

# Groton Daily Independent

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## UpComing Events

### Thursday, March 10

End of Third Quarter  
Middle School Talent Show, 7 p.m., GHS Gym

### Saturday, March 12

Show Choir at Aberdeen Competition

### Sunday, March 13

Daylight Savings Time - turn clocks forward 1 hour

### Monday, March 14

School Board Meeting, 7 p.m.

### Tuesday, March 15

City Council Meeting, 7 p.m.

### Thursday, March 17

State A Tournament in Rapid City: Groton Area vs. Flandreau at 1:45 p.m. MT (2:45 CT).

Spring Break - No School

### Friday, March 18

State A Tournament in Rapid City

Spring Break - No School

### Saturday, March 19

State A Tournament in Rapid City

Mitchell Show Choir Competition



## 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.

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## State Basketball Pairings



### State A

### State B

#### #1 - Summit Arena at The Monument

 1 Dakota Valley	23-0	3/17 12:00 PM MT
 8 Sioux Falls Christian	14-9	



#### #2 - Summit Arena at The Monument

 4 Flandreau	19-3	3/17 1:45 PM MT
 5 Groton Area	20-3	



#### #3 - Summit Arena at The Monument

 2 St. Thomas More	20-2	3/17 6:00 PM MT
 7 Lakota Tech	16-5	

#### #4 - Summit Arena at The Monument

 3 Winner	22-1	3/17 7:45 PM MT
 6 Sioux Valley	18-5	

#### #1 - Barnett Center

 1 De Smet	22-1	3/17 12:00 PM CT
 8 Waubay/Summit	20-3	


#### #2 - Barnett Center

 4 Potter County	22-1	3/17 1:45 PM CT
 5 Aberdeen Christian	20-3	

#### #3 - Barnett Center

 2 Lower Brule	20-3	3/17 6:00 PM CT
 7 Castlewood	17-6	

#### #4 - Barnett Center

 3 White River	19-2	3/17 7:45 PM CT
 6 Freeman Academy/Marion	21-2	

## Groton Area Boys are State A Bound!

The boys basketball season continues for the Groton Area Tigers as the team posted a 63-48 SoDak 16 win over Mt. Vernon/Plankinton. The game was played in Redfield.

The Tiger defense proved to be too much for the Titans to overcome. Even offensively, Tate Larson, at 6-3, was not intimidated by 6-7 Jordan Stoltz under the basket and even when he was outmatched, it opened up Jacob Zak who was seven of nine in two-pointers. The Titans had 17 turnovers, 13 of which were steals by the Tigers with Larson having four steals. Mt. Vernon/Plankinton threw a box and one defense on the the Tigers, chasing down Lane Tietz. Coach Dolan pulled Tietz back to midcourt and basically just had him standing there, pulling his defender with him while it was four-on-four offensively for most of the first half. Dolan said it worked fairly well, but then the Tigers started to stand around offensively so he pulled that idea late in the second quarter.

The Tigers had to overcome a first half challenge from Mt. Vernon/Plankinton. The game was tied seven times and there were six lead changes in the first half before the Tigers scored eight straight points to take a 25-20 lead at half time. Groton Area continued to pull away in the second half, taking a 41-28 lead into the fourth quarter.

Tate Larson led the Tigers in scoring with 17 points while Jacob Zak had 14, Lane Tietz 12, Kaden Kurtz and Wyatt Hearnen each had seven, Jayden Zak had four and Cole Simon added two points.

Reed Run led the Titans with 17 points while Jordan Stoltz had 10, Zach Baker and eight, Mason Hetland six, Blaine Bohr five and Ryan Chapman added two points.

Jayden Zak - 4 points, 3 rebounds, 2 assists, 2 steals, 4 fouls.

Lane Tietz - 12 points, 1 rebound, 2 assists, 2 steals.

Jacob Zak - 14 points, 1 rebound, 2 assists, 2 steals, 4 fouls, 1 block.

Tate Larson - 17 points, 3 rebounds, 3 assists, 4 steals.

Kaden Kurtz - 7 points, 3 rebounds, 1 assist, 3 steals, 5 fouls.

Cole Simon - 2 points.

Wyatt Hearnen - 7 points, 2 rebounds, 2 fouls.

Also playing were Colby Dunker, Logan Ringgenberg, Cade Larson and Teylor Diegel.

Groton Area made 17 of 29 in two-point field goals for 59 percent, six of 15 in three-pointers for 45 percent, made 11 of 15 free throws, had 13 rebounds, 8 turnovers, 10 assists, 13 steals, 15 fouls and one block.

Mt. Vernon/Plankinton made 20 of 36 total field goals for 56 percent, made seven of 11 free throws, had 15 team fouls and 17 turnovers.

Groton Area, now 20-3, will play Flandreau on March 17 at 1:45 p.m. MT at the State A Tournament in Rapid City.

The game was broadcast live on GDILIVE.COM, with a record viewership of over 1,100 viewers. The game sponsors were 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



**Tate Larson holds up the plaque as the Tigers celebrate the SoDak 16 win over Mt. Vernon/Plankinton.** (Photo by Bruce Babcock)

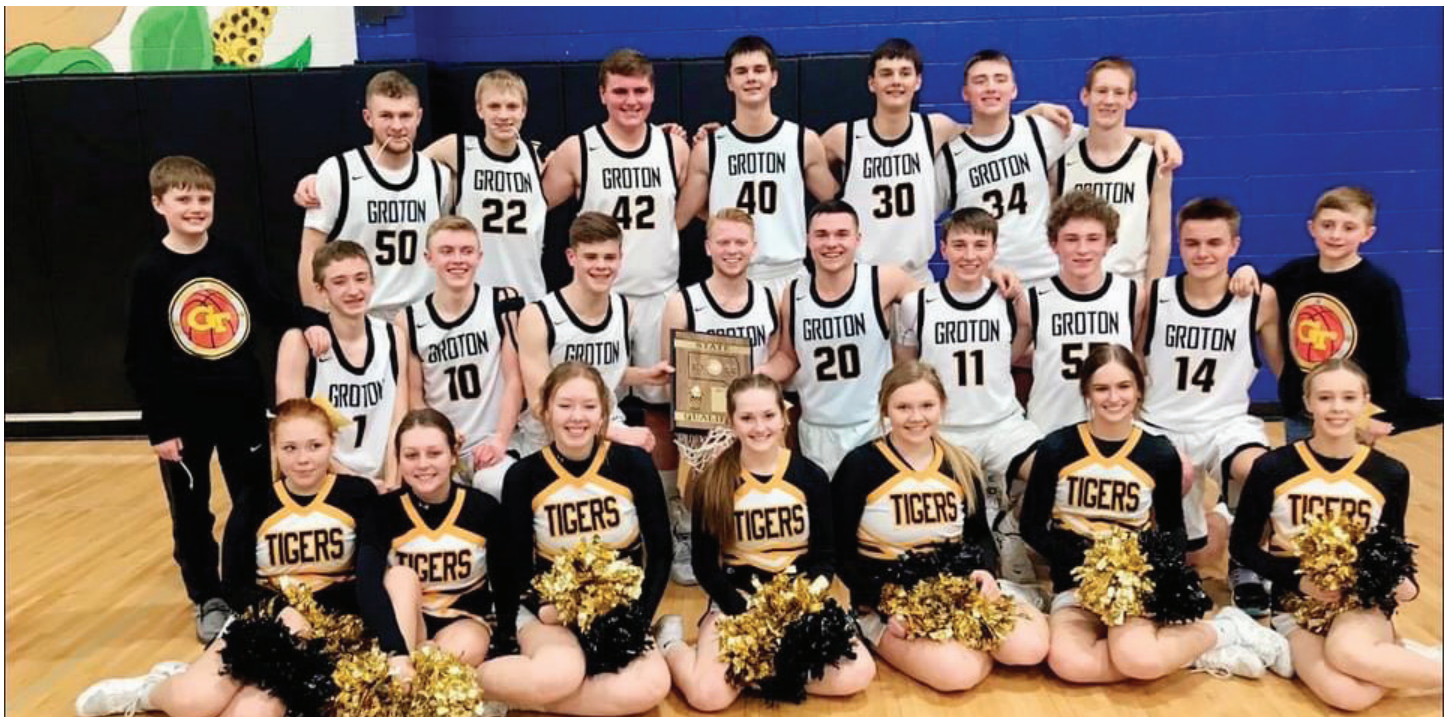


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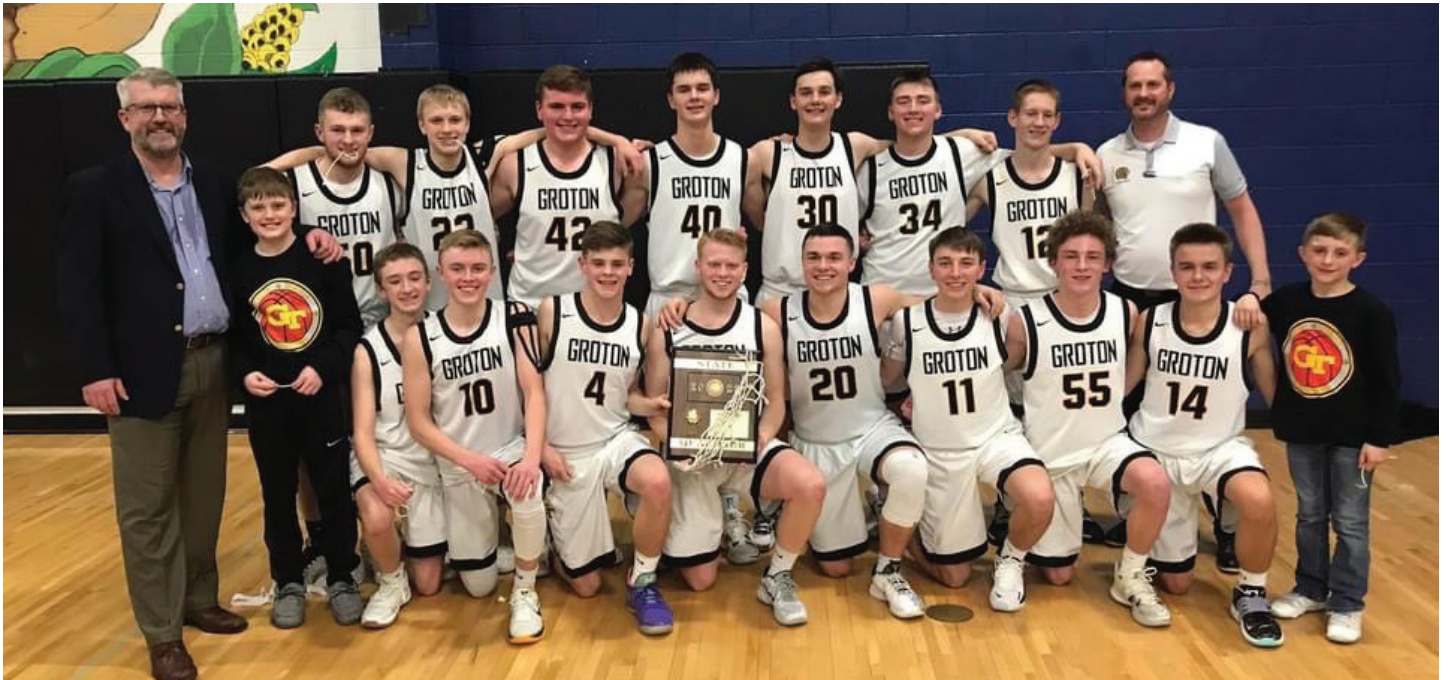
**It was a sea of white as the Groton Area Tigers celebrate the SoDak 16 win over Mt. Vernon/Plankinton in the game played Tuesday in Redfield.** (Photo from Alexa Schuring's Facebook Page)



(Photo from Diane Kurtz's Facebook Page)



## Groton Area Boys are State A Bound!

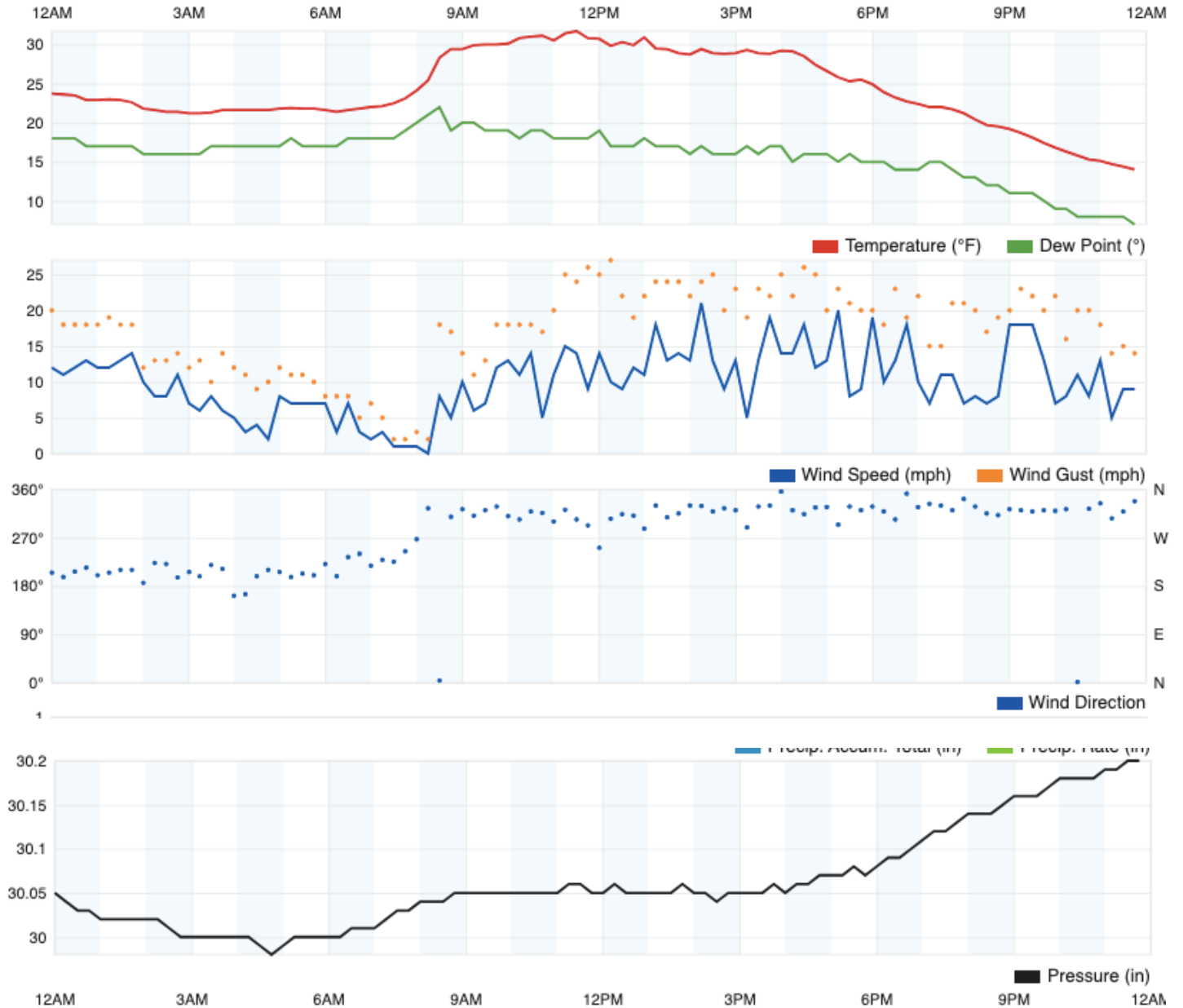


(Photo from Diane Kurtz's Facebook Page)

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## Yesterday's Groton Weather Graphs



# Groton Daily Independent

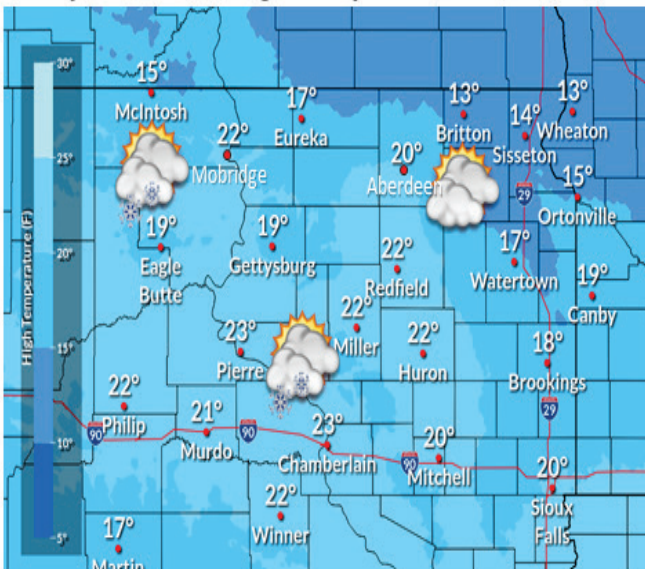
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Today	Tonight	Thursday	Thursday Night	Friday
				
Partly Sunny	Partly Cloudy	Mostly Sunny then Sunny and Breezy	Partly Cloudy	Sunny and Blustery
High: 19 °F	Low: -6 °F	High: 28 °F	Low: 4 °F	High: 12 °F

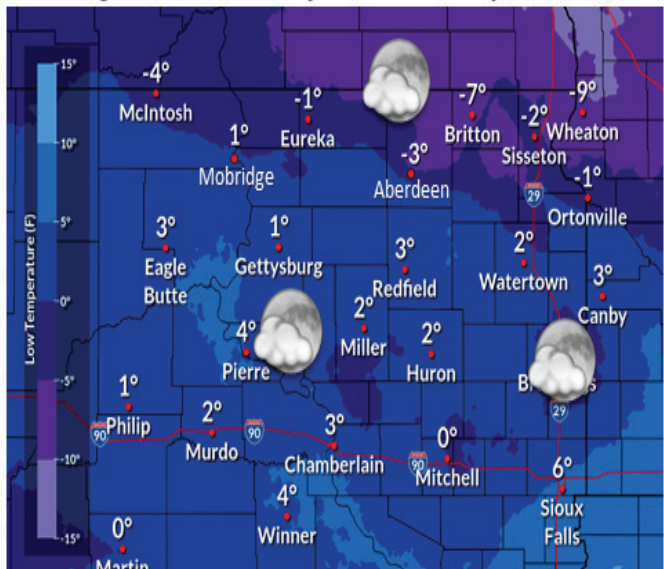
## Chilly Next Couple of Days, Cold Nights

Light snow showers are possible today, mainly across central South Dakota. Temperatures will be a good 10 to 25 or more degrees below normal through Saturday morning. Breezy to windy Thursday evening into Friday, with wind chills of 10 to 20 below zero Friday and Saturday mornings. *Expect a big warm-up beginning Saturday afternoon*

Today, March 9<sup>th</sup>, High Temperature Forecast



Overnight into Thursday AM Low Temp Forecast



 National Weather Service Aberdeen, SD

 Updated: 3/9/2022 5:09 AM Central

Unseasonably cold air will be in place through Saturday morning - wind chills are forecast to drop to between 10 and 20 degrees below zero Friday and Saturday mornings. Next to no precipitation is anticipated over the next several days, besides potential light snow showers today. Big warm-up beginning this weekend!

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## Today in Weather History

March 9, 1993: High winds gusting more than 50 mph moved east across South Dakota behind a strong cold front. Peak wind gusts reported included 62 mph at Pierre and 49 mph at Aberdeen. High winds flipped over a mobile home on top of a car and a utility shed near The Oahe Reservoir. A semi-tractor trailer was overturned while crossing Ft. Randall Dam. An office trailer was also tipped over at the same location.

1891: From March 9th through the 13th, a blizzard struck southern England and Wales with gale-force winds. An estimated 220 people were killed; 65 ships foundered in the English Channel, and 6,000 sheep perished. Countless trees were uprooted, and trains buried. Up to a foot of snow and snowdrifts of 11.5 feet were reported in Dulwich, London, Torquay, Sidmouth, and Dartmouth. Click [HERE](#) for more information about this storm from the National Maritime Museum.

1956: A whopping 367 inches of snow was measured on the ground at the Rainier Paradise Ranger Station in Washington. The snow depth was a state record and the second-highest total on record for the continental U.S.

1957: An earthquake measuring a magnitude 8.6 struck the Aleutian Islands of Alaska. A Pacific-wide tsunami was generated that caused damage in Hawaii, but fortunately, no lives were lost. Hardest hit was the island of Kauai, where houses were destroyed and roads washed away. Waves reached 34.1 feet high at Haena, HI.

1960 - A winter storm produced a narrow band of heavy snow from north central Kentucky into Virginia and the mountains of North Carolina. Snowfall amounts ranged from 12 to 24 inches, with drifts up to eleven feet high in western Virginia. (David Ludlum)

1987 - Gale force winds ushered arctic air into the north central U.S. Some places were 50 degrees colder than the previous day. Northeast winds, gusting to 60 mph, produced 8 to 15 foot waves on Lake Michigan causing more than a million dollars damage along the southeastern shoreline of Wisconsin. (The National Weather Summary) (Storm Data)

1988 - A cold front brought high winds to the southwestern U.S. Winds in the Las Vegas Valley of Nevada gusted to 70 mph, and one person was injured by a falling tree. (The National Weather Summary) (Storm Data)

1989 - Twenty-two cities in the southwestern U.S. reported new record high temperatures for the date. In New Mexico, afternoon highs of 72 at Los Alamos, 76 at Ruidoso, and 79 at Quemado, were records for March. (The National Weather Summary)

1990 - Evening thunderstorms produced severe weather in West Texas. Thunderstorms produced wind gusts to 71 mph at Lubbock, and golf ball size hail was reported at several other locations. Strong thunderstorm winds injured two persons north of the town of Canyon. (The National Weather Summary) (Storm Data)



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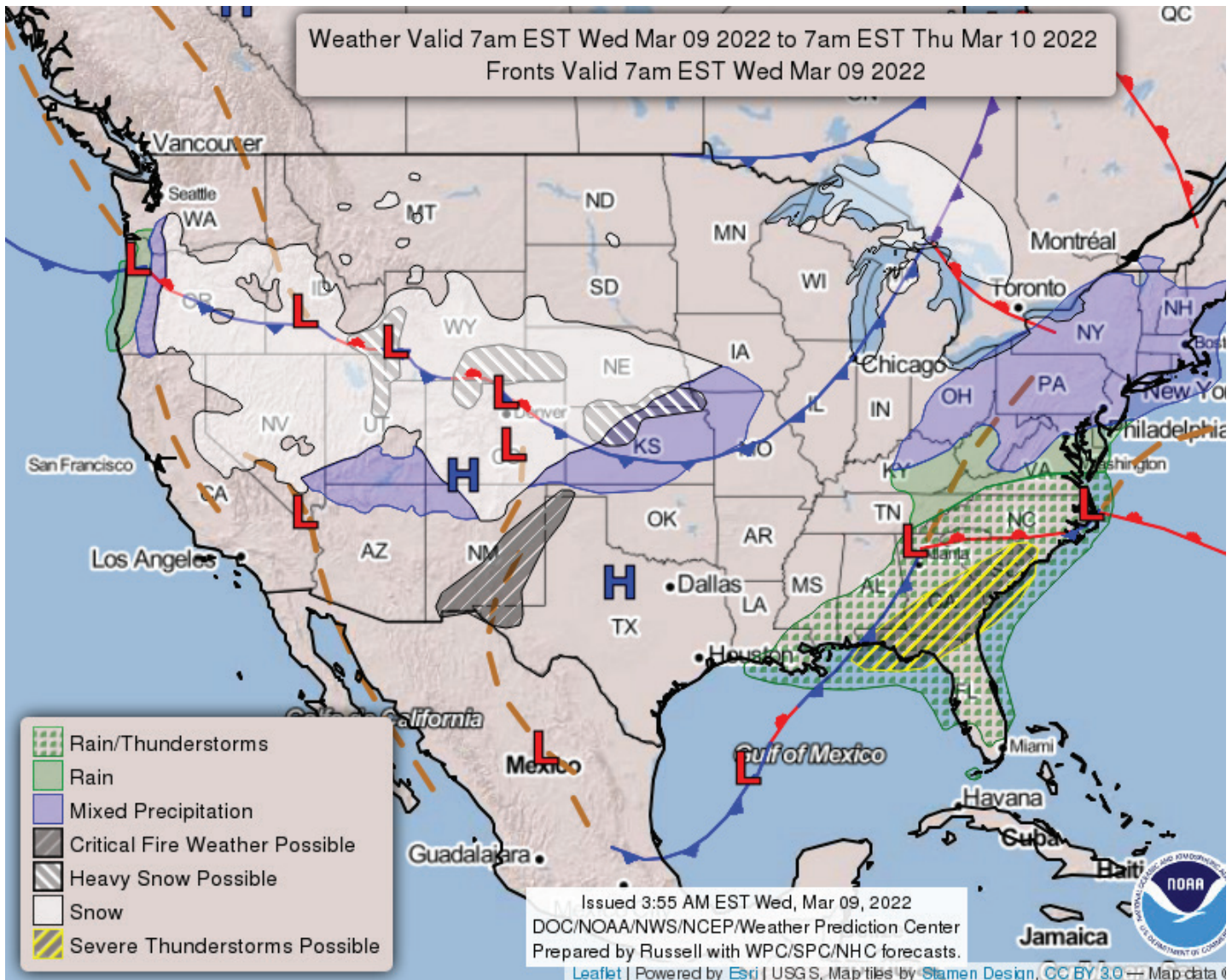
## Yesterday's Groton Weather

**High Temp: 32 °F at 11:29 AM**  
**Low Temp: 14 °F at 11:56 PM**  
**Wind: 27 mph at 12:07 PM**  
**Precip: 0.00**

Day length: 11 hours, 37 minutes

## Today's Info

Record High: 69 in 2021  
Record Low: -20 in 1951  
Average High: 38°F  
Average Low: 16°F  
Average Precip in Mar.: 0.22  
Precip to date in Mar.: 0.00  
Average Precip to date: 1.39  
Precip Year to Date: 0.97  
Sunset Tonight: 6:31:41 PM  
Sunrise Tomorrow: 6:52:08 AM



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## **DIRECTION OR DESTRUCTION**

Fact-filled decisions bring stability to one's life. All too often, however, decisions are made for the moment. They are based on convenience or what is most acceptable to my friends or what will cause the least conflict.

