

# 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



**“SOMETIMES ASKING  
FOR HELP ALSO  
MEANS YOU ARE  
HELPING YOURSELF.”**

*-Renuka Pitre*

## 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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## Gov. Noem Signs Bills into Law

PIERRE, S.D. – Governor Kristi Noem signed 16 bills into law: (Click on bill number to get more information)

[SB 4](#) revises provisions related to a written certification for the medical use of cannabis.

[SB 12](#) revises the annual report on medical cannabis by the Department of Health to the Legislature.

[SB 14](#) revises provisions related to the confidential list of medical cannabis cardholders maintained by the Department of Health.

[SB 23](#) revises the definition of bona fide practitioner-patient relationship.

[SB 27](#) revises the provisions regarding the denial or nonrenewal of a patient registry identification card.

[SB 52](#) makes an appropriation for the replacement of the Richmond Lake spillway and for the general maintenance and repair of other state-owned dams.

[SB 64](#) makes appropriations from the water and environment fund and its revolving subfunds for various water and environmental purposes.

[SB 67](#) makes an appropriation to the Department of Game, Fish and Parks to improve and repair infrastructure around Lake Alvin and Newell Lake.

[SB 73](#) provides for the use of artificial light and night-vision equipment while hunting coyotes and other predators.

[SB 93](#) revises certain provisions related to the use of epinephrine and supraglottic airway devices by ambulance services.

[SB 176](#) revises provisions regarding self-propelled agriculture units.

[HB 1083](#) provides a partial property tax exemption for the surviving spouses of certain veterans.

[HB 1130](#) specifies taxation, authorization, and standards of practice for the sale of travel insurance.

[HB 1153](#) revises the number of class hours required to obtain a responsible broker's license.

[HB 1169](#) modifies the licensing of barbers.

[HB 1195](#) directs the Indian Education Advisory Council to make an annual report to the Governor and the State-Tribal Relations Committee.

Governor Noem has signed 102 bills into law and vetoed one this legislative session.

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**The Groton Area cheering sections put on a display of team spirit during the Milbank game.**

(Photo by Britt Andera Frost)

It has been 21 years since the Groton boys' basketball team has earned a berth to the state tournament. Back in 2001, the Tigers placed sixth in the State A Tournament.

Third year head coach Brian Dolan has led the Tigers to back-to-back Northeast Conference champions (sharing this year) and now to a State A Tournament this year.

Groton Area advanced to the State Tournament with a Region 1A semifinal win over Milbank, 59-51, in a game played in Groton, and then defeated Mt. Vernon/Plankinton in the SoDak 16 game played in Redfield, 63-48.

The State A Tournament will be held March 17-19 at Summit Arena at The Monument in Rapid City.

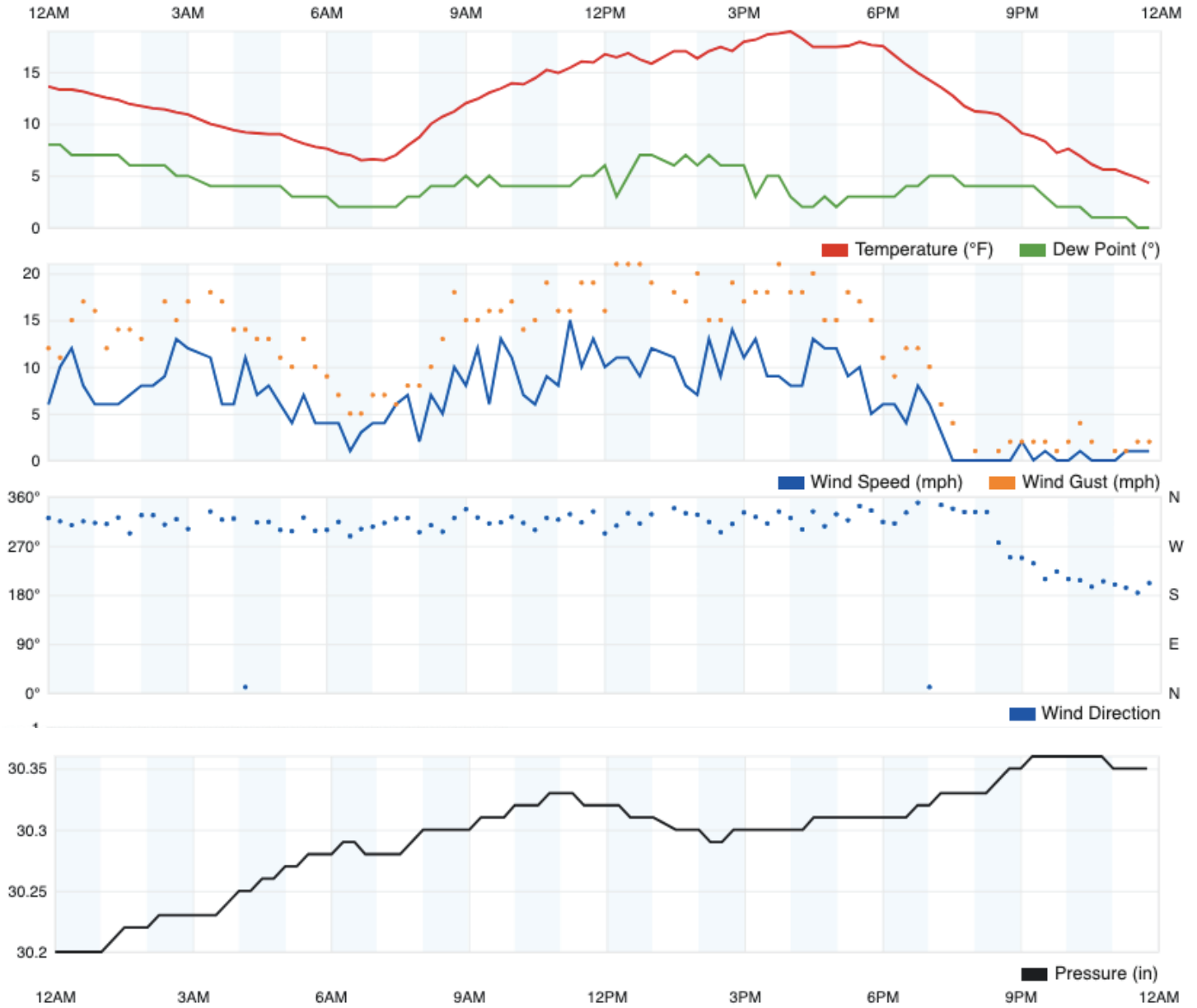
First round games on Thursday have Dakota Valley playing Sioux Falls Christian at 1 p.m., Flandrea taking on Groton Area at 2:45 p.m., St. Thomas More playing Lakota Tech at 7 p.m. and Winner taking on Sioux Valley at 8:45 p.m. All times listed are central time.

The dress-up days at the State A for Groton Area are St. Patrick's Day on Thursday, Formal/Dress Attire on Friday and Black and Gold day on Saturday.

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## Yesterday's Groton Weather Graphs







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Thursday	Thursday Night	Friday	Friday Night	Saturday
				
Mostly Sunny then Sunny and Breezy	Slight Chance Snow and Blustery	Mostly Sunny and Blustery	Mostly Clear	Mostly Sunny and Breezy
<b>High: 31 °F</b>	<b>Low: 2 °F</b>	<b>High: 12 °F</b>	<b>Low: -2 °F</b>	<b>High: 40 °F</b>

## Cold Continues

Today Mar 10 <sup>th</sup> , 2022	Tonight	Friday Mar 12 <sup>th</sup> , 2022	Fri Night
			
24 to 34°	-2 to 5°	5 to 20°	-10 to 2°

Breezy southwest winds today become breezy to windy out of the northwest this evening & tonight, as an Arctic cold front passes.

**-15 to -25 F Wind Chills tonight and Friday night.**



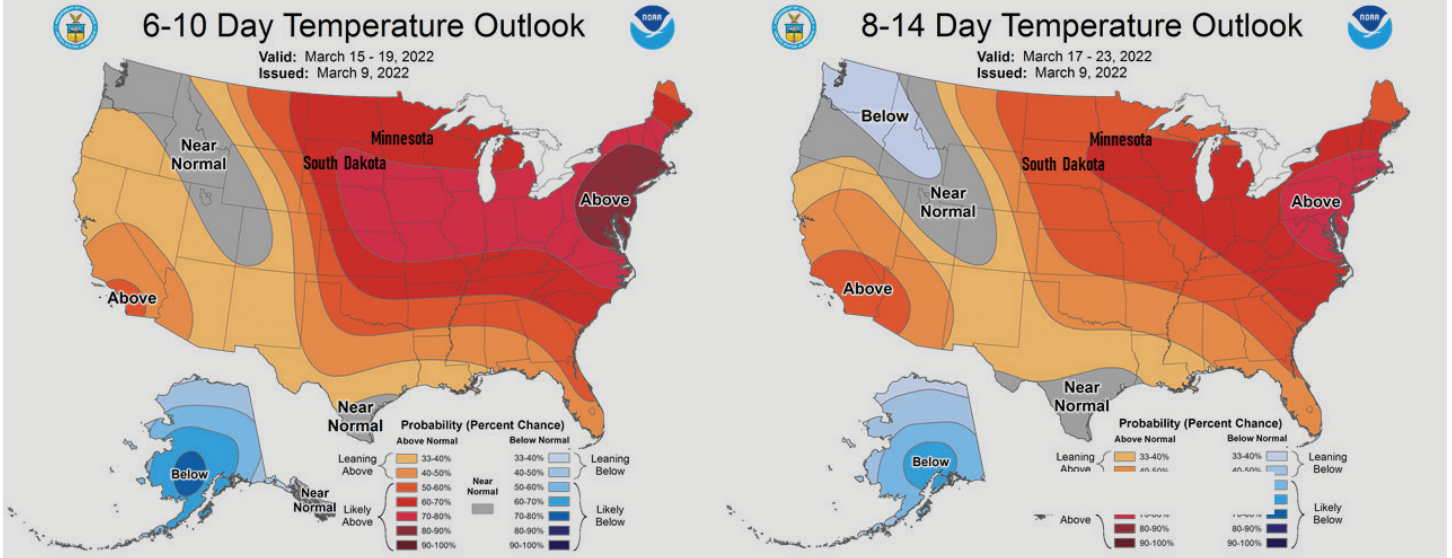
*Much warmer air arrives by Saturday afternoon, and remains into next week*



While southwest breezes and plenty of sunshine will result in highs in the 20s and 30s today, a reinforcing shot of cold air will arrive on gusty northwest winds this evening as an Arctic cold front passes. Temperatures tonight through Saturday morning will be a good 20 to 30 degrees below normal for this time of year.

