being in office going to affect me in this little, rotten town here?'"

But something else seems to be going on in Selma and Dallas County. Other poor, mostly Black areas have not seen the same drastic decline in turnout. Only one of Alabama's majority Black counties, Macon, the home of historically Black Tuskegee University, had lower voter turnout than Dallas in 2020.

Selma is hardly the only place where big Black majorities don't always translate to big voter turnout. The U.S. Census Bureau found that a racial gap persisted nationwide in voting in 2020, with about 71% of white voters casting ballots compared to 63% of eligible Black people.

A majority of Dallas County's voters are Black, and Black people made up the largest share of the county's vote in 2020, about 68%, state statistics show. But white voters had a disproportionately larger share of the county electorate compared to Black voters, records showed.

Jimmy L. Nunn, a former Selma city attorney who became Dallas County's first Black probate judge in 2019, said the community is weighted down by its own history.

"We have been programmed that our votes do not count, that we have no vote," said Nunn, who works in the same county courthouse where white, Jim Crow officeholders refused to register Black voters, helping inspire the protests of 1965. "It is that mindset we have to change."

Selma entered voting rights legend because of what happened at the foot of the Edmond Pettus Bridge, which is named for a onetime Confederate general and reputed Ku Klux Klan leader, on March 7, 1965.

After months of demonstrations and failed attempts to register Black people to vote in the white-controlled city, a long line of marchers led by John Lewis, then a young activist, crossed the span over the Alabama River headed toward the state capital of Montgomery to present demands to Gov. George C. Wallace, a segregationist. State troopers and sheriff's posse members on horseback stopped them.

A trooper bashed Lewis' head during the ensuing melee and dozens more were hurt. Images of the violence reinforced the evil and depth of Southern white supremacy, helping build support for the Voting Rights Act of 1965.

In the following decades, Selma became a worldwide touchstone for voting rights, with then-President Barack Obama speaking at the 50th anniversary of Bloody Sunday in 2015.

"If Selma taught us anything, it's that our work is never done," he said. "The American experiment in self-government gives work and purpose to each generation."

But in Selma, voting already was on the decline. After more than 66% of Dallas County's voters went to the polls in 2008, when Obama became the nation's first Black president, turnout fell in each presidential election afterward.

Shamika Mendenhall, a mother of two young children with a third on the way, was among registered voters who did not cast a ballot in 2020. She often goes to the annual jubilee that marks the anniversary of Bloody Sunday and has relatives who participated in voting rights protests of the 1960s, and she's still a little sheepish about missing the election.

"To choose our president we ought to vote," said Mendenhall, 25.

A Black member of the county's Democratic Party executive committee, Collins Pettaway III spends a lot of time pondering how to get young voters like Mendenhall more engaged. Older residents who remember Bloody Sunday and the subsequent Selma-to-Montgomery voting rights march vote, he said, but turnout is falling away among millennials and other, younger generations.

"We just have to try to really make it relevant for them and really get them to see the importance through their lens," said Pettaway, 32, the son of a county judge.

This year, the commemoration of Bloody Sunday will include a “hip-hop political summit” aimed at helping make voting more relevant and giving voice to the reality that many people have given up on the system because they seldom see their votes making a difference in their daily lives, he said.

“There are so many people who feel they have been disenfranchised and they believe that the system is working against them. We cannot dispute it and we cannot make them feel that is wrong, because it is true,” Pettaway said. “We have to let them know and find a way for them understand that the only way that is going to change is if they participate in the process.”

‘Abhorrent’: Prison boss vexes DOJ with alleged intimidation

By MICHAEL BALSAMO and MICHAEL R. SISAK Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — The Justice Department says it is gravely concerned about allegations that a high-ranking federal prison official entrusted to end sexual abuse and cover-ups at a women’s prison known as the “rape club” may have taken steps to suppress a recent complaint about staff misconduct.

Deputy Regional Director T. Ray Hinkle is accused of attempting to silence a female employee who said she had been harassed by a manager at the prison — the federal correctional institution in Dublin, California — by meeting with her personally in violation of established protocols.

“These allegations, if true, are abhorrent, and the Department of Justice takes them very seriously,” the Justice Department said in response to questions from the Associated Press about Hinkle’s alleged behavior.

Hinkle, who pledged to staff that he would help Dublin “regain its reputation” during a stint as acting warden that ended this week, was also admonished by his bosses at the federal Bureau of Prisons for sending all-staff emails that were critical of agency leadership and policies.

In one email, Hinkle complained that he was unable to defend himself in an AP story last week about allegations that he bullied whistleblower employees, threatened to close Dublin if they kept speaking up about misconduct, and stonewalled a Congresswoman who sought to speak candidly with staff and inmates at the prison last month.

Hinkle didn’t respond to email and text messages seeking comment. He previously said that he was not authorized to speak with the media.

Four workers at Dublin, including a warden, have been arrested in the last eight months and charged with sexually abusing inmates. Several others are under investigation. FBI agents were at the facility Tuesday and Wednesday questioning inmates and staff.

The Bureau of Prisons says Director Michael Carvajal will visit Dublin soon. Members of Congress say they’re also planning to visit as they seek to push back against agency interference and increase oversight of the crisis-plagued federal prison system. The Justice Department said it will say more in the coming weeks about actions it is taking to combat abuse at Dublin.

Hinkle’s management of Dublin in the wake of the sexual abuse arrests — at a time when he was supposed to be rooting out misconduct and boosting morale — has only heightened scrutiny of the facility and eroded trust among staff, inmates and top officials at Justice Department and Bureau of Prisons headquarters in Washington D.C.

After receiving a copy of a memo the female employee wrote out detailing her alleged harassment, Hinkle called her into his office at Dublin and spoke with her one-on-one, people familiar with the matter told the AP. The woman felt blindsided and, after the meeting, was reluctant to proceed with her complaint, the people said. They were not authorized to speak about sensitive prison matters and did so on condition of anonymity.

The woman’s union had provided her memo to Hinkle, expecting that he, as the official in charge of the prison, would follow proper procedures to have her harassment complaint investigated. They expected him to respect her anonymity and did not anticipate he would attempt to speak to her on his own, the people said.

Under Bureau of Prisons policy, a warden who becomes aware of allegations of serious misconduct, such as sexual or workplace harassment, must report them immediately to the Office of Internal Affairs

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and must coordinate with that office before proceeding with an investigation.

Such matters are normally handled by trained investigators, not the warden. The policy also establishes protocols for interviewing with staff members about misconduct allegations, including ensuring that they have union representation.

"There are accountability mechanisms in place, whether through the Equal Employment Opportunity Office, the Office of the Inspector General, or even criminal prosecution, to ensure misconduct at all levels is met with the appropriate consequences," the Justice Department said.

Hinkle was named Dublin's acting warden after a previous warden, Ray J. Garcia, was arrested on charges he molested an inmate and forced her and another inmate to strip naked as he took pictures — images prosecutors say were later found on his government-issued phone and personal laptop computer. Garcia has pleaded not guilty. Two other workers pleaded guilty in recent weeks.

An AP investigation last month revealed rampant sexual misconduct at the prison and detailed a toxic culture that enabled it to continue for years. After that reporting, which included accounts of inmates being sent to solitary confinement or transferred to other prisons to silence them, workers and union leaders at the Bay Area lockup and other federal prisons told the AP they too were being threatened for raising alarms about misconduct.

The Bureau of Prisons has been plagued by crises in recent years, many of them exposed by AP reporting, including criminal activity by employees, critically low staffing levels hampering responses to emergencies, the rapid spread of COVID-19, a failed response to the pandemic and dozens of escapes.

In a Feb. 24 email to Dublin staff after an AP story detailed allegations that he was bullying employee whistleblowers, Hinkle wrote: "I will continue to be as transparent as possible regardless of how it makes me look. It's not about me. It's about raising FCI Dublin to a new level of professionalism and correctional excellence. We must continue to serve with integrity and respect, and to have the courage to address wrongdoing."

But Dublin employees say Hinkle's actions belied that message, and worked directly against the Justice Department's efforts to reform the beleaguered prison. The Justice Department has said it has zero tolerance for sexual misconduct. A new warden, Thahesha Jusino, took charge of the Dublin prison on Monday. That change had been previously decided.

In a statement, the Bureau of Prisons said it "takes seriously our duty to protect the individuals entrusted in our custody, as well as maintain the safety of correctional staff and the community" and that allegations of misconduct are taken seriously.

"Incidents of potential criminal activity or misconduct inside BOP facilities are thoroughly investigated for potential administrative discipline or criminal prosecution," agency spokesperson Kristie Breshears said.

She said the Bureau of Prisons was also "committed to fostering a workplace that is free of any type of harassment and will not tolerate harassing conduct by anyone in the workplace" and said employees who make harassment claims "will be protected against further harassing conduct or retaliation."

Hours after the AP reported on allegations that Hinkle was bullying employee whistleblowers, the acting warden emailed Dublin's entire staff a link to the article and a warning that they were not allowed to speak to reporters or leak prison emails. He also accused officials at Justice Department headquarters of not letting him and others defend themselves.

"For reasons beyond my scope of understanding, we are not allowed to defend ourselves," he wrote in the message, which was obtained by the AP.

That email followed another message that Hinkle sent criticizing a California congresswoman who visited the prison earlier in the month. In that note, also sent to all Dublin staff, he accused Rep. Jackie Speier, a Democrat who sits on the House oversight committee, of "mistreating" officers at the prison during a visit she said was prompted by the AP's reporting on sexual misconduct.

Speier told the AP that Hinkle repeatedly tried to block her from meeting privately with inmates, dismissed the allegations of sexual assault at Dublin as "an embarrassment" and then only allowed her to speak with inmates he picked out in a prison yard, in front of prison officials and other inmates.

The Bureau of Prisons condemned Hinkle's actions.

"While the BOP promotes transparency between leadership and line staff, we are aware several emails did not reflect the expected standards of communication," Breshears said in response to questions about Hinkle's messages. "We have addressed the issue."

Russia attacks Ukraine nuclear plant as invasion advances

By JIM HEINTZ, YURAS KARMANAU and MSTITSLAV CHERNOV Associated Press

KYIV, Ukraine (AP) — Russian forces shelled Europe's largest nuclear plant early Friday, sparking a fire as they pressed their attack on a crucial energy-producing Ukrainian city and gained ground in their bid to cut off the country from the sea.

Leading nuclear authorities were concerned — but not panicked — about the damage to the power station. The assault triggered phone calls between Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy and U.S. President Joe Biden and other world leaders. The U.S. Department of Energy activated its nuclear incident response team as a precaution.

The attack on the eastern city of Enerhodar and its Zaporizhzhia nuclear plant unfolded as the invasion entered its second week and another round of talks between the two sides yielded a tentative agreement to set up safe corridors to evacuate citizens and deliver humanitarian aid.

Nuclear plant spokesman Andriy Tuz told Ukrainian television that shells were falling directly on the facility and had set fire to one of its six reactors. That reactor is under renovation and not operating, but there is nuclear fuel inside, he said.

Firefighters cannot get near the flames because they are being shot at, he said, and Ukrainian Foreign Minister Dmytro Kuleba tweeted a plea to the Russians to stop the assault and allow fire teams inside.

"We demand that they stop the heavy weapons fire," Tuz said in a video statement. "There is a real threat of nuclear danger in the biggest atomic energy station in Europe."

The assault renewed fears that the invasion could damage one of Ukraine's 15 nuclear reactors and set off another emergency like the 1986 Chernobyl accident, the world's worst nuclear disaster, which happened about 110 kilometers (65 miles) north of the capital.

U.S. Energy Secretary Jennifer Granholm tweeted that the Zaporizhzhia plant's reactors were protected by robust containment structures and were being safely shut down.

In an emotional speech in the middle of the night, Zelenskyy said he feared an explosion that would be "the end for everyone. The end for Europe. The evacuation of Europe."

"Only urgent action by Europe can stop the Russian troops," he said. "Do not allow the death of Europe from a catastrophe at a nuclear power station."

But most experts saw nothing to indicate an impending disaster.

The International Atomic Energy Agency said the fire had not affected essential equipment and that Ukraine's nuclear regulator reported no change in radiation levels. The American Nuclear Society concurred, saying that the latest radiation levels remained within natural background levels.

"The real threat to Ukrainian lives continues to be the violent invasion and bombing of their country," the group said in a statement.

Jon Wolfsthal, who served during the Obama administration as the senior director for arms control and nonproliferation at the National Security Council, said the plant's reactors have thick concrete containment domes that should protect them from tank and artillery fire.

But he too was concerned about a potential loss of power at the plant, which could imperil its ability to keep the nuclear fuel cool.

The mayor of Enerhodar said earlier that Ukrainian forces were battling Russian troops on the city's outskirts. Video showed flames and black smoke rising above the city of more than 50,000, with people streaming past wrecked cars.

Prior to the shelling, the Ukrainian state atomic energy company reported that a Russian military column was heading toward the nuclear plant. Loud shots and rocket fire were heard late Thursday.

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"Many young men in athletic clothes and armed with Kalashnikovs have come into the city. They are breaking down doors and trying to get into the apartments of local residents," the statement from Energoatom said.

Later, a livestreamed security camera linked from the homepage of the Zaporizhzhia plant showed what appeared to be armored vehicles rolling into the facility's parking lot and shining spotlights on the building where the camera was mounted.

Then there were what appeared to be muzzle flashes from vehicles, followed by nearly simultaneous explosions in surrounding buildings. Smoke rose into the frame and drifted away.

Ukrainian Prime Minister Denys Shmyhal called on the West to close the skies over the country's nuclear plants. "It is a question of the security of the whole world!" he said in a statement.

The U.S. and NATO allies have ruled out creating a no-fly zone since the move would pit Russian and Western military forces against each other.

Vladimir Putin's forces have brought their superior firepower to bear over the past few days, launching hundreds of missiles and artillery attacks on cities and other sites around the country and making significant gains in the south.

The Russians announced the capture of the southern city of Kherson, a vital Black Sea port of 280,000, and local Ukrainian officials confirmed the takeover of the government headquarters there, making it the first major city to fall since the invasion began a week ago.

Heavy fighting continued on the outskirts of another strategic port, Mariupol, on the Azov Sea. The battles have knocked out the city's electricity, heat and water systems, as well as most phone service, officials said. Food deliveries to the city were also cut.