Never mind whether or not it is the truth, decent, law-agreeing or God-honoring. As long as there will be no ripples or difficulties for anyone, no feathers ruffled or people threatened, "if it feels good - go with it. But don't let it cause any trouble to anyone."

Living a life that has no principles rarely has any purpose. To try to be all things to all people and have no direction or goal does no good. It's like a ship with no rudder or compass. Where the ship docks may or may not be where it was charted to go. But it got "there."

The Psalmist had some strong words for people with no purpose. He made no apology for those who were unwilling to take a stand: "I hate double-minded people, but I love Your law!"

Double-minded persons are those who are more concerned with popularity than with truth. The Apostle James said that the "double-minded person is unstable in all his ways." But a person who loves God's laws and is obedient to them is a person who is straightforward, trustworthy and absolute. The Word of God will lead us to a place in life where we will acknowledge that God is our refuge and shield and in His Word we find eternal life.

It is God's Word that enables us to be bold and to be a people who are single-minded. God's Word brings truth.

Prayer: Help us, Father, to accept the wisdom of Your Word and to become a people who speak with integrity. Keep us from double-mindedness. In Jesus' Name, Amen.

Scripture For Today: I hate double-minded people, but I love Your law. Psalm 119:113

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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

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## News from the Associated Press

### SD Lottery

By The Associated Press

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

Mega Millions

07-18-38-58-64, Mega Ball: 24, Megaplier: 3

(seven, eighteen, thirty-eight, fifty-eight, sixty-four; Mega Ball: twenty-four; Megaplier: three)

Estimated jackpot: \$126 million

Powerball

Estimated jackpot: \$99 million

### Tuesday's Scores

The Associated Press

BOYS PREP BASKETBALL

SDHSAA SoDak 16

State Qualifier

#### Class A

Dakota Valley 68, Madison 50

Flandreau 47, Clark/Willow Lake 38

Groton Area 63, Mt. Vernon/Plankinton 48

Lakota Tech 68, Rapid Christian 63

Sioux Falls Christian 63, Tea Area 47

Sioux Valley 64, Hanson 34

St. Thomas More 60, Stanley County 21

Winner 57, Red Cloud 28

#### Class B

Aberdeen Christian 64, Lyman 46

Castlewood 61, Burke 39

Desmet 66, Chester 24

Freeman Academy/Marion 78, Timber Lake 64

Lower Brule 77, Viborg-Hurley 53

Potter Gettysburg/Hoven 78, Ethan 47

Waubay/Summit 49, Platte-Geddes 44

White River 68, Harding County 50

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

### S. Dakota St. beats NDSU 73-69 for Summit League title

SIOUX FALLS, S.D. (AP) — Douglas Wilson had 21 points and 11 rebounds and South Dakota State beat North Dakota State 73-69 on Tuesday night to win the Summit League tournament and earn an automatic berth into the NCAA Tournament.

South Dakota State (30-4) added to the program's single-season record for wins. The Jackrabbits, who became the first team in Summit League history to go undefeated in conference play, have won 21 game in a row — the longest active streak in Division I.

North Dakota State (23-9) trailed by as many as 10 points in the first half and didn't take its first lead until Sam Griesel hit a 3-pointer with 3:05 left to put the Bison up 61-60. Charlie Easley answered with a

jumper for the Jackrabbits 16 seconds later, Baylor Scheierman followed with 3 to make it 65-61 with 1:54 left and SDSU made 8 of 10 from the free-throw line the rest of the way to seal it.

Easley had 15 points, Zeke Mayo scored 12 and Scheierman 11 for South Dakota State.

Griesel made 10 of 16 from the field and finished with 24 points, eight rebounds and five assists for the Bison. Jarius Cook scored 13 points and Grant Nelson 11.

Either the Jackrabbits or North Dakota State has played in each of the last 11 Summit League title games. SDSU has won six championships, including finals wins over the Bison in 2013, 2016 and 2022. NDSU beat South Dakota State for the 2015 crown, one of its four in that span.

## Noem's SD vaccine exemption bill derailed amid GOP infight

PIERRE, S.D. (AP) — Republican legislative proposals to allow South Dakota employees to gain exemptions from their employers' COVID-19 vaccine requirement were derailed Tuesday after lawmakers couldn't find agreement on competing proposals from Gov. Kristi Noem and House Speaker Spencer Gosch.

The two officials are both Republicans but have clashed in recent months and brought differing proposals to allow exemptions from employers' vaccine mandates. After Republican lawmakers from the House and Senate couldn't find agreement between differing versions of a bill, both versions were left all but dead.

The intra-party squabble comes as the state's vaccination rate of 60% of people fully vaccinated lags behind the nationwide rate of 65%.

Noem's bill would have allowed employees to cite either a medical exemption, religious grounds for refusal or a test showing antibodies against COVID-19 in the last six months. But after that passed the Senate, the House, led by Gosch, rewrote Noem's bill to allow employees to cite any objection of their conscience.

A committee of six Republicans appointed to find agreement between the House and Senate versions of the bill dissolved Tuesday, leaving Noem's proposal with little chance of passage this year, the Sioux Falls Argus Leader reported.

House lawmakers took issue with a clause in Noem's bill that would have allowed businesses to opt out of the law if it created "undue hardship" for the business.

The governor and a group of House Republicans have exchanged barbs for months over competing proposals to allow employees to gain exemptions from vaccination requirements, with a group of House conservatives pushing broader exemptions.

"Those words in this bill make it worth about as much as the paper it's printed on," Gosch said, referring to the employer hardship clause.

Senators also refused to budge on the bill, arguing that Noem's version was a compromise between individual and business rights.

President Joe Biden's administration pushed vaccine mandates through employers last year to boost the nation's COVID-19 vaccination rate and slow the spread of the coronavirus.

South Dakota has seen a decrease in reported COVID-19 cases and hospitalizations in recent weeks. The Department of Health on Tuesday reported 120 people are currently hospitalized with COVID-19 infections, marking a decline from January when the number topped 400 — the highest rate in over a year.

## SD Lawmakers send Noem \$200M housing infrastructure package

By STEPHEN GROVES Associated Press

PIERRE, S.D. (AP) — South Dakota House lawmakers on Tuesday passed a \$200 million funding package to spur infrastructure around workforce housing developments, clearing a proposal that has become a major point of friction between Gov. Kristi Noem and House Republicans.

As the legislative session enters its final days, the Republican-controlled House has resisted budget proposals from Noem, opting to look for ways to cut taxes rather than fund projects she says are necessary for the state.

House Republican leader Rep. Kent Peterson called the package an essential "domino" that would lead to other budget items falling into place amid negotiations over one-time funding projects and the state



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budget. But it was not clear whether Noem would veto the package after lawmakers proposed sending the funds to an outside organization.

The bill passed Tuesday has already cleared the Senate. It will create grants and revolving loans for infrastructure, such as roads and water lines, near housing developments. Lawmakers will use \$150 million in general funds, as well as \$50 million in federal funds from last year's American Rescue Plan Act.

Noem had proposed the funding package be distributed by the Governor's Office of Economic Development, but lawmakers changed her proposal to designating the grants and loans be overseen by an organization outside her control. If Noem signs the proposal, the money will go to the South Dakota Housing Development Authority, an organization focused on housing for low- and moderate-income people.

Noem told the Sioux Falls Argus Leader that the organization "is less accountable to taxpayers" because its operating budget does not come from the Legislature. She also argued that the organization does not have the authority to fund infrastructure projects.

As budget negotiations between the governor's office and some House Republicans have broken down this week, Noem on Tuesday made public her gripes with lawmakers. Her office live-streamed an Argus Leader interview with her and top aides.

"It's just really strange that we're in this situation with disagreement," Noem said.

But as some House Republicans have eyed a historical amount of money flowing into the state, both from tax revenue and federal grants, they have ardently resisted funding state government programs.

Republican Rep. Kaleb Weis argued on the House floor that the federal taxes were akin to "legalized theft" of taxpayers.

"Let's give it back to them, let's not spend it on somebody's special interest," he said.

The House passed a proposal to cut the state's sales tax on food Monday, but that was quickly dismissed in the Senate Tuesday.

However, a two-thirds majority of both chambers bought into the argument that communities across the state desperately need a boost in affordable housing.

The \$200 million package was just the latest budget item that has produced a fight between Noem and the House. She lamented the chamber's failure to pass this week a \$39 million request to build a women's prison near Rapid City, a facility that would include work programs and addiction treatment.

"We need this facility desperately," Noem said in a Facebook video posted Tuesday, making yet another public plea to pressure lawmakers.

They didn't seem to be listening. While Noem held her live stream on the Capitol's second floor Tuesday, House lawmakers filed into their chamber on the third floor and began debating the workforce housing package.

However, if Noem's pressure fails, she has also floated another option: a veto of the state budget.

"I can sit here until July. I'm not in a hurry," she said, adding. "I don't have to go anywhere so I will sit here until we do it right."

## Sjerven, Lamb lead South Dakota women to Summit crown 56-45

SIoux FALLS, S.D. (AP) — Hannah Sjerven scored 19 points with 10 rebounds, Chloe Lamb added 17 points and South Dakota clamped down on South Dakota State to earn their fourth-straight NCAA Tournament bid with a 56-45 win in the Summit League title game on Tuesday.

The top-seeded Jackrabbits, gunning for the 11th NCAA berth, never led in the second half and finished with their worst shooting game of the season (24.6%) and second-lowest scoring game, 34.7 points below their average.

Second-seeded South Dakota, which won the last two Summit tournaments and earned an at-large bid in 2019, has beaten their rival five times in seven tournament championship matchups. The last time was a 63-58 win in 2020, two days before the pandemic halted the basketball season.

The teams split in the regular season with South Dakota winning the first, holding the Jackrabbits to 42 points and winning by 23. Since then, South Dakota State won 15 games, reaching their 11th-straight

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20-win season and avenging the loss with a 75-65 win.

Liv Korngable added 11 points for the Coyotes (27-5), who were potentially in the NCAA had they not won. Tylee Irwin led the Jackrabbits (23-9) with 15 points and Paiton Burckhard had 14. Myah Selland had 10 rebounds but was 0-for-10 shooting and finished nine points below her 14.1 average.

South Dakota State entered leading the nation in 3-point shooting at 39.4%, led by Selland's 55% and the Jackrabbits were 8 of 23 (34.8%) but 6 of 34 inside the arc.

Lamb, the Summit League player of the year, hit a 3-pointer to give the Coyotes a 23-22 lead at the half and opened the third quarter with a jumper. After two Selland free throws, Lamb and Korngable hit back-to-back 3-pointers and South Dakota State could never get the deficit down to one possession.

Korngable's 3-pointer was South Dakota's only basket of the fourth quarter as the Coyotes were 1 of 8 but went 10 of 14 from the line to clinch their fifth NCAA trip. South Dakota State was 3 of 22 in the final frame.

## Bill provides campground owners immunity from acts of nature

PIERRE, S.D. (AP) — A bill that provides immunity for campground owners whose guests encounter the inherent risks of outdoor camping is headed for the governor's desk.

Both chambers of the South Dakota Legislature have approved the bill that cuts the risk of lawsuits for campground owners who say they've been sued for acts of nature beyond their control.

The owners say the coronavirus pandemic and the South Dakota's open invitation to visit have resulted in an influx of novice campers who don't understand the unpredictability of nature, South Dakota Public Broadcasting reported.

Mary Arlington is executive director of the South Dakota Campground Owners Association. She testified before both the House and Senate Judiciary Committees that the legislation isn't about gross negligence, it's about the unpredictability of woods and meadows that has led to lawsuits over conditions outside the campground's control.

"We visited with industry insurance carriers, and they confirmed they've seen lawsuits on such natural situations as bee stings and mosquito bites," she said.

Arlington said many campers are native South Dakotans, but there has been a recent flood of out-of-staters. She said novice campers may have expectations of comfort that the realities of nature just can't provide.

She recalled a camper who was outraged because a songbird woke her on the only morning she could sleep in. Arlington says the camper demanded a campsite refund or she would sue.

The legislation has a long list of inherent risks, including trees and tree stumps, uneven terrain, weather, wild animals, roots, rocks, mud, sand, and the absence of street lights.

## Ukrainians flee besieged cities as conditions worsen

By YURAS KARMANAU Associated Press

LVIV, Ukraine (AP) — Renewed efforts to evacuate civilians from besieged and bombarded Ukrainian cities were underway Wednesday as authorities seek to rescue people from increasingly dire conditions. Days of shelling have largely cut residents of the southern city of Mariupol off from the outside world and forced them to scavenge for food and water.

Authorities announced another cease-fire to allow civilians to escape from Mariupol, Sumy in the north-east, Enerhodar in the south, Volnovakha in the southeast, Izyum in the east, and several towns in the region around the capital, Kyiv.

Previous attempts to establish safe evacuation corridors have largely failed due to attacks by Russian forces, and there were few details on Wednesday's new effort. But air raid sirens repeatedly went off in the capital and explosions could be heard there, raising tensions in the rattled city.

Mariupol, which nearly half of the population of 430,000 is hoping to flee, has been surrounded by Russian forces for days. Corpses lie in the streets, and people break into stores in search of food and melt

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snow for water. Thousands huddle in basements, sheltering from the Russian shells pounding this strategic port on the Azov Sea.

"Why shouldn't I cry?" resident Goma Janna demanded as she wept by the light of an oil lamp below ground, surrounded by women and children. "I want my home, I want my job. I'm so sad about people and about the city, the children."

Thousands of people are thought to have been killed, both civilians and soldiers, in two weeks of fighting since President Vladimir Putin's forces invaded. The U.N. estimates that more than 2 million people have fled the country, the biggest exodus of refugees in Europe since the end of World War II.

The crisis is likely to get worse as Russian forces step up their bombardment of cities throughout the country in response to stronger than expected resistance from Ukrainian forces. Russian losses have been "far in excess" of what Putin and his generals expected, CIA Director William Burns said Tuesday.

An intensified push by Russian forces could mean "an ugly next few weeks," Burns told a congressional committee, warning that Putin was likely to "grind down the Ukrainian military with no regard for civilian casualties."

Britain's Defense Ministry said Wednesday that fighting continues northwest of Kyiv. The cities of Kharkiv, Chernihiv, Sumy and Mariupol are being heavily shelled and remain encircled by Russian forces.

Russian forces are placing military equipment on farms and amid residential buildings in the northern city of Chernihiv, Ukraine's general staff said. In the south, Russians dressed in civilian clothes are advancing on the city of Mykolaiv, a Black Sea shipbuilding center of a half-million people, it said.

The Ukrainian military, meanwhile, is building up defenses in cities in the north, south and east, and forces around Kyiv are "holding the line" against the Russian offensive.

That resistance is stiffer than many expected — and Western nations are rushing now to bolster their force. Ukraine's president has pleaded repeatedly for warplanes to counter Russia's significant air power, but Western countries have disagreed over how best to do that amid concerns it could raise the risk of the war expanding beyond Ukraine.

Poland late Tuesday offered to give the U.S. 28 MiG-29 fighter planes for Ukraine's use. U.S. officials said that proposal was "untenable," but they would continue to consult with Poland and other NATO allies.

In addition to material support for Ukraine, Western countries have sought to pressure Russia through a series of punishing sanctions. On Tuesday, President Joe Biden upped the ante further, saying said the U.S. would ban all Russian oil imports, even if it meant rising costs for Americans.

Energy exports have kept a steady stream of cash flowing to Russia despite otherwise severe restrictions that have largely cut its economy off from the world. McDonald's, Starbucks, Coca-Cola, PepsiCo and General Electric all announced that they're temporarily suspending business in the country, furthering that isolation.

The moves have done little to blunt the conflict so far.

A series of air raid alerts Wednesday morning urged residents of the capital to go to bomb shelters amid fears of incoming missiles. Associated Press reporters later heard explosions.

Such alerts are common, though irregular, keeping people on edge. Kyiv has been relatively quiet in recent days, though Russian artillery has pounded the outskirts of the city.

On those outskirts, police officers and soldiers helped elderly residents from their homes on Tuesday. People crowded together under a destroyed bridge before crossing a river on slippery wooden boards as they tried to escape Irpin, a town of 60,000 that has been targeted by Russian shelling.

Kyiv regional administration head Oleksiy Kuleba said the crisis for civilians was growing in the capital, with the situation particularly critical in the city's suburbs.

"Russia is artificially creating a humanitarian crisis in the Kyiv region, frustrating the evacuation of people and continuing shelling and bombing small communities," he said.

Amid the bombardments, authorities have tried repeatedly to evacuate civilians, but many attempts have been thwarted by Russian shelling.

One evacuation did appear successful on Tuesday, with Ukrainian authorities saying 5,000 civilians, in-



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cluding 1,700 foreign students, had managed to escape from Sumy, an embattled northeastern city of a quarter-million people.

That corridor was to reopen for 12 hours on Wednesday, with the buses that took people southwest to the city of Poltava the day before returning to pick up more refugees, regional administration chief Dmytro Zhyvytskyi said.

Priority was being given to pregnant women, women with children, the elderly and the disabled.

In the south, Russian troops have advanced deep along Ukraine's coastline in an effort to establish a land bridge to Crimea, which Moscow seized from Ukraine in 2014.

That has left Mariupol encircled by Russian forces.

On Tuesday, an attempt to evacuate civilians and deliver badly needed food, water and medicine failed, with Ukrainian officials saying Russian forces fired on the convoy before it reached the city.

Natalia Mudrenko, a senior member of Ukraine's UN Mission, told the Security Council that the people of Mariupol have "been effectively taken hostage" by the siege. Her voice shook with emotion as she described how a 6-year-old died shortly after her mother was killed by Russian shelling. "She was alone in the last moments of her life," she said.

Theft has become widespread in the city as beleaguered residents search for food, clothes, even furniture. Some residents are reduced to scooping water from streams. Authorities say they plan to start digging mass graves for the dead.

With the electricity out, many people rely on their car radios for information, picking up news from stations broadcast from areas controlled by Russian forces or Russian-backed separatists.

Ludmila Amelkina, who was walking along an alley strewn with rubble and walls pocked by gunfire, said the destruction had been devastating.

"We don't have electricity, we don't have anything to eat, we don't have medicine. We've got nothing," she said, looking skyward.

## European stocks surge, Asia down after Wall St retreat

By JOE McDONALD AP Business Writer

BEIJING (AP) — European stocks and Wall Street futures rebounded Wednesday as investors watched diplomatic efforts to end Russia's attack on Ukraine, while Asian markets sank after Chinese inflation accelerated.

Already high oil prices added more than \$1 per barrel and then gave up those gains following President Joe Biden's ban on imports of Russian crude.

London and Frankfurt opened higher. Shanghai, Tokyo and Hong Kong declined amid enduring unease about the war's global impact.

Futures for Wall Street's S&P 500 index and Dow Jones Industrial Average were up more than 1% after the market slid Tuesday.

"Financial markets seem calmer" as Ukrainian and Russian diplomats prepare to meet in Turkey, Chris Turner and Francesco Pesole of ING said in a report. "Yet energy prices look set to stay high as the West weans itself off Russian exports."

The FTSE 100 in London jumped 1.6% to 7,079.13. Frankfurt's DAX surged 4.9% to 13,454.38 and the CAC 40 in Paris jumped 4.6% to 6,234.13.

Analysts said investors appeared to be snagging bargains after recent losses.

On Wall Street, the S&P 500 sank 0.7% on Tuesday for its fourth straight daily decline. It is now 13.1% below its latest record high.

The Dow lost 0.6% and the Nasdaq composite retreated 0.3%. On Monday, it closed 20% below its record high.

In Asia, the Shanghai Composite Index tumbled 1.1% to 3,256.39 after China's government reported consumer prices rose 0.6% in February over the previous month, picking up from January's 0.4% gain.

The Nikkei 225 in Tokyo slid 0.3% to 24,717.53. The Hang Seng in Hong Kong lost 0.7% to 20,627.71

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after being down 2.2% at one point.

"Inflation will pick up" as prices of oil and other commodities rise due to the Ukraine war, Julian Evans-Pritchard of Capital Economics said in a report. That "will have a much more pronounced impact on the March figures."

Sydney's S&P-ASX 200 climbed 1% to 7,053.00 and India's Sensex advanced 2.3% to 54,684.42.

New Zealand and Southeast Asian markets rose. South Korean markets were closed for a presidential election.

Benchmark U.S. crude fell \$3.60 to \$120.10 per barrel in electronic trading on the New York Mercantile Exchange. The contract jumped \$4.30 on Tuesday to \$123.70.

Brent crude, the basis for international oil prices, gave up \$3.22 to \$124.76 per barrel in London. It advanced \$4.77 the previous session to \$127.98.

Commodities markets have been roiled because Russia is the No. 2 oil exporter and the No. 3 supplier of nickel, which is used in electric car batteries, stainless steel and other products. Russia and Ukraine also are among the biggest global sellers of wheat.

Nickel prices doubled Tuesday to more than \$100,000 per metric ton, prompting the London Metal Exchange to suspend trading. The exchange said it did not expect to resume trading before Friday and was considering imposing limits on price fluctuations when it does.

A major Chinese producer of nickel and stainless steel, Tsingshan Group, faces potential losses of billions of dollars on futures contracts, The Asian Wall Street Journal and Bloomberg News reported. A woman who answered the phone at Tsingshan's headquarters hung up when told a reporter was calling.

On Tuesday, Biden announced the United States would block imports of Russian crude to punish Putin for attacking Ukraine. Biden said he acted in consultation with European allies but acknowledged they are more dependent on Russian oil and gas and might not be able to make similar moves immediately.

Biden said he hopes to limit the pain for Americans but acknowledged the ban will push up gasoline prices.

"Defending freedom is going to cost us as well," he said.

Before the invasion of Ukraine, financial markets already were uneasy about the global outlook as the Federal Reserve and other central banks prepare to try to cool inflation by withdrawing ultra-low interest rates and other stimulus.

In currency markets, the dollar advanced to 115.91 yen from Tuesday's 115.74 yen. The euro gained to \$1.0959 from \$1.0908.

## Changing snowfall makes it harder to fight fire with fire

By BRITTANY PETERSON and MATTHEW BROWN Associated Press

DECKERS, Colo. (AP) — Dripping flaming fuel as they go, a line of workers slowly descends a steep, snow-covered hillside above central Colorado's South Platte River, torching piles of woody debris that erupt into flames shooting two stories high.

It's winter in the Rocky Mountains, and fresh snow cover allowed the crew of 11 to safely confine the controlled burn.

Such operations are a central piece of the Biden administration's \$50 billion plan to reduce the density of western forests that have been exploding into firestorms as climate change bakes the region.

But the same warming trends that worsen wildfires will also challenge the administration's attempts to guard against them.

Increasingly erratic weather means snow is not always there when needed to safely burn off tall debris piles like those on Colorado's Pike-San Isabel National Forest. And that seriously complicates the job of exhausted firefighters, now forced into service year-round.

Their goal is to cut and burn enough vegetation that the next fires won't be as catastrophic as ones that leveled vast forestland and neighborhoods in Colorado, California, Oregon, Montana and elsewhere.

Western wildfires have become more volatile as climate change dries forests already thick with vegetation from years of intensive fire suppression. And the window for controlled burns is shrinking.

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"It's been a little bit harder just because of shorter winters," said David Needham, a U.S. Forest Service ranger who led the Colorado burn operation in late February when the thermometer hovered around zero degrees Fahrenheit (minus 18 Celsius). Surrounding hillsides showed barren scars from past wildfires, including a 2002 blaze that destroyed 133 homes and at the time was the largest in state history.

"On days like this, we capitalize on temperature being in the negatives," Needham said, "Even small snow storms coming in definitely helps us with that."

Across the Rockies, piles of slash and trees cleared to reduce fire hazards span some 100,000 acres (40,500 hectares), waiting to be burned once the right amount of snow is on the ground. Sometimes there's too much, making the piles inaccessible. Other times there's not enough snow and prescribed burns get canceled so they don't get out of hand like a previous one that led to fatalities.

An overnight snow in central Colorado meant the crew from the forest service and Mile High Youth Corps could burn debris from twice the area they planned. Yet officials said climate change is making it more difficult to find that sweet spot for safe burning.