## Much Warmer Air on the Way

Beginning Saturday afternoon, March 12<sup>th</sup>, temperatures will turn mild. Above normal temperatures are then favored to continue through the middle of the month.



Beginning Saturday afternoon, March 12<sup>th</sup>, temperatures will turn mild. Above normal temperatures are then favored to continue through the middle of the month, along with near to below average precipitation.

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## Today in Weather History

March 10, 2005: High winds of 35 to 45 mph with gusts to near 70 mph occurred across all of central and northeast South Dakota from early morning to early evening. The high winds overturned a semi-truck near Mound City; knocked a large branch down onto a pickup truck in Selby; blew a glass door of a store in Clark off; tore a sign down in Aberdeen, and ripped the roof off a mobile home in South Shore.

March 10, 2009: A low-pressure system tracking across the panhandle of Oklahoma into the Great Lakes region produced moderate to heavy snow across northeast South Dakota from the morning to the evening of the 10th. Strong north to northwest winds gusting to 45 mph resulted in blizzard conditions. Travel became difficult, if not, impossible across northeast South Dakota. Interstate 29 between Watertown and the North Dakota border was closed for several hours. Several minor accidents occurred, along with some injuries. Snowfall amounts included; 3 inches near Milbank; 4 inches near Columbia, Summit, and at Sisseton; 5 inches at Waubay and Wilmot; 6 inches 10 miles northeast of Sisseton, Britton, and Roy Lake; 7 inches in Webster and Westport.

Bitter cold air filtered in behind the low-pressure system bringing record cold to the area. On the 11th, Aberdeen and Sisseton broke their record low highs for the date with afternoon highs only reaching zero. The record at Aberdeen had been in place since 1896. Sisseton also set a record low of 14 degrees below zero on March 12th.

1884: John Park Finley issued the first experimental tornado prediction. Finley had studied the atmospheric parameters that were present during previous tornadoes. Many of these same criteria are still used by operational forecasters today. But the use of tornado forecasts would be banned just a few years later and would remain banned until 1952.

1912 - The barometric pressure reached 29.26 inches at Los Angeles, CA, and 29.46 inches at San Diego CA, setting all-time records for those two locations. (David Ludlum)

1922 - Dodge City, KS, reported a record 24 hour total of 17.5 inches of snow. (The Weather Channel)

1986: Severe thunderstorms and tornadoes hit Indiana, Kentucky, and Ohio. A total of 19 tornadoes occurred. Three of the tornadoes in Indiana reached F3 intensity. A densely populated subdivision of Southeast Lexington, Kentucky, was heavily damaged by a tornado. Twenty people were injured, and 900 homes were destroyed or demolished. A very strong thunderstorm downburst hit the Cincinnati area. At the Greater Cincinnati Airport, windows were blown out of the control tower, injuring the six controllers on duty. At Newport, Kentucky, 120 houses were destroyed from winds estimated from 100 to 140 mph.

1987 - Strong northwesterly winds ushered arctic air into the eastern U.S. Gales lashed the middle and northern Atlantic coast. Winds gusted to 50 mph at Manteo NC and Cape Hatteras NC. (The National Weather Summary) (Storm Data)

1988 - A winter storm produced snow and high winds in the Central Rocky Mountain Region. Snowfall totals in Utah ranged up to 42 inches at Alta, with 36 inches reported at the Brian Head Ski Resort in 24 hours. Winds gusted to 72 mph at La Junta CO and Artesia NM. (The National Weather Summary) (Storm Data)

1989 - Thirty-four cities in the central and southwestern U.S. reported new record high temperatures for the date. The high of 85 degrees at Hanksville UT was a record for March, and Pueblo CO equalled their March record of 86 degrees. Hill City KS warmed from a morning low of 30 degrees to an afternoon high of 89 degrees. (The National Weather Summary)

1990 - Thunderstorms developing along a warm front produced severe weather from southeast Iowa to central Indiana and north central Kentucky. Thunderstorms produced wind gusts to 65 mph at Fort Knox KY, and hail two inches in diameter west of Lebanon IN. Evening thunderstorms over central Oklahoma deluged Guthrie with 4.5 inches of rain. (The National Weather Summary) (Storm Data)

2010 - As many as four people are injured, one is killed and homes were damaged in Center Hill and Pearson, AR, by an EF2 tornado.





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## OUR SOURCE FOR SAFETY

What our family and friends call us usually depends on how they see us or our personality or some particular trait or habit. A good example of this was the name given to Thomas Jonathan Jackson, a Confederate general. He was responsible for commanding his brigade in the first Battle of Bull Run.

Soon after the battle began, his men realized that they faced an overwhelming force of men with what they understood was an unlimited supply of ammunition. But General Jackson and his men stood their ground and fought fiercely.

"There stands Jackson like a stone wall!" exclaimed an officer. That name fit his personality so well that he was always called "Stonewall" Jackson after that.

One day he was painfully wounded in battle. One of his captains asked, "General, how is it that you could keep your senses and appear so utterly insensitive to the danger in the storm of shells and bullets that rained about you?"

"Captain," explained "Stonewall" Jackson, "my religious belief teaches me to feel as safe in battle as I feel in bed."

The Psalmist had that same sense of God's presence and security when he wrote, "You are my refuge and my shield: I have put my hope in Your Word."

The Lord's protective "shield" is always around us and no matter where we are, He is our "refuge." Those who trust in Him and follow His "commands" will always be protected.

Prayer: How great is Your faithfulness, Lord, and how blessed we are to have Your protection, night and day, in peace and conflict. We put our hope in you! In Jesus' Name, Amen.

Scripture For Today: You are my refuge and my shield: I have put my hope in Your Word. Psalm 119:114

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## 2022 Community Events

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

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## The Groton Independent Printed & Mailed Weekly Edition

### Subscription Form

All prices listed include 6.5% Sales Tax

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## News from the Associated Press

### SD Lottery

By The Associated Press undefined

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

Dakota Cash

07-12-26-28-34

(seven, twelve, twenty-six, twenty-eight, thirty-four)

Estimated jackpot: \$38,000

Lotto America

01-03-06-08-49, Star Ball: 2, ASB: 3

(one, three, six, eight, forty-nine; Star Ball: two; ASB: three)

Estimated jackpot: \$8.6 million

Mega Millions

Estimated jackpot: \$20 million

Powerball

13-22-34-51-67, Powerball: 10, Power Play: 2

(thirteen, twenty-two, thirty-four, fifty-one, sixty-seven; Powerball: ten; Power Play: two)

Estimated jackpot: \$99 million

### South Dakota official: Attorney general 'unfit' for office

By STEPHEN GROVES Associated Press

PIERRE, S.D. (AP) — South Dakota Gov. Kristi Noem's cabinet secretary who oversaw an investigation into the state's attorney general for a 2020 fatal car crash on Wednesday urged House lawmakers to bring impeachment charges against him, alleging in a letter that the attorney general was distracted, was untruthful during the investigation and previously traded "disparaging and offensive" text messages with his staff about other state officials.

Secretary of Public Safety Craig Price released the letter sent to House lawmakers Wednesday, stating that the investigation led him to conclude Attorney General Jason Ravensborg is "unfit to hold the position as the chief law enforcement officer" of the state.

Price alleged that an examination of Ravensborg's phone had turned up text messages between the Republican attorney general and his top aides that made "disparaging and offensive statements" about law enforcement officers, a U.S. senator, a supreme court justice and other state officials.

Price's letter did not divulge details about the messages besides one — sent to Ravensborg from a political consultant — that stated, "Well, at least the guy was a Democrat" two days after the crash. No context around that text message was given.

A spokesman for Ravensborg did not immediately respond to a request for comment.

House Speaker Spencer Gosch, a Republican who is overseeing the House's impeachment investigation into Ravensborg's conduct, called the pressure from Noem's office an attempt to "interfere" in an investigation that belonged to the House.

"It's disgusting and it's just a poor way to allow the process to run out," Gosch said, adding that Noem's move was "very calculated."

As a House committee has dug into the crash investigation to determine whether Ravensborg may have committed an impeachable offense surrounding the crash, some lawmakers have questioned whether Noem and Price applied undue pressure on prosecutors as she pushed for Ravensborg to be forced from his office.

Prosecutors last month told the impeachment investigation they were displeased by the governor's decision to release video of Ravensborg being interviewed by detectives while he was still facing charges.

"Some members of the committee appear more interested in discovering why information was provided

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to the public as opposed to the facts of the investigation," Price wrote in the letter.

Noem has called for the attorney general to resign and repeatedly pushed lawmakers to bring impeachment charges against him. Ravensborg pled no contest to a pair of misdemeanors in the crash in August, but has cast it as a tragic accident.