Associated Press video from the port city showed the assault lighting up the darkening sky above deserted streets and medical teams treating civilians, including a 16-year-old boy inside a clinic who could not be saved. The child was playing soccer when he was wounded in the shelling, according to his father, who cradled the boy's head on the gurney and cried.

Severing Ukraine's access to the Black and Azov seas would deal a crippling blow to its economy and allow Russia to build a land corridor to Crimea, seized by Moscow in 2014.

Overall, the outnumbered, outgunned Ukrainians have put up stiff resistance, staving off the swift victory that Russia appeared to have expected. But a senior U.S. defense official, speaking on condition of anonymity, said Russia's seizure of Crimea gave it a logistical advantage in that part of the country, with shorter supply lines that smoothed the offensive there.

Ukrainian leaders called on the people to defend their homeland by cutting down trees, erecting barricades in the cities and attacking enemy columns from the rear. In recent days, authorities have issued weapons to civilians and taught them how to make Molotov cocktails.

"Total resistance. ... This is our Ukrainian trump card, and this is what we can do best in the world," Oleksiy Arestovich, an aide to Zelenskyy, said in a video message, recalling guerrilla actions in Nazi-occupied Ukraine during World War II.

The second round of talks between Ukrainian and Russian delegations was held in neighboring Belarus. But the two sides appeared far apart going into the meeting, and Putin warned Ukraine that it must quickly accept the Kremlin's demand for its "demilitarization" and declare itself neutral, renouncing its bid to join NATO.

Putin told French President Emmanuel Macron he was determined to press on with his attack "until the end," according to Macron's office.

The two sides said that they tentatively agreed to allow cease-fires in areas designated safe corridors, and that they would seek to work out the necessary details quickly. A Zelenskyy adviser also said a third round of talks will be held early next week.

Despite a profusion of evidence of civilian casualties and destruction of property by the Russian military, Putin decried what he called an "anti-Russian disinformation campaign" and insisted that Moscow uses "only precision weapons to exclusively destroy military infrastructure."

Putin claimed that the Russian military had already offered safe corridors for civilians to flee, but he asserted without evidence that Ukrainian "neo-Nazis" were preventing people from leaving and were using them as human shields.

He also hailed Russian soldiers as heroes in a video call with members of Russia's Security Council, and ordered additional payments to families of men killed or wounded.

The Pentagon set up a direct communication link to Russia's Ministry of Defense earlier this week to avoid the possibility of a miscalculation sparking conflict between Moscow and Washington, according to a U.S. defense official who spoke on condition of anonymity because the link had not been announced.

Karmanau reported from Lviv, Ukraine. Chernov reported from Mariupol, Ukraine. Sergei Grits in Odesa, Ukraine; Francesca Ebel, Josef Federman and Andrew Drake in Kyiv; and other AP journalists from around the world contributed to this report.

Follow the AP's coverage of the Ukraine crisis at <https://apnews.com/hub/russia-ukraine>

Ex-officer cleared in shooting during Breonna Taylor raid

By DYLAN LOVAN Associated Press

LOUISVILLE, Ky. (AP) — A former Kentucky police officer was found not guilty Thursday on charges he endangered neighbors the night he fired into Breonna Taylor's apartment during a botched drug raid that resulted in Taylor's death.

The panel of eight men and four women delivered its verdict for Brett Hankison about three hours after it took the case following closing arguments from prosecution and defense attorneys.

None of the officers involved in the March 13, 2020, raid were charged with Taylor's death, and Hankison did not fire any of the bullets that killed the 26-year-old Black woman. His acquittal likely closes the door on the possibility of state criminal charges against any of the officers involved in the raid. A federal investigation into whether the officers violated his civil rights is underway.

Taylor's mother, Tamika Palmer, and a group of friends and family left quickly without commenting after the verdict.

Hankison did not appear outside the courtroom after the verdict was read. But his attorney Stewart Mathews said he and Hankison were "thrilled."

Asked what might have swayed the jury, Mathews replied, "I think it was absolutely the fact that he was doing his job as a police officer."

Assistant Kentucky Attorney General Barbara Maines Whaley said she respected the verdict but had no further comment.

Prosecutors stressed in opening statements that the case wasn't about Taylor's death or the police decisions that led to the raid. Jurors were shown a single image of her body, barely discernible at the end of the hallway.

Taylor had been settling down for bed when officers arrived at her door. She was shot multiple times in her hallway and died at the scene.

Protesters filled the streets for months after Kentucky Attorney General David Cameron's office declined to seek charges against any of the officers in connection to Taylor's death. Taylor's name and those of George Floyd and Ahmaud Arbery — Black men who died in encounters with police and white pursuers — became rallying cries for racial justice during nationwide protests in 2020.

Sadiqa Reynolds, president and CEO of the Louisville Urban League, said the verdict didn't surprise her. Black residents of the city, she explained, had already been "experiencing a certain amount of frustration," because no officer had been charged for Taylor's death.

"I think there are a lot of people who are disappointed. It is very disheartening, but I have to tell you, it's just not surprising," she said. "It just doesn't feel like an optimistic day for policing, for Black people, for our entire community."

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Louisville Mayor Greg Fischer said the verdict added to the "frustration and anger of many over the inability to find more accountability for the tragic events of March 13, 2020."

"While the conduct considered in this case was not specific to Breonna Taylor's death, the fact remains that she should not have died that night, and I know that for many, justice has still not been achieved," he said.

Fischer cited some of the changes Louisville metro government has made since Taylor's death, such as banning so-called no-knock warrants and conducting a top-to-bottom review of the police department.

Hankison, 45, had been charged with three counts of wanton endangerment for firing through sliding-glass side doors and a window of Taylor's apartment during the raid. Multiple bullets pierced the wall of a neighboring apartment, and prosecutors said Hankison endangered the lives of a pregnant woman, her young child and her boyfriend who lived there.

Hankison's attorneys never contested the ballistics evidence, but said he fired 10 bullets because he thought his fellow officers were "being executed."

One of those officers, Sgt. John Mattingly, was hit in the leg by a bullet from a handgun fired by Taylor's boyfriend, Kenneth Walker, who said he thought intruders were breaking in.

"The jury felt like you go out and perform your duty and your brother officer gets shot, you got a right to defend yourself," Mathews said of Hankison's acquittal. "Simple as that."

Hankison was fired by Louisville Police for shooting blindly during the raid. Asked during the trial if he did anything wrong that night, he said, "Absolutely not."

Taylor was killed in the fire returned by Mattingly and fellow officer Myles Cosgrove.

Mattingly and Cosgrove declined to testify during Hankison's trial, invoking their Fifth Amendment rights because of an ongoing FBI civil rights investigation. Hankison's handgun and other evidence from the scene is being held by FBI investigators, though the gun was loaned to prosecutors to show at trial.

The U.S. Department of Justice also announced last year that it is investigating the city's police department for potential discrimination and its use of force and search warrant policies.

Later Thursday evening, roughly 20 demonstrators gathered at Jefferson Square Park in downtown Louisville, protesting the verdict. In 2020, the square became an impromptu hub for protesters during months of demonstrations.

Cheyenne Osuala, who sat in on the trial with Taylor's family, said she was stunned when she heard the jury's decision.

"We've gotten nothing, not that that would have been justice for Breonna Taylor. But at least a conviction, even if it is small, it would have been something more than nothing," she said.

Associated Press reporter Piper Hudspeth Blackburn contributed to this report. Hudspeth Blackburn is a corps member for The Associated Press/Report for America Statehouse News Initiative. Report for America is a nonprofit national service program that places journalists in local newsrooms to report on undercovered issues.

Pelosi supports halting Russian oil imports to US: 'Ban it'

By LISA MASCARO AP Congressional Correspondent

WASHINGTON (AP) — Amid the escalating war in Ukraine, House Speaker Nancy Pelosi said Thursday she supports banning Russian oil imports to the U.S., a hefty nod that could strengthen President Joe Biden's hand as global allies seek to isolate Russian President Vladimir Putin's regime.

Biden has been reluctant to curb Russian oil shipments to the U.S. or slap on energy sanctions in ways that would reduce supply as gas prices at the pump are already climbing for Americans. But Pelosi's support gives fresh currency for an idea in Congress already backed by wide swaths of Republicans and an increasing number of Democrats. The White House has said all tools remain on the table.

"I'm all for that," Pelosi said about ending Russian oil in the U.S. "Ban it."

Finding common ground to counter Russian aggression toward Ukraine through energy policy would be

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a breakthrough for the divided Congress, which has shown remarkable resolve in unifying U.S. support for Ukrainians but has struggled over concrete steps that would help the Western-style democracy battle the Russian invasion.

A Russian oil ban could draw momentary alliance of lawmakers on the left and right — Democrats fighting climate change who want to lessen the U.S. reliance on fossil fuels; Republicans who want to boost U.S. energy production at home; and the great majority of lawmakers of both parties who want to stop Putin's war.

Republicans have been pushing for the Russian oil ban, joined by some Democrats eager to punish Putin. "What if we crush the oil and gas sector of the Russian economy?" said Sen. Lindsey Graham, R-S.C. "That would be a lethal combination for the Russian economy."

Sen. Ed Markey, a liberal Democrat from Massachusetts and a leading advocate of climate change strategies, also backs an import ban. "We cannot criticize Europe for its reliance on Russian energy as we pour dirty oil money into Russia," he said

Still, Biden has resisted, fearing a ban could further disrupt global markets and raise already high prices at the pump. He also risks backlash from climate change activists who say U.S. officials must not use the Ukraine war to expand oil or gas drilling in the U.S., a step Republicans have been urging. Gas prices in the U.S. averaged nearly \$3.73 a gallon Thursday, up almost \$1 from a year ago, according to AAA motor club.

For now, the White House has said all options remain on the table. "We don't have a strategic interest in reducing the global supply of energy," said White House press secretary Jen Psaki.

The remarks from the White House were widely criticized as misguided by Sen. Joe Manchin, D-W.Va., and Sen. Lisa Murkowski, R-Alaska, at a press conference Thursday introducing a bipartisan bill to halt Russian oil imports to the U.S.

The legislation would halt Russian oil imports in the U.S. by declaring a national emergency, something Biden could also do on his own. It gained bipartisan support, including from leadership of the House Problem Solvers Caucus.

"There is a moral obligation here: I don't want us dollars to be funding this, this carnage in Ukraine led by Putin," Murkowski said.

Murkowski said she understood Biden won the White House in part on his promise to fight climate change, but she said after the Russian war in Ukraine, "We are in a different place."

Russian oil and gas exports have loomed over national security policy in the U.S. and its Western allies. The energy sector is vital to the Russian economy and the industry is a political force that leaves countries reliant on Putin's regime. Oil prices globally spiked with the Russian invasion of Ukraine, shaking markets.

The U.S. imported a small but notable amount of oil from Russia — some 7 % of all imports of crude oil and petroleum products. Some US industry groups say it's even less. In 2021, the U.S. brought in roughly 245 million barrels of crude oil and petroleum products from Russia — a one-year increase of 24%, according to the U.S. Energy Information Administration.

Pelosi said she doesn't want to see rising gas prices at the pump for Americans, and outlined steps Congress and the administration are taking to avoid spikes.

Biden announced on Tuesday that he is releasing 30 million barrels of oil from U.S. strategic reserves, part of a global effort to ease oil supplies amid the Ukraine war, and some Democrats have been pushing a temporary holiday from the federal gas tax to ease costs to consumers.

The White House has not endorsed the gas tax holiday or ruled it out.

Associated Press writers Amer Madhani and Matthew Daly contributed to this story.

Father mourns son after shelling on Ukraine soccer field

By MISTYSLAV CHERNOV Associated Press

MARIUPOL, Ukraine (AP) — The surgeons leaving the operating room don't make eye contact. One of them holds up his hands. Another looks down, defeated. It's then that the father waiting at the doorway

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grabs his forehead, tears welling, and turns away, a wail about to escape his throat.

The man, identified only as Serhii, enters the room and finds his 16-year-old son, Iliya, is still and draped by a blood-stained sheet.

Serhii drops down, hugs Iliya's lifeless head and convulses with grief.

Iliya was fatally wounded Wednesday while playing soccer in Mariupol when shelling started amid the Russian invasion of Ukraine. The explosive hit the soccer field near a school in the Azov Sea city.

Elsewhere in Mariupol, shelling illuminated darkening skies as medics stood in a parking lot, with heavy fighting continuing on the city outskirts on Thursday. The city was plunged into darkness as the battle knocked out most phone services and raised the prospect of food and water shortages.

Without phone connections, medics did not know where to take the wounded. Others drove around the city, with one crew finding a wounded woman who was put on a stretcher, carried down the stairs and placed into an ambulance, her hands shaking rapidly.

Cutting off Ukraine's access to the Black and Azov Seas would deal a crippling blow to Ukraine's economy. It would also allow Russia to build a land corridor to Crimea, which it seized in 2014.

Russian President Vladimir Putin's forces have brought their superior firepower to bear over the past few days, launching hundreds of missiles and artillery attacks on cities and other sites around the country and making significant gains in the south.

The Russians announced the capture of the southern city of Kherson, a vital Black Sea port of 280,000, and local Ukrainian officials confirmed the takeover of the government headquarters there, making it the first major city to fall since the invasion began a week ago.

EXPLAINER: Is stuck convoy in Ukraine a setback for Russia?

By LOLITA C. BALDOR and ROBERT BURNS Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — For days, a massive Russian military convoy has sat, largely stalled about 15 miles (25 kilometers) outside Kyiv, the Ukrainian capital, which is believed to be the central target of Moscow's war.

Eight days into the war, the expanse of Russian supply trucks, troops and weapons has been plagued with fuel and food shortages and logistical challenges, including weather and mud. Ukrainian troops have managed to attack and incapacitate some vehicles at the front, creating a traffic jam, but the Russians have largely shielded the convoy from attack by air, according to Western officials and analysts.

The convoy's lack of measurable progress has triggered questions about the short- and long-term implications and what it says about Russia's war planning. But will it affect the war's outcome?

Mason Clark, a Russia analyst at the Institute for the Study of War, says the convoy saga may be emblematic of shortcomings in the Russian army, which is relatively inexperienced in the execution of large-scale operations that combine air, ground and naval forces. But it is unlikely to prevent Russia from prevailing against the outgunned and outnumbered Ukrainian defenders.

"Eventually the Russians will be able to quite simply wear down Ukrainian forces," and take Kyiv, Clark said.

A look at what's known about the convoy:

WHERE IS IT AND WHAT HAS HAPPENED?