Spring is arriving earlier and snow-covered ground is disappearing two weeks sooner, according to Rutgers University researcher and New Jersey state Climatologist David Robinson, who has examined more than 50 years of snow cover data collected through satellite imagery.

"One thing we know about climate change is it is increasing the variability and the extremes we are experiencing," said Robinson. "Out West, once the season shifts, you get very dry, very quickly and it stays dry for months. So you have a real tight window there."

2020 was the worst wildfire season on record in Colorado, where summers and falls also have been warmer and drier, said Assistant State Climatologist Becky Bolinger. It's "a completely different ball game in terms of wildfires," she said.

For parts of the Rockies, this winter brought too much snow, forcing officials to delay burns. Meanwhile, parts of Wyoming haven't received enough snow to moisten the ground and allow fuel piles to be torched. Even when there is snow, that doesn't mean it will last until the debris stops smoldering, said Brian Keating with the Forest Service's Rocky Mountain region.

When pile burns turn into wildfires, Keating said it's usually because snow around when the burn started disappears. The next wind storm can kick up embers and ignite landscape that days earlier seemed fireproof.

Putting off pile burning carries consequences, too. Until the piles are gone, forest managers won't begin another kind of controlled fire called broadcast burning, which consumes vegetation within stands previously thinned with chainsaws and other equipment.

"If we don't burn the piles, ... that can get kicked down the road another year or two," said Keating. "And every year, we keep building this backlog of piles because we can't get to them all."

Another problem is smoke: Burns can be delayed if the smoke will exacerbate poor air quality.

Despite such hurdles, burns are crucial to the Biden administration's 10-year plan to reduce wildfire hazards across almost 80,000 square miles (200,000 square kilometers) of public, private and tribal lands. The recently passed infrastructure bill includes \$500 million for controlled burns over five years.

Prescribed burns and logging were used to reduce wildfire hazards last year on about 4,050 square miles (10,500 square kilometers) of forest — the most in a decade. By ramping that up, officials hope to get ahead of the problem and use less logging in future years, said Frankie Romero, who oversees the forest service's prescribed burn program.

"Once we get into a maintenance cycle and we can continue to treat that same area while it's in its preferred condition with a lot less fuel, then it becomes a lot easier," Romero said. "We're going to experience wildfires in the future ... and they're going to cause problems. The difficult part is trying to remember what those problems would have looked like had we not intervened earlier."

Environmental advocates warn that the scale of work being proposed could allow excessive logging that will harm forests and do little to prevent catastrophic fires.

But Oregon State University forestry professor John Bailey said the choice is between unchecked wildfires raging across the landscape and aggressive steps to at least partially counteract the forces of climate change.



"Not to embrace this challenge is choosing a future with a lot of wildfire in it and almost no control over where they start and where they spread and how much smoke is in the air and for how long," Bailey said.

## **Live updates: Zelenskyy: Thousands being evacuated from Kyiv**

By The Associated Press undefined

The latest developments on the Russia-Ukraine war:

KYIV, UKRAINE — Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy says efforts are under way to evacuate some 18,000 people from the capital Kyiv and embattled towns near it.

He said Wednesday the efforts are part of broader evacuation attempts by multiple humanitarian corridors within Ukraine, and warned Russian forces against violating cease-fire promises.

He appealed again for foreign air support, saying "send us planes." Western powers have sent military equipment and beefed up forces on Ukraine's eastern flank, but have been wary of providing air support and getting drawn into a direct war with Russia.

He also issued an appeal, unusually in Russian, to urge Russian soldiers to leave.

"Our resistance for almost two weeks has shown you that we will not surrender, because this is our home. It is our families and children. We will fight until we can win back our land," he said. "You can still save yourselves if you just go home."

LONDON — Britain has impounded a private jet it suspects of being linked to a Russian oligarch, and tightened aviation sanctions against Russia in response to the invasion of Ukraine.

Transport Secretary Grant Shapps said Wednesday the Luxembourg-registered plane had been seized at Farnborough Airport in southern England while U.K. authorities tried to unravel its ownership.

U.K. officials believe the Bombardier Global 6500 jet is connected to billionaire oil tycoon Eugene Shvidler. It arrived in the U.K. from New Jersey last week and had been due to fly to Dubai on Tuesday.

Britain has banned Russian-owned or operated planes from its airspace, but Shapps said the government was still working to close some "loopholes."

The government announced late Tuesday it was toughening sanctions to include "the power to detain any aircraft owned by persons connected with Russia." Britain also banned the export of aviation- or space-related items and technology to Russia.

MARIUPOL, UKRAINE — The besieged Azov Sea port city of Mariupol has seen some of the most desperate scenes of the war, with civilians struggling without water, heat, basic sanitation or phones for several days.

With water supplies cut, people have been collecting water from streams or melting snow.

The representatives of Ukraine's Red Cross are trying to deliver first aid to those who need it the most, but resources are scarce.

"There is no heating, electricity, water, natural gas ... In other words there is nothing. no household commodities. The water is collected from the roofs after the rain," says Aleksey Berntsev, head of Red Cross of Mariupol.

People sheltered in underground basements, anxiously waiting for news of evacuation efforts as they struggled to survive in a city where bodies have been left uncollected on the streets.

Berentsev said that apart from delivering aid, giving local residents information is one of the most important task they are undertaking.

"Sometimes information is more important for the people than food," he says.

Power cuts mean that many residents have lost internet access and now rely on their car radios for information, picking up news from stations broadcast from areas controlled by Russian or Russian-backed separatist forces.

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WELLINGTON, New Zealand — New Zealand lawmakers have unanimously passed a bill to impose economic sanctions on Russia.

Unlike many countries that had already imposed sanctions, New Zealand's laws didn't previously allow it to apply meaningful measures unless they were part of a broader United Nations effort. Because Russia has U.N. Security Council veto power, that had left New Zealand hamstrung.

The new law, which was rushed through in a single day, targets those in Russia associated with the invasion, including oligarchs. It will allow New Zealand to freeze assets and stop superyachts or planes from arriving. Lawmakers said it would stop New Zealand becoming a safe haven for Russian oligarchs looking to avoid sanctions elsewhere.

LONDON — British defense officials say Russia's assault on Kyiv has failed to make progress but several Ukrainian cities continue to suffer heavy shelling.

In an update posted on social media Wednesday, the Ministry of Defence said "fighting north-west of Kyiv remains ongoing with Russian forces failing to make any significant breakthroughs."

It said the cities of Kharkiv, Chernihiv, Sumy and Mariupol remain encircled by Russian forces and are being heavily shelled.

The ministry said Ukraine's air defenses were holding up against Russian aircraft, "probably preventing them achieving any degree of control of the air.

BEIJING — China says it is sending humanitarian aid including food and daily necessities worth 5 million yuan (\$791,000) to Ukraine while continuing to oppose sanctions against Russia over its invasion.

Foreign Ministry spokesperson Zhao Lijian told reporters an initial batch was sent to the Ukrainian Red Cross on Wednesday with more to follow "as soon as possible."

China has largely backed Russia in the conflict and Zhao reiterated Beijing's opposition to biting economic sanctions against Moscow.

Zhao told reporters at a daily briefing that "wielding the stick of sanctions at every turn will never bring peace and security but cause serious difficulties to the economies and livelihoods of the countries concerned."

He said China and Russia will "continue to carry out normal trade cooperation, including oil and gas trade, in the spirit of mutual respect, equality and mutual benefit."

China has sought to blame the U.S. for instigating the conflict, citing what it calls Washington's failure to adequately consider Russia's "legitimate" security concerns in the face of NATO expansion.

LVIV, Ukraine — Ukrainian authorities have announced a 9 a.m.-9 p.m. cease-fire along several evacuation routes for civilians in besieged or occupied cities, though it is unclear whether Russian forces will respect it.

Deputy Prime Minister Iryna Vereshchuk said Russian authorities on Wednesday confirmed the cease-fire along the evacuation corridors to Ukrainian counterparts and the Red Cross.

She said the routes lead out of Sumy in the northeast, Mariupol on the Azov Sea coast, Enerhodar in the south, Volnovakha in the southeast, Izyum in the east, and several towns in the Kyiv region.

All the corridors lead to sites elsewhere in Ukraine that are currently held by the Ukrainian government.

The route out of Sumy, on the Russian border, is the only one that has been used successfully so far, allowing for the evacuation of 5,000 people on Tuesday southwest to the city of Poltava.

Ukrainian officials released videos Wednesday showing trucks and buses with red cross symbols heading to besieged cities.

BERLIN — The head of the International Committee of the Red Cross says he hopes that corridors to evacuate civilians from under-fire cities in Ukraine will begin to work better after a sputtering start.

ICRC President Peter Maurer told Germany's Deutschlandfunk radio on Wednesday that his organization has been working for days to bring the warring parties together and encourage them to hold detailed military-to-military talks on enabling civilians to flee.

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Maurer said it's important that agreements succeed "because the military units stand close to each other and the smallest uncertainty, as we have seen in recent days, leads instantly to exchanges of fire, and that makes the escape routes impossible."

He added: "We hope that it will work better today; in any case, we are talking to the parties and, above all, the parties are talking to each other — that is the most important thing at the moment."

But, pressed on how confident he is, he added: "I really can't speculate. But we hope that today a large number can at least get to safety at least from some cities. I wouldn't venture to speculate how the day will develop in eastern Ukraine in particular."

Russia's Defense Ministry says its operation thwarted a large-scale plot to attack separatist-held regions of eastern Ukraine.

Defense Ministry spokesman Maj. Gen. Igor Konashenkov on Wednesday cited from what he claimed was an intercepted Ukrainian National Guard document laying out plans for a weekslong operation targeting the Donbas region.

Konashenkov said in a televised statement: "The special military operation of the Russian armed forces, carried out since Feb. 24, preempted and thwarted a large-scale offensive by strike groups of Ukrainian troops on the Luhansk and Donetsk People's Republics, which are not controlled by Kyiv, in March of this year."

He did not address Russia's shelling, airstrikes and attacks on Ukrainian civilians or cities, Russian military casualties or any other aspect of its bogged-down campaign.

Russia calls its invasion of Ukraine a "special military operation," and official statements about the war have focused almost exclusively on fighting and evacuations in the separatist-held regions, where Russian-backed forces have been fighting Ukraine's military since 2014.

LVIV, Ukraine — The general staff of Ukraine's armed forces says the country is building up its defense of key cities in the north, south and east as Russia's advance has stalled.

In a statement early Wednesday, it said that forces around Kyiv are resisting the Russian offensive with unspecified strikes and "holding the line."

The Ukrainian general staff said that in the northern city of Chernihiv, Russian forces are placing military equipment among residential buildings and on farms.

And in the south, it said Russians dressed in civilian clothes are advancing on the city of Mykolaiv.

Meanwhile, the administration of the northeastern border city of Sumy says further civilian evacuations are planned Wednesday.

In a Telegram post, regional administration chief Dmytro Zhyvytskyy says a safe corridor will be open from 9 a.m. to 9 p.m. and 22 buses that traveled the day before from Sumy southwest to the city of Poltava would return Wednesday afternoon to pick up more people seeking to flee. Priority will go to pregnant women, women with children, the elderly and the disabled.

Sumy is on the Russian border and has seen deadly shelling in recent days. The Sumy-Poltava route is the only one successfully used so far for humanitarian evacuations, and some 5,000 people, including 1,700 foreign students, were brought out Tuesday. Other evacuation efforts stalled or were thwarted by Russian shelling.

LVIV, Ukraine — Ukraine's energy minister said Russian forces that now control a Ukrainian nuclear plant are forcing the exhausted staff to record an address that they plan to use for propaganda purposes.

Russian troops have been in control of the Zaporizhzhia plant, the largest in Europe, since seizing it an attack on Friday that set a building on fire and raised fears of a nuclear disaster. It was later determined that no radiation was released.

Energy Minister Herman Halushchenko said on Facebook that about 500 Russian soldiers and 50 pieces of heavy equipment are inside the station. He said the Ukrainian staff are "physical and emotionally ex-



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hausted.”

Russia describes the war as a “special military operation” and says it is conducting targeted attacks. Halushchenko’s reference to propaganda appears to refer to Russian efforts to show it is not endangering Ukrainian civilians or infrastructure.

LOS ANGELES — Lawmakers in the second most populous city in the U.S. on Tuesday approved a resolution condemning the actions of Russian President Vladimir Putin in waging war against Ukraine.

The Los Angeles City Council voted 14-0 to pass the resolution, which also urges international divestment of holdings in Russia.

The Board of Supervisors in neighboring Orange County unanimously passed a similar resolution Tuesday. It encourages the county to sever ties with any Russian-backed bank or financial institution. The county currently doesn’t have any direct investments in Russia.

In Los Angeles, members of the City Council expressed support for Ukraine, denounced “horrific acts against humanity” and expressed concern that history is repeating itself.

“What’s happening in Ukraine right now is close to home for me,” Councilmember Paul Koretz said.

“My mother’s family fled Kyiv a hundred years ago to avoid the Russian pogroms, and I’ve been sick to my stomach seeing the photos of innocent men, women and especially children who have been murdered in this invasion,” he said.

Koretz also said it was important to support LA’s Russian communities and businesses.

“They are not responsible for the actions of an out-of-control madman,” he said.

LOS ANGELES — A former Miss Ukraine winner on Tuesday described her journey with her young son to escape Kyiv and her homeland as Russian troops invaded the country last month, and called on countries to do more to arm her countrymen and women.

Veronika Didusenko, who was crowned Miss Ukraine in 2018, said she and her 7-year-old son woke on the first day of the invasion to the sounds of air raid sirens and explosions, and they joined thousands of others on the road to evacuate.

“On my ... journey to the border of Ukraine, there was no place where sirens would not sound, where rockets and bombs would not explode,” she said.

Didusenko told her story at a news conference in the Los Angeles office of women’s rights attorney Gloria Allred.

Didusenko and her son eventually made it to Moldova and traveled through other European countries before reaching Geneva, Switzerland. Didusenko said she made the “heartbreaking” decision to leave her son there to travel to the United States to hold the press conference with Allred.

“Right now, millions of Ukrainian children and their mothers are trembling at every sound in the subway stations and bomb shelters. Even more heartbreaking that women are giving birth in such conditions in these shelters,” Didusenko said.

She said Ukrainians are committed to defending their country, but need more help from other nations.

WASHINGTON — Additional air defense capabilities are the number one priority for Ukraine’s military right now, the country’s U.S. defense attache, Maj. Gen. Borys Kremenetskyi, said Tuesday after returning from a meeting at the Pentagon.

“It can be ground based air defense systems. It can be fighter jets, whatever possible,” he said in an interview with The Associated Press.

He said there are countries around the world that have Soviet-produced air defense systems that the Ukrainians already know how to operate. “The U.S. government can also motivate those countries to provide us this equipment,” he said.

They also need additional anti-tank, anti-armor weapons and coastal defense capabilities to defend against Russian ships at the south.

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He said Ukraine is grateful for the support it has gotten from the U.S. and its allies, which has allowed Ukraine to slow the Russian advance. "As combat is ongoing, we need more right now," Kremenetskyi said. "So we try to work with our partners to have it as soon as possible."

**UNITED NATIONS** — Natalia Mudrenko, the highest-ranking woman at Ukraine's U.N. Mission, is accusing Russia of effectively holding civilians "hostage," and says "the critical situation" in Mariupol and other cities demands immediate action by world leaders and humanitarian and medical organizations.

She told a U.N. Security Council meeting Tuesday afternoon on women in conflict that civilians, mostly women and children, "are not allowed to leave and the humanitarian aid is not let in."

"If they try to leave, Russians open fire and kill them," Mudrenko said, her voice shaking with emotion. "They are running out of food and water, and they die."

The Russian military has denied firing on convoys and charged that the Ukrainian side was blocking the evacuation effort.

Mudrenko said a 6-year-old girl died Monday in the besieged city of Mariupol on the Azov Sea, "alone in the last moments of her life as her mother was killed by Russian shelling."

On Tuesday in the Mykolaiv region, she said "Russian occupiers fired at a van with a group of female teachers of the local orphanage (and) three of them were killed." She said there are also "cases of child sexual violence committed by occupiers."

Mudrenko said the war has highlighted the role of Ukrainian women in defending their country, saying there were 57,000 women in the army at the start of 2021, comprising 22.8% of the force.

**LVIV, Ukraine** -- Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy thanked the leaders of the U.S. and Britain for banning Russian oil imports.

"This is a powerful signal to the whole world," he said in his daily address to the nation at the close of another day of war. "Either Russia will respect international law and not wage wars, or it will have no money."

Zelenskyy said when he went to address the British Parliament, "the scariest figure was the 50 Ukrainian children killed in 13 days of war. But then in an hour it became 52 children. I will never forgive this. And I know that you will never forgive the occupiers."

Zelenskyy called for negotiations with Russia on ending the war. "The war must be stopped. We need to sit down at the negotiating table, but for honest, substantive talks."

**WASHINGTON** — The Pentagon said Tuesday that Poland's offer to give its MiG-29 fighter jets to the U.S. so they can be passed to Ukraine raises serious concerns for the NATO alliance and the plan is not "a tenable one."

Pentagon Press Secretary John Kirby said in a statement that the prospect of jets departing from a U.S./NATO base in Germany to fly into airspace contested with Russia in the Ukraine war is concerning. He said it's not clear to the U.S. that there is a substantive rationale for it.

The U.S., he said, will continue to talk to Poland about the matter.

## **Biden signing order on cryptocurrency as its use explodes**

By FATIMA HUSSEIN Associated Press

**WASHINGTON (AP)** — President Joe Biden is signing an executive order on government oversight of cryptocurrency that urges the Federal Reserve to explore whether the central bank should jump in and create its own digital currency.

The Biden administration views the explosive popularity of cryptocurrency as a call for acting with urgency to look at the risks and benefits of digital assets, said a senior administration official who previewed the order on the condition of anonymity.

As part of the order being signed Wednesday, the Treasury Department and other federal agencies are to study the impact of cryptocurrency on financial stability and national security.

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The action comes as lawmakers and administration officials are increasingly voicing concern that Russia may be using cryptocurrency to avoid the impact of sanctions imposed on its banks, oligarchs and oil industry due to the invasion of Ukraine.

Last week, Democratic Sens. Elizabeth Warren, Mark Warner, and Jack Reed asked the Treasury Department to provide information on how it intends to inhibit cryptocurrency use for sanctions evasion.

The Biden administration has argued that Russia won't be able to make up for the loss of U.S. and European business by turning to cryptocurrency. Officials said the Democratic president's order had been in the works for months before Russia's Vladimir Putin invaded Ukraine last month.

The executive order has been widely anticipated by the finance industry, crypto traders, speculators and lawmakers who have compared the cryptocurrency market to the Wild West.

Despite the risks, the government said, surveys show that roughly 16% of adult Americans — or 40 million people — have invested in cryptocurrencies. And 43% of men age 18-29 have put their money into cryptocurrency.

Coinbase Global Inc., the largest cryptocurrency exchange in the United States, said the company had not seen a recent surge in sanctions evasion activity.

Treasury Secretary Janet Yellen said last week that "many participants in the cryptocurrency networks are subjected to anti-money laundering sanctions" and that the industry is not "completely one where things can be evaded."

As for the Federal Reserve getting involved with digital assets, the central bank issued a paper in January that said a digital currency "would best serve the needs" of the country through a model in which banks or payment firms create accounts or digital wallets.

Some participants in digital currency welcome the idea of more government involvement with crypto.

Adam Zarazinski, CEO of Inca Digital, a crypto data company that does work for several federal agencies, said the order presents the opportunity to provide "new approaches to finance."

"The U.S. has an interest in growing financial innovation," Zarazinski said. He added that China and Russia were looking at crypto and building their own currency. More than 100 countries have begun or are piloting their own digital sovereign currency, according to the White House.

Katherine Dowling, general counsel for Bitwise Asset Management, a cryptocurrency asset management firm, said an executive order that provides more legal clarity on government oversight would be "a long term positive for crypto."

But Hilary Allen, a financial regulation professor at American University, cautioned against moving too fast to embrace cryptocurrencies.

"I think crypto is a place where we should be putting the brakes on this innovation until it's better understood," she said. "As crypto becomes more integrated into our financial system it creates vulnerabilities not just to those who are investing in crypto but for everybody who participates in our economy."

On Tuesday, the Treasury Department said its financial literacy arm would work to develop consumer-friendly materials to help people "make informed choices about digital assets."

"History has shown that, without adequate safeguards, forms of private money have the potential to pose risks to consumers and the financial system," said Nellie Liang, undersecretary for domestic finance.

## 1 million children leave behind lives, friends in Ukraine

By JUSTIN SPIKE Associated Press

ZAHONY, Hungary (AP) — After bombs started falling in her hometown of Kharkiv, Annamaria Maslovska left her friends, her toys, and her life in Ukraine and set off on a days-long journey with her mother toward safety in the West.

After finally crossing the Hungarian border by train along with hundreds of other Ukrainian refugees, the 10-year-old Maslovska said she had begun to worry about her friends in Kharkiv after the messages she sent to them on Viber went unanswered.

"I really miss them because I can't contact them, they just read my messages and that's all. I really



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worry, because I don't know where they are," she said in clear English from inside the train station at the border town of Zahony.

Annamaria, who was raised alone by her mother, is one of more than 1 million children who have fled Ukraine in the less than two weeks since Russia first invaded the country, something UNICEF spokesperson James Elder called "a dark historical first."

That means that children represent around half of the more than 2 million people that have fled the war, an exodus that the U.N. refugee agency has called the fastest-growing refugee crisis in Europe since World War II.

Most of those fleeing the war have entered countries on Ukraine's western border, like Hungary, Poland, Slovakia, Romania and Moldova. The majority have gone into Poland, where 1.33 million refugees have crossed according to the Polish Border Guard agency.

Moldova Prime Minister Natalia Gavrilița told CNN on Sunday that one in every eight children in her country is a refugee.

In addition to children, most other refugees are women — the mothers and grandmothers of the children that are bringing them to safety — since Ukrainian men from age 18 to 60 aren't permitted to leave the country.

That policy is aimed at keeping men available to fight against Russian forces that are making deeper incursions into Ukrainian territory.

Annamaria's hometown of Kharkiv, Ukraine's second-largest city with 1.5 million inhabitants, has undergone heavy bombardment by Russian forces. Residential areas in the city near the Russian border were shelled for several days before a missile strike hit a government building in the city's central Freedom Square last week, killing at least six.

Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy called the attack "frank, undisguised terror."

Even though she's only 10, the precocious Annamaria, now a refugee, already knows she wants to be an actress in the United States, and is proud of speaking English at a high level.

"I want to be an actress in USA and English is a very popular language," she said. "A big percent of people in the world know it and it's very easy to speak it in other countries."

She and her mother, Viktoria, planned to travel on to Hungary's capital, Budapest, but didn't know where they would go after that. Annamaria said she hoped to visit Disneyland in Paris.

Once the war ends, she said, she wants to go back to Kharkiv and reconnect with her friends who have been scattered by Russia's violent invasion.

"If war stops, I really want to go home because there are my friends, there are beautiful parks, supermarkets, centers, and playgrounds behind my house," she said. "Kharkiv, it's like a piece of your heart."

## White House: Venezuela has freed 2 detained Americans

By ERIC TUCKER, REGINA GARCIA CANO and JOSHUA GOODMAN Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — The Venezuelan government has freed two jailed Americans, including an oil executive imprisoned alongside colleagues for more than four years, as it seeks to improve relations with the Biden administration amid Russia's war with Ukraine, the White House announced Tuesday night.

Gustavo Cardenas was released following a secret weekend visit to Venezuela by senior Biden administration officials, the first White House trip to the country in more than two decades. Also freed was Jorge Fernandez, who was arrested last year on what the White House described as "spurious charges."

"These men are fathers who lost precious time with their children and everyone they love, and their families have suffered every day of their absence," President Joe Biden said in a statement.

The release came hours after Venezuelan President Nicolás Maduro signaled an interest in improving relations at a time when Russia's invasion of Ukraine has sparked concerns in the United States over rising gas prices. In a televised address, he appeared to indicate he was willing to accede to U.S. demands that he resume negotiations with his opponents as a first building block for any relief from U.S. sanctions that have been punishing the OPEC nation for years.

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U.S. officials have not detailed any other specific outcomes of the talks, but said the release reflected months of relationship-building, particularly involving Roger Carstens, the administration's special presidential envoy for hostage affairs.

Carstens made a trip to Venezuela in December that did not immediately result in the release of detainees but that senior administration officials credited with establishing trust and laying the groundwork for Tuesday's outcome. He returned to Venezuela last weekend with other administration officials including Juan Gonzalez, the National Security Council director for the Western Hemisphere, and Ambassador James Story, who heads the U.S. government's Venezuelan Affairs Unit out of neighboring Colombia.

The Biden administration described it as the first Venezuela visit by a White House official since Hugo Chavez led the country in the late 1990s, and a rare opportunity to discuss policy issues with the Maduro government. One official described it as "a constructive, diplomatic but very candid dialogue" and that did not entail any quid-pro-quo but allowed the Biden administration to share its "view of the world" with Maduro.