But Price, who previously said he thought Ravensborg should have faced manslaughter charges, said the investigation showed Joseph Boever, who was walking near a rural highway, "was killed because the attorney general had been distracted."

Ravnsborg initially told a 911 dispatcher after the crash that he did not know what he hit and surmised that he hit an animal. He later told investigators that the last thing he remembered before the crash was turning off the radio and looking down at the speedometer.

Ravnsborg has insisted he did not realize he had killed Boever until he returned to the scene the next day and discovered his body.

The House impeachment committee is set to meet Thursday to decide how to wrap up its investigation. The committee has been tasked with making a recommendation to the rest of the House on whether Ravensborg should face impeachment charges.

But Gosch said that Noem's move throws the committee's work into doubt.

"We have to have a serious conversation as to what we can do next or if we can even proceed as a legislative body in the impeachment process," he said. "That's how bad this has become."

House Democratic leader Rep. Jamie Smith, who has previously called for Ravensborg's impeachment and is a part of the House investigation, said he would let the investigation process conclude before he decided to renew calls for Ravensborg to step down or be impeached.

"Timing wise, it's unfortunate," he said of Price's letter. "It muddies the water."

## South Dakota lawmakers pass limit on homegrown medical pot

PIERRE, S.D. (AP) — South Dakota lawmakers on Wednesday passed a proposal place a four-cap limit on the number cannabis plants that medical marijuana patients can grow in their homes.

The Republican-controlled House and Senate have debated for weeks what limits to place on the number of cannabis plants that may be grown in homes after a voter-passed law placed no limit on homegrown plants.

The Senate proposed a limit of three flowering and three non-flowering plants, while the House wanted to do away with homegrown cannabis entirely. On Wednesday, both chambers agreed to limit the number of plants to two flowering and two nonflowering.

The bill passed both chambers and will be sent to Gov. Kristi Noem's desk.

Democratic Rep. Jennifer Keintz argued on the House floor that the limitation would have been one of the lowest in the nation and make it difficult for low-income patients and those who live in rural areas to access medical marijuana.

"It gives them an opportunity to do this at a lower cost and have better access," she said.

But most Republican lawmakers sided with the argument that the limitations were a necessary compromise between what voters passed and an outright ban on homegrown, which other states in the region have issued.

## Native Americans fret as report card released on 2020 census

By FELICIA FONSECA and MIKE SCHNEIDER Associated Press

FLAGSTAFF, Ariz. (AP) — Plans for the 2020 census were set well in advance to ensure Native Americans living on reservations were counted more accurately than during the 2010 census, when almost 5% of the population was missed.

COVID-19, politics and an ever-changing deadline that cut the decennial count short weren't in those plans.

Instead of canvassing neighborhoods and setting up at huge events like the Gathering of Nations in New Mexico, advocates turned to phone banking, dropped off promotional material at entrances to tribal

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lands that were closed to visitors and tried to entice people to fill out the census with sacks of flour and potatoes at roadside stands.

Despite a well-financed campaign, Native Americans expect those living on about 300 reservations across the U.S. to be undercounted again. They'll find out Thursday just how good a job the Census Bureau believes it did in counting every U.S. resident during the 2020 census when the statistical agency releases two reports assessing the national count based on race, Hispanic origin, sex and age.

"At the end of the day when you have your whole religious calendar that has been discontinued, when you are looking at 'How do I support this huge health risk in my community,' it really wasn't at the forefront of everyone's minds," said Ahtza Chavez, executive director of NAVA Education Project, which led the New Mexico Native Census Coalition.

The 2020 census figures showed there are now 9.7 million people who are American Indian and Alaska Native either alone or in combination with another race — a significant increase from the 5.2 million in 2010.

The numbers don't line up with tribes' own enrollment figures, in part because the census allows people to self-identify. Tribes have stricter criteria for enrollment that can include calculating one's percentage of ancestry or tracing lineage to a list of names.

Still, evidence that people were missed can be startlingly obvious. For example, census data showed the Havasupai Tribe in northern Arizona had no one who self-responded to the census.

Tribal members were encouraged to fill out the census online and by mail, and to respond to a census taker, said tribal Chairman Thomas Siyuja Sr. They might have been reluctant to open the door, though, because of the coronavirus, he said. The tribe's reservation deep in a gorge off the Grand Canyon largely has been closed to outsiders during the pandemic.

"It is uncertain how our census count is zero because obviously we as a tribe do exist, and we do have tribal members and other residents who live in Supai," Siyuja said in an email Tuesday.

Up until the 20th century, Native Americans weren't regularly counted in the once-a-decade census. They first were counted on reservations and in the general population in 1900, decades before the U.S. considered them citizens.

More recent changes allow Native Americans, Alaska Natives and other Indigenous peoples to write in their ties to specific tribes or communities.

The numbers matter because they are used to distribute \$1.5 trillion in federal funding each year and to determine congressional representation. Montana gained a congressional seat after the latest census, but Arizona fell short of the numbers needed to add one.

The tribal self-response rate among Arizona tribes, not including the Navajo Nation, was less than 27%. Tribes in Montana and the Dakotas didn't fare much better. Washington state had the highest self-response rate for tribes at around 60%.

Even before Thursday's results are released, tribal leaders worried the coronavirus pandemic would contribute to an undercount. Tribes across the country shut down their reservations, making follow-up interviews with unresponsive households almost impossible for door-knocking census takers and forcing advocates to get creative.

In New Mexico, tribal advocates campaigned on social media, the radio and through videos produced in eight Indigenous languages. They passed out coloring books with census messaging, deployed Wi-Fi hot spots to help communities struggling with internet access and printed flyers to let people know head start centers, health care and housing are funded through census data, Chavez said.

"We went above and beyond, like miracle workers," she said.

The Klamath Tribes, based in Chiloquin, Oregon, did raffles and drive-thru dinner events to help people fill out the census and drew attention in a video to inaccurate figures for tribal housing in the 2010 census. Tribal Councilwoman Willa Powless said the data showed 38 homes on the tribe's land, but the tribe had more than 80.

"That really motivated people to want to participate," she said. "It was a shock for tribal members to see how severely undercounted we were."

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During the last census in 2010, there was a 4.8% net undercount of Native American and Alaskan Natives living on reservations, the highest of any race. Black people were undercounted by more than 2%, Hispanics were undercounted by 1.5%, and Asians were undercounted by 0.08%. Non-Hispanic whites were overcounted by 0.8%.

Chavez thinks the undercount will be higher for Native Americans this time around. While a handful of pueblos saw high self-response rates because of previous investments in broadband, others didn't, she said.

Many tribal lands were still closed when census field operations ended in mid-October 2020. By then plans had already gotten complicated.

The Census Bureau initially planned for up to 1,000 census takers to spread out across the Navajo Nation — the largest Native American reservation in the U.S., spanning 27,000 square miles (69,000 square kilometers) in Utah, New Mexico and Arizona. It ended up with less than 300 at the peak, said James Tucker, an attorney with the Lawyer's Committee for Civil Rights who chairs a Census Bureau advisory committee.

North Dakota state Rep. Marvin Nelson, whose district includes the Turtle Mountain Band of Chippewa reservation, is worried about a severe undercount in his district since census operations were interrupted by the pandemic. He said his county was pegged at having 12,000 residents in the 2020 census, while federal numbers put the tribal population alone at 17,500 people.

"The way the census was conducted was really problematic," Nelson said last week. "Almost no one got a census mailing, and then due to COVID, there was no home-to-home" door-knocking by census takers.

## Indian Health Service head nominated amid tough challenges

By FELICIA FONSECA Associated Press

FLAGSTAFF, Ariz. (AP) — President Joe Biden announced Wednesday he is nominating veteran health administrator Roselyn Tso to oversee the federal agency that delivers health care to more than 2.5 million Native Americans and Alaska Natives.

The selection of Tso to lead the Indian Health Services comes amid a push from tribal health advocates for stability in the agency. Acting directors have filled the role for years at the agency that's chronically underfunded and struggles to meet the needs of Indian Country.

Tso, an enrolled member of the Navajo Nation, most recently served as director of the agency's Navajo region, which stretches across parts of Arizona, New Mexico and Utah. She began her career with the Indian Health Service in 1984 and held various roles in the agency's Portland, Oregon, area and at its headquarters in Maryland, the White House said.

Navajo Nation President Jonathan Nez said Tso is "exceptionally qualified" to lead the agency and pointed specifically to her work during the coronavirus pandemic, when the Navajo Nation had one of the highest per capita infection rates in the U.S.

"Throughout the COVID-19 pandemic, her leadership, expertise and compassion have helped to reduce the spread of this modern-day monster and save lives," Nez said in a statement.

Tso's nomination is subject to confirmation from the U.S. Senate. She holds a bachelor's degree in interdisciplinary studies from Marylhurst University in Oregon and a master's degree in organizational management from the University of Phoenix.

The Indian Health Service repeatedly has been the focus of congressional hearings and scathing government reports that seek reform. The agency runs two dozen hospitals and about 90 other health care facilities around the country, most of which are small and on or near Native American reservations.

Other hospitals and health care facilities are run by tribes or tribal organizations under contract with the agency.

The National Indian Health Board wrote to Biden last November, saying it was disappointed he had not made the nomination of an Indian Health Service director a higher priority, particularly because the coronavirus pandemic has disproportionately sickened and killed Native Americans.

Tribal members also have been hit hard as COVID-19 fueled America's drug crisis, and have some of the worst health disparities among other groups in the U.S.

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The health board didn't specifically weigh in on Tso's nomination but recently outlined expectations for a new director. Among them are advocating for full and mandatory funding of the Indian Health Service, consulting with tribes in a meaningful way, investing long-term in public health infrastructure and keeping tribes up to date on agency actions and funding decisions.