The convoy, which stretches for as much as 65 kilometers (40 miles) from near Prybisk in the north to the southern end near the Antonov airport, was moving steadily south at the onset of the war. But this week, progress appeared to all but stop.

Reports immediately centered on fuel and food shortages. And, a senior U.S. defense official said Ukrainian troops have been targeting the convoy with ground fire, including shoulder-fired Javelin anti-tank missiles provided by Western countries. The most significant impact of those attacks is that they struck vehicles at the front of the convoy, essentially creating a roadblock.

In addition, the muddy ground has made it difficult for the Russians to go off-road to make more progress along other routes. Photos and videos show vehicles stuck in the mud.

John Kirby, the Pentagon press secretary, said U.S. officials assess that the convoy, as well as the broader Russian thrust toward Kyiv from the north, is largely stalled. He said the Russians appear to be regrouping and reassessing the reasons for their slow progress, "and how to make up for lost time." He said they

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likely did not anticipate such problems or the extent of the Ukrainian resistance.

A SITTING DUCK?

The most frequent question has been why doesn't the Ukraine military decimate it, as it sits on the highways.

Such a long string of military vehicles in relatively open terrain would normally be vulnerable to air attack. But any Ukrainian attacks on the convoy may be limited because officials believe it contains air defense systems and may be shielded by screening forces to ward off ground attackers.

While the Ukrainian military has hit vehicles in the front and in other sporadic locations, it is likely too risky to put manned aircraft in the area to take it out with larger weapons, which also could be met with defensive strikes. And Ukraine's military has been focused on defending the major cities that are under siege and in danger of being overtaken.

DOES THIS SIGNAL SERIOUS PROBLEMS FOR RUSSIA'S OFFENSIVE?

U.S. officials caution against any sweeping conclusions that the convoy problem signals a debilitating setback for the Russians. While it clearly has stalled the Russian assault on Kyiv for now, officials believe Russia has so much military combat power in Ukraine that it will adjust, compensate and overcome such setbacks.

Observers say Russia has clearly been frustrated by persistent logistical and supply problems, with troops running out of food and vehicles running out of fuel.

Clark said some portion of the fuel-truck segment of the convoy ran low on fuel, ironically, "which tells you the state of Russian logistics on this line of advance."

It is also possible, officials say, that part of the reason for the stalled progress is that Russian commanders are deliberately pausing to reassess and reset, allowing time to get more supplies at the ready before beginning a further advance on Kyiv.

Observers also note that in other places — largely in the south — Russian troops are having more success. They announced the capture of the southern city of Kherson, a vital Black Sea port of 280,000, and local Ukrainian officials confirmed the takeover of the government headquarters there. And they were gaining ground in their effort to move into Mariupol, a strategic port on the Azov Sea.

Still, the extent — and days-long length — of the convoy's problems do raise larger issues about whether the Russians adequately prepared for the attack, despite positioning troops around Ukraine for months before actually moving in. A critical — and many would say No. 1 — tenet for any ground campaign is to ensure that troops have the supplies, weapons and basics such as food, water and fuel, they need to move forward to their objective.

On Thursday, French President Emmanuel Macron spoke for 90 minutes with Russian President Vladimir Putin, who told him that military operations in Ukraine are "going according to plan," an official in the French president's office said.

But, Russia's inability to keep its troops supplied has raised eyebrows in the Pentagon, where officials note that it has been years since Moscow's military has been involved in this type of ground war. And they say it's hard to tell if this was a failure to properly plan or a collapse in the Russian military's execution of the plan.

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As refugee numbers soar, many haunted by terror of war

By VANESSA GERA and RENATA BRITO Associated Press

PRZEMYSL, Poland (AP) — It took Tatyana Pelykh and her 11-year-old son four days of travel and a wait of nearly 48 hours at the border crossing to escape their native Ukraine for Romania. There they found safety and a place to sleep, on the floor of a hotel conference room.

But Pelykh, a baker, says she still carries the terror of war inside her.

"I feel that my body is here, but my heart and my soul are in Okhtyrka and Kharkiv," the cities in Ukraine

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where her parents and best friend remain hunkered down in basements and garages under Russian attack.

In just one week, Russia's invasion of Ukraine has produced a refugee exodus so large that it almost matches the number of people who sought refuge in Europe in a whole year during the 2015 migration crisis.

The United Nations refugee agency said Thursday that 1 million people had fled Ukraine since Russia's invasion, the swiftest exodus of refugees this century.

In 2015, hundreds of thousands of Syrians had fled their strife-torn country, which Russia also bombarded. Together with people escaping fighting in Afghanistan, Iraq and elsewhere, they headed west, with thousands dying at sea trying to reach a continent where many didn't want them.

The arrival of about 1.3 million people sparked tensions among European partners, who squabbled over how many to accept, and bolstered far-right populists, some friendly to the Kremlin.

This time, as Russian forces inflict massive destruction on Ukraine, Europeans have united in extending a helping hand.

In one week, neighboring nations accepted more than 2% of Ukraine's population of 44 million, according to the U.N. refugee agency, UNHCR. The operation has gone relatively smoothly thanks to an enormous mobilization of volunteers who have gone to the borders to help.

The European Union decided Thursday to grant people fleeing Ukraine temporary protection and residency permits. EU Migration Commissioner Ylva Johansson said millions more were expected to move into the 27-nation bloc and would require shelter, schooling and work. The U.N. refugee agency predicted the war could produce up to 4 million refugees.

Meanwhile, Ukrainians and others who had been living in Ukraine continued to arrive in Polish, Hungarian, Slovakian, Romanian and Moldovan border towns.

Among them was Nadia Zuravka, a teenager who arrived Thursday in Przemysl, Poland, with her mother. They came from Ukraine's second-largest city, Kharkiv, which is under bombardment. She said both her school and home had been hit by bombs, and her friends were all hiding in basements.

"Everything of value to me" has faced some kind of destruction, she said.

Poland, a neighboring Slavic nation where many Ukrainians have settled in recent years for work, has received the largest single group of refugees so far, with many being taken in by relatives or friends. Many refugees continue moving west to countries like Italy and Germany.

Volunteers and local authorities at border crossings meet exhausted people who have been traveling for days. They serve food or guide the newcomers to shelters; sometimes they take strangers into their own homes. Children arriving with cancer were evacuated to hospitals in Poland.

Pope Francis thanked Poland for its role in helping refugees, praising the country's people for "opening your borders, your hearts, the doors of your homes."

People from across Europe are helping too, even as they struggle with their own fears of what this dangerous new chapter holds for a continent that has faced so much bloodshed in past wars.

Luc Dedecker drove 1,650 kilometers (1,025 miles) from his home in Belgium to Przemysl, stopping only to sleep in his car. He was prepared to take strangers back to his place.

"People need to be helped," he said. He also described a profound fear of Russian President Vladimir Putin.

For Poles, Russia's attack on Ukraine evokes memories of their own country's double invasion in 1939 by Nazi Germany and the Soviet Union. The German invasion triggered World War II and a brutal five-year occupation that killed 6 million Poles, including 3 million Jews murdered in the Holocaust.

Scenes of destroyed Ukrainian cities today recall the look of Polish cities leveled by German bombardments during the war.

Some Poles described helping Ukrainians now as part of a struggle by the democratic West to defend their own liberty, since sheltering Ukrainian women and children frees men to fight at home.

"We think that if Ukrainians fight and win, we will be safe. Now, we are not safe," said Bartosz Tomaszewski, a 28-year-old Pole in a yellow security vest that marked him as a volunteer.

He was guiding people coming off trains in Przemysl, where he has traveled each day from his home

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in nearby Rzeszow.

Tomaszewski fears that if Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy fails to stop Putin, Poland could be next, along with the Baltic nations of Lithuania, Latvia and Estonia.

Pelykh, the Ukrainian refugee in the Romanian border town of Siret, hopes people in Russia "will read about this and think about what is happening now (in Ukraine). It's not photoshop, it's not fairy tales. It's real, it's real. It's in my town."

Brito reported from Siret Romania, Monika Scislowska in Warsaw and Raf Casert in Brussels contributed.

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As vaccine demand falls, states are left with huge stockpile

By JENNIFER McDERMOTT Associated Press

As demand for COVID-19 vaccines collapses in many areas of the U.S., states are scrambling to use stockpiles of doses before they expire and have to be added to the millions that have already gone to waste.

From some of the least vaccinated states, like Indiana and North Dakota, to some of the most vaccinated states, like New Jersey and Vermont, public health departments are shuffling doses around in the hopes of finding providers that can use them.

State health departments told The Associated Press they have tracked millions of doses that went to waste, including ones that expired, were in a multi-dose vial that couldn't be used completely or had to be tossed for some other reason like temperature issues or broken vials.

Nearly 1.5 million doses in Michigan, 1.45 million in North Carolina, 1 million in Illinois and almost 725,000 doses in Washington couldn't be used.

The percentage of wasted doses in California is only about 1.8%, but in a state that has received 84 million doses and administered more than 71 million of them, that equates to roughly 1.4 million doses. Providers there are asked to keep doses until they expire, then properly dispose of them, the California Department of Public Health said.

The national rate of wasted doses is about 9.5% of the more than 687 million doses that have been delivered as of late February, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention said Thursday. That equates to about 65 million doses.

The problem is not unique to the U.S. More than a million doses of the Russian Sputnik vaccine expired this week in Guatemala, because nobody wanted to take the shot.

Vaccination program managers say that tossing out doses is inevitable in any inoculation campaign because of the difficulty in aligning supply and demand for a product with a limited shelf life.

But the coronavirus pandemic has killed nearly 6 million people and shattered economies across the globe, and every dose that goes to waste feels like a missed opportunity considering how successful the vaccines are in preventing death and serious disease.

It also comes only about a year after people desperate to get the vaccine attempted to jump in line to get ahead of those deemed higher priority. Hospital board members, their trustees and donors around the U.S. got early access or offers for vaccinations, raising complaints about favoritism and inequity at a time when the developing world had virtually no doses.

And many poorer nations still have low vaccine rates, including 13 countries in Africa with less than 5% of their population fully vaccinated. They are plagued by unpredictable deliveries, weak health care systems, vaccine hesitancy and some supply issues, although health officials say inventory is markedly stronger than earlier in the pandemic.

In fact, supplies are so strong that the CDC now advises doctors that it's OK to discard doses if it means opening up the standard multi-dose vials to vaccinate a single person and the rest has to be tossed.

"Pivoting to what's happening now, you have much more production and distribution to low-income countries," said Dr. Joseph Bresee, who directs the COVID-19 Vaccine Implementation Program at the

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Task Force for Global Health in Decatur, Georgia. "The issue of some stockpiles in the U.S., Germany and Japan, that are not redistributed to sub-Saharan Africa, it's less of an acute problem now because vaccine production and distribution is in high-gear right now serving those low-income countries."

The Department of Health and Human Services also said that redistributing states' excess doses to other nations is not feasible because of the difficulty in transporting the shots, which must remain cold, in addition to not being cost effective because of the relatively small number concentrated at sites.

Of the more than 687 million doses sent to states, 550 million to 600 million have been administered, HHS said Monday. The vaccines authorized in the U.S., made by Pfizer, Moderna and Johnson & Johnson, can last for up to about six months from the time of manufacture.

A senior HHS official familiar with vaccine distribution plans took issue with the word "wastage," saying it implies mismanagement when states are effectively overseeing their inventories. The CDC, however, uses the term "wastage" on its website and asks states to report their numbers.

The CDC said Thursday that the federal government, jurisdictions and vaccine providers have a strong partnership to get as many people vaccinated as possible while reducing vaccine wastage, and that the likelihood of leaving unused doses in a vial may increase as demand slows, even when providers continue to follow best practices to use every dose possible.

The fading demand comes as the pandemic itself wanes in the U.S. On Thursday, the CDC said about 90% of the U.S. population lives in counties where the risk of coronavirus is posing a low or medium threat — meaning residents don't need to wear masks in most indoor settings. That was up from 70% last week.

The average number of Americans getting their first shot is down to about 70,000 a day, the lowest point since the U.S. vaccination campaign began in December 2020. About 76% of the U.S. population has received at least one shot and roughly 65% of all Americans are fully vaccinated.

With demand so low, states will undoubtedly be confronted with more waste in the months ahead, although they will benefit from any booster expansions.

Idaho, for example, has 230,000 doses on hand but is only averaging fewer than 2,000 doses administered a week.

Oregon's vaccination rate is slightly higher than the national average, but the health authority there said last week that they have "significant excess vaccine on hand" because of the recent drop in demand. The state is trying to use up as many of the 716,000 doses in its inventory as possible.

Rhode Island has the highest percentage of residents who are fully vaccinated in the nation, at slightly more than 80%, but the health department reported having 137,000 doses on hand last week. Health officials say they need them for a big push to increase the vaccination rate for booster doses.

Health officials in some states have developed "matchmaker" programs to connect vaccine providers with excess doses with providers seeking doses. Many said they're attempting to redistribute doses with expiration dates that are quickly approaching. New Jersey has a task force that has transferred more than 600,000 doses around the state since June. West Virginia has offered to transfer Pfizer adult doses to nearby states.

Immunization managers have been asking for single-dose vials, especially for pediatricians, but it may not work for manufacturers to package it that way yet, said Claire Hannan, executive director at the Association of Immunization Managers. She said wasting vaccine "just can't be an issue."

"We tell this to providers, but the most important thing is getting people vaccinated. And that's hard when the demand goes down. You don't have constant flow," she said. "But that's just a necessary evil I guess."

HHS said states are ordering prudently, paralleling the drop in demand. The minimum order for Pfizer used to be nearly 1,200 doses but now it's 100, and Moderna reduced the number of doses per vial, the agency said.

"Given what we've seen in terms of the number of people still unvaccinated, I do think finding any way to get the shot in arms, even at the expense of potential wastage, is still important," said Katie Greene, an assistant research director at the Duke-Margolis Center for Health Policy.

AP Medical Writer Mike Stobbe contributed to this report.

Breakdown of US-Russia diplomacy runs deep, beyond Ukraine

By MATTHEW LEE and VLADIMIR ISACHENKOV Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — Eyeing each other warily across negotiating tables, U.S. and Russian diplomats never much trusted each other. Yet even during the Cold War, they hashed out agreements on the biggest issues of the day.

Now the fierce, mutual hostility over Russia's invasion of Ukraine raises a critical question: Is U.S.-Russian diplomacy effectively dead?