Senior administration officials, speaking to The Associated Press on condition of anonymity under ground rules set by the government, declined to say how Cardenas and Fernandez were selected for release among nearly 10 American detainees held in Venezuela. But they said Carstens pushed hard for the release of all of them, and that the possibility of additional releases remains.

Cardenas and five other executives of Houston-based Citgo, a subsidiary of Venezuela's state-owned oil giant, had been in detention in Venezuela since 2017 when they were led away by masked security agents while at a meeting in Caracas. They had been lured to Venezuela in order to attend a meeting at the headquarters of Citgo's parent, state-run oil giant PDVSA.

They were sentenced on charges stemming from a never executed plan to refinance some \$4 billion in Citgo bonds by offering a 50% stake in the company as collateral. Prosecutors accused the men of maneuvering to benefit from the proposed deal.

The U.S. government pressed for their release, calling them wrongful detainees held without a fair trial.

Besides the other members of the Citgo 6, several other Americans remain held in Venezuela. Two former Green Berets, Luke Denman and Airan Berry, were arrested for their involvement in a confusing plot to overthrow Maduro, and former U.S. Marine Matthew Heath was detained on weapons charges.

Fernandez was detained in February 2021 near the border with Colombia after he was found in possession of a drone, whose use is restricted in Venezuela. He was accused of terrorism.

Gonzalo Himiob, a lawyer and vice president director of Foro Penal, said in a statement that the end of an arbitrary detention should be celebrated but warned of the consequences that can come from an agreement like the one that led to Cardenas' release.

"The release of any political prisoner, when it arises from an agreement between political actors, and not from respect for the law, confirms that from the beginning the reasons for the detention were neither legal nor valid, but political and, consequently, arbitrary and contrary to human rights," Himiob said.

The weekend discussions came a little more than three years after the U.S. broke off relations with Maduro and recognized opposition leader Juan Guaidó as Venezuela's legitimate leader.

The talks came together after months of backchannel efforts by intermediaries — American lobbyists, Norwegian diplomats and international oil executives — who have been pushing for Biden to revisit the so far unsuccessful "maximum pressure" campaign to unseat Maduro that he inherited from the Trump administration.

But the impetus for the outreach to Maduro, who has been sanctioned and is indicted in New York on drug trafficking charges, took on added urgency following Russia's invasion of Ukraine and ensuing U.S. sanctions. The Ukraine crisis promises to reshuffle global alliances and add to rising gas prices driving inflation already at a four-decade high.

Powerful Democrats and Republicans alike on Capitol Hill last week began voicing support for a U.S. ban on Russian oil and natural gas imports as the next step to punish Russian President Vladimir Putin for the invasion.

Venezuela is Putin's top ally in Latin America and a top oil exporter. Its reentry into U.S. energy markets could mitigate the fallout at the pump from a possible oil embargo on Russia. But the discussions in Caracas were quickly condemned by top Democrat and Republican senators.

U.S. Sen. Bob Menendez, the Democratic chairman of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, said Biden's efforts to unite the world against Putin "should not be undercut by propping up" Maduro, whose government is under investigation by the International Criminal Court for possible crimes against humanity committed against protesters in 2017.

## Harris heads to Poland amid turbulence over jets for Ukraine

By AAMER MADHANI and LISA MASCARO Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — Vice President Kamala Harris' trip to Warsaw to thank Poland for taking in hundreds of thousands of Ukrainians fleeing Russia's invasion took an unexpected turn before she even left Washington. She'll be parachuting into the middle of unexpected diplomatic turbulence over fighter jets.

The Polish government on Tuesday came out with a plan to transfer its Russian-made fighter planes to a U.S. military base in Germany, with the expectation that the planes would then be handed over to Ukrainian pilots trying to fend off Russian forces. In turn, the U.S. would supply Poland with U.S.-made jets with "corresponding capabilities."

But the Poles didn't run that idea past the Biden administration before going public with it, and the Pentagon quickly dismissed the idea as not tenable.

It was a rare moment of disharmony in what has been a largely united effort by NATO allies to assist Ukraine without getting embroiled in a wider war with Russia.

And it meant Harris was flying into fractious terrain Wednesday as she opens a two-day visit to Poland and Romania and tries to patch things up.

"This fighter jet situation is a messy deal, and Harris will have to go there and smooth things out," said Daniel Fried, who served as U.S. ambassador to Poland for President Bill Clinton and was a senior adviser in the George W. Bush and Barack Obama administrations. "There's plenty of discussion on the way ahead that needs to be had with the Poles that is better to have in an in-person conversation."

Harris is expected to continue talks with the Poles about getting fighter jets to the Ukrainians during her visit to Warsaw, according to a senior administration official who previewed the trip on the condition of anonymity. The matter remains a priority to the Biden administration, the official added.

Harris is slated to meet on Thursday with Polish President Andrzej Sebastian Duda and Prime Minister Mateusz Morawiecki as well as with Ukrainians who have fled to Poland. She'll also meet with Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau while in Warsaw. Trudeau has been in Europe this week meeting with Ukraine allies.

Harris will travel on Friday to Bucharest, where she's to meet Romanian President Klaus Iohannis.

The vice president also is expected to use the meetings in Poland and Romania to underscore the U.S. commitment to the NATO alliance and the need for continued humanitarian and military assistance for Ukraine. She'll also highlight the need for allies to continue their close coordination moving forward.

Biden has applauded Poland and other eastern European countries for stepping up in the midst of what's become an enormous humanitarian crisis that is only growing. Some 2 million people have fled Ukraine, and more than half of the refugees have arrived in Poland.

Biden on Tuesday said he was committed to helping Ukraine's neighbors bear some of the financial pain of assisting refugees. He previously deployed 4,700 additional U.S. troops to Poland to bolster the defense of the eastern flank NATO ally.

"I've made it clear that the United States will share in the responsibility of caring for the refugees so the costs do not fall entirely on the European countries bordering Ukraine," Biden said. He had been looking to Congress to pass a \$14 billion aid package to assist Ukraine and its eastern European allies.

Hours after Biden spoke, Poland blindsided the White House with its proposal.

Victoria Nuland, undersecretary of state for political affairs, told the Senate Foreign Relations Committee that she saw the Polish government's announcement as she was driving to Capitol Hill to testify.



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Sen. Chris Murphy, D-Conn. called it "curious" for Poland to announce its plan "without alerting us first." Secretary of State Antony Blinken did say on Sunday that the U.S. was working with Poland on plans to supply Ukraine with fighter jets and to "backfill" Poland's needs. The Polish government, however, made clear that it would not send its fighter jets directly to Ukraine or allow its airports to be used.

And Poland's idea of transferring its MiGs to the U.S. did not come up during the talks with Blinken, according to a U.S. official familiar with the talks.

The official, who spoke on the condition of anonymity to discuss the delicate matter, said White House officials did not think the proposal would easily solve logistical challenges of providing aircraft to Ukraine and questioned the logic of transferring the planes to a major NATO base in Germany only to move them back to eastern Europe.

Ukraine President Volodymyr Zelenskyy has been pleading for NATO to impose a no-fly zone over Ukraine or provide Ukraine with fighter jets. NATO has nixed the no-fly zone idea, saying such a move would lead to the biggest conflict in Europe since World War II and spread further.

Rep. Michael McCaul of Texas, the top Republican on the House Foreign Affairs Committee, said late Tuesday he hoped the administration could work out a better agreement with Poland. "I hope they can go back to Poland, renegotiate this and give them assurances that we will deliver" fighter jets, he said.

McCaul also said that more lethal drones could be another option to help provide air power to the Ukrainians

Despite the disconnect over Poland's proposal, the White House remained intent on dispatching Harris to Poland and Romania, as it looks to spotlight efforts to build a unified front with European neighbors and western allies.

Harris traveled to the Munich Security Conference last month to rally European allies in the days ahead of the invasion. She also met with Zelenskyy and other European officials.

"The vice president's trip to Poland and to Europe is part of our effort to show our strong support for our NATO allies and partners, the security assistance they've been providing, their role in accepting and welcoming refugees from Ukraine," White House press secretary Jen Psaki said.

## WHO Africa's 1st woman leader helps continent fight COVID

By CARLEY PETESCH Associated Press

BRAZZAVILLE, Republic of Congo (AP) — People stand when Dr. Matshidiso Moeti enters a room at the World Health Organization's Africa headquarters in the Republic of Congo and they listen intently to what she says.

Small in stature and big in presence, Moeti is the first woman to lead WHO's regional Africa office, the capstone of her trailblazing career in which she has overcome discrimination in apartheid South Africa to become one of the world's top health administrators.

As WHO Africa chief, Moeti initiates emergency responses to health crises in 47 of the continent's 54 countries and recommends policies to strengthen their health care systems.

Since her appointment in 2015, Moeti has grappled with the world's deadliest Ebola outbreak, in West Africa. She has also had to handle lingering criticism of WHO's spending and hiring in Africa as it also deals with allegations of sexual assault by contractors during Congo's Ebola crisis.

From 2020, the start of her second term, Moeti has faced her toughest professional and personal challenge: helping Africa respond to the coronavirus pandemic as the continent trails the rest of the world in testing and vaccination efforts. She has become one of the world's most compelling voices urging better consideration of Africa's people — especially women, who've in many ways been hit hardest by COVID. Her identity as an African woman has been both a strength and an obstacle on a continent where much of society is still dominated by patriarchal systems.

"I'm certainly doing my best to be there not only as a technician and a manager and a leader, but also very much as a woman from the region, from the continent," Moeti, 67, told The Associated Press during a recent visit to WHO Africa headquarters in Republic of Congo. "I feel very privileged.

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"At the same time ... I'm looking forward to the day when it will no longer be notable that there's a woman leading an organization — when it will have become part of the norm."

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

Moeti has made strides within WHO Africa to follow through on her word — starting a leadership program that has helped promote more women by ensuring that female applicants for jobs are taken as seriously as men.

Improved gender parity is evident at WHO Africa, where nearly equal numbers of men and women walk around the sprawling campus, about a 20-minute drive outside Brazzaville along the Congo River. In her time in office, Moeti said, she is proud to have shifted the ratio of men to women — now, four female directors and four male directors flank her in the grand conference room where meetings and Zoom calls are held. Prior, it was three women in the presence of six men.

One of the women at the table is Dr. Mary Stephens who says that seeing Moeti as regional director means a lot to her and others in Africa, where women historically and traditionally have had to take a back seat: "It gives us hope and an indication that it can happen for any woman on the continent."

Emergency work like hers, Stephens said, "adds another layer of challenge to it for a woman, because you're deployed to difficult situations and it is perceived to be a job that not all women can do. Well, we have been doing this work. I've been doing it for almost 10 years now, and we are progressing."

In Africa, women have suffered disproportionately during the pandemic — with lower vaccine rates, economic turmoil, rising pregnancies, other healthcare issues, increases in domestic and gender-based violence — and Moeti has made addressing that inequality a cornerstone of her work.

"Very often I'm thinking about those people who are most frequently disadvantaged and missed by the health services ... the kind of adolescent girl, that person who is transitioning from being a child taken care of by the child health services to being a woman of reproductive age with all the vulnerabilities that that implies in Africa," Moeti said.

She thinks of women she knows and sees. The woman who braids her hair, who lost work because of the lockdown and is scared of the vaccine. An elderly woman who must carry her load of food up and down steep hills. Women selling produce at marketplaces forced to close their stalls.

The way out of the pandemic is to reach these women with awareness campaigns and economic aid, she said.

To this end, Moeti tries to get out into the field monthly. She's frequently joined by government officials and journalists, and the convoy can attract a crowd — as with a recent trip to the dense Ouenze neighborhood of Brazzaville. Women and men jostled to get a glimpse of their health minister, the mayor and Moeti, at a small yard outside a health center.

In a colorful tailored top and WHO vest, Moeti listened with the others to 25-year-old biochemistry student Arnie Mayeyenda explain COVID-19, prevention methods and vaccination efforts to residents. Moeti leaned over to listen to a translator as the student spoke — nodding in encouragement.

"Many people aren't aware of the presence of the virus, so we need to let them know about it and how to avoid getting it," Mayeyenda said, explaining how Africa still lags behind other parts of the world.

Later, Mayeyenda said Moeti and her work inspire her as Africa tries to catch up, and she recommended that the leader also visit universities to speak and show young women that a future in science is possible for them, too.

The pandemic has also worsened existing gender inequities in key spheres, according to WHO Africa. Women constitute 70% of the health and social workers in Africa and are on the frontlines of COVID-19 response, yet 85% of national task forces are led by men, according to the U.N.

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After cheering and celebration — part of the usual fanfare of official visits — Moeti and the officials headed to a hospital, where nurses lined up to welcome them. In a tight corner, she and the health minister spoke with a woman being tested for COVID, reassuring her.

Africa has shown lower rates of COVID-19 cases compared with the rest of the world, but that's likely due to lower testing levels. Countries have struggled to treat the sick, and vaccination rates are low, with just over 13% of all of Africa's 1.3 billion people fully vaccinated at the beginning of March. That's far behind the global rate of 56.6%, according to Our World in Data

Moeti has nearly 40 years of experience in public health, but the coronavirus pandemic has confronted her with new challenges.

"The difficulties have really been about learning about this new virus, adapting quickly and helping countries to do the same," she said. She noted Africa faces unique challenges — at the start of the pandemic only a handful of the continent's countries could test for COVID-19, now virtually every nation can do that. Africa has been dependent upon imported vaccines which resulted in lengthy delays as rich nations bought the inoculations first.

The U.N.-backed COVAX initiative, meant to ensure equitable access to vaccines, did not make its first deliveries to African countries until a year into the pandemic, and even then had uneven distribution.

But now steady supplies of vaccines are arriving across the continent and Africa is creating labs that can manufacture vaccines.

With hindsight, Moeti says she wishes she'd focused more on Africa's low-income countries that needed help getting vaccines. She is pleased that the continent's countries can now get specific vaccines and reliable delivery dates, she said.

A major controversy during Moeti's term erupted in Congo where a commission found that WHO-contracted staff members were among aid workers who perpetrated sexual abuse during the Ebola crisis from 2018 to 2020. Moeti said policies have been implemented to be sure this does not happen again, including more stringent management of the hiring and supervision of contract workers.

Moeti remains optimistic about Africa's path out of the pandemic — and WHO's role in that progress.

With a demanding schedule, she lives on the WHO campus and her office is just a few meters from home. It's sacred ground, with assistants making sure she's not disturbed. Her sprawling desk is neatly organized, with the United Nations and WHO banners behind it, the backdrop on her many Zoom conferences. Her collection of African sculptures and paintings enlivens the office.

Warm with colleagues and journalists but private, she offers few details about her family, saying simply that they have been her refuge during the pandemic. Sunday afternoons are reserved for her two daughters with whom she enjoys lengthy Zoom calls. Responding to their pleading, she now wakes up and doesn't look at her phone until she has eaten breakfast.

Only recently has Moeti found time for activities outside work: listening to jazz, exercising on her stationary bike, tending a vegetable garden in her yard.

The women in her family helped her to achieve so much, she says. Moeti's mother was a doctor, and her grandmother a teacher who was widowed with seven girls to raise in a South African society that looked more favorably on educating sons. Moeti speaks of her as a hero — "a very determined, soldiering-on type of woman."

Moeti also acknowledges that she was privileged to be raised in a family that valued education above all else. When she was young in apartheid South Africa where segregated, sub-standard Bantu education was enforced for Blacks, she had to commute to Swaziland for schooling and faced scrutiny at the borders of the small country encircled by South Africa. The commute was too much, so her parents moved the family to Botswana where they could get better, non-racist education.

The importance of education has been a constant in her life. When she pursued a master's degree in London, she was separated from her daughters for a year, and her marriage to their father eventually ended. She is now remarried to an epidemiologist who has worked on many outbreaks and commutes in and out of the country, she said.

Despite the challenges she has faced, she wouldn't change her life, she says. Her family and education continue to motivate her to improve Africa's health care. Thinking of young African girls suffering during COVID-19, Moeti says she wants to help improve their lives, inspire them and make them into leaders.

She wants them to know: "I'm a child who was in the South African township and running around the streets. I hope that will encourage them."

## Top lawmakers reach deal on Ukraine aid, \$1.5T spending

By ALAN FRAM Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — Congressional leaders reached a bipartisan deal early Wednesday providing \$13.6 billion to help Ukraine and European allies plus billions more to battle the pandemic as part of an overdue \$1.5 trillion measure financing federal agencies for the rest of this year.

Though a tiny fraction of the massive bill, the money countering a Russian blitzkrieg that's devastated parts of Ukraine and prompted Europe's worst refugee crisis since World War II ensured the measure would pass with robust bipartisan support. President Joe Biden requested \$10 billion for military, humanitarian and economic aid last week, and Democratic and Republican backing was so staunch that the figure grew to \$12 billion Monday and \$13.6 billion just a day later.

"We're going to support them against tyranny, oppression, violent acts of subjugation," Biden said at the White House.

Party leaders planned to whip the 2,741-page measure through the House on Wednesday and the Senate by week's end, though that chamber's exact timing was unclear. Lawmakers were spurred by the urgency of helping Ukraine before Russia's military might makes it too late.

They also faced a Friday deadline to approve the government-wide spending measure or face a weekend election-year federal shutdown. As a backstop against delays, the House planned to pass a bill Wednesday keeping agencies afloat through March 15.

Over \$4 billion of the Ukraine aid was to help the country and Eastern European nations cope with the 2 million refugees who've already fled the fighting. Another \$6.7 billion was for the deployment of U.S. troops and equipment to the region and to transfer American military items to Ukraine and U.S. allies, and there was economic aid and money to enforce economic sanctions against Russia as well.

"War in Europe has focused the energies of Congress to getting something done and getting it done fast," said Senate Majority Leader Chuck Schumer, D-N.Y.

Senate Minority Leader Mitch McConnell, R-Ky., said the measure would provide loan guarantees to Poland to help it replace aircraft it is sending Ukraine. "It's been like pulling teeth" to get Democrats to agree to some of the defense spending, he said. But he added, "It's an important step. It needs to be passed. It needs to be passed quickly."

The bipartisan rallying behind the Ukraine aid was just one manifestation of Congress' eagerness to help the beleaguered country, though not all of it has been harmonious.

Republicans accused Biden of moving too slowly to help Ukraine and NATO allies and to impose sanctions against Russia and its president, Vladimir Putin. Democrats countered that time was needed to bring along European allies that rely heavily on Russian energy sources. And a bipartisan push to ban Russian oil imports had become nearly unstoppable before Biden announced Tuesday that he would do that on his own.

The huge overall bill was stocked with victories for both parties.

For Democrats, it provides \$730 billion for domestic programs, 6.7% more than last year, the biggest boost in four years. Republicans won \$782 billion for defense, 5.6% over last year's levels.

In contrast, Biden's 2022 budget last spring proposed a 16% increase for domestic programs and less than 2% more for defense — numbers that were doomed from the start thanks to Democrats' slender congressional majorities.

The bill was also fueled by large numbers of hometown projects for both parties' lawmakers, which Congress had banned since 2011 but were revived this year. The spending — once called earmarks, now



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dubbed community projects — includes money for courthouses in Connecticut and Tennessee and repairs to a post office in West Virginia. And it names a federal building in Tuscaloosa, Alabama, after Sen. Richard Shelby, the state's senior GOP senator, a chief author of the bill who's retiring after six terms.

Democrats won \$15.6 billion for a fresh round of spending for vaccines, testing and treatments for COVID-19, including \$5 billion for fighting the pandemic around the world. That was below Biden's \$22.5 billion request.

Republicans said they'd forced Democrats to pay for the entire amount by pulling back money from COVID-19 relief bills enacted previously. Much of the money was to go to help states and businesses cope with the toll of the pandemic.

There's added money for child care, job training, economic development in poorer communities and more generous Pell grants for low-income undergraduates. Public health and biomedical research would get increases, including \$194 million for Biden's "Cancer Moonshot" effort to cure the disease.

Citizenship and Immigration Services would get funds to reduce huge backlogs of people trying to enter the U.S. There would be fresh efforts to bolster renewable energy and curb pollution, with some of that aimed specifically at communities of color.

There is added funding to build affordable housing. And the measure distributes billions of dollars initially provided by the bipartisan infrastructure bill enacted last year for road, rail and airport projects.

The bill "delivers transformative federal investments to help lower the cost of living for working families, create American jobs, and provide a lifeline for the vulnerable," said House Appropriations Committee Chair Rosa DeLauro, D-Conn.

The bill renews programs protecting women against domestic violence and requires many infrastructure operators to report significant cyber attacks and ransomware demands to federal authorities. The Defense Department would have to report on extremist ideologies within the ranks.

The measure retains strict decades-old curbs against using federal money for nearly all abortions. It has \$300 million in military assistance for Ukraine and \$300 million to help nearby countries like the Baltic nations and Poland. Service members would get 2.7% pay raises, and Navy shipbuilding would get a boost in a counter to China.

It "rejects liberal policies and effectively addresses Republican priorities," said Shelby, top Republican on the Senate Appropriations Committee.

Since the government's fiscal year began last Oct. 1, agencies have been running on spending levels approved during Donald Trump's final weeks in the White House. Congress has approved three short-term bills since then keeping agency doors open.

## With Ukraine war, Europe's geopolitical map is moving again

By RAF CASERT Associated Press

BRUSSELS (AP) — Even though Russia has lost influence and friends since the collapse of the Soviet empire in 1989, the nuclear superpower still holds sway over several of its neighbors in Europe and keeps others in an uneasy neutrality.

The Russian invasion of neighboring Ukraine and the humanitarian tragedy it provoked over the past two weeks have raised a Western outcry of heartfelt support and spawned calls for a fundamental rethink of how the geopolitical map of Europe should be redrawn in the future.

To anchor that in the reality of 2022 is far more difficult than may appear at first sight. Nudging Ukraine, Europe's second-biggest country, fully into the Western fold against the will of Moscow poses massive problems.

And European Union leaders will confront them together head on during a two-day summit at Versailles just outside Paris starting Thursday — forced into the assessment by Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy when he amazingly signed an official request to become an EU member last week.

"The European Union is going to be much stronger with us. So that's for sure," Zelenskyy said in an emotional live transmission to the European Parliament on Tuesday.

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Piling on the pressure, he said, "So do prove that you are with us. Do prove that you will not let us go. Do prove that you indeed are Europeans."

Compounding the EU's problem, Moldova and Georgia, two smaller nations who also fear the expansive reach of Russia, followed tack within days and also asked for membership.

The violence of the Russian invasion also spooked historically neutral countries like Sweden and Finland, which now see a surge in support for joining NATO and in Helsinki's case unshackling itself from a Russian influence so heavy that it became a political moniker — "Finlandization."

Within days, conventional knowledge of who belongs where on the geopolitical map of the continent has been badly shaken.

Despite the thrill of opportunity, progress could be slow.

Many nations fear an enlargement of the bloc and a reshaping of traditional spheres of influence would put the continent on the brink of a full-fledged war. And there is no better example than Ukraine's aspirations to join the 27-nation EU that could tilt the balance of blocs in Europe.

"There is no doubt that these brave people who defend our values with their lives belong in the European family," said European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen, choosing her words carefully and avoiding an outright promise of membership.

Even if support for Ukraine is overwhelming among the EU member states, granting membership is anything but automatic. The leaders of eight eastern member states officially said Ukraine "deserves receiving an immediate EU accession perspective."

But others range from cautious to skeptical, with Dutch Prime Minister Mark Rutte saying that "every country in Europe is free to ask for it," and immediately listed the immense bureaucratic hurdles ahead.

"It is extremely sensitive. The member states are not all on the same page," a high-level EU official said on condition of anonymity because he wasn't authorized to speak publicly about political discussions happening behind the scenes.

There could quickly be political fallout in Versailles.

"The discussion about Ukraine's accession to the EU could also easily become overheated, providing euroskeptics with a perfect opportunity to spread fear among voters," said Pawel Zerka of the European Council on Foreign Relations think tank.

Several nations indicate it isn't good to give Ukraine immediate hope with any rash decision taken in the heat of battle. Calls for a fast-track move to grant membership clash with institutional and political objections and some common sense.

In the past, membership applications have taken years, sometimes decades. Turkey applied to join in 1987 and is nowhere close to membership. Four others are candidate countries now, but the EU has shown an extreme reluctance to expand further eastward. To allow Ukraine to leapfrog over the others would stir passions in the Western Balkans where several are awaiting a nod.

For the European Commission to just assess whether a nation could be a candidate to start membership talks with often takes a year to 18 months.

And to be admitted, potential newcomers would also need to absorb all EU regulations, from rule of law principles to trade and fertilizer standards — about 80,000 pages of rules. Over the past years, the EU has often pointed out that Ukraine's anti-corruption measures still lacked teeth.

And to top it off, any candidate needs the unanimous approval of current members, often allowing one nation to decide on the fate of the whole process.

In comparison, a move toward NATO membership, especially for nations like Sweden and Finland, would be easier, since the two already have very close cooperation with the military alliance.

A formal step though would surely raise the wrath of Moscow and be seen as a geopolitical power play.

"It's obvious that if Finland and Sweden join NATO, which is first of all a military organization, it will entail serious military-political consequences, which would require retaliatory steps by the Russian Federation," Russian Foreign Ministry spokeswoman Maria Zakharova said.