## Editorial Roundup: South Dakota

By The Associated Press undefined  
Yankton Press & Dakotan. March 7, 2022.

Editorial: Energy Plans And The Situation At Hand

At the very least, it appears the war in Ukraine has produced one point upon which Americans can agree: This country must do more to become "energy independent."

But after that, the path forward diverges mightily.

With oil prices surging amid war and sanctions, there are those who are arguing the United States should expand oil drilling and restart the controversial Keystone XL pipeline project that was to send Alberta tar sand oil from Canada to the Gulf of Mexico.

There are also those proclaiming that it's time to move more toward renewable energy, not only to expand our energy reserves, but also to combat the effects of climate change.

Fossil fuels are a short-term answer, while renewable energy is increasingly becoming a fact of the present and will define our future. The issue, of course, is getting to the point where renewable energy is feasible in a society geared largely (but gradually less so) to run on petrol.

The current crisis's impact on energy prices (and the associated pain that comes with it) is nothing new. We've dealt with the fallout from volatile oil markets for almost 50 years, and the pain of the more turbulent times has always been acute. So, one must wonder when we will finally realize that relying so much on petroleum will always leave us prone to such hard, sometimes even devastating, fluctuations.

The demand to achieve energy independence by drilling for more oil and to remove us from reliance on foreign producers is both simplistic and complex.

As it turns out, this nation has learned lessons from the past: According to the U.S. Energy Information Administration, the United States has emerged in the past decade as the world's leading producer of oil, accounting for 20% of all oil on the market. Through continual development in places such as North Dakota and elsewhere, we have become a fossil-fuel superpower, producing an estimated average of about 18.61 million barrels a day. (Notably, the U.S. consumes an estimated 20.54 million barrels per day, also tops in the world.)

However, drilling for more U.S. oil doesn't mean it will be earmarked for domestic consumption. American companies sell to the world, just as foreign interests do. Unless the U.S. begins mandating that oil produced domestically must remain here (which isn't exactly a "free market" approach), we will continue to be at the mercy of what the global market dictates. As such, "energy independence" may be more of a handy slogan and a dream than an achievable goal.

There's also the issue of Alberta tar sand oil, which — contrary to what you might conclude based on some of the current rhetoric — is pumped through the U.S. via pipelines already (including one that passes on the east side of Yankton) without the Keystone XL pipeline. Meanwhile, overall U.S. pipeline capacity is far from full. Last December, Reuters reported that the nation's oil pipelines were running only at 50% capacity, mostly due to the recent downward trends in the oil market.

On the other hand, renewable energy is growing. For instance, the current spike in fuel prices is causing more people to turn toward electric or hybrid vehicles, including electric trucks. Also, more industries are retooling for renewable fuels. And with climate change now a primary concern for most countries, the move away from fossil fuels figures to accelerate.

However, the U.S. is still in an early transition phase and figures to have a dependence on fossil fuels to some degree for a few decades. Renewable energy is the long-term solution, but the changeover to it will take time.



Which brings us to the current moment. This crisis may be a game-changer in that transition; perhaps now, we will commit more vigorously to a move away from fossil fuels. But in the meantime, we must deal with the issues now, which should produce an intriguing debate in the weeks ahead.

END

## Man acquitted in fatal shooting of daughter's boyfriend

ABERDEEN, S.D. (AP) — A jury in Brown County has acquitted a man who claimed he was defending himself and his daughter when he fatally shot her boyfriend in 2020.

After eight hours of deliberation, the jury on Tuesday night found Jarrett Jones not guilty of first-degree murder, second-degree murder and first- and second-degree manslaughter.

Jon Schumacher, of Mina, was shot twice in the shop area of Jones' home on Jan. 2, 2020.

According to testimony during the trial, Schumacher was in a relationship with Jones' daughter, Makayla Jones. But they got in an argument at the Jones residence and she told Schumacher the relationship was over, Aberdeen American News reported.

Schumacher was later arrested for driving drunk and taken to jail where his ex-wife picked him up and drove him back to the Jones house to retrieve a coat, according to testimony.

Prosecutors say that while Schumacher was making drunken threats, it didn't escalate to violence and was not self-defense.

But, the defense said Jones was legally justified in shooting Schumacher to defend his life and his daughter's life.

## SD regulators to consider Keystone XL pipeline's exit

PIERRE, S.D. (AP) — More than a year after President Joe Biden revoked the federal permit for the contentious Keystone XL oil pipeline, lawyers for the halted project are asking South Dakota regulators to consider nearly all activities in the state officially ended.

Parent company TC Energy has filed a motion with the South Dakota Public Utilities Commission asking the three-member panel to release a \$15.6 million road bond that regulators required as part of the 2010 decision granting the South Dakota permit.

The commission on Tuesday will also consider TC Energy's request to approve removal of the public liaison officer in South Dakota, saying her work is finished.

"Keystone has no remaining activities in South Dakota that are within the scope of the permit or the conditions," the motion states, KELO-TV reported.

"Keystone has returned the workforce camp sites to the landowners and transferred the storm water prevention plan permits to the landowners. Keystone sold the pump stations to a salvage company and has no further legal responsibility for these sites," attorneys for the company wrote.

Calgary-based TC Energy has said it would work with government agencies "to ensure a safe termination of and exit" from the partially built line, which was to transport crude from the oil sand fields of western Canada to Steele City, Nebraska where it would connect to other pipelines that feed oil refineries on the U.S. Gulf Coast.

Construction on the 1,200-mile (1,930-kilometer) pipeline began in 2020 when former President Donald Trump revived the long-delayed project after it had stalled under the Obama administration.

Biden canceled the pipeline's border crossing permit when he took office over longstanding concerns that burning oil sands crude could make climate change worse.

## US VP Harris embraces call for war crimes probe of Russia

By AAMER MADHANI Associated Press

WARSAW, Poland (AP) — U.S. Vice President Kamala Harris on Thursday embraced calls for an international war crimes investigation of Russia over its invasion of Ukraine and the bombing of civilians, including

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a maternity hospital.

Speaking in Warsaw, where she is demonstrating U.S. support for NATO's eastern flank allies, Harris expressed outrage over the bombing Wednesday of the maternity hospital and scenes of bloodied pregnant women being evacuated.

"Absolutely there should be an investigation, and we should all be watching," said Harris.

Standing alongside Harris, Polish President Andrzej Duda said "it is obvious to us that in Ukraine Russians are committing war crimes."

THIS IS A BREAKING NEWS UPDATE. AP's earlier story follows below.

WARSAW, Poland (AP) — Vice President Kamala Harris on Thursday praised the Polish people for their generosity for taking in more than 1 million refugees since Russia invaded Ukraine last month.

Harris made the comments as she met with Polish Prime Minister Mateusz Morawiecki hours after the U.S. House passed a massive spending bill that includes \$13.6 billion in aid for Ukraine and its European allies. The legislation includes \$6.8 billion to care for refugees and other economic aid to allies.

"I've been watching or reading about the work of ordinary people doing extraordinary things, and so I bring you thanks from the American people," Harris said.

Harris also met with Polish President Andrzej Duda, and the two were scheduled to hold an afternoon news conference. Later Thursday, the vice president was slated to meet with Ukrainian refugees who have fled to Poland since the Russian invasion began.

The vice president is also scheduled to meet with Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau while in Warsaw. The Canadian leader has been in Europe in recent days meeting with allies about Ukraine.

Harris' whirlwind visit to Poland and Romania was billed by the White House as a chance for the vice president to consult with two of the leaders from eastern flank NATO nations about the growing humanitarian crisis caused by the Russian invasion of Ukraine.

Already, more than 2 million refugees have fled Ukraine — with more than half coming to Poland — and even more expected to arrive in the days ahead.

But differences between Warsaw and Washington over a Polish plan to send Soviet-made fighter jets to a base in Germany for Ukraine's use have cast a shadow over Harris' visit to Poland. Just as Harris arrived in Warsaw late Wednesday evening, the Pentagon definitively rejected the idea.

The proposal was publicly floated by Poland — without first consulting the U.S. — days after Secretary of State Antony Blinken said the Biden administration was "very, very actively" looking at a proposal under which Ukraine's neighbor Poland would supply Kyiv with Soviet-era fighters and in turn receive American F-16s to make up for their loss. Polish government officials, however, insisted any transfer of planes must be done within the NATO framework.

On Wednesday, the Pentagon shut the door on the prospect of NATO transferring jets to Ukraine, saying such a move with a U.S. and NATO connection would run a "high risk" of escalating the Russia-Ukraine war.

Gen. Tod D. Wolters, the commander of U.S. European Command, said in a statement Thursday that the "most effective way to support the Ukrainian military in their fight against Russia is to provide increased amounts of anti-tank weapons and air defense systems." That effort by the U.S. and allies is ongoing, Wolters added.

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

## Strike on Ukrainian hospital that killed 3 draws outrage

By EVGENIY MALOLETKA and MSTYSLAV CHERNOV Associated Press

MARIUPOL, Ukraine (AP) — A Russian airstrike on a Mariupol maternity hospital that killed three people drew outrage on Thursday, with Ukrainian and British officials branding it a war crime. As efforts to reach a broad cease-fire failed, emergency workers renewed efforts to get vital food and medical supplies into besieged cities, and to get traumatized residents out.

Mariupol's city council and Ukraine's president said a child was among the dead in Wednesday's attack in the southern port. Another 17 people were wounded, including women waiting to give birth, doctors

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and children buried in the rubble.

Images of pregnant women covered in dust and blood dominated news reports in many countries, and brought a new wave of horror at the 2-week-old war sparked by Russia's invasion, which has killed thousands of soldiers and civilians, driven more than 2 million people from Ukraine and shaken the foundations of European security.