The answer is crucial for reasons that go far beyond the Ukraine war and the immediate interests of both nations.

The United States and Russia have been at the center of almost every item on the global agenda, including arms control, space cooperation, cybersecurity and climate change. Progress on those issues and more, such as Arctic policy and maritime and aviation safety, largely depend on the two giants finding common ground.

There hasn't been a total breakdown in diplomatic ties. For the moment at least, embassies remain open in both capitals despite a festering but unrelated diplomatic spat that has seen the two sides expel dozens of diplomats since 2017. And both Russia and the United States are involved in negotiations about reviving the 2015 Iran nuclear deal, now underway in Vienna.

The well-known "hotline" communication channels aimed at preventing nuclear war remain in place. And the Pentagon has established a "de-confliction line" of direct communication with the Russian ministry of defense to avoid unintended Ukraine military incidents and escalation.

But aside from the Vienna talks, the most recent significant communication between the two sides appears to have been the U.S. notification to Russia on Monday that it would expel 12 Russians from the United Nations on espionage grounds.

Secretary of State Antony Blinken, whose spokesman last week accused the Russians of engaging in diplomatic "kabuki theater," said the door to diplomacy remains open but only narrowly and only if Moscow halts its military offensive.

"What we've seen repeatedly is that Russia goes through the pretense of diplomacy to distract and continue on its aggressive path," Blinken told reporters Wednesday.

"If we determine that there are areas that it's in our interest to continue to pursue that may involve some engagement for Russia, we'll continue to pursue that," he said, adding however that "we're not going to let Russia dictate in any way what's in our interests and how to pursue it."

At the highest level, President Joe Biden and Russian leader Vladimir Putin have not spoken since a roughly hourlong phone call on Feb. 12, in which Biden told Putin that a "Russian invasion of Ukraine would produce widespread human suffering and diminish Russia's standing." Twelve days later, Russia invaded.

The last contact between the nations' top diplomats — Blinken and Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov — occurred on the eve of the invasion. On Feb. 23, Blinken wrote to Lavrov to say he was canceling a scheduled meeting in Geneva the next day because he did not believe it would be productive. Lavrov replied with a cursory note blaming any lack of productiveness on inflexible American positions, according to U.S. officials.

Other than that, the last publicly acknowledged contact may have been the U.S. informing Russia on Feb. 23 that it was expelling the No. 2 at its embassy in Washington in retaliation for Russia's expulsion of the U.S. deputy ambassador from Moscow in mid-February.

The dearth of contact, apart from angry statements delivered by both sides at the United Nations, is problematic.

"Generally one should preserve the ability to talk, and at the end of the day one usually finds ways to do what needs to be done," said Ronald Neumann, the president of the American Academy of Diplomacy and a former three-time U.S. ambassador. "Russia won't be isolated forever, but right now there is a need

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to send them a message. We can't wink at them extinguishing a sovereign country."

Neumann noted that even during the Cuban missile crisis in the 1960s there were secret contacts, often involving intermediaries, despite bluster from both Washington and Moscow, and eventually there was a peaceful resolution. Cooler heads, he said, should prevail eventually as the impact of the lack of diplomacy becomes clearer.

"We, too, will pay a price for isolating Russia," he said. "But right now that appears to be a price that we should pay (because) we don't want to give the Russians a free hand."

With a wide-ranging list of potential areas of cooperation, the Biden administration has sought to ensure that not all contacts are banned. It has barred most U.S. diplomats from formal interactions with their Russian counterparts overseas, but the State Department said Tuesday that U.S. Ambassador to Russia John Sullivan has been in touch with counterparts in Moscow in recent days.

The exemptions to barred contacts include not just the Iran talks but discussions with Russia at most international forums like the United Nations. They also include direct talks with Moscow on consular issues, which for the United States means primarily the fate of at least two Americans detained on what Washington says are specious espionage charges.

For Russia, though, the appearance of diplomacy remains. Even as Russian troops have pressed their offensive deeper into Ukraine amid international outrage and increasing international isolation, Lavrov has sought to continue business as usual, talking about arms control in remarks to a U.N. disarmament conference in Geneva on Tuesday.

He spoke via video link after several EU nations barred him from flying there because of a European ban on Russian planes, part of bruising sanctions against Moscow. Lavrov berated the EU members for their "refusal to respect the right to freedom of movement, which is a fundamental human right."

After repeating a litany of accusations against Ukraine and the West for moves he said were threatening Russia's security, Lavrov spoke about Moscow's readiness to continue the talks on arms control and European security — a statement that rang hollow as the war in Ukraine made such negotiations irrelevant.

He denounced what he called NATO's policy to contain Russia and its refusal to meet Moscow's demand to keep Ukraine out of NATO and roll back alliance military deployments in Eastern Europe.

"I am once again urging the United States, its allies and clients to unflinchingly honor their obligations not to strengthen their own security at the expense of others," Lavrov said. "Obviously, this would help improve the military-political situation in the Euro-Atlantic region and create prerequisites for making headway on the entire range of matters in the field of arms control, including possible work on new agreements."

Isachenkov reported from Moscow.

Takeaways as Jan. 6 panel eyes Trump 'criminal conspiracy'

By MARY CLARE JALONICK and FARNOUSH AMIRI Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — The House panel investigating the Jan. 6, 2021, insurrection at the Capitol has previewed some of its findings in a federal court filing, and investigators for the first time said they have enough evidence to suggest then-President Donald Trump committed crimes.

That doesn't necessarily mean that Trump will be charged, or even that the Justice Department will investigate. But the legal document offers an early look at some of the panel's likely conclusions, which are expected to be submitted in coming months. The committee has interviewed more than 650 witnesses as it investigates the violent siege by Trump supporters, the worst attack on the Capitol in more than two centuries.

In the 221-page filing, the panel said it has evidence that the defeated Republican president and his associates engaged in a "criminal conspiracy" to prevent Congress from certifying Democrat Joe Biden's election victory. Hundreds of Trump's supporters violently bashed their way past police that day and sent lawmakers into hiding, interrupting but not stopping the certification.

The filing came in response to a lawsuit from John Eastman, a lawyer and law professor who was con-

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sulting with Trump while attempting to overturn the election and who is trying to withhold documents from the committee.

Eastman's attorney, Charles Burnham, responded to the legal filing by defending Eastman's efforts to protect his documents through attorney-client privilege. Investigating lawmakers argue there is a legal exception allowing a lawyer to disclose communications when they might be related to ongoing or future crimes.

Takeaways from the Jan. 6 committee's court filing:

A CASE FOR FRAUD AND OBSTRUCTION

The committee says it has evidence of three crimes, all of which are related to Trump's activity, and his coordination with Eastman, in the run-up to the insurrection.

In a "conspiracy to defraud the United States," the committee argues that evidence it has gathered supports an inference that Trump, Eastman and several other allies of the former president "entered into an agreement to defraud the United States."

The panel says Trump and his allies interfered with the election certification process, disseminated misinformation about election fraud and pressured state and federal officials to assist in that effort.

The panel also asserts that Trump obstructed an official proceeding, the joint session of Congress where the Electoral College votes are certified. The committee said Trump either attempted or succeeded at obstructing, influencing, or impeding the ceremonial process on Jan. 6 and "did so corruptly" by pressuring Vice President Mike Pence to try and overturn the results as he presided over the session. Pence declined to do so.

The last charge the committee lays out is "common law fraud," or falsely representing facts with the knowledge that they are false. Trump embarked on a wide-scale campaign to convince the public and federal judges that the 2020 election was fraudulent and that he, not Biden, won the Electoral College tally. Election officials and courts across the country, along with Trump's attorney general, rejected those claims.

As an example of such fraud, the committee noted that a Justice Department official told Trump directly that a Facebook video posted by his campaign "purporting to show Georgia officials pulling suitcases of ballots from under a table" was false, yet the campaign continued to run it. Georgia officials also repeatedly denied the claim.

"The president continued to rely on this allegation in his efforts to overturn the results of the election," the filing says.

COURT ARGUMENTS, NOT CHARGES

While the document marks the committee's most formal effort to link the former president to a federal crime, Congress does not have the power to bring criminal charges.

Still, members of Congress can formally refer crimes to the Justice Department, if they think they have sufficient evidence. It is unclear if the committee will take that step, and federal prosecutors have much of the information already.

House Intelligence Committee Chairman Adam Schiff, a Democratic member of the panel, said Thursday, "The department shouldn't be waiting on our committee." Schiff has urged the Justice Department to be more aggressive in investigating the insurrection.

The department is already investigating and prosecuting hundreds of rioters who broke into the Capitol. Attorney General Merrick Garland has repeatedly said that prosecutors will follow the facts and the law wherever that takes them, stopping short of saying whether Trump is being investigated.

PRESSURING PENCE

Much of the committee's filing focuses on the expansive, ultimately unsuccessful effort by Eastman to convince Trump and the White House that there was a viable legal avenue for his baseless election fraud claims. In a series of memos ahead of Jan. 6, Eastman pushed for Pence to intervene in his ceremonial role and halt the certification of the electoral votes, a step Pence had no legal power to take and refused to attempt.

In an attempt to establish that Eastman was planning a crime, the committee included excerpts of witness transcripts in which former White House aides and other officials discussed Eastman's efforts.

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In one interview, Pence's chief counsel described a meeting with Eastman at the White House on Jan. 5. "He came in and said, 'I'm here asking you to reject the electors,'" Greg Jacob told the committee, adding that he took notes of the meeting contemporaneously. "That's how he opened at the meeting."

A 'SERPENT IN THE EAR'

On Jan. 6, as Pence presided over the congressional session and later hid inside the Capitol from rioters calling for his hanging, Eastman and Jacob exchanged a heated series of emails.

The emails give an extraordinary window into the extent of the pressure campaign – which continued into the evening, even after the rioters had been pushed out and the frazzled Congress reconvened to certify the results.

As the rioters broke into the Capitol, Pence's chief counsel, Jacob, wrote to Eastman that "I respect your heart" but that the legal framework he was putting forward was "essentially entirely made up."

He added, "And thanks to your bulls—, we are now under siege."

Eastman angrily responded that "the 'siege' is because YOU and your boss did not do what was necessary."

Jacob, who was sheltering with Pence in the Capitol at the time, apologized. But he did not let up.

"The advice provided has, whether intended or not, functioned as a serpent in the ear of the president of the United States, the most powerful office in the entire world," Jacob wrote Eastman. "And here we are."

As Congress reconvened that evening, Eastman wrote Jacob to "implore" that Pence adjourn the count to delay the certification. That did not happen, and Congress certified Biden as the winner in the early hours of Jan. 7.

Still, Eastman made clear that there wouldn't be hard feelings.

"When this is over, we should have a good bottle of wine over a nice dinner someplace," Eastman wrote amid the exchanges.

NEW QUESTIONS FOR LAWMAKERS

While Eastman repeatedly invoked his Fifth Amendment rights during his interview with the committee, members and staff asked him hours of questions anyway. The resulting transcript provides new clues about what lawmakers are investigating.

One of the biggest unanswered questions about Jan. 6 concerns the role that GOP lawmakers may have played. The committee has asked several House Republicans for information about their communications with Trump that day, and the transcript shows interest in GOP senators as well.

Investigators asked Eastman whether Sens. Ted Cruz of Texas and Josh Hawley of Missouri — the two senators who formally objected to the count that night — had been invited to speak at the president's rally the morning of Jan. 6, at which Trump told the angry crowd to "fight like hell." And they asked if Eastman knew why the senators did not speak at the rally.

They also asked Eastman if he had any conversations with Cruz "regarding efforts to change the outcome of the 2020 election," and about a conversation he had previously said he had with Utah Sen. Mike Lee.

Associated Press writer Michael Balsamo contributed to this report.

Is NYC ready to move on from COVID? Depends on who you ask

By BOBBY CAINA CALVAN and DEEPTI HAJELA Associated Press

NEW YORK (AP) — From the frightening, grief-filled early days of the pandemic until perhaps even now, a return to normalcy seemed so out of reach in New York City, where people kept breathing through masks and avoiding indoor gatherings even as other places abandoned COVID-19 safety protocols.

But with the city preparing to lift more mask and vaccination mandates, the question is: Are New Yorkers mentally prepared to turn the page on the virus and give up precautions that got the city through its darkest days?

Mayor Eric Adams has said he plans to lift mask requirements in schools and vaccination mandates in restaurants, bars, gyms, theaters and other cultural and entertainment venues as soon as Monday, with a decision likely to come before the weekend on the timing of the rollback.

There will still be some rules: Masks will still be required on public transportation. Public and private

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employers in the city will still — for now — be required to bar unvaccinated people from the workplace.

Even with those restrictions, though, New Yorkers will face choices unthinkable just a few months ago. Do they send their kids to school without masks? Can they keep eating at restaurants without the assurance of knowing whether the unmasked person next to them is vaccinated?

Tim Okamura, a city resident who could see one of the city's temporary morgues for the coronavirus dead from his kitchen window, said it's been difficult to shake the trauma of the spring of 2020.

In a little more than six weeks, 20,000 people died in the city. Another 20,000 have perished in the two years since then.

"My experience was one of tragedy, of depression, of suffering. So it's very real for me," said Okamura, who contracted COVID-19 himself in March 2020, about the same time the first refrigerated trucks for bodies began parking on his street in his old neighborhood in Brooklyn. He learned of his infection the day the virus killed a cousin.

But at some point, he said, his city needs to begin a new chapter.

"Like so many others, I do have fatigue. I'm tired of walking into businesses and putting on a mask or forgetting my mask," he said, "If something else happens, well, we know the drill. We can always go back."

For Audrey Montas, this is not a moment to celebrate.

She understands the impulse people have to put things behind them, but the 48-year-old high school English teacher just got a new kidney in September and feels ignored in the conversations about returning to normalcy and lifting mandates.

"My biggest gripe has been that when they talk about mandates ... I'm like, you know you're leaving immunosuppressed people out. And as far as I know, there are a whole bunch of us out there who live very limited lives, because other people want their freedoms and other people want things to go back to normal."

Montas worries about what her third-grader could bring home from school if masks are optional, even though her daughter will continue to wear one in the classroom.

"If you don't want to wear a mask and you don't want to get vaccinated that means I have to stay home," she said.

Parents will have to navigate tough decisions, said Maggie Moroff, a policy coordinator with the Advocates for Children of New York.