But, somehow, that Nordic neutrality might already be slipping.

"Sweden and Finland have effectively ended their neutrality by sending military aid to Ukraine (lethal aid in the case of Sweden)," said Ed Arnold of Royal United Services Institute.

## **Biden's inflation plan upends thinking on jobs sent overseas**

By JOSH BOAK Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — President Joe Biden has a solution for high inflation that seems counterintuitive: Bring factory jobs back to the U.S.

This challenges a decades-long argument that employers moved jobs abroad to lower their costs by relying on cheaper workers. The trend contributed to the loss of 6.8 million U.S. manufacturing jobs, but it also translated into lower prices for consumers and put downward pressure on inflation in ways that kept broader economic growth going.

It was a trade-off that many corporate and political leaders were privately comfortable making.

Now, with inflation at a 40-year high, the president has begun to argue that globalization is stoking higher prices. That's because proponents of outsourcing failed to consider the costs of increasingly frequent global supply chain disruptions. Recent disruptions have included the COVID-19 pandemic, shortages of basic goods like semiconductors, destructive storms and wildfires and, now, the Russian invasion of Ukraine, which has sent oil prices soaring.

Biden says the federal government can pursue two courses on inflation. It can either pull back on support and cause wages and growth to cool, or it can get rid of the pressure points that can lead to inflation when emergencies and uncertainties occur.

"We have a choice," Biden said Friday when announcing plans by Siemens USA to add 300 jobs. "The way to fight inflation is to drive down wages and make Americans poorer or have a better plan to fight inflation: Lower costs and not your wages."

The president then unspooled his thinking that more manufacturing of semiconductors inside the U.S. would lead to more cars and other products being produced domestically. That would fill the supply chain and, in theory, bring prices down.

But this plan would take years to implement and the consumer price report being released Thursday is expected to show that annual inflation rose to nearly 8% last month, according to the financial data firm FactSet.

Biden's challenge is that he's got long-term plans on inflation to address pain that consumers are feeling each day, said Douglas Holtz-Eakin, president of the center-right American Action Forum, who described Biden's plan as "optics."

"Semiconductor manufacturing facilities take years to build," he said. "Inflation's here now, and it's it's an issue now."

Biden's assertion sets up an ideological battle with Republicans, who blame the president's \$1.9 trillion coronavirus relief package for being excessive and flushing more cash into the U.S. economy than was needed. GOP lawmakers have said inflation — up from recent averages of about 2% — is entirely the president's fault, while the administration is trying to say the bigger problem rests with the structure of the global economy.

House Republican leader Kevin McCarthy and others said last week that inflation — especially for gasoline — was the key source of the nation's angst ahead of this year's midterm elections.

"You don't need a speech to know what the state of the union is. You feel it every time you go to the grocery store and the gas pump," McCarthy said on Twitter.

Critics see this new Biden effort as largely an attempt at political damage control, rather than a data-driven approach to reducing inflation.

"It's primarily about optics," said Scott Lincicome, director of economics and trade at the libertarian Cato Institute. "The Biden administration clearly knows that inflation is a political albatross. And they are looking for anything and everything to show American voters that they have a plan to fix the problem."

Lincicome argues that the vast majority of inflation is caused by Federal Reserve efforts to boost growth, Biden's relief package and the general challenges of restarting an economy after the pandemic. Restor-

ing factory jobs that went elsewhere would not address those challenges and any arguments for that are based on the belief that supply chain disruptions have become a permanent feature of the global economy, he says.

"Global supply chains lower costs and increase efficiency," Lincicome said. "The idea that reshoring will somehow lower costs assumes a permanent pandemic situation and that's just not reality."

The Biden administration, for its part, is making that exact argument — supply chain disruptions are becoming more common and weighing on prices in ways that companies previously failed to consider.

The White House contends that the existing setup of the U.S. economy makes it vulnerable to disruptions that drive up prices. When companies first sent jobs overseas, they failed to fully account for the possible setbacks and challenges that can occur overtime with distant factories.

People were not accounting for increased "risks and disruption, and they weren't thinking about five-, 10-year horizons," said Sameera Fazili, deputy director of the White House National Economic Council. "They were looking at minimizing costs over a one-year horizon, two-year horizon."

The administration is basing its argument, in part, on analyses done by the McKinsey Global Institute. A 2020 report by the institute found that companies will likely experience supply chain disruptions lasting a month or longer every 3.7 years, which increases costs and cuts into profits.

The risks examined in the report range from a "supervolcano" to a "common" cyberattack. There are political risks as well, as 29% of all global trade in 2018 came from countries ranked in the bottom half of political stability by the World Bank, an increase from 16% in 2000.

## Ukraine war at 2-week mark: Russians slowed but not stopped

By ROBERT BURNS and LOLITA C. BALDOR Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — Two weeks into its war in Ukraine, Russia has achieved less and struggled more than anticipated at the outset of the biggest land conflict in Europe since World War II. But the invading force of more than 150,000 troops retains large and possibly decisive advantages in firepower as they bear down on key cities.

Moscow's main objective — toppling the Kyiv government and replacing it with Kremlin-friendly leadership — remains elusive, and its overall offensive has been slowed by an array of failings, including a lack of coordination between air and ground forces and an inability to fully dominate Ukraine's skies.

The Pentagon on Tuesday estimated that Russia retains about 95% of the combat power it has deployed in Ukraine, accounting for weapons and vehicles destroyed or made inoperable as well as troops killed and wounded. Those losses, while modest at first glance, are significant for two weeks of fighting.

Two weeks of war have created a humanitarian crisis in Ukraine that has accelerated in recent days. The United Nations estimates that 2 million Ukrainians have fled their country, and the number is expected to grow.

Russia likely has had between 2,000 and 4,000 troops killed thus far, said Lt. Gen. Scott Berrier, director of the Defense Intelligence Agency, adding that his agency has "low confidence" in its estimate.

With no sign of Russian President Vladimir Putin backing away, the war appears likely to drag on. CIA Director William Burns told a congressional panel Tuesday that Putin is frustrated and likely to "double down" in Ukraine. He said that could mean "an ugly next few weeks" as the fighting intensifies.

Whether and how the conflict might expand is a major concern in the West, not least because Putin has said he will not tolerate unlimited U.S. or NATO arms supplies to Ukraine. NATO in turn has warned against the Russian conflict spilling over Ukraine's border into a NATO country like Poland or Romania. Poland on Tuesday offered to transfer MiG-29 fighter jets to U.S. control at an air base in Germany, presumably leaving to Washington the question of whether and how to get the planes to Ukraine. The Pentagon quickly shot down the idea, calling it untenable in light of Ukraine's contested airspace.

Some worry that a frustrated Putin could escalate the conflict in dangerous ways. A few days into the war, he invoked the prospect of nuclear war by announcing he had put his nuclear forces on heightened alert, although U.S. officials detected no threatening changes in Russia's nuclear posture.

"As he weighs an escalation of the conflict, Putin probably still remains confident that Russia can militar-



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ily defeat Ukraine and wants to prevent Western support from tipping the balance and forcing a conflict with NATO," Avril Haines, the director of national intelligence, told Congress on Tuesday.

Although a detailed picture of the unfolding war is difficult to acquire, American and European officials and analysts say the Russians started slowly and have since been hobbled by a combination of inadequate planning, flawed tactics and possibly an erosion of spirit among troops not ready to fight.

On the opening day of the war, the Pentagon estimated that only about one-third of pre-staged Russian combat forces had entered Ukraine, with the remaining two-thirds coming in gradually until nearly all were in this week. The Russian troops have made incremental progress, but their pace has been remarkably slow.

"They are having morale problems," said John Kirby, the Pentagon's chief spokesman. "They are having supply problems. They are having fuel problems. They're having food problems. They are meeting a very stiff and determined Ukrainian resistance. And we still maintain that they are several days behind what they probably thought they were going to be in terms of their progress."

Kirby said the Pentagon believes that the Russians' slow pace of advance by ground troops has prompted them to make greater use of rockets, artillery and other long-range weapons, including in urban areas. That has resulted in more civilian casualties, he said.

"We think it's because, again, they have not been able to make up for the lost time that they continue to suffer from on the ground in terms of the advancement of ground forces," Kirby said.

After staging more than 150,000 troops on Ukraine's borders, the Russians launched their invasion Feb. 24, pressing south toward Kyiv from points in southern Belarus and Russia; toward Kharkiv, the largest city in eastern Ukraine, and north from the Crimean peninsula, which Russia has occupied since 2014.

Ukrainians mounted a fiercer resistance than Putin likely expected, even as Russian missile and rocket attacks on cities have caused civilian casualties, damaged and destroyed civilian infrastructure and triggered an accelerating exodus of refugees seeking safety in Poland and beyond.

Jens Stoltenberg, the NATO secretary-general, said Friday that Russia may have underestimated the degree to which Ukraine's armed forces had improved since 2014 as a result of U.S. and NATO training.

"And this is the reason why they are able to push back" as effectively as they have, Stoltenberg said.

Philip Breedlove, a retired Air Force general who was NATO's top commander in Europe from 2013 to 2016, said that although Russian forces are far behind schedule, he believes they are capable of eventually taking Kyiv.

"Unless there is a big operational-level change, they have enough of what I call slow, steady momentum that if they can stand the losses it will give them, they will eventually accomplish that objective," he said. That raises questions about a Russian occupation and the potential for an insurgency.

Breedlove said the Russian offensive in southern Ukraine has been less bogged down than in the north and is designed to establish a "land bridge" between the southeastern Donbas region to the Crimean peninsula and west to the Black Sea port city of Odesa, which would make Ukraine a landlocked country.

## Record gas costs pose fresh political challenge for Biden

By WILL WEISSERT and NATHAN ELLGREN Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — Rising gas prices pose a fresh election year challenge for President Joe Biden. He's balancing concerns about costs at the pump in the U.S. against calls from both parties to step up penalties on Russian President Vladimir Putin following his invasion of Ukraine.

In announcing a ban on U.S. imports of Russian oil on Tuesday, Biden was blunt in warning that while the move would hurt Putin, "there will be a cost as well here in the United States." He sought to avoid being blamed for that by dubbing it "Putin's price hike."

Later, while arriving on a visit to Texas, Biden was asked if he had a message for the American people about gas prices and responded, "They're going to go up."

"Can't do much right now," the president added in response to questions. "Russia is responsible."

That's a message the president may have to reinforce repeatedly in coming days as drivers in the U.S. adjust to the shock of rapidly increasing gasoline prices, which reached a record average of \$4.17 per gal-

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lon on Tuesday, according to AAA. That increase, combined with concerns about the rising cost of other goods, could add to the headwinds Democrats are facing heading into this year's midterm elections.

Senate Majority Leader Chuck Schumer sought to frame the moment as one that goes beyond politics. "For many in our caucus, and I think on the other side, it's a moral issue," he said. "You don't want to fuel the Russian war effort."

Still, top Republicans blamed Biden for the higher gas prices, and assailed the White House for promoting climate change-fighting environmental measures that they said had hurt U.S. energy production domestically and helped drive fuel prices up.

At the same time, many in the GOP have been pressing the president to cut off imports of Russian oil, a contributing factor to the market volatility. Last year, the U.S. imported nearly 700,000 barrels per day of crude oil and refined petroleum products from Putin's country.

Former President Donald Trump, who is nearly alone in his party in calling Putin "smart" following the invasion, issued a statement noting record-high gas prices and asked "DO YOU MISS ME YET?"

House Minority Leader Kevin McCarthy said Democratic "policies are why we are here in the first place."

Republican Rep. August Pfluger, who represents a portion of West Texas' oil patch, called banning Russian oil imports "great," but also a "lesser step."

"It is time to unleash American oil and gas," Pfluger said, contending that the White House's "assault on the oil and gas industry has created a weakness in the United States."

Caught in the middle is much of the American public, torn between wanting to support Ukraine and pocketbooks ready to be further squeezed. A Quinnipiac University poll released Monday — before Biden's Russian import announcement — found that as many as 7 in 10 Americans suggested they'd support a "ban on Russian oil," even if it meant higher gas prices.

But many drivers said the sticker shock was still a lot to digest.

"How long this can go on? Will we be willing to pay four, five dollars, six dollars" a gallon? wondered Vikas Grover, who was filling up in the Washington suburb of Herndon, Virginia, prior to the White House's Russian oil announcement.

"It just disrupts the whole budget," Grover said. "If it becomes unsustainable, you know, this all falls apart."

David Custer, a Virginia resident who was paying \$60 to fill up his SUV before Tuesday's announcement, said Biden should undo executive actions he issued to protect the environment upon taking office and instead promote U.S. "energy independence."

"Those that work to resolve the issue will get my vote," Custer said. "Those who continue the path that we've been on recently will not."

Still, Asiya Joseph, who was filling up her tank in Brooklyn, New York, said, "I don't think that it's fair to blame the Democrats for something that may be somewhat not under their control."

"This is a response to what's happening over in Ukraine," said Joseph, who added that COVID had also likely contributed to higher prices.

Samantha Gross, a fellow and director of the Energy Security and Climate Initiative at the Democratic-leaning Brookings Institution, said gas prices were already on the rise as global markets coped with increasing demand as the coronavirus pandemic began to recede — but are up even more amid questions about international supply because of the Russia-Ukraine war.

"You drive down (the road) and there's the price and a great big sign right next to you. So we're always really aware of what gasoline costs. And it's often a big political issue for whoever's in charge in the presidency and Congress," Gross said. "But, the truth of the matter is, is that oil prices are set on a global market based on global conditions. And there's very, very little that Congress or the president can actually do about them."

Even if Biden were to loosen environmental rules, it's unlikely oil and natural gas production around the U.S. could ramp up fast enough to ease currently spiking prices at the pump. In the meantime, the Biden administration has approached oil-rich Venezuela and its socialist President Nicolás Maduro — drawing still more criticism from Republicans.

"Never should we think that foreign oil is better than American independence when it comes to energy," said Rep. Yvette Herrell, a New Mexico Republican. She also criticized the Biden administration for scrapping work on the Keystone XL crude oil pipeline. Even if that project had been allowed to continue, however, it probably wouldn't have been far enough completed to immediately stabilize oil prices.

Gross said the Biden administration could further tap into the U.S. Strategic Petroleum Reserve, as it did to try and calm rising gas prices in November. The White House announced Tuesday that it had committed to releasing 90-plus million barrels from the reserve this fiscal year.

"In the short term that's the way to help keep prices down," Gross said. "But in the long term, if we continue to see the war effort from President Putin, it's a difficult situation."

## South Koreans vote for president in tight, bitter election

By HYUNG-JIN KIM and KIM TONG-HYUNG Associated Press

SEOUL, South Korea (AP) — South Koreans were voting for a new president Wednesday, with an outspoken liberal ruling party candidate and a conservative former prosecutor considered the favorites in a tight race that has aggravated domestic divisions.

Pre-election surveys showed liberal Lee Jae-myung, a former governor of South Korea's most populous Gyeonggi province, and his main conservative challenger, ex-prosecutor general Yoon Suk Yeol, with neck-and-neck support, way ahead of 10 other contenders. The winner will take office in May and serve a single five-year term as leader of the world's 10th-largest economy.

Lee and Yoon conducted one of the most bitter political campaigns in recent memory. Both recently agreed that if they won they would not conduct politically motivated investigations against the other, but many believe the losing candidate could still face criminal probes over some of the scandals they're been implicated in.

Critics say neither candidate has presented a clear strategy on how they would ease the threat from North Korea and its nuclear weapons. They also say voters are skeptical about how both would handle international relations amid the U.S.-China rivalry and how they would address widening economic inequality and runaway housing prices.

"Despite the significance of this year's election, the race has centered too much on negative campaigning," said Jang Seung-Jin, a professor at Seoul's Kookmin University, adding that neither leading candidate laid out a convincing blueprint on how they would lead South Korea.

The election comes as South Korea has been grappling with an omicron-driven COVID-19 surge. On Wednesday, South Korea's health authorities reported 342,446 new virus cases, another record high.

After the voting began at 6 a.m., masks-wearing voters waited in long lines at some polling stations before putting on vinyl gloves or using hand sanitizers to cast ballots. People infected with the coronavirus were to vote after regular voting ends Wednesday evening.

About 44 million South Koreans aged 18 or older are eligible to vote, out of the country's 52 million people. About 16 million cast ballots during early voting last week. Turnout was more than 60% seven hours into voting Wednesday, when including early voting ballots, the National Election Commission said.

Election officials said vote-counting may take longer than usual because of the extended voting time for COVID-19 patients and that the winner may not be clear until early Thursday.

Ahead of the vote, Jeong Eun-yeong, a 48-year-old Seoul resident, said she was agonizing over which candidate is "the lesser of two evils."

"Nobody around me seems happy about voting" for either Lee or Yoon, she said. "We need a leader who would be really devoted to improving the lives of working-class citizens."

While both Lee and Yoon share some similar economic and welfare policies, they've clashed over North Korea and other foreign policy issues.

Lee, who has often expressed nationalistic views, calls for exemptions to U.N. sanctions so that dormant inter-Korean economic projects can be revived, and hopes to mediate between Pyongyang and Washington over the North Korean nuclear crisis. Yoon, for his part, says he would sternly deal with North Korean

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provocations and seek to boost trilateral security cooperation with Washington and Tokyo.

On confrontation between Washington, Seoul's top military ally, and Beijing, its biggest trading partner, Lee says picking a side would pose a greater security threat to South Korea. Yoon wants to place a priority on an enhanced alliance with the United States.

After North Korea's latest reported ballistic missile launch Saturday, Yoon accused North Korean leader Kim Jong Un of trying to influence the results of the South Korean election in favor of Lee.

"I would (teach) him some manners and make him come to his senses completely," Yoon told a rally near Seoul.

Lee wrote on Facebook that he would push for a diplomatic solution to North Korean nuclear tensions but won't tolerate any act that would raise animosity.

South Korea's constitution limits a president to a single five-year term, so Lee's party colleague, President Moon Jae-in, cannot seek a reelection. Moon came to power in 2017 after conservative President Park Geun-hye was impeached and ousted from office over a huge corruption scandal.

With conservatives initially in shambles after Park's fall, Moon's approval rating at one point hit 83% as he pushed hard to achieve reconciliation with North Korea and delve into alleged corruption by past conservative leaders. He eventually faced strong backlash as talks on North Korea's nuclear program faltered and his anti-corruption drive raised questions of fairness.

Yoon had been Moon's prosecutor general but resigned and joined the opposition last year following infighting over probes of Moon's allies. Yoon said those investigations were objective and principled, but Moon's supporters said he was trying to thwart Moon's prosecution reforms and elevate his own political standing.

Yoon's critics have also attacked him over a lack of experience in party politics, foreign policy and other key state affairs. Yoon has responded he would let experienced officials handle state affairs that require expertise.

Lee, a former human rights lawyer who entered local politics in 2005, has established an image as a tough-speaking, anti-elitist who can get things done and fix establishment politics. But his opponents call him a dangerous populist relying on divisions and demonizing opponents.

Yoon has launched a political offensive on Lee over allegations that Lee is a key figure in a corrupt land development project launched in the city of Seongnam when he was mayor there. Lee has tried to link Yoon to that scandal. Both of their wives have offered public apologies over separate scandals.

Whoever wins will likely struggle to bridge conservative-liberal divisions, some experts say.

"Both candidates have failed to create their own, distinctive images because they became absorbed in party allegiances amid partisan animosity, so the race was defined by negative campaigning," said Shin Yul, a politics professor at Seoul's Myongji University. "Whoever wins will be tasked with an important but difficult task of healing the divisions."

## Aaron Rodgers says he will remain with Packers next season

GREEN BAY, Wis. (AP) — Aaron Rodgers is planning to come back to the Green Bay Packers for an 18th season, a move that keeps the reigning MVP off the trade market and answers the question that had dominated NFL offseason discussions.

Rodgers sent out a tweet Tuesday afternoon confirming his return.

"YES, I will be playing with the Packers next year," Rodgers said. "However, reports about me signing a contract are inaccurate, as are the supposed terms of the contract 'I signed.' I'm very excited to be back."

NFL Network and Pat McAfee, the host of "The Pat McAfee Show" on SiriusXM and YouTube, had both reported earlier in the day that Rodgers was staying with the Packers. Rodgers makes a weekly appearance on McAfee's show during the season.

NFL Network reported that the 38-year-old Rodgers had agreed to a four-year, \$200 million contract that includes \$153 million in guaranteed money. McAfee disputed the terms and said the contract wasn't signed yet, and Rodgers' tweet backed up McAfee's account.



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Rodgers' decision comes nearly a month after he won his second straight MVP award. The four-time MVP quarterback has spent his entire career in Green Bay.

He said he wanted to make an announcement on his future before the start of the free agency period that begins next week. The reports of his decision surfaced the same day the Packers placed the franchise tag on All-Pro receiver Davante Adams. Unless Adams signs a long-term deal before July 15, he will make just over \$20 million in 2022.

Rodgers wanted to avoid a repeat of 2021, when his status was uncertain until the start of training camp after he skipped the Packers' mandatory minicamp.

The questions about his future stemmed from Rodgers' disagreements with team management at the time. Rodgers said on multiple occasions over the last few months that his relationship with team officials had improved significantly.

Rodgers' plans had been the subject of much speculation ever since the Packers traded up four spots to take Utah State quarterback Jordan Love with the 26th overall pick in the 2020 draft. After referring to his future as a "beautiful mystery" late in the 2020 season, Rodgers skipped the Packers' organized team activities and mandatory minicamp in a standoff with team management.

Rodgers reported for training camp on time but acknowledged his future with the organization was uncertain. At the time, he said he wanted to have a voice in the team's decision-making process.

Rodgers recently has frequently offered compliments about the moves general manager Brian Gutekunst made to improve the team. Those moves included acquiring wide receiver Randall Cobb at Rodgers' request. Rodgers said he got the sense there was better communication this season and that "I feel like my opinion mattered."

"I think he put together a really nice team, a team that could have won a Super Bowl, and he deserves a lot of credit for some of the moves that he made," Rodgers said after a January playoff loss to San Francisco. "I'm disappointed we couldn't put it together for him and the organization tonight, and I'm disappointed it's ending."

Gutekunst agreed their relationship was in a good place.

"I feel really good about where we sit right now," Gutekunst said before the NFL scouting combine.

Rodgers had a tumultuous 2021 season in a number of respects, particularly for comments he made about his vaccination status. When asked before the season whether he had been vaccinated against COVID-19, Rodgers replied, "Yeah, I'm immunized." But after testing positive during the season, Rodgers acknowledged he was unvaccinated and said he instead had sought alternative treatments.

Rodgers also dealt with a fractured left pinky toe for much of the year, but continued playing at an All-Pro level. He threw 20 touchdown passes with no interceptions over his final seven regular-season games. He led the Packers to a 13-4 record and a third straight NFC North championship.

But his season ended with a disappointing playoff performance. The Packers scored a touchdown on the game's opening series but never reached the end zone again in the home loss to the 49ers.

Packers coach Matt LaFleur, Gutekunst and president/CEO Mark Murphy said after the season they all wanted Rodgers back in 2022.

"I think we've got as good a shot as anybody to win a Super Bowl next year (with Rodgers)," Gutekunst said. "He's the MVP of the league. That's our goal. I think we have an opportunity to do it right now."

LaFleur made a move seemingly aimed at keeping Rodgers when he brought back Tom Clements as quarterbacks coach. Rodgers had praised the 68-year-old Clements, who previously worked for the Packers from 2006-16 in roles that included quarterbacks coach (2006-11), offensive coordinator (2012-14) and associate head coach/offense (2015-16). Rodgers lauded Clements on multiple occasions over the last year.

Rodgers' return would answer one giant question for the Packers as they head into a critical offseason. They're well over the salary cap and have several key players with expiring contracts.

Gutekunst has said he believes the Packers could keep Rodgers and Adams while building a contending team around them. And they have done so.

"I think obviously everything around here kind of centers on the quarterback," Gutekunst said before

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the combine. "It's a big piece and a domino that kind of has to fall before we go down the other avenues. So, it's important as we go through this and the puzzle pieces we have to try to make fit. That's the first one to go."

## **AP sources: Seahawks agree to trade Russell Wilson to Denver**

By ARNIE STAPLETON AP Pro Football Writer

ENGLEWOOD, Colo. (AP) — The Denver Broncos have finally landed a worthy successor to Peyton Manning.

Six years and a day after Manning retired, Broncos general manager George Paton agreed to send a massive haul of players and draft picks to the Seattle Seahawks for nine-time Pro Bowl quarterback Russell Wilson, two people familiar with the negotiations confirmed to The Associated Press on Tuesday.

The people spoke on condition of anonymity because the blockbuster trade, which is pending Wilson passing a physical, can't become official until the start of the new league year on March 16.

The teams cannot comment on the deal until then, but the Broncos cleverly tweeted a clip of Tom Hanks' character in "Cast Away" drawing a face on the volleyball he named "Wilson."

About an hour later, the Seahawks tweeted another clip from that movie in which Hanks' scraggly, skinny character loses the volleyball at sea and hollers, "Wilson, where are you? Wilson! Wilson!"