Bombs also fell on two hospitals in Zhytomyr, west of the capital, Kyiv, the mayor said, as Russian forces intensified their siege of Ukrainian cities. The World Health Organization said it has confirmed 18 attacks on medical facilities since the Russian invasion began two weeks ago.

As the war entered its third week, Western officials said Russian forces have made little progress on the ground in recent days. But they have intensified the bombardment of Mariupol and other cities, trapping hundreds of thousands of people, with food and water running short.

Temporary cease-fires to allow evacuations and humanitarian aid have often faltered, with Ukraine accusing Russia of continuing their bombardments. But Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy said 35,000 people managed to get out on Wednesday from several besieged towns, and more efforts were underway on Thursday from towns and cities in eastern and southern Ukraine — including Mariupol — as well as the Kyiv suburbs.

The Mariupol city council posted a video Thursday showing buses driving down a highway, with a note saying that a convoy bringing food and medicine was on the way despite several days of thwarted efforts to reach the city.

"Everyone is working to get help to the people of Mariupol. And it will come," said Mayor Vadym Boychenko.

Images from the city, where hundreds have died and workers hurried to bury some of the bodies in a mass grave, have drawn condemnation from around the world. The living have resorted to breaking into shops for food or melting snow for water. The city has been without heat for days as nighttime temperatures fall below freezing and daytime ones hover just above it.

The ground shook more than a mile away when the series of blasts hit a children's and maternity hospital in Mariupol. Explosions blew out windows and ripped away much of the front of one building. Police and soldiers rushed to the scene to evacuate victims, carrying a bleeding woman with a swollen belly on a stretcher past burning and mangled cars. Another woman wailed as she clutched her child.

Britain's Armed Forces minister, James Heappey, said that whether hitting the hospital was "indiscriminate" fire into a built-up area or a deliberate targeting, "it is a war crime." White House press secretary Jen Psaki called the attacks on innocent civilians "barbaric."

Volodymyr Nikulin, a top regional police official, standing in the ruins called the attack "a war crime without any justification."

Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov dismissed concerns about civilian casualties as "pathetic shrieks" from Russia's enemies. He claimed without providing evidence that the Mariupol hospital had been seized by far-right radical fighters who were using it as a base — despite the fact that photographs from the aftermath show pregnant women and children at the site.

Several rounds of talks have not stopped the fighting, and a meeting in a Turkish Mediterranean resort between Lavrov and his Ukrainian counterpart Dmytro Kuleba failed to yield much common ground.

In their highest-level talks since the war began, Kuleba said the two sides discussed a 24-hour cease-fire but did not make progress. He said Russia was still seeking "surrender from Ukraine."

"This is not what they are going to get," he said, adding that he was willing to continue the dialogue.

French President Emmanuel Macron and German Chancellor Olaf Scholz, meanwhile, called for an "immediate cease-fire" in Ukraine, in a phone call with Russian President Vladimir Putin on Thursday.

Lavrov also said Russia was ready for more negotiations but showed no sign of softening Moscow's demands. He said Russian President Vladimir Putin could meet with Zelenskyy but only after further negotiations about Russia's broader grievances. Russia has alleged that western-looking, U.S.-backed Ukraine posed a threat to its security — but Western officials suspect Putin would like to install a government friendly to Moscow in Kyiv as part of efforts to draw the ex-Soviet state back into its orbit.

As the war enters its third week, Russia's military is struggling, facing stronger than expected Ukrainian

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resistance and heavier losses of its own troops. But Putin's invading force of more than 150,000 troops retains possibly insurmountable advantages in firepower as it bears down on key cities.

Despite often heavy shelling on populated areas, American military officials reported little change on the ground over the previous 24 hours, other than Russian progress against the cities of Kharkiv and Mykolaiv, in heavy fighting.

Western countries have sought to hasten the war's end by imposing punishing sanctions on Russia, and a cascade of global companies have abandoned the country, plunging its economy into isolation.

Britain added more oligarchs to its sanctions list on Thursday, including Roman Abramovich, the billionaire Premier League soccer club Chelsea. The government said Abramovich's assets — including Chelsea — were frozen, he was banned from visiting the U.K. and barred from transactions with U.K. individuals and businesses.

The fighting has repeatedly raised the specter of a nuclear disaster. It knocked out power to the decommissioned Chernobyl nuclear plant on Wednesday, raising fears about the spent radioactive fuel stored there that must be kept cool. But the U.N. nuclear watchdog agency said it saw "no critical impact on safety."

Ukrainian Deputy Prime Minister Iryna Vereshchuk pleaded Thursday with the Russian military to allow access for repair crews to restore electricity to the plant, and to fix a damaged gas pipeline in the south that has left Mariupol and other towns.

## United on Ukraine, EU tackles the devil in details at summit

By SAMUEL PETREQUIN Associated Press

VERSAILLES, France (AP) — When French President Emmanuel Macron picked the lavish Versailles Palace for this week's summit of European Union leaders, he didn't anticipate the grimness of the Ukraine war.

With the coronavirus pandemic receding, the two-day meeting starting Thursday should have been devoted to optimistic discussions on the EU's new economic growth and investment model.

Russian President Vladimir Putin's decision to invade his neighbor turned everything upside down.

With European nations united in backing Ukraine's resistance with unprecedented economic sanctions, three main topics now dominate the agenda: Ukraine's application for fast-track EU membership; how to wean the bloc off its Russian energy dependency; and bolstering the region's defense capabilities.

The EU has showed remarkable cohesion since the war started last month. It quickly adopted massive sanctions targeting Putin himself, Russia's financial system and its high-maintenance oligarchs. It also took the unprecedented step of collectively supplying weapons to a country under attack.

The EU agreed to spend 450 million euros (\$500 million) on buying weapons for Ukraine. Meanwhile, Germany said it would raise defense spending above 2% of gross domestic product — and broke with a long tradition of refusing to export weapons to conflict zones when it agreed to send anti-tank and air defense missiles to Ukraine.

"In stepping up European defense, we must find a consensus within the EU, that sometimes the best way of achieving peace is the willingness to use military strength," Estonian Prime Minister Kaja Kallas said.

According to a draft of the summit's conclusions obtained by The Associated Press, leaders will agree in Versailles that they "must bolster resolutely (their) investment in defense capabilities and innovative technologies," and to continue efforts to make the EU "a stronger and more capable security provider."

But two weeks into the war, divisions among leaders have started to surface on integrating Ukraine and severing energy ties with Moscow.

Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy wants his country to quickly become an EU member, but an agreement on that point won't be achieved this week, despite more prodding from Foreign Minister Dmytro Kuleba.

"This step would provide an enormous injection of hope to the Ukrainian people. In these dark times, we need this hope more than ever," Kubela wrote in an opinion article in the Financial Times. "Leaders of the EU, it is your turn to make history."

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The Ukrainian fast-track bid has received warm support in Eastern European countries, but EU officials have stressed the process could take years, with unanimity among current members required to allow a newcomer in the club.

"This will not happen in the short term, because this is a whole process taking many years," Dutch Prime Minister Mark Rutte said Wednesday.

Another key deterrent to a hasty decision is the specific EU treaty clause that if a member falls victim to armed aggression, the other EU countries have an obligation to aid and assist it by all the means in their power.

"The chance of all member states agreeing to admit Ukraine while it is at war with Russia is virtually zero, as it could trigger conflict with Moscow," said Luigi Scazzieri, a senior research fellow at the Centre for European Reform.

On energy, all agree that the EU should reduce its dependency on imports of Russian gas, oil and coal while accelerating the green transition. The EU imports 90% of the natural gas used to generate electricity, heat homes and supply industry, with Russia supplying almost 40% of EU gas and a quarter of its oil.

Earlier this week, the European Commission proposed to diversify natural gas supplies and speed up renewable energy development in a bid to reduce EU demand for Russian gas by two-thirds before the end of the year.

EU leaders are expected to agree on that, but it's highly unlikely they will follow Washington's lead and unanimously endorse a full embargo on Russian oil and gas imports. France won't defend what it considers a radical measure and German Chancellor Olaf Scholz has made clear he opposes the idea.

Efforts to agree on a boycott are complicated because some EU countries, including Germany and Italy, are much more dependent than others on Russia. Poland gets 67% of its oil from Russia, while Ireland receives only 5%.

Rutte said it was essential that the EU should "not (go) hastily in the direction of a complete ban on gas and oil from Russia."

"Because we are very much dependent, that's the painful reality," he said. "(A ban) would have huge ramifications on all our economies ... but even up to Ukraine itself, because we still have to find the diesel to put in the trucks which are driving into Ukraine to help them."

Some countries could however decide to go solo and impose an embargo even without an EU deal, since members are free to make their own energy choices.

Divergences on how the the EU should tackle the energy price surge due to the Ukraine conflict also remain ahead of the meeting. Greece has proposed a six-point plan including a price-cap mechanism to address the spiking energy prices, but that idea has been dismissed as unrealistic by other members.

"Collectively, it is a mission impossible," a EU diplomat said. "Private sector has long-term investment deals, that would lead to court cases. It is very complicated." The person spoke anonymously ahead of the summit in line with EU practice.

## Two years into COVID, was \$800B payroll aid plan worth it?

By JOSH BOAK Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — President Donald Trump rolled out the Paycheck Protection Program to catapult the U.S. economy into a quick recovery from the coronavirus pandemic by helping small businesses stay open and their employees working. President Joe Biden tweaked it to try to direct more of the money to poorer communities and minority-owned companies.

Now, almost two years after the program made its debut, the question is what taxpayers got for the \$800 billion. The Biden administration says its version of the program helped prevent racial inequality from worsening, while a prominent academic study suggests the overall price tag was high per job saved and most of the benefits accrued to the affluent.