Families "are going to keep puzzling over this and trying to figure out what makes the most sense for them in their homes and with their students," she said.

"There are peer pressure issues that we all know exist in school," she said, "either to wear masks or not to wear masks."

Columbia University psychology Professor George Bonanno said New York City possesses the resiliency to recover — as proved from tragedy after tragedy over the years — but he worries the seeming suddenness in lifting restrictions could sow confusion.

"Putting this behind us will mean we have to feel that it's safe again," he said. "We have to feel that we're going to be OK if we go back out again."

He said he'd be uncomfortable with the possibility that he could be dining near people who haven't been vaccinated and who aren't wearing masks.

"It's going to be hard to give up the habit of being careful. I think it will make people very uneasy," said Bonanno, who recently published a book called "The End of Trauma," which delves into the science of resiliency, including a chapter on the pandemic.

New York City would be easing its restrictions at a time when the omicron wave is fading, even if the virus continues to kill at elevated rates compared to a few months ago.

More than 200 people died of COVID-19 in New York City the week that ended Feb. 19, the last full week for which city health officials say reliable data is available.

That's way down from nearly 900 killed the week that ended Jan. 15. But it is still four times as many deaths as occurred the first week in November.

Sharai Lewis-Gruss bemoans what she sees as a lack of empathy, an unwillingness from people to live

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with COVID precautions that would help those who are more at risk feel safe.

"It feels like a missed opportunity for the idea that we're doing this to have compassion for most vulnerable members of society," she said.

She's vaccinated and has actually had COVID more than once, but still plans on wearing her mask in public spaces and limiting her social life as she has been for the last two years.

Businesses will still be free to set their own rules for entry. Broadway theaters still plan to require patrons to show proof of vaccination to see shows through at least the end of April. Signs saying "masks required" still hang on some shop windows.

"We need to return the joy back into people's lives," said Andrew Rigie, the executive director of the New York City Hospitality Alliance, whose members were among the worst hit economically by the pandemic.

"We need cheerleaders for New York City. There has been so much doom and gloom, but it is in the human DNA to go out and eat and drink and socialize. And when we see other people doing it, it will help other people drop their inhibitions," he said.

Marc Kozlow, who also watched hospital workers load refrigerated trucks with corpses and had cleaned apples with disinfecting wipes out of fear, has been longing for the days before the pandemic — even if things may never again be the same.

"There's definitely lingering trauma from what we witnessed outside our window, but it's a memory that hopefully will start to fade," he said.

"I think there's still hope to be back to where we were," he said. "Considering the amount of things that have come and hit New York City, we still get back on our feet."

Macron to seek 2nd term in France's April presidential vote

By SYLVIE CORBET The Associated Press

PARIS (AP) — French President Emmanuel Macron formally announced Thursday that he will run for a second term in April's presidential election, ahead of which he is already leading in the polls.

In a "letter to the French" published on domestic media websites, Macron said: "I am seeking your trust again. I am a candidate to invent with you, faced with the century's challenges, a French and European singular response."

Macron, 44, had long indicated that he wanted to run in the election, scheduled to be held in two rounds on April 10 and April 24, without formally announcing it until now. But his initial campaign plans have changed since Russia's invasion of Ukraine.

In the past weeks, the centrist president has dedicated most of his time to diplomatic talks with world leaders and coordination with European and other Western allies.

Polls suggest Macron is the front-runner in the race. Conservative candidate Valérie Pécresse and two far-right figures, Marine le Pen and Eric Zemmour, are expected to be his main challengers.

Left-wing candidates run divided in the race, none of them appearing in a position to qualify for the run-off. Christiane Taubira, a champion of minority groups, dropped out of the race this week because she had not managed to get enough support.

Henri Wallard, chairman of the French polling firm Ipsos, said that Macron's candidacy is boosted by his being in office. Wallard noted the 21 million viewers who watched Macron's address to the nation this week centered on the war in Ukraine and its consequences.

"That's after he spoke nine times to the French during the COVID crisis. So he doesn't play on the same team as the other candidates, because he is already in charge and dealing with a crisis," Wallard told the AP.

Macron's popularity in recent months has remained relatively stable, with an approval rating hovering around 40% depending on polling institutes — higher than his predecessors Francois Hollande and Nicolas Sarkozy had after nearly five years in office.

Even without a formal candidacy announcement, Macron was the first candidate to receive the legally required 500 endorsements from elected officials. The rule is intended to limit the number of people running for president.

Macron said in his letter Thursday that the war in Ukraine would prevent him from campaigning "as I

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would have liked.”

Campaign events will be limited to the minimum for now, several French presidency officials said. Macron wants his duties as president at a key time for the European continent not to be disrupted by his candidacy, they stressed. France currently holds the rotating presidency of the European Union Council, giving Macron a key role in organizing the 27-nation bloc’s response to Russia’s actions.

When Macron was first elected in May 2017 on a pro-business, pro-European platform, he had little political experience. A former investment banker, he had been economy minister from 2014 to 2016 under Socialist President Francois Hollande.

He seduced French voters by promising to bring fresh air into politics, managing to attract support from both the center-left and the center-right.

Almost five year later, Macron noted that “rarely has France faced such an accumulation of crises,” listing extremist attacks, the COVID-19 pandemic and the war in Ukraine.

Macron made changes to the economy to boost job creation and cut taxes on businesses. He notably eased rules to hire and fire workers and to make it harder to get unemployment benefits. Critics say his policies threaten the French welfare state.

He faced the first major crisis of his term when the anti-government yellow vest protest movement broke out at the end of 2018.

Named after the vests French drivers must keep in their cars for emergencies, it started with demonstrations against a planned fuel tax hike and quickly spread into a broader movement against economic injustice. For months, weekly protests across the country often degenerated into scattered violence.

In 2020, the COVID-19 pandemic led Macron to declare the country “at war” against the virus.

After a lockdown-fueled historic recession, his government focused on supporting the economy with a 100 billion-euro recovery plan.

The pandemic forced Macron to delay some economic reforms, including a difficult overhauling of France’s pension system that he had previously promised to push through.

“We did not succeed in everything,” Macron acknowledged in his letter Thursday.

“Thanks to reforms, our industry created jobs again for the first time and unemployment has reached its lowest level in fifteen years,” he said. The unemployment rate recently reached 7.4%, down from over 10% when he came into power.

“I’m a candidate to continue preparing the future of our children and our grand-children,” he said.

Purdue Pharma, US states agree to new opioid settlement

By GEOFF MULVIHILL and JOHN SEEWER Associated Press

Purdue Pharma reached a nationwide settlement Thursday over its role in the opioid crisis, with the Sackler family members who own the company boosting their cash contribution to as much as \$6 billion in a deal intended to staunch a flood of lawsuits facing the maker of OxyContin.

The deal follows an earlier settlement that had been appealed by eight states and the District of Columbia. They agreed to sign on after the Sacklers kicked in more cash and accepted other terms. In exchange, the family would be protected from civil lawsuits.

In all, the plan could be worth more than \$10 billion over time. It calls for members of the Sackler family to give up control of the Stamford, Connecticut-based company so it can be turned into a new entity with profits used to fight the crisis. The deal would not shield members of the family from criminal charges, although there’s no indication any are forthcoming.

Sackler family members have not unequivocally offered an apology but issued a statement of regret about the toll of OxyContin, its signature painkiller, which users learned could be manipulated to produce quick highs. Purdue Pharma had promoted its use for a broad range of pain issues for which doctors previously had shied away from prescribing opioids.

“While the families have acted lawfully in all respects, they sincerely regret that OxyContin, a prescription medicine that continues to help people suffering from chronic pain, unexpectedly became part of an

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opioid crisis that has brought grief and loss to far too many families and communities," said the statement from the Sackler family.

Under the settlement, victims also are to have a forum in court, by videoconference scheduled for March 9, to address some of the Sacklers. That's something they have not been able to do previously in a public setting.

The settlement is outlined in a report filed in U.S. Bankruptcy Court in White Plains, New York, and must be approved by the judge. It was hammered out with attorneys general from the eight states — California, Connecticut, Delaware, Maryland, Oregon, Rhode Island, Vermont and Washington — and D.C. who had opposed the earlier one, arguing that it did not properly hold Sackler family members accountable.

Several parents whose children became addicted to opioids said they were ambivalent — glad that more money will be available for addiction treatment, but upset that the Sacklers will remain wealthy and escape more accountability.

Connecticut's Paige Niver, whose daughter became addicted following a bicycle accident when she was 14 and remains in recovery about 13 years later, said she didn't want other families to endure what hers did.

"As a mother, I did what the doctor told me to do and I just kept giving them to her. And when they were starting to have kind of a lesser effect, they say, 'Oh, then you need to give her more.' And that's exactly what I did," she said at a news conference Thursday with her state's attorney general.

"I never thought I'd see any justice for it, so the money will do so much good — fund as much treatment and prevention as possible," Niver said.

Ed Bisch, whose 18-year-old son died of an overdose 20 years ago, is glad states pushed Sackler family members to pay more. Still, he called the settlement "a horrible deal" because so many parents who buried loved ones won't see money, while the Sacklers retain their wealth.

"Guess what? They still made billions and billions of dollars," said Bisch, of Westampton, New Jersey. "Without any jail time, where is the deterrent? We've lost two generations to their greed."

Individual victims and their survivors are to share a \$750 million fund, a key provision not found in other opioid settlements. About 149,000 people made claims in advance and could qualify for shares from the fund.

That amount is unchanged in the new plan, but states will be able to create funds they can use to compensate victims beyond that, if they choose.

Other new provisions include an agreement from Sackler family members that they won't fight when institutions attempt to take their names off buildings funded by the family's support. And additional company documents are to be made public.

Most of the the money is to flow to state and local governments, Native American tribes, and some hospitals, with the requirement that it be used to battle an opioid crisis that has been linked to more than 500,000 deaths in the U.S. over the past two decades.

"We're pleased with the settlement achieved in mediation, under which all of the additional settlement funds will be used for opioid abatement programs, overdose rescue medicines, and victims," Purdue Pharma said in a statement issued separately from the family's. "With this mediation result, we continue on track to proceed through the appeals process on an expedited schedule, and we hope to swiftly deliver these resources."

Kentucky and Oklahoma are not part of the deal because they both reached previous settlements with Purdue.

Purdue, the originator of time-release versions of powerful prescription painkillers, is the highest-profile company out of many that have faced lawsuits over the crisis. It has twice pleaded guilty to criminal charges related to its business practices around OxyContin.

The latest announcement follows another landmark settlement late last week, when drugmaker Johnson & Johnson and three distributors finalized a settlement that will send \$26 billion over time to virtually every state and local governments throughout the U.S.

There are two key differences between the the latest Purdue settlement and the previous one struck last year. The Sacklers' cash contribution has gone up by at least \$1.2 billion, and state attorneys general

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and the District of Columbia have now agreed.

The money is to begin flowing after Purdue, which is to be renamed Kinoa Pharma, emerges from bankruptcy. It's not clear when that will be. The last payment under the settlement is not scheduled to be made until 2039.

Last year, the eight states and D.C. refused to sign on, and then most of them appealed after the deal was approved by the bankruptcy judge.

In December, a U.S. district judge sided with the nine holdouts. The judge, Colleen McMahon, rejected the settlement with a finding that bankruptcy judges lack the authority to grant legal protection to people who don't themselves file for bankruptcy when some parties disagree.

Purdue appealed that decision, which, if left standing, could have scuttled a common method of reaching settlements in sweeping, complicated lawsuits.

The attorneys general who have signed on are dropping from the main legal battle but are still free to write briefs to tell courts not to allow the protections for people who do not file for bankruptcy themselves.

Connecticut Attorney General William Tong has repeatedly said he has felt a "special obligation to be aggressive" in the case because Purdue is headquartered in the state. He expressed some disappointment Thursday with the final settlement, even though he said it was 40% more than the previous one.

"I wanted more. I still want more. But I took it as far as I could take it," he said during a news conference. "If we were to continue, we would do it alone and that is untenable."

The new settlement requires approval from U.S. Bankruptcy Judge Robert Drain. Appeals related to the previous version of the plan could continue moving through the court system.

Associated Press writers Dave Collins and Susan Haigh in Connecticut contributed to this report.

This story has been corrected to show that the terms of the agreement did not require an apology from the Sackler family, though the family did issue a statement of regret.

Pelosi: GOP Reps. Boebert, Greene 'should just shut up'

By FARNOUSH AMIRI Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — House Speaker Nancy Pelosi had stern words Thursday for two of the most right-wing members of her chamber after their outbursts during President Joe Biden's State of the Union.

"I agree with what Sen. Lindsey Graham said, 'Shut up.' That's what he said to them. They should just shut up," the California Democrat told reporters about the conspicuous interruptions by GOP Reps. Marjorie Taylor Greene and Lauren Boebert during Tuesday's address.

The first incident took place as Biden was talking about immigration on the southern border. Greene, a Georgia freshman and member of the conservative House Freedom Caucus, stood up and began chanting, "Build the wall! Build the wall!" in reference to the border wall former President Donald Trump began building during his administration.

The second incident happened as Biden began to discuss how his son Beau, who died of cancer, was among many veterans who may have suffered from toxic exposure to military burn pits used extensively in Iraq and Afghanistan. Beau Biden, a U.S. Army major, died in 2015.

"A cancer that put them in a flag-draped coffin," Biden started to say, when Boebert yelled, "You put them in. Thirteen of them!"

Boebert, a freshman from Colorado, said her comments were made in defense of the 13 service members who were killed during the U.S. withdrawal from Afghanistan last August.

In the chamber, the comment drew an outpouring of boos from Democrats, adding a note of political division to an address that received several moments of robust bipartisan applause. The television cameras were focused on Graham, a Republican from South Carolina, when the heckling occurred. He was caught on camera mumbling what appeared to be "shut up" under his breath in response.

Boebert responded to Pelosi's Thursday comments and said: "I will not shut up" about what she called

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Biden's failure in Afghanistan "and the 13 heroes we lost because of it."

The incidents were just the latest breach of decorum for a presidential address, an annual event where unruly behavior by lawmakers has become more frequent. Republican Rep. Joe Wilson shouted "you lie!" at President Barack Obama during a joint speech to Congress in 2009. Eleven years later, Pelosi ripped up a copy of Trump's speech while standing behind him.