Denver was seen as the front-runner for Aaron Rodgers before the two-time reigning MVP agreed Tuesday to stay in Green Bay, presumably as the highest-paid player in NFL history. Not long afterward, Paton landed a Super Bowl-winning quarterback anyway, and one who's five years younger than the 38-year-old Packers star.

The NFL Network reported the Seahawks agreed to send Wilson and a fourth-round pick to Denver in exchange for two first-round picks, two second-round picks, and a fifth-rounder, along with quarterback Drew Lock, defensive end Shelby Harris and tight end Noah Fant, the Broncos' first-round draft pick in 2019.

Since Manning retired a month after winning Super Bowl 50, the Broncos have churned through 10 starting quarterbacks, including a different starter in each of the last five season openers: Trevor Siemian, Case Keenum, Joe Flacco, Lock and Teddy Bridgewater, who beat out Lock last summer.

The Broncos haven't been back to the playoffs since Manning retired, but they appear to have a playoff-worthy roster. New coach Nathaniel Hackett, Rodgers' former offensive coordinator, is building an offense around dynamic wide receivers Jerry Jeudy, Courtland Sutton, Tim Patrick and K.J. Hamler, tight end Albert Okwuegbunam and running back Javonte Williams.

And now he has the quarterback to make it all work, one who can stack up with the likes of Patrick Mahomes, Justin Herbert and Derek Carr in the tough AFC West.

Jeudy tweeted a frowning emoji upon word of Rodgers staying put, then he tweeted a smiling emoji when word broke that Wilson was headed to Denver.

The Seahawks had made it clear they weren't interested in moving Wilson unless a transformational offer came along.

Seattle's offseason had mostly been focused on adjustments on defense with coaching and scheme changes, and the belief that with Wilson still at quarterback the Seahawks would remain contenders in the stacked NFC West.

Last week at the NFL scouting combine in Indianapolis, coach Pete Carroll said that general manager John Schneider was receiving calls about Wilson's availability but the Seahawks weren't shopping him.

The trade, though, was the culmination of more than a year's worth of buildup. Wilson first expressed his discontent with the franchise last offseason after Seattle won the division but lost in the first round of the playoffs.

The acrimony got to the point that his agent publicly expressed the teams Wilson would be willing to accept a trade to, but the quarterback and the Seahawks moved forward together for one more season.

This was always the offseason that seemed to make the most sense for a potential move with Wilson, however. He has two years remaining on his current contract and a salary cap hit of \$37 million for the

2022 season.

Wilson was a third-round pick in 2012 out of Wisconsin. He won the starting job as a rookie after Seattle had signed Matt Flynn in free agency. The decision to go with Wilson was one of the smartest ever made by Carroll.

Wilson started 149 regular-season games and 16 playoff games before suffering a fractured middle finger on his right hand and missing four games last season, when he went 6-8. Seattle finished 7-10, the only losing season in Wilson's tenure.

He struggled upon his return but finished strong, showing it was more of an injury-marred stretch than an indication he was in any sort of decline.

Wilson helped Seattle to its only Super Bowl title with a 43-8 thumping of Manning and the Broncos in Super Bowl 48, then lost to Tom Brady and the Patriots in the Super Bowl a year later. Overall, he's 9-7 in the playoffs.

Lock is 8-13 with 25 touchdown passes and 20 interceptions over three seasons in Denver.

Unless the Seahawks package their newly acquired picks and try to land, say, Deshaun Watson from the Texans should he clear up his legal issues, it appears a larger rebuild may be in play for Seattle.

The Seahawks have major free agent questions with left tackle Duane Brown, safety Quandre Diggs, cornerback D.J. Reed and running back Rashaad Penny. There also have been questions about 31-year-old linebacker Bobby Wagner's future in Seattle with the Seahawks facing a \$20 million cap hit under his current contract.

And now they need a starting quarterback.

## Ghislaine Maxwell juror regrets not disclosing sex abuse

By TOM HAYS and LARRY NEUMEISTER Associated Press

NEW YORK (AP) — A juror told a judge Tuesday that failing to disclose his child abuse history during jury selection at the trial of British socialite Ghislaine Maxwell was one of the biggest mistakes of his life — but an unintentional one.

"I didn't lie in order to get on this jury," the juror said.

A U.S. judge questioned the juror extensively as part of an effort to decide whether the revelation about his personal history as a sex abuse survivor will spoil the verdict in the sex trafficking trial.

Lawyers for Maxwell — who was present in the courtroom, clad in a dark blue jail smock — say the verdict should be thrown out. Maxwell's lawyers potentially could have objected to the man's presence on the jury, on the grounds that he might not be fair to a person accused of a similar crime.

Maxwell, 60, was convicted in late December of helping financier Jeffrey Epstein sexually abuse multiple teenage girls from 1994 to 2004.

Sitting in a courtroom witness box, the juror repeatedly expressed regret as U.S. District Judge Alison J. Nathan asked him dozens of questions about why he didn't reveal repeated incidents of sexual abuse by two people at age 9 and 10 on a questionnaire during the jury selection process.

The juror said he "skimmed way too fast" through the questionnaire.

"This is one of the biggest mistakes I've ever made in my life," the juror identified only as Juror No. 50 said as he looked directly at the judge.

"I flew through the questions," he said, adding that he was "super distracted" by nearby conversations and movements of prospective jurors who dropped off their completed questionnaires just a few feet from him. "I honestly never thought I'd be chosen for this jury."

The juror said he also incorrectly answered a question asking if he'd ever been a crime victim, in part because the sex abuse he endured "doesn't define me."

"I do not feel I am a victim of a crime," he said. "It's not something I think about. It happened so long ago and it's not part of who I am."

The judge gave lawyers in the case until March 15 to submit legal briefs on whether the verdict should be set aside. Maxwell's sentencing is scheduled for June.

The juror did several media interviews after the trial in which he revealed he'd been abused. He described persuading some fellow jurors during deliberations that a victim's imperfect memory of abuse doesn't mean it didn't happen.

All potential jurors in the case had been asked to fill out a screening form in early November that asked: "Have you or a friend or family member ever been the victim of sexual harassment, sexual abuse, or sexual assault? (This includes actual or attempted sexual assault or other unwanted sexual advance, including by a stranger, acquaintance, supervisor, teacher, or family member.)"

The juror checked "No." The juror said in the interviews he didn't remember being asked that question, which was No. 48 on the form.

The judge granted the juror immunity before he answered questions for about an hour. He said he would invoke his Fifth Amendment privilege without it.

Maxwell lawyers in January asked the judge to immediately order a new trial after the juror's public statements, but Nathan said she could not do so without questioning the juror.

Outside court, Maxwell's sister, Isabel, said the family was hoping a new trial would be ordered.

"A full and impartial jury is the very basis of the criminal justice system and it must be preserved," she said.

Maxwell was convicted of sex trafficking and other charges after a monthlong trial that featured testimony from four women who said she played a role in setting them up for abuse by Epstein.

Epstein, 66, killed himself in August 2019 as he awaited trial at a federal jail in New York on related sex trafficking charges.

Maxwell says she's innocent.

## Suffering goes on in encircled Mariupol as evacuation fails

By MSTYSLAV CHERNOV and YURAS KARMANAU Associated Press

MARIUPOL, Ukraine (AP) — Corpses lie in the streets of Mariupol. Hungry people break into stores in search of food and melt snow for water. Thousands huddle in basements, trembling at the sound of Russian shells pounding this strategic port city.

"Why shouldn't I cry?" Goma Janna demanded as she wept by the light of an oil lamp below ground, surrounded by women and children. "I want my home, I want my job. I'm so sad about people and about the city, the children."

A humanitarian crisis is unfolding in this encircled city of 430,000, and Tuesday brought no relief: An attempt to evacuate civilians and deliver badly needed food, water and medicine through a designated safe corridor failed, with Ukrainian officials saying Russian forces had fired on the convoy before it reached the city.

Nearly two weeks into the invasion, the Russians have advanced deep along Ukraine's coastline in what could establish a land bridge to Crimea, which Moscow seized from Ukraine in 2014. Mariupol, which sits on the Azov Sea, has been surrounded by Russian soldiers for days.

Mariupol, said Ukrainian Deputy Prime Minister Iryna Vereshchuk, is in a "catastrophic situation."

In other developments in the Russian invasion:

— Poland offered to give all of its MiG-29 fighter jets to the U.S., apparently agreeing to an arrangement that would allow them to be used by Ukraine's military. But Pentagon press secretary John Kirby later said the plan is not "tenable" and raises serious concerns for the NATO alliance. He said the U.S. would discuss it further with Poland.

— U.N. officials said that 2 million people have now fled Ukraine.

— Russia's economic isolation deepened as U.S. President Joe Biden announced a ban on Russian oil imports and Shell said it will no longer buy oil and natural gas from the country. Also, Adidas and McDonald's said they are suspending their operations in Russia.

For days, as Moscow's forces have laid siege to Ukrainian cities, attempts to create corridors to safely evacuate civilians have stumbled amid continuing fighting and objections to the proposed routes. Ukraine



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has rejected Moscow's offers of corridors that lead civilians to Russia or its ally Belarus.

The Russian military has denied firing on convoys and charged that the Ukrainian side is blocking evacuation efforts.

One evacuation did appear successful Tuesday, with Vereshchuk saying that 5,000 civilians, including 1,700 foreign students, had been brought out via a safe corridor from Sumy, an embattled northeastern city of a quarter-million people where overnight strikes killed 21, including two children.

Natalia Mudrenko, the highest-ranking woman at Ukraine's U.N. Mission, told the Security Council that the people of Mariupol have "been effectively taken hostage," by the siege. Her voice shook with emotion as she described how a 6-year-old died shortly after her mother was killed by Russian shelling. "She was alone in the last moments of her life," she said.

Authorities in Mariupol planned to start digging mass graves for all the dead, though the number is unclear. The shelling has shattered buildings, and the city has no water, heat, working sewage systems or phone service.

Theft has become widespread for food, clothes, even furniture, with locals referring to the practice as "getting a discount." Some residents are reduced to scooping water from streams.

With the electricity out, many people are relying on their car radios for information, picking up news from stations broadcast from areas controlled by Russian forces or Russian-backed separatists.

Ludmila Amelkina, who was walking along an alley strewn with rubble and walls pocked by gunfire, said the destruction had been devastating.

"We don't have electricity, we don't have anything to eat, we don't have medicine. We've got nothing," she said, looking skyward.

Across the country, thousands are thought to have been killed, both civilians and soldiers, in nearly two weeks of fighting. Russian forces have seen their advances stopped in certain areas — including around Kyiv, the capital, where a vast armored column has been stalled for days — by fiercer resistance than expected from the Ukrainians.

Late Tuesday, Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy released a video showing him standing near the presidential offices in Kyiv. Behind him were piles of sandbags, a snow-dusted fir tree and a few cars.

It was the second video in 24 hours showing him near the country's seat of power, apparently made to dispel any doubts about whether he had fled the city.

"Snow fell. It's that kind of springtime," he said in a soft voice. "You see, it's that kind of wartime, that kind of springtime. Harsh. But we will win."

## US strikes harder at Putin, banning all Russian oil imports

By ZEKE MILLER, MIKE BALSAMO and JOSH BOAK Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — Striking harder at Russia's economy, President Joe Biden on Tuesday ordered a ban on Russian oil imports in retaliation for Vladimir Putin's onslaught in Ukraine. The major trade action, responding to the pleas of Ukraine's embattled leader, thrust the U.S. out front as Western nations seek to halt Putin's invasion.

Americans will feel pain, too — at the gas pump — Biden acknowledged, declaring, "Defending freedom is going to cost."

The imports have been a glaring omission in the massive sanctions put in place on Russia over the invasion. Energy exports have kept a steady stream of cash flowing to Russia despite otherwise severe restrictions on its financial sector.

"We will not be part of subsidizing Putin's war," Biden said, calling the new action a "powerful blow" against Russia's ability to fund the ongoing offensive.

Biden said the U.S. was acting in close consultation with European allies, who are more dependent on Russian energy supplies and who he acknowledged may not be able to join in immediately. The announcement marked the latest Biden attempt at cutting off Russia from much of the global economy and ensuring that the Ukraine invasion is a strategic loss for Putin, even if he manages to seize territory.

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"Ukraine will never be a victory for Putin," Biden said.

Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy in a tweet praised Biden's action: "Thankful for US and @ POTUS personal leadership in striking in the heart of Putin's war machine and banning oil, gas and coal from US market. Encourage other countries and leaders to follow."

The European Union this week will commit to phasing out its reliance on Russia for energy needs as soon as possible, but filling the void without crippling EU economies will likely take some time. The U.K., which is no longer part of the EU, announced Tuesday that oil and oil products from Russia will be phased out by the end of the year.

Unlike the U.S., which is a major oil and gas producer, Europe relies on imports for 90% of its gas and 97% of its oil products. Russia supplies 40% of Europe's gas and a quarter of its oil. The U.S. does not import Russian natural gas.

The issue of oil sanctions has created a conflict for the president between political interests at home and efforts to impose costs on Russia. Though Russian oil makes up only a small part of U.S. imports, Biden has said he was reluctant to ban it, cutting into supplies here and pushing gasoline prices higher.

Inflation is at a 40-year peak, fueled in large part by gas prices, and that could hurt Biden heading into the November midterm elections.

"Putin's war is already hurting American families at the gas pump," Biden said, adding, "I'm going to do everything I can to minimize Putin's price hike here at home."

Gas prices have been rising for weeks due to the conflict and in anticipation of potential sanctions on the Russian energy sector. The average price for a gallon of gasoline in the U.S. hit a record \$4.17 Tuesday, rising by 10 cents in one day, and up 55 cents since last week, according to auto club AAA.

Biden said it was understandable that prices were rising, but cautioned the U.S. energy industry against "excessive price increases" and exploiting consumers.

Even before the U.S. ban many Western energy companies including ExxonMobil and BP moved to cut ties with the Russia and limit imports. Shell, which purchased a shipment of Russian oil this weekend, apologized for the move on Tuesday amid international criticism and pledged to halt further purchases of Russian energy supplies. Preliminary data from the U.S. Energy Department shows imports of Russian crude dropped to zero in the last week in February.

In 2021, the U.S. imported 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.

"It's an important step to show Russia that energy is on the table," said Max Bergmann, a former State Department official who is now a senior fellow at the Democratic-leaning Center for American Progress.

Bergmann said it wasn't surprising that the U.S. was able to take this step before European nations, which are more dependent on Russian energy.

"All of this is being done in coordination, even if the steps are not symmetrical," he said. "We are talking to them constantly."

The White House said the ban on new purchases was effective immediately but the administration was allowing a 45-day "wind down" for continued delivery under existing contracts.

The news of Biden's decision Tuesday was first reported by Bloomberg.

The White House announcement comes amid bipartisan pressure on Capitol Hill to ban Russian energy and impose other economic costs.

Last week, House Speaker Nancy Pelosi gave a big boost when she declared, "Ban it."

On Monday, Democrats on the powerful Ways & Means Committee posted, then removed, an announcement on a bipartisan bill to ban Russian oil imports and slap further trade sanctions on the country, according to an aide, because of pushback from the White House against acting before Biden had made his decision.

"President Biden is finally doing what members of Congress have been pushing for all along," Sen John Barrasso, R-Wyo., and a member of party leadership, said Tuesday. "His decision to ban Russian oil is a much-needed step to kill Putin's cash cow."

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Said Jason Furman, a Harvard professor and former economic adviser to President Barack Obama: "The United States economy can fully handle any of the challenges associated with higher oil prices. But it will bring some challenges. We're going to have higher prices at the pump, and there's no way around that."

Pelosi said the House would go forward with a vote Tuesday on legislation to ban the Russian oil imports, impose trade costs on Russia and expand sanctions authority against Russians for attacks on civilians in Ukraine.

But late Tuesday, the House pushed back a vote on the bill amid disagreements among lawmakers over details. The House was expected to vote on the bill Wednesday, according to an aide granted anonymity to discuss the situation.

Before the invasion, Russian oil and gas made up more than a third of government revenues. Global energy prices have surged after the invasion and have continued to rise despite coordinated releases of strategic reserves, making Russian exports even more lucrative.

As a consequence of Russia's invasion of Ukraine, the U.S. and international partners have sanctioned Russia's largest banks, its central bank and finance ministry, and moved to block certain financial institutions from the SWIFT messaging system for international payments.

But the rules issued by the Treasury Department allow Russian energy transactions to keep going through non-sanctioned banks that are not based in the U.S. in an effort to minimize any disruptions to the global energy markets.

German Chancellor Olaf Scholz has said he opposes a European ban on Russian energy imports and that there's no other way to meet the European Union's needs for motor fuel, heat and electricity, and industrial use. Vice Chancellor Robert Habeck said Tuesday that when he visited Washington last week, U.S. officials acknowledged Europe was in a different situation.

"They told me in the talks that they will neither demand nor ask that Germany do the same. But I would extrapolate from that for us, and for me, that we need as soon as possible to create the possibility to take similar measures."

While Russian oil makes up a small amount of overall U.S. energy imports, the U.S. could replace Russian crude with imports from other oil-rich nations, but that could prove politically problematic.

Key U.S. senators are warning the Biden administration from seeking any oil import deal from the Nicolas Maduro regime in Venezuela.

"The Biden administration's efforts to unify the entire world against a murderous tyrant in Moscow should not be undercut by propping up a dictator under investigation for crimes against humanity in Caracas," said Sen. Bob Menendez, D-N.J., the chairman of the Foreign Relations Committee, in a statement late Monday. "The democratic aspirations of the Venezuelan people, much like the resolve and courage of the people of Ukraine, are worth much more than a few thousand barrels of oil."

## Sen. Collins, key vote on Supreme Court, praises Jackson

By MARY CLARE JALONICK Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — Republican Sen. Susan Collins had words of praise for Supreme Court nominee Ketanji Brown Jackson after meeting with her for more than an hour and a half at the Capitol on Tuesday, raising Democrats' hopes that she could be a GOP vote in favor of her confirmation.

Collins, a moderate from Maine, said afterward that her discussion with the judge was productive and that her credentials are impressive. She said that Jackson, an appeals court judge who would be the first Black woman on the high court, "explained in great depth" the process she uses when making decisions.

"She takes a very thorough, careful approach in applying the law to the facts of the case, and that is what I want to see in a judge," Collins said. She said she would wait to make a final decision on whether to support Jackson after her confirmation hearings, which begin March 21.

The Maine senator is perhaps Democrats' best hope of landing a Republican vote for Jackson's nomination, as Supreme Court confirmations have become sharply partisan affairs in recent years. President Joe Biden and Judiciary Committee Chairman Dick Durbin, D-Ill., who is guiding the vetting process for

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Jackson, have both said they want to get back to the days when Supreme Court confirmations were overwhelmingly bipartisan. Retiring Justice Stephen Breyer, whom Jackson would replace, was confirmed with 87 votes in 1994.

Both Biden and Durbin have made Collins' vote, in particular, a priority. Durbin said he called her within hours of learning that Breyer would retire; Biden has called her personally three times, according to her office. She said after the meeting with Jackson that she has "confidence" in Durbin's ability to lead the hearings.

Collins has only voted against one Supreme Court nominee since was elected in 1996 — Justice Amy Coney Barrett, whom Trump nominated after Justice Ruth Bader Ginsburg's death in September 2020. Collins voted against Barrett because of the accelerated six-week timeline that saw her confirmed just days before the presidential election.

While Democrats are using the rapid timeline for Barrett as a model for Jackson, Collins says the circumstances are different. For one, the vacancy is not being filled immediately before a election. She has also noted that Jackson has been confirmed by the Senate several times before, for two federal judge positions and for the U.S. Sentencing Commission, where she served under former President Barack Obama.

Collins, Lisa Murkowski of Alaska and Lindsey Graham of South Carolina were the only three Republican senators to vote to confirm Jackson to the appeals court last year. Murkowski said in a statement last week that her previous vote did not mean she would be supportive this time, and Graham has signaled he won't vote for Jackson after he pushed Biden to pick a different candidate from his home state, federal Judge J. Michelle Childs.

Other Republicans are unlikely to vote for Jackson. Senate Republican Leader Mitch McConnell, who met with the nominee last week, afterward questioned her support from liberal advocacy groups.

"She's clearly a sharp lawyer with an impressive resume, but when it comes to the Supreme Court, a core qualification is judicial philosophy," McConnell said.

Jackson is meeting with senators one-on-one this week, a ritual for nominees, as the Judiciary committee prepares for hearings and as the White House makes the case for her confirmation. On Tuesday, Jackson also met with Democratic Sens. Mazie Hirono of Hawaii, Richard Blumenthal of Connecticut, Sheldon Whitehouse of Rhode Island and Cory Booker of New Jersey. She also met with Republican Sen. Rick Scott of Florida and Ted Cruz of Texas. All but Scott sit on the Judiciary panel.

Hirono said she talked to Jackson about comments by Mississippi Sen. Roger Wicker, a Republican, that he viewed President Joe Biden's pledge to nominate a Black woman to the court as "affirmative action." Hirono said she told Jackson that she found that insulting and that she believes that phrase is used as "code for minority nominees" and questions about competence.

Hirono noted that Jackson excelled at Harvard Law School and is highly qualified for the position. She asked that "those who use those terms stop using them."

Hirono said Jackson told her one of her strengths would be listening to the other justices on the court, which has been increasingly partisan in recent years.

"She is someone who wants to reach out to the other justices and be as persuasive as she can," Hirono said.

## Jury picked for Michigan Gov. Whitmer kidnap plot trial

By MICHAEL TARM, ED WHITE and SARA BURNETT Associated Press

GRAND RAPIDS, Mich. (AP) — A jury was selected Tuesday for the trial of four men charged with plotting to kidnap Michigan Gov. Gretchen Whitmer in 2020, extraordinary allegations of violence planned against an elected official that led the presiding judge to advise: "This isn't your average criminal case."

Opening statements were scheduled for Wednesday in the federal court in Grand Rapids. Prosecutors have said the men were angry about pandemic restrictions the Democratic governor imposed, and that they will present secret recordings and other evidence against the men, including of a trip to check Whitmer's vacation home and training with weapons and explosives.

Defense attorneys say the men deny any conspiracy to kidnap Whitmer, and have signaled an entrap-



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ment defense, criticizing the government's use of undercover FBI agents and confidential informants.

Eleven women and seven men were selected to serve as jurors, with 12 who will decide the case and six alternates, though the court did not make clear Tuesday which jurors are alternates. Before they left the courtroom, U.S. District Judge Robert Jonker told the jury to stay off social media and not discuss the case with family.

"Put them on pause," he said.

Earlier Tuesday, Jonker told prospective jurors they must put aside any personal feelings about politics, Whitmer and her administration's response to COVID-19, to fairly hear the case. Several said they weren't sure they could be impartial.

Some potential jurors were dismissed after the judge's questions revealed that they dislike Whitmer, with one man saying, "I would probably be pretty biased." A woman who said she is an enthusiastic supporter of the governor also was let go, as was a man who told the court, "I don't really trust the government right now." Another man was dismissed after saying he has followed news coverage of the case closely and "I think they're guilty."

Others were dismissed because of job or home conflicts with the trial, which could take more than a month.

In 2020, Whitmer was trading taunts with then-President Donald Trump over his administration's response to COVID-19. Her critics, meanwhile, were regularly protesting at the Michigan Capitol, clogging streets around the statehouse and legally carrying semi-automatic rifles into the building.

During that turbulent time, when stay-home orders were in place and the economy was restricted, Adam Fox, Brandon Caserta, Barry Croft Jr. and Daniel Harris were coming up with a plot to snatch Whitmer, prosecutors say.

They're accused of taking critical steps over several months, including secret messaging, gun drills in the woods and a night drive to northern Michigan to scout her second home and figure out how to blow up a bridge.

The FBI, which had infiltrated the group, said it thwarted the plan with the arrests of six men in October 2020. Two of them, Ty Garbin and Kaleb Franks, have pleaded guilty and will appear as crucial witnesses for the government, giving jurors an inside view of what was planned.

Garbin said Fox, the alleged ringleader, wanted the men to chip in for a \$4,000 explosive large enough to destroy a bridge near Whitmer's home and distract police during a kidnapping.

"The blood of tyrants needs to be shed," Garbin quoted Caserta as saying during a meeting.

Garbin and Franks insist no one in the group acted because of excessive influence by agents or undercover informants.

"It is not the end of the case for the defense, but it's a big obstacle to overcome," John Smietanka, a former federal prosecutor, said of the pair's cooperation. "It's going to come down to the credibility of witnesses plus the effect of any extrinsic evidence, like tapes."

On Tuesday, marshals escorted the defendants in and out of the court in handcuffs and leg restraints. During the morning proceedings the four men and their attorneys sat at separate conference tables along one wall of the courtroom. Harris and Croft were dressed in suits and ties, while Caserta and Fox wore dress shirts and pants. All four men stood and turned toward potential jurors as they filed in. Their handcuffs were removed and bunting hanging from the tables obscured potential jurors' view of the leg restraints.

The pool of prospective jurors was drawn from a 22-county slice of western and northern Michigan, extending from just below the Grand Rapids metro area to the tip of the Lower Peninsula. The region is largely rural and leans Republican, although Democrats recently have gained in Grand Rapids — the state's second-largest city — and surrounding Kent County, which backed Whitmer in 2018. She carried only two of the other counties.