Nearly a year after the implementation of its \$1.9 trillion coronavirus relief package, the Biden administration is arguing that it made critical adjustments to the forgivable loan program, pointing to internal figures

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showing that more benefits went to poorer communities, racial minorities and the smallest of businesses — those in which the owner is the sole employee.

“The administration came into office with a big focus on racial and social equity, and small business is a significant part of it,” said Michael Negron, the senior White House adviser for small businesses. “For our equity goals, entrepreneurship is important because it helps create generational wealth.”

However, an outside study suggests that the program — commonly known as PPP — was troublingly expensive per job saved and the payments mostly benefitted business owners who were best prepared to weather the pandemic. On the whole, the study implies that just 23% to 34% of PPP dollars went to workers who would have lost jobs, at a cost of as much as \$258,000 per job retained.

The conflicting views of PPP are part of a broader debate over how to help an economy in crisis. There are pressures to get the right amount of money out as fast as possible without driving more inequality or triggering other forms of blowback such as high inflation.

Across two presidencies, Congress approved an unprecedented \$5.8 trillion in relief spending that included new interventions such as forgivable loans, direct payments and an expanded child tax credit that was deposited into people’s bank accounts monthly.

When MIT economist David Autor analyzed PPP with other economists, he saw a tool that was too blunt. The U.S. never developed the data systems to monitor what was happening to individual businesses’ payrolls, unlike in Canada, the Scandinavian region, Portugal and Brazil. Those systems would have made it easier to allocate money based on genuine need during a downturn. The U.S. failed to invest in its own data resources and could not target the aid as a result.

“The U.S. has instead ‘starved the beast,’” Autor said. “The result is not less government. It’s simply less effective government.”

By changing the PPP program’s guidelines, the Biden administration was trying to prevent the pandemic from further widening the country’s racial wealth gap.

Black Americans make up about 12% of the U.S. population, yet they control just 2% of the assets from private business ownership that are often key for ascending the economic ladder, according to the Federal Reserve. Just 4.3% of total U.S. household wealth belongs to Black Americans and 2.5% to Hispanic Americans, significantly below their share of the total U.S. population.

When the Trump administration unveiled PPP in 2020, the full impacts from the pandemic were just beginning to be felt in the economy. There was a race to get money out as quickly as possible because of how unpredictable the situation was, so the loans went through major banks that often had existing relationships with eligible businesses for the sake of expediency.

The program enjoyed bipartisan support and the treasury secretary at the time, Steven Mnuchin, told a congressional committee in September 2020 that the payments had supported 50 million jobs. Yet as he pushed for additional aid, Mnuchin said the most important thing during the pandemic was to provide aid “quickly.”

The need for speed also made it harder for historically disadvantaged groups to access the money. That’s why the Biden administration changed the guidelines and rules after taking office.

It set up a 14-day period in February 2021 when only companies with fewer than 20 employees could apply for PPP loans. It changed how PPP loans were calculated so that sole proprietors, independent contractors and self-employed people could receive funding equal to their needs. More of the loans went through community and minority-owned financial institutions.

As a result of the changes, PPP issued about 2 million loans last year to businesses in low- to moderate-income communities, a 67% increase from a year earlier, according to figures provided by administration officials. There were 6 million businesses with fewer than 20 employees that got loans, a 35% increase from the program during the Trump administration.

Because the administration was targeting more companies — including those in which the owner was the only employee — the average size of a PPP loan decreased. It averaged \$42,500 last year, down dramatically from \$101,500 in 2020.

"We inherited a program from the previous administration that was rife with inequities," said Isabel Guzman, the head of the Small Business Administration.

Still, the analysis by Autor and other economists says the distributions during the Biden administration "had no discernable effect on employment." That's likely because the job market began to recover in May 2020 despite waves of infections that slowed momentum. Because there were fewer jobs at risk, there were fewer jobs to save.

Autor estimates that the richest 20% of households captured about 85% benefits of the program. It could be that the changes by Biden did make PPP more equitable, but the proof won't come until tax receipts roll in over the next few years, he said.

"They tried to be better stewards of the program, which they had the luxury of doing because the crisis was not as urgent," Autor said. "It's not that PPP did nothing; it was a life saver for some small businesses and their creditors. It was also an astoundingly large handout from future generations of U.S. taxpayers" to some profitable companies.

## Live updates: No breakthrough in Ukraine-Russia talks

By The Associated Press undefined

The latest developments on the Russia-Ukraine war:

**ANTALYA, Turkey** — Ukraine's foreign minister says talks between the top diplomats of Moscow and Kyiv produced no breakthrough on ending the war in Ukraine following Russia's invasion.

Ukrainian Foreign Minister Dmytro Kuleba said he attended the meeting Thursday with Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov in Turkey to discuss humanitarian corridors and a cease-fire.

Kuleba said there are "other decision-makers" in Russia who need to be consulted, adding that he agreed with Lavrov to continue to seek a solution to humanitarian issues caused by the war.

He said Moscow is not ready to offer a cease-fire. He said: "They seek Ukraine's surrender. This is not going to happen."

Kuleba said "the last thing" he wanted was to kill hope for Ukrainians seeking safe passage out of cities besieged by Russian bombardments and attacks.

**WARSAW, Poland** — U.S. Vice President Kamala Harris is praising the Polish people for taking in more than 1 million refugees since Russia invaded Ukraine.

Harris made the comments Thursday as she met with Polish Prime Minister Mateusz Morawiecki and hours after the U.S. House passed a massive spending bill that includes aid for Ukraine and its European allies. The legislation includes \$6.8 billion to care for refugees and other economic help.

"I've been watching or reading about the work of ordinary people doing extraordinary things, and so I bring you thanks from the American people," Harris said.

Harris also met with Polish President Andrzej Duda. They were scheduled to hold an afternoon news conference.

Harris is also scheduled to meet with Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau while in Warsaw. The Canadian leader has been in Europe in recent days meeting with allies about Ukraine.

**PARIS** — French President Emmanuel Macron and German Chancellor Olaf Scholz have called for an immediate cease-fire in Ukraine in a phone call with Russian President Vladimir Putin.

A statement from the French presidency Thursday said that any solution to the crisis must be negotiated between Russia and Ukraine.

The three leaders agreed to stay in close contact in the coming days, the statement said.

Russia's invasion of Ukraine is the main issue at a summit of European Union heads of states and government at the Versailles Palace, in France on Thursday and Friday.

**BEIJING** — China is easing government exchange rate controls to let the Russian ruble fall faster in value

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against the Chinese yuan and help insulate Beijing from economic sanctions on Moscow.

The margin by which the ruble is allowed to fluctuate against the yuan in state-controlled daily trading will be doubled in size to 10% above or below the day's opening price starting Friday, the China Foreign Exchange Trade System announced.

The ruble has lost about 40% of its value since Western governments cut off some Russian banks from the international SWIFT payment system in retaliation for President Vladimir Putin's decision to invade Ukraine. Russia's central bank was blocked from using its foreign currency reserves to defend the exchange rate.

China has avoided joining other governments in criticizing Putin's attack and has criticized Western sanctions. Chinese companies are giving no sign they are joining Western counterparts in pulling out of Russia, but economists say they are likely to take advantage of pressure on Moscow to strike better deals.

**ANTALYA, Turkey** — Russia's foreign minister is dismissing concerns about Russian military attacks on civilians, including on a maternity hospital, as "pathetic shrieks" from its enemies.

Sergey Lavrov met his Ukrainian counterpart in Turkey on Thursday in the highest-level Russian-Ukrainian talks since the war began last month.

In the Russian government's first public comment on Wednesday's strike on a maternity hospital in the besieged city of Mariupol, Lavrov didn't deny or shy away from responsibility for the attack.

He claimed the site had earlier been seized by Ukrainian far-right radical fighters who were using it as a base. Even though there were many images of civilians wounded in the attack and the city council said a child was among the three people killed, Lavrov claimed all the patients and nurses were moved of the hospital before the assault.

Lavrov said Russia was ready for more negotiations but showed no sign of softening Moscow's stance in the dispute.

**LONDON** — Britain's government says it is introducing a new system letting Ukrainians into the United Kingdom, after coming under heavy criticism for not doing enough to help those fleeing the Russian invasion.

Fewer than 1,000 visas have been granted so far, out of more than 22,000 applications for Ukrainians to join their families in the U.K.

Many people, including Ukraine's ambassador to the U.K., have complained that refugees face a cumbersome visa application process to enter Britain. Some people have needed to travel between visa offices in different European cities.

Home Secretary Priti Patel said Thursday that from next Tuesday, Ukrainians with passports no longer need to travel to a visa application center to provide fingerprints. They can instead apply to enter the U.K. online and give their fingerprints after arrival.

**HELSINKI** — Finland's president says he is due to talk with Russian President Vladimir Putin by phone on Friday.

Sauli Niinisto said Thursday it is important to keep talking with Moscow to achieve peace in Ukraine through diplomacy and prevent the conflict from spreading elsewhere in Europe.

He referred to recent phone calls and efforts by the French President Emmanuel Macron and German Chancellor Olaf Scholz to keep touch with Putin.

The Finnish leader, however, noted that Putin is keen to engage in discussions mainly with the United States rather than with European leaders and that most messages from the Kremlin are directed to Washington, not to European capitals.

Finland, which is a member of the European Union but not NATO, shares a 1,340-kilometer (833-mile) border with Russia. A nationwide poll last week showed that for the first time a majority of those questioned said the Nordic nation should join NATO.

**GENEVA** — The World Economic Forum, best known as the host of an annual meeting of elites in Davos,



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Switzerland, says it's freezing all its relations with Russian entities following the invasion of Ukraine.

Russian President Vladimir Putin last participated in the event at a virtual "Davos Agenda" meeting in January 2021. Previously, he attended the event in person.