Athletes force a change in ban of Russians at Paralympics

By EDDIE PELLIS AP National Writer

Athletes around the world cheered when leaders of the Paralympics booted Russia from the Games. The move, in many eyes, marked the high point of a growing movement by the people who actually deliver the show to find a greater voice in the Olympic world.

"It is because of the athletes," said Ukrainian skeleton athlete Vladyslav Heraskevych, who has been living about 100 miles from Ukraine's capital of Kyiv, fearful of an attack by Russian troops who invaded the country earlier this week.

The tipping point to the rapid turn of events Thursday was "a very, very volatile environment" in the athletes village in Beijing at the Paralympics, according to the head of that organization.

The International Paralympic Committee was faced with the very real possibility that athletes might simply pick up and go home before their Games start Friday. To prevent that, it made an abrupt about-face and chose to ban the Russian and Belarusian Paralympic teams that, previously, were being allowed to compete under a neutral flag.

"We did not think that entire delegations, or even teams within delegations, will withdraw, will boycott, will not participate," IPC president Andrew Parsons said.

Rob Koehler, the head of the advocacy group Global Athlete, called the moment "a clear message to every single athlete about how valuable and important their voices are for change."

Early in the week, a cadre of Ukrainian athletes aligned with Koehler's group to put out a statement condemning Russia's invasion and asking for an immediate ban of Russian and Belarusian athletes from the Olympics and Paralympics. The list of signers to this letter grew by the hour. It encompassed several hundred athletes, when adding the individuals who put their names on the letter to those who were members of the federations and athlete committees that signed on, as well.

It could have been more, but as the letter poignantly stated, "it has been a challenge to speak with all athletes from Ukraine as they are seeking safety in bomb shelters."

The International Olympic Committee signaled that it heard the message. It urged all federations to prohibit athletes from those countries from competing. Many took heed of that advice — including ice skating, skiing, soccer, hockey, basketball and others.

But the Paralympics didn't do a ban, explaining it would never hold up in court because of the rulebook. The IOC, with the Olympics in the rearview mirror, also passed on a ban itself.

That decision cast a different light on a New York Times report that China had specifically asked Russia to hold off on any invasion until the Olympics were over. The countries are allies — their presidents held a summit the day after the opening ceremony and declared their strategic partnership had "no limits." It was no shock that China didn't want the start of a war to tarnish its massive sports spectacle.

But the Paralympics bring another 600-plus athletes to Beijing to compete over 10 days of skiing, skating and sledding. It is one of the largest gathering of international athletes this side of the Olympics. The removal of Russia's flag, without the removal of the country's athletes was, Parsons said, the "harshest possible punishment we can hand down within our constitution and the current IPC rules."

Those rules, however, took a backseat to reality.

The Latvian and South Korean curling teams said they wouldn't take the ice against Russia for an early round match. Other athletes were considering leaving. The IPC could no longer ignore that possibility.

"It is abundantly clear that athletes forced this decision, not sport leaders," said Ali Jawad, a four-time Paralympian who is on the board of Global Athlete.

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The thought of walking away is the most drastic possible option for athletes who spend their lives training for a day or two of glory at the biggest spectacle in sports. For decades, none have willingly made that choice.

The thought of competing in China, with its record of human-rights abuses, was stomach-turning to many Olympians. But they all chose to go, in large part because they knew there was no groundswell that would follow them out the door. Boycotting by themselves, they said, would grab headlines for a day or two, but then the world would simply move on.

Athletes posed a bigger threat than that at the Paras. It was the latest, most striking show of power in a movement that has included victories in the fight over Olympic rules on marketing and demonstrations, a flap over women wearing bikini bottoms for beach handball, pay for women's soccer players and more.

"The list goes on and on, and it shows that when athletes say 'Things are changing, and they're changing today,' that it really can happen," Koehler said.

Russia is likely to take this case to the Court of Arbitration for Sport. CAS, the IOC, World Athletics, the World Anti-Doping Agency and dozens more in this long "alphabet soup" of sports organizations have a long history of contorting the rulebooks of international sports to make them say whatever they want.

One example: While, before the war broke out, Russia remained largely eligible in most sports despite eight years of rule-breaking and cover-ups, it was still considered a rogue state in track and field.

It is also, for the time being, persona non grata at the Paralympics. The credit for that goes to a growing group of athletes who wouldn't accept any other option.

___ More AP sports: <https://apnews.com/hub/apf-sports> and https://twitter.com/AP_Sports

Russia's war spurs corporate exodus, exposes business risks

By KELVIN CHAN AP Business Writer

LONDON (AP) — Car factories idled, beer stopped flowing, furniture and fashion orders ceased, and energy companies fled oil and gas projects.

Russia's invasion of Ukraine has thrown business plans into disarray and forced a growing number of the world's best known brands — from Apple to Mercedes-Benz and BP — to pull out of a country that's become a global outcast as companies seek to maintain their reputations and live up to corporate responsibility standards.

Investors were drawn to Russia in search of lucrative profits they thought were worth the geopolitical risks. That calculation has changed after Russia's war triggered a wave of global sanctions and export restrictions that have thrown its economy into turmoil and disrupted the operations of multinational corporations there.

"You basically have Russia becoming a commercial pariah," said economist Mary Lovely, a senior fellow at the Peterson Institute for International Economics in Washington. "Pretty much no company, no multinational, wants to be caught on the wrong side of U.S. and Western sanctions."

They're also expressing concern about the plight of Ukrainians, showing how they want to be seen coming out on the right side of history.

Complicating companies' push to flee is an order from Moscow temporarily restricting foreign investors from selling Russian assets. Prime Minister Mikhail Mishustin said Tuesday that it would help investors make "a considered decision" rather than succumb to the political pressure of sanctions. It's not clear how that may affect corporate efforts to exit Russia.

Oil and gas companies, already feeling the heat from climate activists to invest in renewable energy, were among the companies that announced the most rapid and dramatic exits.

Energy firm BP said Sunday that it would abandon its \$14 billion stake in Russian state-owned oil and gas company Rosneft. The next day, Shell said it was leaving its joint venture with state-owned Gazprom and its involvement in the now-suspended Nord Stream 2 pipeline built to carry natural gas to Western Europe.

ExxonMobil said it will pull out of a key oil and gas project and halt any new investment in Russia. All their chief executives said they were shocked and saddened by the increasingly bloody conflict. Smaller

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energy firms have followed suit.

Companies in other industries, including automakers, signaled they're staying out of the Russian market either out of concern for Ukraine or to comply with Western sanctions.

Toyota is halting production at its St. Petersburg plant that makes RAV4 and Camry models starting Friday because of supply chain disruptions, saying it was watching events "with great concern for the safety of the people of Ukraine."

Mercedes-Benz suspended vehicle exports to Russia and manufacturing there. Volkswagen Group, which also owns Porsche and Audi, did the same, saying it believes a "sustainable solution to the conflict can only be found on the basis of international law."

Volvo Cars said it stopped deliveries because of "potential risks associated with trading material with Russia," citing Western sanctions. Ford suspended operations.

Harley-Davidson halted motorcycle shipments to Russia, saying its thoughts "continue for the safety of the people of Ukraine." Putin famously rode a three-wheeled Harley on a visit to Ukraine in 2010.

Others with more at stake in Russia might find it harder to navigate the crisis.

French automaker Renault, whose second-biggest market is Russia, said only that it's temporarily suspending production at its Moscow plant through Saturday "due to some logistics issues," without being more specific.

Danish brewery group Carlsberg suspended production at its three breweries in Ukraine but indicated operations in Russia, where it owns St. Petersburg-based Baltika Breweries and employs 8,400 people, would continue.

"Millions of lives are being impacted and we strongly condemn the acts of violence and aggression we are witnessing," Vice President of Corporate Affairs Christian Wulff Sondergaard said by email. Carlsberg is obligated to "protect the livelihood of all our employees" in Russia as the economy is increasingly pressured by sanctions, he said.

Czech brewer Budvar, which counts Russia as one of its five major markets, halted beer deliveries to the country, saying business is not the top priority and that it's looking for ways to help, including finding accommodations for Ukrainian refugees.

"It's really tough to do business in Russia under the best of conditions. Now it's become just crazy. So getting out is a smart business proposal," said James O'Rourke, a professor at the University of Notre Dame's Mendoza College of Business specializing in reputation management.

Companies will have to chalk up any losses as the cost of doing business.

"This is like going into business with the Manson family," O'Rourke said, referring to the followers of cult leader Charles Manson. "You honestly do not want your name associated with those people, and it's probably not going to cost you that much to disinvest."

Ikea suspended operations at its 17 Russian stores and paused exports and imports. The Swedish furniture giant said, "The war has had a huge human impact" and resulted "in serious disruptions to supply chain and trading conditions."

Fast fashion brand H&M paused sales in Russian stores, expressing concern about the "tragic developments." Nike said on its Russian website it can't guarantee deliveries.

Airplane makers Boeing and Airbus stopped supplying parts and service support for Russian carriers.

Even Hollywood studios are delaying the release of new films in Russia, which isn't a leading movie market but typically ranks in the top dozen countries for box office revenue. Warner Bros., the Walt Disney Co. and Sony Pictures cited the "humanitarian crisis."

Netflix is pausing all future projects and acquisitions from Russia. The streaming service reportedly had four Russian projects in the pipeline.

Tech companies also headed for the door.

Apple stopped selling iPhones and other devices inside Russia, while computer maker Dell Technologies suspended sales in Ukraine and Russia.

Google and TikTok blocked Russian state media channels from their platforms after a plea from the

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European Union. Apple blocked RT News and Sputnik News downloads from its App Store outside Russia. It's not just sanctions but public sentiment that companies have to respond to as the human costs of the war grow.

Company commitments to environmental, social and corporate governance, known as ESG, are being put to the test. ESG has become a buzzy acronym that's increasingly seen as an important way for corporations to tout responsible business credentials.

"But there can also be an element of greenwashing," where companies say things that make it seem like they hold certain values or are on the right side of ESG issues while their practices and behavior suggest otherwise, Columbia Business School associate professor Vanessa Burbano said.

"Stakeholders like employees and consumers will want to see if companies' actions and behaviors are consistent with the communicated support that companies are expressing for Ukrainians," she said.

Some companies went beyond halting deliveries or operations.

Lego, Ford and Volkswagen Group said they would make millions of dollars in charitable donations to support Ukrainian refugees.

Associated Press writers Matt O'Brien in Providence, Rhode Island; Danica Kirka in London; Tali Arbel and Ken Sweet in New York; Michael Liedtke in San Ramon, California; and Jan M. Olsen in Copenhagen, Denmark, contributed.

Follow AP's coverage of the tensions between Russia and Ukraine at <https://apnews.com/hub/russia-ukraine>. Follow Kelvin Chan on Twitter at <https://www.twitter.com/chanman>.

UN report paints dire picture of the Gulf of Mexico's future

By REBECCA SANTANA and CURT ANDERSON Associated Press

NEW ORLEANS (AP) — Hurricane Harvey dumped more than 50 inches of rain on parts of the Texas coast in 2017. Then in 2020, ferocious winds from Hurricane Laura destroyed homes across coastal Louisiana. Hurricane Ida hit in 2021, leaving the entire city of New Orleans without power for days.

Such extreme weather is becoming more common, and that's just one of the warnings for the Gulf of Mexico region in a United Nations report released this week. The devastating effects of climate change in the region also include rising seas, collapsing fisheries and toxic tides, even if humanity somehow manages to limit global warming to 1.5 degrees Celsius above the pre-industrial era.

"The hurricanes that we get, there's a higher probability that they can bloom up into major hurricanes," Louisiana's state climatologist Barry Keim said, agreeing with the report's details on more dangerous weather.

The report, an "atlas of human suffering," details numerous ways in which climate change will affect the gulf. From Texas to Florida, which has the longest coastline of any state, the entire U.S. Gulf coast is under serious threat from rising seas as the planet's polar ice caps melt, the U.N. report says.

The region, home to major oil and gas production in Texas and Louisiana and tourist destinations in Mississippi, Alabama and Florida, tends to be conservative politically, and its mostly Republican leaders have stressed adaption to climate change — higher roads, sea walls, preventing saltwater intrusion — more than broad efforts to reduce greenhouse gas emissions or promote cleaner energy.

For example, the Republican-led Florida House of Representatives refused on Tuesday to add clean-energy measures to a plan to bolster the state against sea level rise and flooding. The bill's sponsor, GOP Rep. Demi Busatta Cabrera of the Miami area, said her aim is to do "what we can fix today."

Democratic Rep. Ben Diamond, who is running for a St. Petersburg-area congressional seat, was disappointed lawmakers didn't do more.

Improved climate change resiliency is good, he said, but "then there's also stopping the causes of those problems in terms of greenhouse gas emissions, in terms of reducing our carbon emissions." The Florida House bill does not get into that.

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People considering 30-year mortgages are already looking for homes and commercial buildings that pose lower flood risks. One study cited by the U.N. says the trend is evident in Florida's Miami-Dade County, where some buyers are shying away from expensive waterfront homes.

In Miami Beach, streets already flood on sunny days, especially during the so-called King Tides, and the report says the Tampa Bay area, surrounded by shallow seas, and is considered one of the most vulnerable places in the nation for storm surges.

Sea level rise poses an existential threat to much of Louisiana, because so much of the Mississippi River delta has been sinking due to human interventions. The loss of sediment from leveeing the river and salt-water intrusion caused by coastal oil and gas development are two big culprits, Keim noted.

"South Louisiana is probably the most vulnerable place to climate change in the United States," Keim said.

Other parts of the Gulf face different problems, the report warns. Tourism and fishing industries depend on thriving habitats off the coasts of Florida and the Yucatan Peninsula, but coral reefs are bleaching due to "warming ocean waters interacting with non-climate stressors." In Florida alone, the decline of the reefs could translate into \$24 billion to \$55 billion in economic losses by 2100, the report said.

The report details efforts in the region to adapt to climate change. Miami-Dade released a strategic sea level rise response plan in 2021 that calls for adapting infrastructure, elevating roads, building on higher ground and expanding waterfront parks and canals.

The city of Miami Beach has already spent more than \$500 million installing pumps to flush water off the island, with no guarantees that this will keep the tourists' feet dry. The city of Miami is spending potentially billions of dollars to keep the ocean at bay and limit saltwater intrusion into freshwater supplies.

"The most common question I get asked is whether Miami is going to be here in 50 years, whether it's going to be here in 100 years," Miami Mayor Francis Suarez said at a recent news conference. "This is the beginning of having a comprehensive plan to answer that question in the affirmative."