Whitmer, who is seeking reelection this year, rarely talks publicly about the case and isn't expected to attend the trial. She has blamed Trump for stoking mistrust and fomenting anger over coronavirus restrictions and refusing to condemn hate groups and right-wing extremists like those charged in the plot. She

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has said he was also complicit in the deadly Jan. 6 Capitol insurrection.

Separately, authorities in state court are prosecuting eight men who are accused of aiding the group.

## **McDonald's, Starbucks, Coke, Pepsi join exodus out of Russia**

By DEE-ANN DURBIN AP Business Writer

DETROIT (AP) — McDonald's, Starbucks, Coca-Cola, PepsiCo and General Electric \_\_\_ ubiquitous global brands and symbols of U.S. corporate might \_\_\_ all announced Tuesday they were temporarily suspending their business in Russia in response to the country's invasion of Ukraine.

"Our values mean we cannot ignore the needless human suffering unfolding in Ukraine," McDonald's President and CEO Chris Kempczinski said in an open letter to employees.

The Chicago-based burger giant said it will temporarily close 850 stores but continue paying its 62,000 employees in Russia "who have poured their heart and soul into our McDonald's brand."

Kempczinski said it's impossible to know when the company will be able to reopen its stores.

"The situation is extraordinarily challenging for a global brand like ours, and there are many considerations," Kempczinski wrote in the letter. McDonald's works with hundreds of Russian suppliers, for example, and serves millions of customers each day.

Last Friday, Starbucks had said that it was donating profits from its 130 Russian stores \_\_\_ owned and operated by Kuwait-based franchisee Alshaya Group \_\_\_ to humanitarian relief efforts in Ukraine. But on Tuesday, the company changed course and said it would temporarily close those stores. Alshaya Group will continue to pay Starbucks' 2,000 Russian employees, Starbucks President and CEO Kevin Johnson said in an open letter to employees.

"Through this dynamic situation, we will continue to make decisions that are true to our mission and values and communicate with transparency," Johnson wrote.

Coca-Cola Co. announced it was suspending its business in Russia, but it offered few details. Coke's partner, Switzerland-based Coca-Cola Hellenic Bottling Co., owns 10 bottling plants in Russia, which is its largest market. Coke has a 21% stake in Coca-Cola Hellenic Bottling Co.

PepsiCo and General Electric both announced partial shutdowns of their Russian business.

Pepsi, based in Purchase, New York, said it will suspend sales of beverages in Russia. It will also suspend any capital investments and promotional activities.

But the company said it will continue to produce milk, baby formula and baby food, in part to continue supporting its 20,000 Russian employees and the 40,000 Russian agricultural workers who are part of its supply chain.

"Now more than ever we must stay true to the humanitarian aspect of our business," PepsiCo CEO Ramon Laguarta said in an email to employees.

General Electric also said in a Twitter post that it was partially suspending its operations in Russia. GE said two exceptions would be essential medical equipment and support for existing power services in Russia.

McDonald's is among those to take the biggest financial hit. Unlike Starbucks and other fast food companies like KFC and Pizza Hut, whose Russian locations are owned by franchisees, McDonald's owns 84% of its Russian stores. McDonald's has also temporarily closed 108 restaurants it owns in Ukraine and continues to pay those employees.

In a recent regulatory filing, McDonald's said its restaurants in Russia and Ukraine contribute 9% of its annual revenue, or around \$2 billion last year.

Yum Brands, the parent company of KFC and Pizza Hut, said late Tuesday it planned to temporarily close 70 company-owned KFC restaurants in Russia. The company said it was also in talks with a franchisee to close all 50 Pizza Hut restaurants in Russia. It had announced Monday that it was donating all of the profits from its 1,050 restaurants in Russia to humanitarian efforts. It has also suspended new restaurant development in the country.

Burger King said it is redirecting the profits from its 800 Russian stores to relief efforts and donating \$2 million in food vouchers to Ukrainian refugees.

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McDonald's said Tuesday it has donated more than \$5 million to its employee assistance fund and to relief efforts. It has also parked a Ronald McDonald House Charities mobile medical care unit at the Polish border with Ukraine; another mobile care unit is en route to the border in Latvia, the company said. PepsiCo said it is donating food, refrigerators and \$4 million to relief organizations.

Some of the companies have a long history operating in Russia. PepsiCo entered the Russian market in the early 1960s, at the height of the Cold War, and helped to create common ground between the U.S. and the Soviet Union.

Later, McDonald's was one of the first U.S. fast food companies to open a store in Russia, a sign that the Cold War had thawed. On Jan. 31, 1990, thousands of Russians lined up before dawn to try hamburgers \_\_\_ many for the first time \_\_\_ at the first McDonald's in Moscow. By the end of the day, 30,000 meals had been rung up on 27 cash registers, an opening-day record for the company.

But since the Ukraine invasion last month, many corporations have ceased operations in Russia in protest. Among them is consumer goods conglomerate Unilever, which on Tuesday said it has suspended all imports and exports of its products into and out of Russia, and that it will not invest any further capital into the country. In a more limited move, Amazon said Tuesday the company's cloud computing network, Amazon Web Services, will stop allowing new sign-ups in Russia and Belarus.

Pressure had been mounting on companies that remained in the country. Hashtags to boycott companies like McDonald's, Coca-Cola and PepsiCo quickly emerged on social media.

Last week, New York State Comptroller Thomas DiNapoli \_\_\_ a trustee of the state's pension fund, which is a McDonald's investor \_\_\_ sent letters to McDonald's, PepsiCo and eight other companies urging them to consider pausing their operations in Russia.

"Companies doing business in Russia need to seriously consider whether it's worth the risk. As investors, we want assurances that our holdings are not in harms way," DiNapoli said Tuesday in a statement. "I commend the companies that are taking the right steps and suspending their operations in Russia."

In his letter, Kempczinski cited influential former McDonald's Chairman and CEO Fred Turner, whose mantra was, "Do the right thing."

"There are countless examples over the years of McDonald's Corp. living up to Fred's simple ideal. Today is one of those days," Kempczinski said.

## Fleeing sanctions, oligarchs seek safe ports for superyachts

By MICHAEL BIESECKER Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — The massive superyacht Dilbar stretches one-and-a-half football fields in length, about as long as a World War I dreadnought. It boasts two helipads, berths for more than 130 people and a 25-meter swimming pool long enough to accommodate another whole superyacht.

Dilbar was launched in 2016 at a reported cost of more than \$648 million. Five years on, its purported owner, the Kremlin-aligned Russian oligarch Alisher Usmanov, was already dissatisfied and sent the vessel to a German shipyard last fall for a retrofit reportedly costing another couple hundred million dollars.

That's where she lay in drydock on Thursday when the United States and European Union announced economic sanctions against Usmanov — a metals magnate and early investor in Facebook — over his ties to Russian President Vladimir Putin and in retaliation for the invasion of Ukraine.

"We are joining with our European allies to find and seize your yachts, your luxury apartments, your private jets," President Joe Biden said during his State of the Union speech Tuesday night, addressing the oligarchs. "We are coming for your ill-begotten gains."

But actually seizing the behemoth boats could prove challenging. Russian billionaires have had decades to shield their money and assets in the West from governments that might try to tax or seize them.

Several media outlets reported Wednesday that German authorities had impounded Dilbar. But a spokeswoman for Hamburg state's economy ministry told The Associated Press no such action had yet been taken because it had been unable to establish ownership of the yacht, which is named for Usmanov's mother.

Dilbar is flagged in the Cayman Islands and registered to a holding company in Malta, two secretive

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banking havens where the global ultra-rich often park their wealth.

Still, in the industry that caters to the exclusive club of billionaires and centimillionaires that can afford to buy, crew and maintain superyachts, it is often an open secret who owns what.

Working with the U.K.-based yacht valuation firm VesselsValue, the AP compiled a list of 56 superyachts — generally defined as luxury vessels exceeding 24 meters (79 feet) in length — believed to be owned by a few dozen Kremlin-aligned oligarchs, seaborne assets with a combined market value estimated at more than \$5.4 billion.

The AP then used two online services — VesselFinder and MarineTraffic — to plot the last known locations of the yachts as relayed by their onboard tracking beacons.

While many are still anchored at or near sun-splashed playgrounds in the Mediterranean and Caribbean, more than a dozen were underway to or had already arrived in remote ports in small nations such as the Maldives and Montenegro, potentially beyond the reach of Western sanctions. Three are moored in Dubai, where many wealthy Russians have vacation homes.

Another three had gone dark, their transponders last pinging just outside the Bosphorus in Turkey — gateway to the Black Sea and the southern Russian ports of Sochi and Novorossiysk.

Graceful, a German-built Russian-flagged superyacht believed to belong to Putin, left a repair yard in Hamburg on Feb. 7, two weeks before Russia invaded Ukraine. It is now moored in the Russian Baltic port of Kaliningrad, beyond the reach of Western sanctions imposed against him this past week.

Some Russian oligarchs appear to have not gotten the memo to move their superyachts, despite weeks of public warnings of Putin's planned invasion.

French authorities seized the superyacht Amore Vero on Thursday in the Mediterranean resort town of La Ciotat. The boat is believed to belong to Igor Sechin, a Putin ally who runs Russian oil giant Rosneft, which has been on the U.S. sanctions list since Russia annexed Crimea in 2014.

The French Finance Ministry said in a statement that customs authorities boarded the 289-foot Amore Vero and discovered its crew was preparing for an urgent departure, even though planned repair work wasn't finished. The \$120 million boat is registered to a company that lists Sechin as its primary shareholder.

On Saturday, Italian financial police in the port of San Remo seized the 132-foot superyacht Lena, which is flagged in the British Virgin Islands. Authorities said the boat belongs to Gennady Timchenko, an oligarch close to Putin and among those sanctioned by the European Union. With an estimated net worth of \$16.2 billion, Timchenko is the founder of the Volga Group, which specializes in investments in energy, transport and infrastructure assets.

The 213-foot Lady M was also seized by the Italians while moored in the Riviera port town of Imperia. In a tweet announcing the seizure on Friday, a spokesman for Italian Prime Minister Mario Draghi said the comparatively modest \$27 million vessel was the property of sanctioned steel baron Alexei Mordashov, listed as Russia's wealthiest man with a fortune of about \$30 billion.

But Mordashov's upsized yacht, the 464-foot Nord, was safely at anchor on Friday in the Seychelles, a tropical island chain in the Indian Ocean not under the jurisdiction of U.S. or EU sanctions. Among the world's biggest superyachts, Nord has a market value of \$500 million.

Since Friday, Italy has seized 143 million euros (\$156 million) in luxury yachts and villas in some of its most picturesque destinations, including Sardinia, the Ligurian coast and Lake Como.

Most of the Russians on the annual Forbes list of billionaires have not yet been sanctioned by the United States and its allies, and their superyachts are still cruising the world's oceans.

The evolution of oligarch yachts goes back to the tumultuous decade after the 1991 fall of the Soviet Union, as state oil and metals industries were sold off at rock-bottom prices, often to politically connected Russian businessmen and bankers who had provided loans to the new Russian state in exchange for the shares.

Russia's nouveau riche began buying luxury yachts similar in size and expense to those owned by Silicon Valley billionaires, heads of state and royalty. It's a key marker of status in Moscow and St. Petersburg, and size matters.



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"No self-respecting Russian oligarch would be without a superyacht," said William Browder, a U.S.-born and now London-based financier who worked in Moscow for years before becoming one of the Putin regime's most vocal foreign critics. "It's part of the rite of passage to being an oligarch. It's just a prerequisite."

As their fortunes ballooned, there was something of an arms race among the oligarchs, with the richest among them accumulating personal fleets of ever more lavish boats.

For example, Russian metals and petroleum magnate Roman Abramovich is believed to have bought or built at least seven of the world's largest yachts, some of which he has since sold off to other oligarchs.

In 2010, Abramovich launched the Bermuda-flagged Eclipse, which at 533 feet was at the time the world's longest superyacht. Features include a wood-burning fireplace and swimming pool that transforms into a dance floor. Eclipse also boasts its own helicopter hangar and an undersea bay that reportedly holds a mini-sub.

Dennis Causier, a superyacht analyst with VesselsValue, said oligarch boats often include secret security measures worthy of a Bond villain, including underwater escape hatches, bulletproof windows and armored panic rooms.

"Eclipse is equipped with all sorts of special features, including missile launchers and self-defense systems on board," Causier said. "It has a secret submarine evacuation area and things like that."

Eclipse was soon eclipsed by Azzam, purportedly owned by the emir of Abu Dhabi, which claimed the title of longest yacht when it was launched in 2013. Three years after that, Usmanov launched Dilbar, which replaced another slightly smaller yacht by the same name. The new Dilbar is the world's largest yacht by volume.

Abramovich, whose fortune is estimated at \$12.4 billion, fired back last year by launching Solaris. While not as long as Eclipse or as big as Dilbar, the \$600 million Bermuda-flagged boat is possibly even more luxurious. Eight stories tall, Solaris features a sleek palisade of broad teak-covered decks suitable for hosting a horde of well-heeled partygoers.

But no boat is top dog for long. At least 20 superyachts are reported to be under construction in various Northern European shipyards, including a \$500 million superyacht being built for the American billionaire Jeff Bezos.

"It's about ego," Causier said. "They all want to have the best, the longest, the most valuable, the newest, the most luxurious."

But, he added, the escalating U.S. and EU sanctions on Putin-aligned oligarchs and Russian banks have sent a chill through the industry, with boatbuilders and staff worried they won't be paid. It can cost upwards of \$50 million a year to crew, fuel and maintain a superyacht.

The crash of the ruble and the tanking of Moscow stock market have depleted the fortunes of Russia's elite, with several people dropping off the list of Forbes billionaires last week. Causier said he expects some oligarch superyachts will soon quietly be listed by brokers at fire-sale prices.

The 237-foot Stella Maris, which was seen by an AP journalist docked this past week in Nice, France, was believed to be owned by Rashid Sardarov, a Russian billionaire oil and gas magnate. After publication of an earlier version of this story, AP was contacted Sunday by yacht broker Joan Plana Palao, who said his company represents a U.S. citizen from California who purchased the Stella Maris last month. He declined to disclose the name of the buyer or the person from whom the boat had been purchased.

On Thursday, the U.S. Treasury Department issued a new round of sanctions that included a press release touting Usmanov's close ties to Putin and photos of Dilbar and the oligarch's private jet, a custom-built 209-foot Airbus A340-300 passenger liner. Treasury said Usmanov's aircraft is believed to have cost up to \$500 million and is named Bourkhan, after his father.

Usmanov, whose fortune has recently shrunk to about \$17 billion, criticized the sanctions.

"I believe that such a decision is unfair and the reasons employed to justify the sanctions are a set of false and defamatory allegations damaging my honor, dignity and business reputation," he said in a statement issued through the website of the International Fencing Federation, of which he has served as president since 2008.

Abramovich has not yet been sanctioned. Members of the British Parliament have criticized Prime Minister Boris Johnson for not going after Abramovich's U.K.-based assets, which include the professional soccer

club Chelsea. Under mounting pressure, the oligarch announced this past week he would sell the \$2.5 billion team and give the net proceeds "for the benefit of all victims of the war in Ukraine."

Meanwhile, location transponders showed Solaris moored in Barcelona, Spain, on Saturday. Eclipse set sail from St. Maarten late Thursday and is underway in the Caribbean Sea, destination undisclosed.

## 1st trial in Capitol riot ends in conviction on all counts

By MICHAEL KUNZELMAN and COLLEEN LONG Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — A Texas man was convicted on Tuesday of storming the U.S. Capitol with a holstered handgun, a milestone victory for federal prosecutors in the first trial among hundreds of cases arising from last year's riot.

A jury also convicted Guy Wesley Reffitt of obstructing Congress' joint session to certify the Electoral College vote on Jan. 6, 2021, of interfering with police officers who were guarding the Capitol and of threatening his two teenage children if they reported him to law enforcement after the attack. Jurors deliberated about three hours and convicted him on all counts.

The verdict could be a bellwether for many other Capitol riot cases. It could give Justice Department prosecutors more leverage in plea negotiations and discourage other defendants from gambling on trials of their own.

Gregg Sofer, a former federal prosecutor who served as U.S. attorney for the Western District of Texas from October 2020 to February 2021, said before Reffitt's trial started that it would be "the canary in the coal mine."

"If you're a defendant awaiting trial at this point, the canary just died," said Sofer, now a partner at the law firm Husch Blackwell. "I do think it is likely to affect people's perceptions about the likelihood of their success."

Reffitt, 49, of Wylie, Texas, didn't testify at his trial, which started last Wednesday. He showed little visible reaction to the verdict, but his face was covered by a mask.

Outside court, his wife Nicole said the verdict was "against all American people. If you're going to be convicted on your First Amendment rights, all Americans should be wary. This fight has just begun."

She said her husband was being used as an example by the government. "You are all in danger," she said.

In a statement after the verdict, U.S. Attorney Matthew Graves in Washington thanked the jury "for upholding the rule of law and for its diligent service in this case."

During the trial's closing arguments on Monday, Assistant U.S. Attorney Risa Berkower told jurors that Reffitt drove to Washington, D.C., intending to stop Congress from certifying President Joe Biden's electoral victory. Reffitt proudly "lit the fire" that allowed others in a mob to overwhelm Capitol police officers near the Senate doors, the prosecutor said.

Reffitt was not accused of entering the Capitol building. Defense attorney William Welch said there is no evidence that Reffitt damaged property, used force or physically harmed anybody.

He will be sentenced June 8. He could receive 20 years in prison on the top charge alone, but he's likely to face far less time behind bars. Other rioters have pleaded guilty; the longest sentence so far is five years and three months for Robert Palmer, a Florida man who pleaded guilty to attacking police officers at the Capitol.

The riot resulted in the deaths of five people, including a police officer. More than 100 officers were injured. Rioters caused over \$1 million in damage to the Capitol.

U.S. District Judge Dabney Friedrich presided over Reffitt's trial. Trump nominated her in 2017.

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

Jurors saw videos that captured the confrontation between a few Capitol police officers and a mob of people, including Reffitt, who approached them on the west side of the Capitol.

Reffitt was armed with a Smith & Wesson pistol in a holster on his waist, carrying zip-tie handcuffs and wearing body armor and a helmet equipped with a video camera when he advanced on police, accord-

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ing to prosecutors. He retreated after an officer pepper sprayed him in the face, but he waved on other rioters who ultimately breached the building, prosecutors said.

Before the crowd advanced, Reffitt used a megaphone to shout at police to step aside and to urge the mob to push forward and overtake officers. Assistant U.S. Attorney Jeffrey Nestler said Reffitt played a leadership role that day.

During last Friday's testimony, prosecutors zoomed in on a video image of Reffitt at the Capitol. FBI Special Agent Laird Hightower said the image shows "a silvery metallic linear object" in a holster protruding from under Reffitt's jacket as he leaned forward.

Shauni Kerkhoff, who was one of the Capitol police officers who tried to repel Reffitt, said she launched pepperballs that didn't stop him from advancing. She testified that Reffitt appeared to be leading the crowd up stairs toward police.

Reffitt's 19-year-old son, Jackson, testified last Thursday that his father threatened him and his sister, then 16, after he drove home from Washington. Reffitt told his children they would be traitors if they reported him to authorities and said "traitors get shot," Jackson Reffitt recalled.

He said the threat terrified him. His younger sister, Peyton, was listed as a possible government witness but didn't testify. She said that she would talk more later on her own time, but: "Kids should never be used against the parents."

Jackson Reffitt used a cellphone app to secretly record his father boasting about his role in the riot. Jurors heard excerpts of that family conversation.

Jackson Reffitt initially contacted the FBI on Christmas Eve, less than two weeks before the riot, to report concerns about his father's behavior and increasingly worrisome rhetoric. But the FBI didn't respond until Jan. 6, after the riot erupted.

Another key witness, Rocky Hardie, said he and Reffitt were members of "Texas Three Percenters" militia group. The Three Percenters militia movement refers to the myth that only 3% of Americans fought in the Revolutionary War against the British.

Hardie drove from Texas to Washington with Reffitt. He testified that both of them were armed with holstered handguns when they attended then-President Donald Trump's "Stop the Steal" rally before the riot erupted. Reffitt also took an AR-15 rifle to Washington but left it locked up in his car, Hardie said.

Hardie said Reffitt talked about dragging lawmakers out of the Capitol and replacing them with people who would "follow the Constitution." Hardie also said Reffitt gave him two pairs of zip-tie cuffs in case they needed to detain anybody.

Reffitt was arrested less than a week after the riot. The FBI found a handgun in a holster on a nightstand in the defendant's bedroom when they searched his home near Dallas.

More than 750 people have been charged with federal crimes related to the riot. Over 220 of them have pleaded guilty, mostly to misdemeanors, and over 110 of them have been sentenced. Approximately 90 others have trial dates.

Sofer, the former top federal prosecutor in the Western District of Texas, said Reffitt's trial shows the government has "accurate, good, reliable video that jurors are willing to pay attention to."

"You have to look at it and say this is extremely worrisome if you're a defendant," he said. "The flip side is the government can feel good that it's in the driver's seat pretty strongly here."

## **EXPLAINER: What does a US ban on Russian oil accomplish?**

By CATHY BUSSEWITZ and MATTHEW DALY Associated Press

NEW YORK (AP) — With Russia intensifying its war on Ukraine, killing civilians and triggering a mass refugee crisis, President Joe Biden on Tuesday announced a U.S. ban on imported Russian oil. Critics of Russia have said that sanctioning its energy exports would be the best — perhaps only — way to force Moscow to pull back.

A full embargo would be most effective if it included European allies, which are also desperate to stop the violence in Ukraine and the danger Moscow poses to the continent. Yet it's far from clear that all of

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Europe would take part in an embargo, though Britain announced Tuesday that it would phase out Russian oil imports by year's end.

Unlike the United States, Europe is deeply reliant on energy it imports from Russia, the world's second-largest crude oil exporter behind Saudi Arabia. While the U.S. could replace the relatively small amount of fuel it receives from Moscow, Europe could not, at least not anytime soon.

What's more, any curbs on Russian oil exports could send already skyrocketing oil and gasoline prices ever higher on both continents and further squeeze consumers, businesses, financial markets and the global economy.

Here is a deeper look:

## WHAT WILL HAPPEN WITH A U.S. BAN ON RUSSIAN OIL?

With gasoline prices in the U.S. surging ever higher, the Biden administration has faced growing pressure to impose further sanctions on Russia, including a ban on oil imports.

For now, a broad U.S.-European ban appears elusive. On Monday, German Chancellor Olaf Scholz made clear that his country, Europe's largest consumer of Russian energy, has no plans to join in any ban. In response, U.S. Deputy Secretary of State Wendy Sherman hinted that the U.S. could act alone or with a smaller group of allies.

"Not every country has done exactly the same thing," Sherman said, "but we have all reached a threshold that is necessary to impose the severe costs that we have all agreed to."

## DOES THE U.S. BAN ON RUSSIAN OIL HURT MOSCOW?

The impact on Russia would likely be minimal. The United States imports a small share of Russia's oil exports and doesn't buy any of its natural gas.

Last year, roughly 8% of U.S. imports of oil and petroleum products came from Russia. Together, the imports totaled the equivalent of 245 million barrels in 2021, which was roughly 672,000 barrels of oil and petroleum products a day. But imports of Russian oil have been declining rapidly as buyers shunned the fuel.

Because the amount of oil the U.S. imports from Russia is modest, Russia could potentially sell that oil elsewhere, perhaps in China or India. Still, it would probably have to sell it at a steep discount, because fewer and fewer buyers are accepting Russian oil.

If Russia were eventually shut off from the global market, rogue countries such as Iran and Venezuela might be "welcomed back" as sources of oil, said Claudio Galimberti, an analyst at Rystad Energy. Such additional sources could, in turn, potentially stabilize prices.

A team of Biden administration officials were in Venezuela over the weekend to discuss energy and other issues, White House press secretary Jen Psaki said. She said officials discussed a range of issues, including energy security.

"By eliminating some of the demand, we're forcing the price of Russian oil down, and that does reduce revenue to Russia," said Kevin Book, managing director at Clearview Energy Partners. "In theory, it is a way of reducing how much Russia earns on every barrel it sells, maybe not by a lot, but by some. The most important question is whether there's going to be more pressure on the other side of the Atlantic."

## HOW COULD A RUSSIAN OIL BAN AFFECT PRICES?

News of the U.S. oil ban sent gasoline prices surging, with a gallon of regular selling for an average of \$4.17 Tuesday.

A month ago, oil was selling for about \$90 a barrel. Now, prices are surging close to \$130 a barrel as buyers shun Russian crude. Refiners had already feared being left with oil they couldn't resell if sanctions were imposed.

Shell said Tuesday that it would stop buying Russian oil and natural gas and shut down its service stations, aviation fuels and other operations there, days after Ukraine's foreign minister criticized the energy giant for continuing to buy Russian oil.

Energy analysts warn that prices could go as high to \$160 or even \$200 a barrel if buyers continue shunning Russian crude. That trend could send U.S. gasoline prices past \$5 a gallon, a scenario Biden and other political figures are desperate to avoid.