The forum said in a statement Thursday that it "will not engage with any sanctioned individual or institution in any of our activities," including the annual meeting.

Russia and Belarus were also suspended Thursday from another international forum: the Northern Dimension, which includes the European Union, Iceland and Norway.

**LONDON** — Two British directors on the board of Chinese telecom equipment giant Huawei's British subsidiary have quit, with news reports saying the resignations were prompted by the company's failure to criticize Russia's invasion of Ukraine.

Sir Andrew Cahn and Sir Ken Olisa resigned on Wednesday.

Sky News, citing unidentified sources, said Cahn and Olisa had urged Huawei to criticize Putin "but the company refused." The British Broadcasting Corp. said the company's silence "made their positions untenable" but gave no indication whether they asked Huawei to criticize the Russian attack.

The Chinese government has declined to join other governments in criticizing the Kremlin and blames Washington for the Feb. 24 invasion.

Huawei Technologies Ltd. is the world's biggest maker of switching equipment for phone and internet carriers.

**LONDON** — German fashion brand Hugo Boss and U.S. hotel chain Hilton are the latest brands to pause their Russian businesses over the Ukraine invasion.

Hugo Boss said Thursday that it has temporarily closed its stores and suspended its own retail and e-commerce business activities in Russia. The company said it will give all affected employees "financial and operational support."

Russia, along with Ukraine, accounted for about 3% of Hugo Boss's total sales last year.

The Hilton hotel chain said it's closing its corporate office in Moscow and suspending new hotel development in Russia. Russian workers will continue to be paid, the company said.

Hilton's 26 hotels in Russia remain open. They are owned and operated by franchisees, but Hilton said it is donating any profits from those hotels to relief efforts in Ukraine. Hilton said it has also donated up to 1 million room nights to support Ukrainian refugees.

Wall Street titan Citigroup also said Wednesday it would wind down its Russian banking business and will be "operating the business on a more limited basis" until a sale happens.

**TOKYO** — Japanese clothing chain Uniqlo is temporarily closing in Russia, following a social backlash over reported comments by a top executive that its 49 stores will stay open.

Earlier this week, Fast Retailing Chief Executive Tadashi Yanai was quoted as saying in Japanese business daily Nikkei that Uniqlo would stay open in Russia because Russians had as much right to everyday clothes as anyone else.

That comment, coming after other major consumer brands like Zara, Coca-Cola, Apple and McDonald's left Russia, prompted public criticism, including calls for a boycott on social media.

"Uniqlo has made everyday clothing available to the general public in Russia, too, as part of our mission. However, we have recently faced a number of difficulties, including operational challenges and the worsening of the conflict situation," said Fast Retailing Co., the holding company for several clothing brands, including Uniqlo.

Fast Retailing has donated clothing and \$10 million through the UN refugee program.

**NICOSIA, Cyprus** — Cyprus' government says it rescinded clearances for four Russian warships to dock in the east Mediterranean island nation's ports last week.

Cyprus Foreign Ministry Spokesman Demetris Demetriou told The Associated Press on Thursday that

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the Cypriot government made the decision "given the current political context and the military invasion of the Ukraine by Russia."

Demetriou said the clearances for the ships to refuel and resupply had been issued prior to Russia's invasion.

"No particular issues were raised by the Russian side" once the clearances were rescinded, Demetriou said.

**ISTANBUL** — Talks between the foreign ministers of Russia and Ukraine are underway on the sidelines of a diplomatic summit in Turkey.

An official photograph showed Russia's Sergey Lavrov flanked by two advisers sitting across from his Ukrainian counterpart Dmytro Kuleba and his officials on Thursday.

Turkish Foreign Minister Mevlut Cavusoglu sat at the head of a U-shaped table in a wood-paneled hotel conference room near the Mediterranean city of Antalya.

The talks are the first high-level talks between the two countries since Russia invaded Ukraine two weeks ago. Cavusoglu has said the aim of the meeting is to pave the way for a meeting between the Russian and Ukrainian presidents that would be facilitated by Turkey's president.

NATO member Turkey, which has cultivated close ties with both Russia and Ukraine, is trying to balance relations with both nations. It has positioned itself as a neutral party, seeking to facilitate negotiations between the warring sides.

**JERUSALEM** — The Israeli parliament is trying to arrange an address by Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy to Israeli lawmakers.

Officials say the Ukrainian ambassador requested an address to the Knesset, Israel's parliament, by Zelenskyy, but those plans have been complicated because the Knesset is in spring recess and the building is undergoing repairs.

Knesset Speaker Mickey Levy offered to hold a virtual conference between Israeli legislators and Zelenskyy over Zoom, but his office has yet to receive an official reply.

Israel maintains good relations with both Russia and Ukraine and has emerged as a mediator between the two countries in the two weeks since Russia invaded Ukraine.

**COPENHAGEN, Denmark** — Three major newspapers in the Nordic region are to translate some of their articles on the invasion of Ukraine into Russian.

The plan is to inform people in Russia about what is happening, after independent media there were shut down.

The translated newspaper articles also will be posted on social media.

Denmark's Politiken newspaper Politiken said Thursday that "our goal is to provide the Russians with impartial and reliable news coverage."

It added that "democracy dies in the dark. The free dissemination of independent information is essential for maintaining the hope of peace and the hope of humanity."

Other newspapers participating in the initiative include Sweden's daily Dagens Nyheter and Finland's largest newspaper, Helsingin Sanomat.

**LONDON** — Britain has imposed a travel ban and asset freezes on seven more wealthy Russians, including Roman Abramovich, the billionaire owner of Premier League soccer club Chelsea.

The government said Thursday that Abramovich's assets are frozen, he is banned from visiting the U.K. and he is barred from transactions with U.K. individuals and businesses.

Abramovich said last week he was trying to sell Chelsea as the threat of sanctions loomed.

Also added to the U.K. sanctions list are industrialist Oleg Deripaska and Rosneft chief executive Igor Sechin.

The sanctions are being imposed in response to Russia's invasion of neighboring Ukraine.

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LONDON — Britain's armed forces minister says Russia's strike on a hospital in Mariupol is a war crime, and warned President Vladimir Putin that using chemical weapons in Ukraine could draw "an international response."

James Heappey said whether it was "indiscriminate" fire into a built-up area or a deliberate targeting, "It is a war crime."

The Biden administration has warned that Russia might seek to use chemical or biological weapons in Ukraine. Russia has claimed, without evidence, that Ukraine is running chemical and biological weapons labs with U.S. support.

Heappey told the BBC "that when other countries have used chemical weapons it has caused an international response."

BRUSSELS — The top U.S. military commander in Europe is thanking Poland for its offer of fighter jets for Ukraine but says that sending the MiG-29 planes would be a "high-risk and low-gain" venture.

Poland had said it was prepared to supply MiG-29 planes – which Ukraine's pilots are trained to fly – to NATO if all 30 allies agreed to send them on to the war-ravaged country.

Gen. Tod D. Wolters, the commander of U.S. European Command, said, "The most effective way to support the Ukrainian military in their fight against Russia is to provide increased amounts of anti-tank weapons and air defense systems."

Wolters is also NATO's top military commander and responsible for beefing up the organization's defenses to deter Russia from attacking any member country. NATO is wary of getting embroiled in Moscow's war on Ukraine.

Wolters says Ukraine already has enough warplanes and that sending MiG-29s "will not appreciably increase the effectiveness of the Ukrainian Air Force."

Wolters says intelligence estimates suggest that sending the planes "may be mistaken as escalatory and could result in Russian escalation with NATO...producing a high-risk scenario."

He told Poland that U.S. European Command will "evaluate ways to best support and assist our Ukraine friends."

ANTALYA, Turkey — The foreign ministers of Russia and Ukraine have begun meeting at a Turkish Mediterranean resort for the first high-level talks between the two countries since the start of Russia's invasion of Ukraine.

The meeting between Russia's Sergey Lavrov and Dmytro Kuleba of Ukraine is taking place on the sidelines of a diplomacy forum near the city of Antalya on Thursday. Turkish Foreign Minister Mevlut Cavusoglu is also participating in the meeting.

Cavusoglu has said the aim of the meeting is to pave the way for a meeting between the Russian and Ukrainian presidents that would be facilitated by Turkey's president. Kuleba has also said that he would propose direct talks between the Ukrainian and Russian presidents when he meets Lavrov.

NATO-member Turkey, which has cultivated close ties with both Russia and Ukraine, is trying to balance relations with both nations. It has positioned itself as a neutral party, seeking to facilitate negotiations between the warring sides.

Turkey has criticized Russia's military actions in Ukraine as "unlawful" and "unacceptable" but it has also said Ankara would not give up on either Russia or Ukraine.

BERLIN — The head of the U.N. nuclear agency says he's en route to Turkey for talks on ensuring the safety of Ukraine's nuclear facilities.

Rafael Grossi, the director-general of the International Atomic Energy Agency, was invited to Antalya, Turkey by Turkish Foreign Minister Mevlut Cavusoglu. Also in Antalya on Thursday, the Russian and Ukrainian foreign ministers are scheduled to hold talks on the sidelines of a diplomacy forum.

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Grossi didn't give details of his own planned meetings in a tweet that showed him sitting on a plane. The IAEA chief has been pressing for an agreement with Ukraine and Russia on the safety of Ukraine's nuclear power plants.

A growing list of concerns includes a power cut at the decommissioned Chernobyl plant as well as limited communications between Ukraine's nuclear regulator and both Chernobyl and the Zaporizhzhia power plant, which Russian forces seized last week.

In addition, the IAEA says it has lost direct transmission of data from systems installed to monitor nuclear material at both Chernobyl and Zaporizhzhia. It says the reasons for the disruption aren't immediately clear. Ukraine has 15 nuclear reactors, eight of which were operating as of Wednesday.