In Louisiana, the state's Coastal Protection and Restoration Authority has a plan with "very specific projects," the U.N. report said, such as dredging to replenish wetlands and rebuilding barrier islands damaged by storms.

Alex Kolker, an associate professor of coastal geology at the Louisiana Universities Marine Consortium in Cocodrie, noted that on Feb. 1, Louisiana also announced a plan to reduce greenhouse gas emissions to net zero by 2050.

Outbreaks of red tide, which are natural toxic organisms originally noticed by the Spanish explorers, have become more frequent and more deadly because of warmer air and water, experts say.

The increasing outbreaks kill more fish and sea life and harm the tourist industry with smelly fish-strewn beaches, poor fishing and the possibility of harms to human health, especially among people with asthma or other lung conditions.

From 2017 to 2019, according to a University of Florida study, tourism sectors lost \$184 million in revenue because of red tide. The warmer water also fosters algae blooms, caused by pollution from agricultural, urban and other sources, that are getting worse along Florida's coasts, contributing to the lack of seagrass that has led to a record die-off of manatees in the past year. The state resorted to feeding one group of starving manatees romaine lettuce instead.

"You can't just go out and plant a bunch of seagrass," said Tom Reinert, regional director of the Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission.

Anderson reported from St. Petersburg, Florida.

Why are COVID vaccination rates still low in some countries?

By VICTORIA MILKO AP Science Writer

Why are COVID-19 vaccination rates still low in some countries?

Limited supplies remain a problem, but experts say other challenges now include unpredictable deliveries, weak health care systems and vaccine hesitancy.

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Most countries with low vaccination rates are in Africa. As of late February, 13 countries in Africa have fully vaccinated less than 5% of their populations, according to Phionah Atuhebwe, an officer for the World Health Organization's regional office for Africa.

Other countries with extremely low vaccination rates include Yemen, Syria, Haiti and Papua New Guinea. For most of last year, developing nations were plagued by a lack of supplies. Rich countries were hoarding doses and many countries didn't have the facilities to make their own vaccines. COVAX — an initiative to distribute vaccines equally around the world — faltered in delivering shots.

Many rich countries had planned to donate doses once their own populations were vaccinated, but the emergence of the delta and omicron variants spurred booster campaigns that further delayed those plans. Vaccine makers have largely declined to share their formulas or technology, further restricting production.

Other setbacks to vaccinations have also emerged.

"The main problem among countries with low vaccination rates is poor infrastructure to distribute shots," says Dina Borzekowski, director of the Global Health Initiative at the University of Maryland. "What is absent are best practices to get vaccines to populations who typically live without safely managed sanitation systems or reliable electricity."

Donated vaccines are also sometimes delivered close to their expiration dates, giving health officials little time to distribute them, says Sinhye Ha of Doctors Without Borders.

Some countries also lack materials like syringes to inject the shots or ways to keep the vaccines at the right temperature.

Vaccine hesitancy fueled by misinformation and a distrust of governments has also contributed to low vaccine uptake in some countries, says Atuhebwe.

The AP is answering your questions about the coronavirus in this series. Submit them at: FactCheck@AP.org. Read more here:

Is omicron leading us closer to herd immunity against COVID-19?

Can you get long COVID after an infection with omicron?

How will the world decide when the pandemic is over?

Neutral Finland, Sweden warm to idea of NATO membership

By JARI TANNER Associated Press

HELSINKI (AP) — Through the Cold War and the decades since, nothing could persuade Finns and Swedes that they would be better off joining NATO — until now.

Russia's invasion of Ukraine has profoundly changed Europe's security outlook, including for Nordic neutrals Finland and Sweden, where support for joining NATO has surged to record levels.

A poll commissioned by Finnish broadcaster YLE this week showed that, for the first time, more than 50% of Finns support joining the Western military alliance. In neighboring Sweden, a similar poll showed those in favor of NATO membership outnumber those against.

"The unthinkable might start to become thinkable," tweeted former Swedish Prime Minister Carl Bildt, a proponent of NATO membership.

Neither country is going to join the alliance overnight. Support for NATO membership rises and falls, and there's no clear majority for joining in their parliaments.

But the signs of change since Russia began its invasion last week are unmistakable.

The attack on Ukraine prompted both Finland and Sweden to break with their policy of not providing arms to countries at war by sending assault rifles and anti-tank weapons to Kyiv. For Sweden, it's the first time it's offering military aid since 1939, when it assisted Finland against the Soviet Union.

Apparently sensing a shift among its Nordic neighbors, the Russian Foreign Ministry last week voiced concern about what it described as efforts by the United States and some of its allies to "drag" Finland and Sweden into NATO and warned that Moscow would be forced to take retaliatory measures if they joined the alliance.

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The governments of Sweden and Finland retorted that they won't let Moscow dictate their security policy. "I want to be extremely clear: It is Sweden that itself and independently decides on our security policy line," Swedish Prime Minister Magdalena Andersson said.

Finland has a conflict-ridden history with Russia, with which it shares a 1,340-kilometer (830-mile) border. Finns have taken part in dozens of wars against their eastern neighbor, for centuries as part of the Swedish Kingdom, and as an independent nation including two fought with the Soviet Union from 1939-40 and 1941-44.

In the postwar period, however, Finland pursued pragmatic political and economic ties with Moscow, remaining militarily nonaligned and a neutral buffer between East and West.

Sweden has avoided military alliances for more than 200 years, choosing a path of peace after centuries of warfare with its neighbors.

Both countries put an end to traditional neutrality by joining the European Union in 1995 and deepening cooperation with NATO. However, a majority of people in both countries remained firmly against full membership in the alliance — until now.

The YLE poll showed 53% were in favor of Finland joining NATO, with only 28% against. The poll had an error margin of 2.5 percentage points and included 1,382 respondents interviewed Feb. 23 to 25. Russia's invasion began on Feb. 24.

"It's a very significant shift," said senior researcher Matti Pesu from the Finnish Institute of International Affairs. "We've had a situation in the past 25-30 years where Finns' opinions on NATO have been very stable. It seems to now to have changed completely."

While noting that it's not possible to draw conclusions from a single poll, Pesu said no similar shift in public opinion occurred after Russia's 2008 war with Georgia and the 2014 annexation of the Crimean Peninsula, "so this is an exception."

In Sweden, a late February poll commissioned by public broadcaster SVT found 41% of Swedes supported NATO membership and 35% opposed it, marking the first time that those in favor exceeded those against.

The Nordic duo, important partners for NATO in the Baltic Sea area where Russia has substantially increased its military maneuvers in the past decade, has strongly stressed that it is up to them alone to decide whether to join the military alliance.

In his New Year's speech, Finnish President Sauli Niinisto pointedly said that "Finland's room to maneuver and freedom of choice also include the possibility of military alignment and of applying for NATO membership, should we ourselves so decide."

NATO Secretary-General Jens Stoltenberg noted last week that for Helsinki and Stockholm "this is a question of self-determination and the sovereign right to choose your own path and then potentially in the future, also to apply for NATO."

There are no set criteria for joining NATO, but aspiring candidates must meet certain political and other considerations. Many observers believe Finland and Sweden would qualify for fast-track entry into NATO without lengthy negotiations within months.

Though not members, Finland and Sweden closely cooperate with NATO, allowing, among other things, the alliance's troops to exercise on their soil. Helsinki and Stockholm have also substantially intensified their bilateral defense cooperation in the past years, and both have secured close military cooperation with the U.S., Britain and neighboring NATO member Norway.

Niinisto's office said Thursday that he would meet U.S. President Joe Biden at the White House on Friday "to discuss Russia's attack on Ukraine, the effects of the war on the European security order, and bilateral cooperation."

The Finnish head of state is one of the few Western leaders who has kept a regular dialogue with Russian President Vladimir Putin ever since Niinisto took office in 2012. Niinisto has a seemingly good rapport also with Biden and two leaders have maintained close contact throughout the Ukraine crisis.

In December, Biden called Niinisto and said he was pleased with Finland's decision to buy 64 Lockheed Martin F-35A stealth fighter jets to replace the country's aging F-18 fighters. Biden said the move would

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pave the way for closer U.S.-Finnish military ties in future.

Finnish Prime Minister Sanna Marin said this week that her Social Democratic Party would discuss possible NATO membership with other parties but didn't set a time frame. She said everyone agrees that the events of the past weeks have been a game-changer.

"Together we see that the security situation has changed remarkably since Russia attacked Ukraine. It is a fact that we have to acknowledge," Marin said.

___ Associated Press writers Karl Ritter in Stockholm, and Lorne Cook in Brussels, contributed to this report.

Follow the AP's coverage of the Ukraine crisis at <https://apnews.com/hub/russia-ukraine>

EXPLAINER: Paralympic U-turn on Russians may see more twists

BEIJING (AP) — The Paralympic U-turn on Russian participation in the upcoming Beijing Games isn't likely to be the end of the story.

The Winter Paralympics are scheduled to open on Friday without Russian and Belarusian athletes. The competitors from those countries were expelled from the event on Thursday because of their governments' role in the invasion of Ukraine.

The decision to bar them came a day after the International Paralympic Committee had originally decided to allow them to compete as "neutral athletes" with no colors, flags or anthems.

The sudden reversal followed an uproar in Beijing, where athletes and teams from other countries threatened to pull out if Russians and Belarusians competed.

WHAT'S NEXT?

The Russians and Belarusians can appeal against their expulsion, either to the Court of Arbitration for Sport in Switzerland or to a court in Germany, where the IPC is based.

CAS said Thursday it had not received any appeal. Although it is obliged to handle doping cases from the Paralympics, CAS doesn't need to be involved in other IPC business.

An urgent legal process on the eve of the Paralympics could be a rerun of the Russian team's efforts to get back into the 2016 Rio de Janeiro Paralympics.

Then, the IPC imposed a blanket ban on the Russian team in fallout from the state-backed doping program that saw many of the country's athletes excluded at short notice from the Summer Olympics only weeks earlier.

In a flurry of legal hearings, the Russian Paralympic Committee failed to get the rulings it sought at the Court of Arbitration for Sport, the Swiss supreme court and the IPC's local court in Bonn, Germany. All the courts thought a Russian blanket ban was proportionate.

The Bonn court suggested the "special nature" of the Olympics and Paralympics, where athletes compete representing their nation rather than as individuals, meant they had to "accept restrictions that are not their own fault."

That judgment could go to the heart of the current case — that Russian and Belarusian Paralympians have been penalized for a war for which they have no responsibility or blame.

More recently, German courts got involved in other IPC business. Before the Beijing Paralympics, local courts in Düsseldorf and Cologne overturned IPC rules and forced them to allow two snowboarders to compete.

RE-REVERSAL?

If the Russians and Belarusians win an appeal and get reinstated, the Beijing Paralympics could be in jeopardy.

IPC President Andrew Parsons said Thursday the organization underestimated the negative reaction to originally letting Russians and Belarusians compete — even as neutral athletes. The Latvian curling team, for instance, said it would refuse to play against the Russians in a scheduled group game.

More tumult could ensue if they are allowed back in, possibly causing some athletes or teams to follow

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up on their threats to withdraw.

THE IPC

The International Paralympic Committee is separate from the International Olympic Committee, Although their events coincide, they maintain different rules and different leadership. However, Parsons is an IOC member and was invited to take part in its executive board meeting on Monday. That led to the IOC urging sports bodies around the world to ban Russians and Belarusians from competitions or let them compete as neutral athletes in special circumstances, like short notice.

The first official Paralympics were held in 1960 in Rome, but under a different name at the time. Other events for disabled athletes preceded that.

The IPC was founded in 1989 and signed an agreement with the IOC in 2001 to ensure the Olympic host city would also stage the ensuing Paralympics.

More AP sports: <https://apnews.com/hub/apf-sports> and https://twitter.com/AP_Sports

Column: Don't come back until baseball has been made better

By TIM DAHLBERG AP Sports Columnist

The talks are over, at least for now. Opening day is gone, too, and now we're forced to wait to see if we get any baseball at all.

If there was any good news coming out of baseball's labor talks in Florida it was this: At least now we know who to blame.

Here's a hint: It's not anyone wearing a uniform.

No, baseball players aren't blameless in any of this, far from it. They keep wanting more when they historically have always had the best deals in all of professional sports.

But this one is mostly on the 30 miserable, conniving owners who have always cared more about squeezing every last dollar out of the game than they ever cared about the game itself.

Once again, they've stolen from baseball fans. This time they made off with opening day and at least six games out of the regular season.

Sadly, that may just be the beginning. The temperatures could easily hit 100 degrees Fahrenheit (38 degrees Celsius) in Arizona by the time spring training begins, if it ever does.

For what purpose, it's hard to figure out. Yes, the players' union can be demanding and is prone to asking for far more than owners are willing to deliver.

But the issues weren't so complex they couldn't be solved with some more time at the table. And the truth is, there was nothing on that table that would tilt the playing field so badly that franchises around the country would start bleeding money.

It's almost like the owners didn't want the season to start on time — and maybe they really didn't. Outside of opening day, early season games are not generally moneymakers for owners despite Commissioner Rob Manfred's contention that missing the games would be a tragedy for baseball.

For weeks, owners refused to negotiate at all. When they finally did, it was with warnings of missed games and salaries and, finally, an ultimatum that opening day would be scratched if players didn't agree to a last and best offer.

Afterward, they cried poor, as if anyone believed them.

"The last five years have been very difficult years from a revenue perspective for the industry given the pandemic," Manfred said.

They've been difficult for baseball fans, too, though that's another story. The fact that fans are fleeing the game isn't all economic, but they've certainly grown weary of paying \$75 for a mediocre seat, \$25 for parking and \$18 plus tip every time the beer guy comes down the aisle.

No one should feel sorry for baseball players, either, who make an average of \$4 million a year to play a child's game. Indeed, the argument advanced by the union that they are bargaining for a system where all teams are competitive is simply a smokescreen for higher payrolls on smaller market clubs.

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But salaries that once seemed to have no ceiling in the past have slipped a bit in the last few years — a trend players want reversed. That's largely because front offices now use analytics to figure out value and teams know that — except for a few superstars — players are pretty much exchangeable.

No reason to pay a veteran reliever \$15 million a year when teams can bring in young fireballers at a fraction of the price to replace them without skipping a beat.

"The game has suffered damage for a while now. ... The game has been manipulated," union chief Tony Clark said. "The value inherent and how players are respected and viewed has changed. Players have been commoditized, monetized in a way that is really hard to explain."