"A U.S. embargo on Russian oil is very politically attractive right now," said Morgan Bazilian, director of



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the Payne Institute at the Colorado School of Mines. Still, the same politicians now supporting the ban "will come back and hammer Biden if U.S. gasoline prices rise further as a result," he said.

## ARE RUSSIAN IMPORTS ALREADY FALLING?

The U.S. oil industry has said it shares the goal of reducing reliance on foreign energy sources and is committed to working with the Biden administration and Congress. Even without sanctions, some U.S. refiners have severed contracts with Russian companies. Imports of Russian crude oil and products have tumbled.

"Our industry has taken significant and meaningful steps to unwind relationships" with Russia and voluntarily limit Russian imports, said Frank Macchiarola, senior vice president of the American Petroleum Institute, the oil and gas industry's largest lobbying group.

Preliminary data from the U.S. Energy Department shows that imports of Russian crude dropped to zero in the last week in February.

## WILL EUROPE GO ALONG?

A ban on Russian oil and natural gas would be painful for Europe. Russia provides about 40% of Europe's natural gas for home heating, electricity and industry uses and about a quarter of Europe's oil. European officials are seeking ways to reduce their dependence, but it will take time.

Britain's business secretary, Kwasi Kwarteng, said his country will use the rest of the year to phase out its imports of oil and petroleum products to "give the market, businesses and supply chains more than enough time to replace Russian imports," which account for 8% of U.K. demand.

Germany's economy minister, Robert Habeck, on Tuesday defended the European decision so far to exempt Russian energy from sanctions.

"The sanctions have been chosen deliberately so that they impact the Russian economy and the Putin regime seriously, but they also have been chosen deliberately so that we as an economy and a nation can keep them up for a long time," Habeck said. "Ill-considered behavior could lead to exactly the opposite."

"We have maneuvered ourselves into an ever-greater dependency on fossil energy imports from Russia in the last 20 years," Habeck said. "That is not a good state of affairs."

Deputy Prime Minister Alexander Novak of Russia underscored that urgency, saying Moscow would have "every right" to halt natural gas shipments to Europe through the Nord Stream 1 pipeline to retaliate against Germany for halting the parallel Nord Stream 2 pipeline, which wasn't yet operating. Novak added that "we have not taken this decision" and that "no one would benefit from this." His statement marked a shift from Russia's earlier assurances that it had no intention of cutting off gas to Europe.

Oil is easier to replace than natural gas. Other countries could increase production of oil and ship it to Europe. But much oil would have to be replaced, and this would drive up prices even more because the oil would likely have to travel farther.

Replacing the natural gas that Russia provides to Europe is likely impossible in the short term. Most of the natural gas Russia provides to Europe travels through pipelines. To replace it, Europe would mostly import liquefied natural gas, known as LNG. The continent doesn't have enough pipelines to distribute gas from coastal import facilities to farther reaches of the continent.

In January, two-thirds of American LNG exports went to Europe, according to S&P Global Platts.

While U.S. oil and gas producers could drill for more natural gas, its export facilities are already operating at capacity. Expanding those facilities would take years and billions of dollars.

## Q&A: Forecasters say gasoline prices likely to remain high

By DAVID KOENIG AP Business Writer

DALLAS (AP) —

Gasoline prices have smashed a 2008 record and are likely to head even higher, further fueling inflation and hitting consumers and businesses that are still coming to grips with the pandemic.

The national average topped \$4.17 a gallon on Tuesday, according to auto club AAA, and several states on each coast could soon join California in the \$5-and-up club.

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Prices at the pump have been rising for more than a year, and analysts expect further increases after President Joe Biden announced that the United States will ban imports of Russian oil to punish Russia more severely for invading Ukraine.

As painful as this week's prices are, they are still not the highest that Americans have paid when you consider inflation. In today's dollars, that 2008 record of \$4.10 a gallon would be equal to about \$5.24.

A look at how we got here, and what it means for American households:

## WHEN DID PRICES START RISING?

After averaging \$2.69 a gallon in 2019, U.S. gasoline prices collapsed as COVID-19 forced offices and businesses to close in early 2020. By late April 2020, a gallon sold for under \$1.90. Prices have mostly risen since then, as demand for energy rebounded, global production failed to keep pace, and inventories shrank.

## WHY ARE PRICES SO HIGH?

It boils down to supply and demand. The world consumes nearly 100 million barrels of oil a day on average. Producers cut spending on exploration and production during the pandemic, and they have been slow to ramp back up. Some producers say they face labor and parts shortages.

The benchmark price for U.S. oil was around \$125 a barrel in afternoon trading Tuesday, while the international standard, Brent crude, was above \$130. Of course, consumers didn't mind when crude was below \$20 at the start of the pandemic.

"Oil companies don't set the market prices; people do, by filling up their tanks," says Patrick De Haan, petroleum analyst for GasBuddy, which tracks gasoline prices around the U.S.

## HOW MUCH IS DUE TO RUSSIA'S WAR?

Analysts say that nearly the entire rise of the last week — about 55 cents a gallon nationwide, on average — can be linked to anticipation that eventually western countries would ban Russian crude, further shrinking their already tight supplies.

"The U.S. doesn't need Russian oil per se, but the world and particularly Europe are dependent on it," says Tom Kloza, an analyst for the Oil Price Information Service.

According to government figures, the U.S. imported 245 million barrels of oil from Russia last year, or 8% of all U.S. oil imports. That is less than the United States imported from Canada or Mexico but more than it took from Saudi Arabia.

## WHEN WILL PRICES EASE?

Normally fuel prices rise in spring and summer, as Americans drive and fly more. Demand could also get a boost as countries continue to shed their COVID-19 restrictions. Those trends suggest that pump prices are heading higher, with demand continuing to outstrip supply.

"It's not going to be a good summer for motorists," De Haan says.

## Proud Boys leader charged with conspiracy in Capitol riot

By MICHAEL KUNZELMAN, COLLEEN LONG and MICHAEL BALSAMO Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — A leader of the far-right Proud Boys extremist group was arrested Tuesday on a conspiracy charge for his suspected role in a coordinated attack on the U.S. Capitol to stop Congress from certifying Democrat Joe Biden's 2020 electoral victory.

Henry "Enrique" Tarrío wasn't there when the riot erupted on Jan. 6, 2021. Police had arrested Tarrío in Washington two days before the riot and charged him with vandalizing a Black Lives Matter banner at a historic Black church during a protest in December 2020. The day before the Capitol was attacked, a judge ordered Tarrío to stay out of Washington.

But Tarrío didn't leave town as he should have, the indictment said. Instead, he met with Oath Keepers founder and leader Elmer "Stewart" Rhodes and others in an underground parking garage for approximately 30 minutes.

"During this encounter, a participant referenced the Capitol," the indictment says.

Tarrío made his initial court appearance via video link to a Miami courtroom Tuesday. His detention hearing was scheduled for Friday.

The arrest came as federal prosecutors won a conviction on all counts in the first trial for a rioter since

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the attack.

The indictment is a further proof of how far the Justice Department is going to prosecute the leaders of extremist groups whose members are suspected to have planned and attacked the U.S. Capitol, even if they weren't in attendance themselves. The latest conspiracy charge zeroes in on organized groups that plotted in advance — as federal prosecutors distinguish them from hundreds of other supporters of then-President Donald Trump who were at the scene that day and were charged.

The new riot-related charges are among the most serious filed so far, but they aren't the first of their kind. Eleven members or associates of the antigovernment Oath Keepers militia group, including Rhodes, have been charged with seditious conspiracy in the Capitol attack.

A message left for Andrew Jacobs, an attorney appointed to represent Tarrío, wasn't immediately returned Tuesday afternoon.

Phillip Linder, an attorney representing Rhodes, also didn't immediately return a call seeking comment on his client's behalf.

Tarrío, who has since stepped down from his post as Proud Boys chairman, didn't immediately respond to a text message seeking comment on his arrest and indictment. He served five months for the unrelated case.

On Dec. 30, 2020, an unnamed person sent Tarrío a document that laid out plans for occupying a few "crucial buildings" in Washington on Jan. 6, including House and Senate office buildings around the Capitol, the indictment says. The nine-page document was entitled "1776 Returns" and called for having as "many people as possible" to "show our politicians We the People are in charge," according to the indictment.

"The revolution is important than anything," the person said.

"That's what every waking moment consists of ... I'm not playing games," Tarrío responded, the indictment says.

Proud Boys members describe the group as a politically incorrect men's club for "Western chauvinists." Its members frequently have brawled with antifascist activists at rallies and protests. Vice Media co-founder Gavin McInnes, who founded the Proud Boys in 2016, sued the Southern Poverty Law Center for labeling it as a hate group.

On the morning of Jan. 6, group members met at the Washington Monument and marched to the Capitol before then-President Donald Trump finished speaking to thousands of supporters near the White House.

Just before Congress convened a joint session to certify the presidential election results, a group of Proud Boys followed a crowd of people who breached barriers at a pedestrian entrance to the Capitol grounds, an indictment says. Several Proud Boys also entered the Capitol building itself after the mob smashed windows and forced open doors.

Prosecutors have said the Proud Boys arranged for members to communicate using specific frequencies on Baofeng radios. The Chinese-made devices can be programmed for use on hundreds of frequencies, making them difficult for outsiders to eavesdrop.

More than three dozen of the more than 750 people charged in the Capitol siege have been identified by federal authorities as Proud Boys leaders, members or associates.

A New York man pleaded guilty in December to storming the U.S. Capitol with fellow Proud Boys members. Matthew Greene was the first Proud Boys member to publicly plead guilty to conspiring with other members to stop Congress from certifying the Electoral College vote. Greene agreed to cooperate with authorities.

In December, a federal judge refused to dismiss an earlier indictment charging four alleged leaders of the far-right Proud Boys with conspiracy. U.S. District Judge Timothy Kelly rejected defense attorneys' arguments that the four men — Ethan Nordean, Joseph Biggs, Zachary Rehl and Charles Donohoe — were charged with conduct that is protected by the First Amendment right to free speech.

Nordean, Biggs, Rehl and Donohoe remain jailed while awaiting a trial scheduled for May.

Tarrío tried to communicate with Nordean and Biggs by telephone while the two men were moving in and out of the Capitol, the indictment says. Biggs and Tarrío had a 42-second call just before 3 p.m. on Jan. 6, according to the indictment.

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Nordean, of Auburn, Washington, was a Proud Boys chapter president and member of the group's national "Elders Council." Biggs, of Ormond Beach, Florida, is a self-described Proud Boys organizer. Rehl was president of the Proud Boys chapter in Philadelphia. Donohoe, of Kernersville, North Carolina, also served as president of his local chapter, according to the indictment.

Dominic Pezzola, 44, of Rochester, New York, also is charged with Tarrío in the new indictment, which identifies Pezzola as a member of his local Proud Boys chapter. Pezzola already was charged with conspiracy in a separate case and has been jailed since his arrest. Greene traveled from Syracuse, New York, to Washington with Pezzola and other Proud Boys on Jan. 5, according to prosecutors.

On global holiday, a 'terrible dream' for Ukrainian women

By JUSTIN SPIKE and BELA SZANDELSZKY Associated Press

ZAHONY, Hungary (AP) — On International Women's Day, the global celebration of women, many fleeing Ukraine felt only the stress of finding a new life for their children as husbands, brothers and fathers stayed behind to defend their country from Russia's invasion.

The number of refugees reached 2 million on Tuesday, according to the United Nations, the fastest exodus Europe has seen since World War II. One million were children, UNICEF spokesman James Elder tweeted, calling it "a dark historical first." Most others were women.

Polina Shulga tried to ease the journey for her 3-year-old daughter by hiding the truth.

"Of course it's hard to travel with a child, but I explained to her that we're going on vacation and that we'll definitely come home one day when the war is over," Shulga said.

She didn't know what would come next after arriving in Hungary from Ukraine's capital, Kyiv, but believed the experience would make her stronger. "I feel like I'm responsible for my child, so it was easier for me to take this step and leave," she said, as her little girl tugged at the hem of her coat.

Nataliya Grigoriyovna Levchinka, from Donetsk in eastern Ukraine, felt much the same.

"I'm generally in some kind of a terrible dream which keeps going on," the retired teacher said. "I would be in some kind of abstraction if it wasn't for my daughter. I wouldn't be able to come to my senses."

A decree by Ukraine's government that prohibits men aged 18 to 60 from leaving the country means that most of those fleeing are women and children, though the U.N. doesn't have exact numbers on gender. Ukraine's policy is meant to encourage men to sign up to fight against Russia's invasion or to keep them available for military conscription.

That has led to heartbreaking scenes of separation, along with growing worry as some encircled, battered parts of Ukraine slip out of reach.

Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy spoke of International Women's Day, which is normally a day for celebration in Ukraine, in a video address.

"Ukrainians, we usually celebrate this holiday, the holiday of spring. We congratulate our women, our daughters, wives, mothers," he said. "Usually. But not today. Today I cannot say the traditional words. I just can't congratulate you. I can't, when there are so many deaths. When there is so much grief, when there is so much suffering. When the war continues."

Women normally receive flowers and chocolates and kisses and speeches. But this time, the messages were tinged with sorrow and pleas for peace.

In a refugee camp in Moldova, Elena Shapoval apologized for her tears. She doesn't hide them from her two children, 4 and 8, while recalling their journey from Odesa. The younger one doesn't understand what's happening, Shapoval said. The older one tries to calm her, saying, "Mom, everything will be all right."

She cannot allow herself to collapse in grief as she thinks about the life they left behind. "I realize that we'll have to work a lot now," she said. "I need to get myself together because I have two children and I need to ball up my will like a fist."

In Romania, Alina Rudakova began to cry as she realized she had forgotten about the holiday. Last year, the 19-year-old from Melitopol received a bouquet of flowers from her father and gifts from other relatives.

"This year, I didn't even think about this day," she said. "This day was really awful."

But some arriving refugees were given spring flowers by the immigration officials and volunteers who greeted them after crossing the borders in Poland and Romania — a reminder of hoped-for better days



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to come.

"I was so stressed, I was so tired, it kind of made my day," said 15-year-old Mariia Kotelnytska from Poltava.

"The best present for every woman will be to stop the war," added 19-year-old Anastasia Kvirikashvili from Vinnytsia.

As the refugees continued to arrive, new fragilities emerged. "The people who are coming now have less means than the people who came initially, and they've also experienced more likely conflict directly, so they're probably more traumatized," said a spokesman for the U.N. refugee agency, Matthew Saltmarsh.

In a theater at the Ukrainian Cultural Center in the Polish city of Przemysl near the border, women and children filled makeshift beds. Some checked their phones yet again for news.

"It was difficult to prepare myself for traveling," said one refugee from near Kyiv who gave only her first name, Natalia. "My sister said that I am very brave, but in my opinion I am a coward. I want to go home."

At the Medyka border crossing in Poland, Yelena Makarova said her hurried flight from Kremenchuk with her mother and teenage daughter marked the end of her life as she knew it. Her father, husband and brother all stayed behind.

"I wish that (the war) would finish as soon as possible, because do you know, for every mother, what can be worse?" she said. "I can't understand why our children are dying. I don't know."

## Column: 1 betting rule remains sacrosanct in the NFL

By TIM DAHLBERG AP Sports Columnist

Calvin Ridley had no inside information and, apparently, no idea how to bet. In other words, he was just like millions of other neophyte bettors lured in by promises of riches from sports betting operators and the leagues they cohabitate with.

Except Ridley plays for the Atlanta Falcons. And that's where things get a little dicey.

Almost everything goes these days in the Wild West of sports betting, but there is still one big no-no that remains sacrosanct: You don't bet on your own league and you certainly don't bet on your own team.

Ridley did both, and it cost him one of the worst bad beats ever. Suspended Monday for at least a year by hypocrite-in-chief Roger Goodell, the wide receiver is out \$11 million in salary for what he said was \$1,500 in bets made while he was on mental health leave from the team.

The bets were relatively paltry, and the crime didn't seem much worse. Ridley wasn't even around his team at the time he made the bets — which according to various reports were long shot parlays of as many as eight teams — and he certainly wasn't trying to fix any games.

This wasn't 1963, when Green Bay halfback Paul Hornung and Detroit Lions defensive tackle Alex Karras were suspended indefinitely for betting on NFL games and associating with "known hoodlums." Ridley made the bets on a phone in Florida where it was legal through a casino that sponsors Miami's stadium.

Like most aspiring bettors, he just wanted a little action.

"I know I was wrong," Ridley tweeted after his suspension was announced. "But I'm getting 1 year lol."

One year does seem a bit excessive, especially in an age when the NFL and its teams not only tolerate betting but encourage it — at least among the general population. A Sunday didn't go by last season without constant reminders on TV about betting partners and sponsorships as the league and the industry settled into a profitable partnership neither saw coming just a few years earlier.

At nearly every commercial break we listened to an assortment of characters from Julius Caesar to the Manning family telling us to sign up and bet, something duly noted by former coach and TV analyst Tony Dungy.

"When we as a league encourage everyone to bet on our games, advertise betting on our players' game stats, take in big money from gambling sites & do everything we can to get our young people to embrace gambling — We can't be surprised when this happens," Dungy tweeted after the suspension was announced.

If it seems a bit awkward, it is. The morality police who once railed about the evils of gambling are now profiting by the new craze.

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Indeed, Ridley actually may have done Goodell a favor by allowing him to make a tough stand against player betting while at the same time not interfering with the flow of money from the betting sites to the NFL coffers.

Here's a short version of the new rules of order if you're still confused: Betting is good. Betting by players is bad.

"There is nothing more fundamental to the NFL's success — and to the reputation of everyone associated with our league — than upholding the integrity of the game," Goodell said.

Hopefully, Goodell keeps that lofty premise in mind as the league investigates allegations made by former Dolphins coach Brian Flores that Miami owner Stephen Ross offered him \$100,000 a loss a few years back so the team would tank enough to get the top pick in the draft.

Ross denies the allegations made in a lawsuit against the league and no one else has come forward publicly to substantiate them. But game fixing goes to the core of sports betting fears, and if Ridley can be suspended for a year for his long shot parlay bets, Ross should be booted from the league if enough evidence emerges to back the claims.

The bottom line is that sports bettors want the same thing ordinary fans want from the NFL — games that are on the level and above suspicion, untainted by players, owners or the guy putting air in the footballs.

That means no betting by players, coaches or anyone else on the field. It means no tampering by owners or general managers or even Goodell himself. It means being more transparent about everything from injuries to suspect calls so that those watching don't automatically think something is fishy.

It also means handing out punishment to those who break the rules.

That includes Ridley, no matter how bad his bets were.

## WHO says COVID boosters needed, reversing previous call

GENEVA (AP) —

An expert group convened by the World Health Organization said Tuesday it "strongly supports urgent and broad access" to booster doses of COVID-19 vaccine amid the global spread of omicron, capping a reversal of the U.N. agency's repeated insistence last year that boosters weren't necessary for healthy people and contributed to vaccine inequity.

In a statement, WHO said its expert group concluded that immunization with authorized COVID-19 vaccines provide high levels of protection against severe disease and death amid the continuing spread of the hugely contagious omicron variant. WHO eased back on its earlier position in January by saying boosters were recommended once countries had adequate supplies and after protecting their most vulnerable.

It said vaccination, including the use of boosters, was especially important for people at risk of severe disease.

Last year, WHO's director-general Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus called for a moratorium on booster doses while dozens of countries embarked on administering the doses, saying rich countries should immediately donate those vaccines to poor countries instead. WHO scientists said at the time they would continue to evaluate incoming data.

The updated recommendations came from an 18-member advisory group that focuses on the impact of "variants of concern" — the most worrying variants, like omicron — and assesses the vaccines' effectiveness against them.

Numerous scientific studies have proven that booster doses of authorized vaccines help restore waning immunity and protect against serious COVID-19. Booster programs in rich countries including Britain, Canada and the U.S. have been credited with preventing the surge in omicron infections from spilling over into hospitals and cemeteries.

WHO said it is continuing to monitor the global spread of omicron, including a "stealth" version known as BA.2, which has been documented to have re-infected some people after an initial case of omicron. There's mixed research on whether it causes more severe disease, but vaccines appear just as effective against it.

WHO noted that the current authorized COVID-19 vaccines are all based on the strain that was first

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detected in Wuhan, China more than three years ago.

"Since then, there has been continuous and substantial virus evolution and it is likely that this evolution will continue, resulting in the emergence of new variants," the agency said. It added that coronavirus vaccines would likely need to be updated.

## Today in History

By The Associated Press undefined

Today in History

Today is Wednesday, March 9, the 68th day of 2022. There are 297 days left in the year.

Today's Highlight in History:

On March 9, 1933, Congress, called into special session by President Franklin D. Roosevelt, began its "hundred days" of enacting New Deal legislation.

On this date:

In 1796, the future emperor of the French, Napoleon Bonaparte, married Josephine de Beauharnais (boh-ahr-NAY'). (The couple later divorced.)

In 1841, the U.S. Supreme Court, in *United States v. The Amistad*, ruled 7-1 in favor of a group of illegally enslaved Africans who were captured off the U.S. coast after seizing control of a Spanish schooner, *La Amistad*; the justices ruled that the Africans should be set free.

In 1862, during the Civil War, the ironclads USS Monitor and CSS Virginia (formerly USS Merrimac) clashed for five hours to a draw at Hampton Roads, Virginia.

In 1916, more than 400 Mexican raiders led by Pancho Villa (VEE'-uh) attacked Columbus, New Mexico, killing 18 Americans. During the First World War, Germany declared war on Portugal.

In 1945, during World War II, U.S. B-29 bombers began launching incendiary bomb attacks against Tokyo, resulting in an estimated 100,000 deaths.

In 1964, the U.S. Supreme Court, in *New York Times Co. v. Sullivan*, raised the standard for public officials to prove they'd been libeled in their official capacity by news organizations.

In 1976, a cable car in the Italian ski resort of Cavalese fell some 700 feet to the ground when a supporting line snapped, killing 43 people.

In 1987, Chrysler Corp. announced it had agreed to buy the financially ailing American Motors Corp.

In 1989, the Senate rejected President George H.W. Bush's nomination of John Tower to be defense secretary by a vote of 53-47. (The next day, Bush tapped Wyoming Rep. Dick Cheney, who went on to win unanimous Senate approval.)

In 1997, gangsta rapper The Notorious B.I.G. (Christopher Wallace) was killed in a still-unsolved drive-by shooting in Los Angeles; he was 24.

In 2000, John McCain suspended his presidential campaign, conceding the Republican nomination to George W. Bush. Bill Bradley ended his presidential bid, conceding the Democratic nomination to Vice President Al Gore.

In 2020, global stock markets and oil prices plunged, reflecting mounting alarm over the impact of the coronavirus. An alarmingly sharp slide at the opening bell on Wall Street triggered the first automatic halt in trading in more than two decades; the Dow industrials finished nearly 8% lower.

Ten years ago: A high-profile international mission to end the Syrian crisis stumbled before it began as the opposition rejected calls by U.N. envoy Kofi Annan for dialogue with President Bashar Assad as pointless and out of touch after a year of violence. Lindsey Vonn of the United States won the World Cup giant slalom race in Are, Sweden to clinch her fourth overall title.

Five years ago: Human rights lawyer Amal Clooney urged Iraq and the world's nations not to let the Islamic State extremist group "get away with genocide," telling a U.N. meeting that what was "shocking" was not just the group's brutality but the "passive" response by the world's nations.

One year ago: Buckingham Palace said allegations of racism made earlier in the week by Prince Harry and Meghan, the Duchess of Sussex, were "concerning" and would be addressed privately by the royal

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family. Longtime NBC and CBS correspondent and television anchor Roger Mudd died at his Virginia home at the age of 93.

Today's Birthdays: Former Sen. James L. Buckley, Conservative-N.Y., is 99. Actor Joyce Van Patten is 88. Country singer Mickey Gilley is 86. Actor Trish Van Devere is 81. Singer-musician John Cale (The Velvet Underground) is 80. Singer Mark Lindsay (Paul Revere and the Raiders) is 80. Former ABC anchorman Charles Gibson is 79. Rock musician Robin Trower is 77. Singer Jeffrey Osborne is 74. Country musician Jimmie Fadden (The Nitty Gritty Dirt Band) is 74. Actor Jaime Lyn Bauer is 73. Magazine editor Michael Kinsley is 71. TV newscaster Faith Daniels is 65. Actor Linda Fiorentino is 64. Actor Tom Amandes is 63. Actor-director Lonny Price is 63. Country musician Rusty Hendrix (Confederate Railroad) is 62. Actor Juliette Binoche is 58. Rock musician Robert Sledge (Ben Folds Five) is 54. Rock musician Shannon Leto (30 Seconds to Mars) is 52. Rapper C-Murder (AKA C-Miller) is 51. Actor Emmanuel Lewis is 51. Actor Jean Louisa Kelly is 50. Actor Kerr Smith is 50. Actor Oscar Isaac is 43. Comedian Jordan Klepper (TV: "The Daily Show") is 43. Rapper Chingy is 42. Actor Matthew Gray Gubler is 42. Rock musician Chad Gilbert (New Found Glory) is 41. NHL defenseman Brent Burns is 37. Actor Brittany Snow is 36. Rapper Bow Wow is 35. Rapper YG is 32. Actor Cierra Ramirez is 27. U.S. Olympic gold-medal-winning gymnast Sunisa Lee is 19.