What neither side seems to realize is that fans don't really care. Not about revenue sharing, not about how many players get to go to arbitration and not about whether each club has a personal chef in the clubhouse.

They just want to go to the ballpark, drink their \$18 beer and see some baseball.

Unfortunately, there's nothing in the negotiations that will make that baseball any better. While the players and owners argue about economics, the game is dying a slow death because it is simply becoming unwatchable.

So here's a thought. Return to the bargaining table and figure out what to do about arbitration years and luxury taxes. Go ahead and expand the playoffs, put ads on uniforms and adopt the DH in the National League because those are done deals already anyway.

Then stay at the table. Figure out what to do about the shift. Put a limit on the number of pitchers in any game. Come up with a way to speed up the game and reintroduce the strategies — the bunt, hit-and-run and sacrifice — that once made it so interesting.

Do something for the fans for once instead of chasing the last dollar they have in their pockets. Or, in the alternative, just don't play at all.

Tim Dahlberg is a national sports columnist for The Associated Press. Write to him at tdahlberg@ap.org or <http://twitter.com/timdahlberg>

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Hundreds of Africans cross into Spain's Melilla for 2nd day

MADRID (AP) — Hundreds of people tried for a second day to climb over the fences that separate a Spanish city in North Africa from Morocco, authorities said Thursday.

The Spanish government's delegation in Melilla said 1,200 migrants attempted to scale the 6-meter (20-foot) barrier that perimeters the city and that 380 succeeded.

On Wednesday, an unprecedented 2,500 people tried to enter the city, resulting in 491 crossings, according to local authorities.

Spanish security forces activated an "anti-intrusion" mechanism early Thursday to confront what the government's delegation described as "extreme violence" by trespassers who "threw stones, used hooks and sticks" at border agents.

Four Civil Guard officers were treated for injuries at a hospital, Sabrina Moh, the central government's delegate in the city, told reporters.

People fleeing poverty or violence sometimes use mass border incursion attempts to reach Melilla and the other Spanish territory on the North Africa coast, Ceuta, as a springboard to continental Europe.

Moh said the ones who succeeded this week were transferred to the local migrant center, and authorities were evaluating their circumstances.

Melilla's border security with Morocco will be reinforced with 84 National Police and Civil Guard officers, Moh said.

Nonprofits working with migrants in Melilla, including Solidary Wheels, said activists saw how Spanish authorities sent back to Morocco three migrants sitting at the top of the fence on Wednesday.

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Mass border pushbacks are illegal under international refugee treaties because they deny people the opportunity to apply for asylum, although European courts have justified them in some instances. Authorities didn't immediately address the allegation.

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Russian energy: Europe scrambles to reduce its dependency

By DAVID McHUGH AP Business Writer

FRANKFURT, Germany (AP) — Europe is scrambling to reduce its dependence on Russia for energy and bracing for potential disruption to critical natural gas supplies as Russia's war in Ukraine sends prices to new highs.

Natural gas prices hit a record Thursday for a second day in a row as restrictions on oil and gas were increasingly treated as a possibility on the eighth day of the war — whether through Western sanctions or Russian retaliation. That could mean even more pain to people's wallets: Energy prices have been high for months because of low supplies, driving up the cost of everything from utility bills to groceries as businesses pass along their costs to customers.

Traders were "factoring in the rising probability of sanctions on gas for each day the offensive continues," said Kaushal Ramesh, senior analyst at Rystad Energy.

The price of gas is 10 times what it was at the start of 2021. But it continues to flow through the major pipelines from Russia to Europe, including those through Ukraine, pipeline companies say.

To prepare for any cutoffs as the war intensifies and to reduce Russian reliance, countries are rounding up new supplies of liquefied natural gas — LNG — by ship. They're also speeding up plans for gas import terminals and pipelines that don't depend on Russia and talking about allowing coal-fired power plants to keep spewing climate-changing emissions for longer if it means energy independence.

Yet many of the measures will take months or, in the case of new pipelines and terminals, years. The long-term answer is rapidly building out renewable sources such as wind and solar. But for now, Europe is reliant on gas to heat homes, generate electricity and supply industries like fertilizer producers.

Europe, which gets almost 40% of its gas from Russia, is in a different situation than the U.S., which produces its own natural gas. Still, EU Energy Commissioner Kadri Simson says Europe "has the tools" to handle any Russian retaliation this winter while conceding a total cutoff "would of course still be a challenge."

Germany is spending 1.5 billion euros (\$1.66 billion) to buy more LNG. Chancellor Olaf Scholz on Sunday proposed building two LNG import terminals, days after blocking the already-completed Nord Stream 2 gas pipeline from Russia to Europe.

European Union countries are working on setting up a strategic gas reserve and establishing storage requirements. Officials are urging countries to sign agreements to share gas in emergencies.

The EU's executive commission is set to unveil steps next week that governments can take. The Paris-based International Energy Agency said Thursday that Russian gas imports could be cut by one-third this year through steps including letting existing gas contracts with Russia expire, finding new supplies from partners such as Norway and Azerbaijan, imposing minimum storage requirements, maximizing use of remaining nuclear plants and offering cash support for vulnerable electricity customers.

Denmark has given the go-ahead for construction of a pipeline to bring Norwegian gas — another major source for Europe — to Poland after permission was suspended last year.

"We are really busy catching up with the lost months," Søren Juul Larsen, chief project manager at Energinet. "We have agreed with our contractors that they will deploy more machines and people for the task, so that we can set the pace and be finished as soon as possible."

Energinet plans for the Baltic Pipe to partially launch Oct. 1. and be fully operational Jan. 1 with capacity of up to 10 billion cubic meters of gas a year.

Weaning Europe completely off Russian gas by next winter's heating season — if that becomes necessary — would be possible but painful, involving extra costs and possibly forced conservation, according

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to analysts at the Bruegel research institute in Brussels. Given record LNG shipments are already coming from places like the U.S., a total loss of Russian gas would leave Europe 10% to 15% short and facing potentially painful steps to reduce gas use, which would hit businesses first.

"If the EU is forced or willing to bear the cost, it should be possible to replace Russian gas already for next winter without economic activity being devastated, people freezing or electricity supply being disrupted," they said.

So far, wide-ranging Western sanctions have spared gas and oil even as they targeted Russian banks and their ability to interact with Western financial systems. Specific exemptions were included for energy transactions. Officials say they're trying to avoid hurting their own economies and consumers as they inflict pain in Russia.

But sanctions are indirectly hitting oil from Russia, the world's No. 3 oil producer that sells 25% of Europe's supply. Some oil buyers in recent days have shunned Russian crude, fearing that if sanctions were applied to Russian energy, their purchased oil could be rendered unusable.

"Cargoes have already been rejected by European refiners in the market, because people are afraid sanctions might be coming, and so they don't want to be caught with some cargo they can't resell," said Amy Myers Jaffe, research professor and managing director of the Climate Policy Lab at Tufts University.

An energy cutoff imposed by Russia was long regarded as unlikely — particularly with gas — because it would cost Russia its biggest customers in Europe and some \$300 million in revenue a day.

Russian officials have underlined that they have no intention of cutting off oil and gas and have stressed their role as reliable suppliers. Yet the conundrum remains: As Western countries cut off Russian banks off, Europe continues to support Russia's government — and military — through energy purchases.

The U.S. is "very open" to sanctioning Russia's energy and gas industry but is measuring that against potential costs to Americans, White House press secretary Jen Psaki said.

"We're considering it. It's very much on the table, but we need to weigh what all of the impacts will be," she said Wednesday on MSNBC. "We're not trying to hurt ourselves. We're trying to hurt President Putin and the Russian economy."

While Europe is vulnerable in the short term before it can build out renewables, it's Russia that would lose long term from an embargo or cutoff.

A gas embargo would over several years lead to a slump of 2.9% in Russian economic output and a 0.1% gain for Germany, said trade expert Hendrik Mahlkow of the Kiel Institute for the World Economy. Any Russian threat to halt supplies "would not be very credible," Mahlkow said.

Associated Press reporters Jan M. Olsen in Copenhagen, Denmark; Cathy Bussewitz in New York; and Darlene Superville in Washington contributed.

Fewer Americans apply for jobless benefits last week

By MATT OTT AP Business Writer

WASHINGTON (AP) — Fewer Americans applied for unemployment benefits last week reflecting a low number of layoffs across the economy.

Jobless claims fell by 18,000 to 215,000 for the week ending February 26, from 233,000 the previous week, the Labor Department reported Thursday.

The four-week average for claims, which compensates for weekly volatility, fell by 6,000 to 230,500.

In total, 1,476,000 Americans were collecting jobless aid the week that ended Feb. 12, a small uptick of 2,000 from the previous week's revised number, which was its lowest level since March 14, 1970.

First-time applications for jobless aid generally track the pace of layoffs, which are back down to fairly healthy pre-pandemic levels.

The Labor Department releases its February jobs report on Friday. Analysts surveyed by the financial data firm FactSet forecast that the U.S. economy added 400,000 jobs last month.

In January, the U.S. economy added a whopping 467,000 jobs and revised December and November

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gains upward by a combined 709,000. The unemployment rate stands at 4%, a historically low figure.

The U.S. economy has rebounded strongly from 2020's coronavirus-caused recession. Massive government spending and the vaccine rollout jumpstarted the economy as employers added a record 6.4 million jobs last year. The U.S. economy expanded 5.7% in 2021, growing last year at the fastest annual pace since a 7.2% surge in 1984, which also followed a recession.

Inflation is also at a 40-year high — 7.5% year-over-year — leading the Federal Reserve to ease its monetary support for the economy. The Fed has said it will begin a series of interest-rate hikes this month in an effort to tamp down surging prices.

Today in History

By The Associated Press undefined

Today in History

Today is Friday, March 4, the 63rd day of 2022. There are 302 days left in the year.

Today's Highlight in History:

On March 4, 1933, Franklin D. Roosevelt took office as America's 32nd president.

On this date:

In 1789, the Constitution of the United States went into effect as the first Federal Congress met in New York. (The lawmakers then adjourned for lack of a quorum.)

In 1863, the Idaho Territory was created.

In 1865, President Abraham Lincoln was inaugurated for a second term of office; with the end of the Civil War in sight, Lincoln declared: "With malice toward none, with charity for all."

In 1917, Republican Jeannette Rankin of Montana took her seat as the first woman elected to the U.S. House of Representatives, the same day President Woodrow Wilson took his oath of office for a second term (it being a Sunday, a private ceremony was held inside the U.S. Capitol; a second, public swearing-in took place the next day).

In 1966, John Lennon of The Beatles was quoted in the London Evening Standard as saying, "We're more popular than Jesus now," a comment that caused an angry backlash in the United States.

In 1981, a jury in Salt Lake City convicted Joseph Paul Franklin, an avowed racist and serial killer, of violating the civil rights of two Black men, Ted Fields and David Martin, who'd been shot to death. (Franklin received two life sentences for this crime; he was executed in 2013 for the 1977 murder of a Jewish man, Gerald Gordon.)

In 1987, President Ronald Reagan addressed the nation on the Iran-Contra affair, acknowledging that his overtures to Iran had "deteriorated" into an arms-for-hostages deal.

In 1994, in New York, four extremists were convicted of the 1993 World Trade Center bombing that killed six people and injured more than a thousand. Actor-comedian John Candy died in Durango, Mexico, at age 43.

In 1998, the U.S. Supreme Court ruled that sexual harassment at work can be illegal even when the offender and victim are of the same gender.

In 2015, the Justice Department cleared Darren Wilson, a white former Ferguson, Missouri, police officer, in the fatal shooting of Michael Brown, a Black 18-year-old, but also issued a scathing report calling for sweeping changes in city law enforcement practices.

In 2018, former Russian spy Sergei Skripal and his daughter were found unconscious on a bench in the southwestern English city of Salisbury; both survived what British authorities said was a murder attempt using a nerve agent.

In 2020, federal health officials investigated a suburban Seattle nursing home at the center of a coronavirus outbreak.

Ten years ago: President Barack Obama, in an address to the American Israel Public Affairs Committee in Washington, said he didn't want war but that he would not hesitate to attack Iran if that were the only option left to stop it from getting a nuclear weapon. Vladimir Putin scored a decisive victory in Russia's

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presidential election to return to the Kremlin and extend his hold on power. Nearly 300 people in the Republic of Congo were killed after a series of blasts at an arms depot in the capital Brazzaville.

Five years ago: President Donald Trump accused former President Barack Obama of tapping his telephones during the 2016 election; an Obama spokesman declared that the assertion was "simply false." Tommy Page, a former pop star whose song "I'll Be Your Everything" went to No. 1 in 1990 and who later became a record company executive, died in New York at age 46.

One year ago: Breaking from other Southern GOP governors, Alabama Gov. Kay Ivey extended her state's mask order for another month but said the requirement would end for good in April. Demonstrators in Myanmar protesting the previous month's military coup returned to the streets, undaunted by the killing of at least 38 people a day earlier by security forces.

Today's Birthdays: Actor Paula Prentiss is 84. Movie director Adrian Lyne is 81. Singer Shakin' Stevens is 74. Author James Ellroy is 74. Former Energy Secretary Rick Perry is 72. Singer Chris Rea is 71. Actor/rock singer-musician Ronn Moss is 70. Actor Kay Lenz is 69. Musician Emilio Estefan is 69. Movie director Scott Hicks is 69. Actor Catherine O'Hara is 68. Actor Mykelti (MY'-kul-tee) Williamson is 65. Actor Patricia Heaton is 64. Sen. Tina Smith, D-Minn., is 64. Actor Steven Weber is 61. Rock musician Jason Newsted is 59. Actor Stacy Edwards is 57. Rapper Grand Puba is 56. Rock singer Evan Dando (Lemonheads) is 55. Actor Patsy Kensit is 54. Sen. James Lankford, R-Okla., is 54. Gay rights activist Chaz Bono is 53. Actor Andrea Bendewald is 52. Actor Nick Stabile (stah-BEEL') is 52. Country singer Jason Sellers is 51. Jazz musician Jason Marsalis is 45. Actor Jessica Heap is 39. Actor Scott Michael Foster is 37. TV personality Whitney Port is 37. Actor Audrey Esparza is 36. Actor Margo Harshman is 36. Actor Josh Bowman is 34. Actor Andrea Bowen is 32. Actor Jenna Boyd is 29.