STOCKHOLM — The Swedish government said Thursday it suggests that the country, which is not a member of NATO, should boost its military spending to 2% of gross domestic product by 2025.

"Between 2014 and 2025, expenditure on defense will have increased by 85%," Prime Minister Magdalena Andersson said. "Sweden's defense capability must be greatly strengthened."

The move follows Russia's invasion of Ukraine, which has profoundly changed Europe's security outlook, including for Nordic neutrals Finland and Sweden, where support for joining NATO has surged to record levels.

The Social Democratic-led government's proposal is likely to get support in the 349-seat Riksdag.

Andersson said that "more young people need to prepare in the long run to do military service and contribute to the military defense."

In 2017, Sweden instituted a military draft for both men and women because of a deteriorating security environment in Europe and around Sweden. Seven years earlier, Sweden had abolished compulsory military service for men because there were enough volunteers to meet its military needs. It has never had a military draft for women.

On Sunday, neighboring Scandinavian country Denmark, which is member of NATO, said it would also boost military spending to meet the NATO target of 2% of gross domestic product by 2033.

The 27-member Western military alliance has a target that its members spend 2% of gross domestic product on defense.

## Russia built an economy like a fortress but the pain is real

By The Associated Press undefined

Western sanctions are dealing a severe blow to Russia's economy. The ruble is plunging, foreign businesses are fleeing and sharply higher prices are in the offing. Familiar products may disappear from stores, and middle-class achievements like foreign vacations are in doubt.

Beyond the short-term pain, Russia's economy will likely see a deepening of the stagnation that started to set in long before the invasion of Ukraine.

But a total collapse is unlikely, several economists say. Despite the punishing financial sanctions, Russia has built "an economy that's geared for conflict," said Richard Connolly, an expert on the Russian economy at the Royal United Services Institute in Britain.

The Russian government's extensive involvement in the economy and the money it is still making from oil and gas exports — even with bans from the U.S. and Britain — will help soften the blow for many workers, pensioners and government employees in a country that has endured three serious financial crises in the past three decades. And as economists point out, Iran, a much smaller and less diversified economy, has endured sanctions misery for years over its nuclear program without a complete breakdown.

Still, the Russian currency has fallen spectacularly, which will drive up prices for imported goods when inflation was already running hot at 9%. It took 80 rubles to get one U.S. dollar on Feb. 23, the day before the invasion. By Thursday, it was 119 — even after Russia's central bank took drastic measures to stop the plunge, including doubling interest rates to 20%.

Marina Albee, owner of the Cafe Botanika vegetarian restaurant in St. Petersburg's historic city center,

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has already heard from her fruit and vegetable supplier that prices will be going up 10% to 50%. Other suppliers can't say how much.

The cafe imports dried seaweed and smoked tofu from Japan, mini asparagus from Chile, broccoli from Benin, basmati rice and coconut oil from India.

"We're waiting for the tsunami to hit — the tsunami being the price increases for everything we purchase," Albee said. "We need to keep our eye on the situation and, if we need to, take those dishes out of the menu."

"We can reengineer our menu to make more Russian-based dishes," she said. "You have to be quick on your feet." After surviving two years without tourists because of the COVID-19 pandemic, "it takes a lot to faze us," Albee added.

Although sanctions have frozen a large portion of Russia's foreign currency reserves, state finances are in good shape with low debt. When the government does need to borrow, its creditors are mostly domestic banks, not foreign investors who could abandon it in a crisis. The government announced support this week for large companies deemed crucial to the economy.

Estimates of the short-term impact on Russia's economic growth vary widely because more sanctions could come and the fallout from President Vladimir Putin's war are uncertain.

"Russians will be a lot poorer — they won't have cash to holiday in Turkey or send their kids to school in the West — and even then, because of Putin, they will not be welcome," said Tim Ash, senior emerging market sovereign analyst at BlueBay Asset Management.

He sees economic growth dropping 10%, while other economists see a drop of as little as 2% or something in between.

Long-term prospects for a growing economy are not good — for enduring reasons that predate the war: A few favored insiders control major companies and sectors, resulting in a lack of competition and new investment. Russia has failed to diversify away from its dominant oil and gas sector. Per capita income in 2020 was roughly what it was in 2014.

Foreign investment built up over the 30 years since the collapse of the Soviet Union and the jobs it brought are heading for the door. Big corporations like Volkswagen, Ikea and Apple have idled plants or halted sales, while energy giants BP, Exxon and Shell have said they will stop buying Russian oil and gas or exit partnerships there.

On Wednesday, ratings agency Fitch cut its credit rating for the country further into junk status and warned of an imminent default on sovereign debt.

The central bank has stepped in to bolster the ruble and the banking system, restrict withdrawals in foreign currency and keep the stock market closed for nearly two weeks. The government also has announced measures to restrict foreign investors from fleeing. While such restrictions shore up the financial system against utter collapse, they also close off the economy to trade and investment that could fuel growth.

Since facing sanctions over its 2014 seizure of Ukraine's Crimea peninsula, the Kremlin has anticipated such measures would be the West's primary weapon in any conflict. In response, it has devised what Connolly, an associate fellow at the Royal United Services Institute and author of a book on Russia's response to sanctions, calls "the Kalashnikov economy," a reference to the Russian military rifle.

It's "a durable, in some ways primitive system," he said, based on low debt, government control of most of the banking system and a central bank able to intervene and prop up the currency and banks.

While trade will fall and fewer goods will be available, the weaker ruble means the Russian government will earn more of its currency for the oil it sells because oil is priced in dollars. With recently higher prices, Connolly estimates Russia is getting 2.7 times the amount of rubles from oil compared with 2019, money that can cover salaries and pensions.

While U.S. and British officials said they will ban the relatively small amount of oil they import from Russia, Europe, which is much more dependent on Russian energy, has held back.

As it stands, "there's a lot of holes in this, and the Russians will exploit this and develop a way of carrying on," Connolly said.

"I'm not saying they're going to have a wonderful time. I'm saying they have the resources to deal with

these problems," he said.

The long-term impact for Putin's government in domestic politics is hard to predict. Simon Commander, managing partner at Altura Partners advisory firm and a former World Bank official, says "buoyant popularity for the regime fueled by increased prosperity ... seems unattainable."

"That may not translate into open dissension, let alone revolt, but it will hardly bolster support for the autocrat," he said.

## 'They were shooting civilians': Ukraine refugees saw abuses

By RAFAL NIEDZIELSKI Associated Press

PRZEMYSL, Poland (AP) — As more than 2 million refugees from Ukraine begin to scatter throughout Europe and beyond, some are carrying valuable witness evidence to build a case for war crimes.

More and more, the people who are turning up at border crossings are survivors who have fled some of the cities hardest hit by Russian forces.

"It was very eerie," said Ihor Diekov, one of the many people who crossed the Irpin river outside Kyiv on the slippery wooden planks of a makeshift bridge after Ukrainians blew up the concrete span to slow the Russian advance.

He heard gunshots as he crossed and saw corpses along the road.

"The Russians promised to provide a (humanitarian) corridor which they did not comply with. They were shooting civilians," he said. "That's absolutely true. I witnessed it. People were scared."

Such testimonies will increasingly reach the world in the coming days as more people flow along fragile humanitarian corridors.

Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy on Wednesday said three such corridors were operating from bombarded areas. People left Sumy, in the northeast near the Russian border; suburbs of Kyiv; and Enerhodar, the southern town where Russian forces took over a large nuclear plant. In all, about 35,000 people got out, he said.

More evacuations were announced for Thursday as desperate residents sought to leave cities where food, water, medicines and other essentials were running out.

At least 1 million people have been displaced within Ukraine in addition to the growing number of refugees, International Organization for Migration director general Antonio Vitorino told reporters. The scale of the humanitarian crisis is so extreme that the "worst case scenario" in the IOM's contingency planning has already been surpassed, he said.

Russian- and Ukrainian-speaking trained psychologists are badly needed, Vitorino said, as more traumatized witnesses join those fleeing.

Nationwide, thousands of people are thought to have been killed across Ukraine, both civilians and soldiers, since Russian forces invaded two weeks ago. City officials in the blockaded port city of Mariupol have said 1,200 residents have been killed there, including three in the bombing of a children's hospital. In Ukraine's second largest city, Kharkiv, the prosecutor's office has said 282 residents have been killed, including several children.

The United Nations human rights office said Wednesday it had recorded the killings of 516 civilians in Ukraine in the two weeks since Russia invaded, including 37 children. Most have been caused by "the use of explosive weapons with a wide impact area," it said. It believes the real toll is "considerably higher" and noted that its numbers don't include some areas of "intense hostilities," including Mariupol.

Some of the latest refugees have seen those deaths first-hand. Their testimonies will be a critical part of efforts to hold Russia accountable for targeting civilians and civilian structures like hospitals and homes.

The International Criminal Court prosecutor last week launched an investigation that could target senior officials believed responsible for war crimes, after dozens of the court's member states asked him to act. Evidence collection has begun.

Some countries continued to ease measures for refugees. Britain said that from Tuesday, Ukrainians with passports no longer need to travel to a visa application center to provide fingerprints and can instead ap-

ply to enter the U.K. online and give fingerprints after arrival. Fewer than 1,000 visas have been granted out of more than 22,000 applications for Ukrainians to join their families there.

Ukrainians who manage to flee fear for those who can't.

"I am afraid," said Anna Potapola, a mother of two who arrived in Poland from the city of Dnipro. "When we had to leave Ukraine my children asked me, 'Will we survive?' I am very afraid and scared for the people left behind."

## Sanctions on Abramovich see restrictions placed on Chelsea

By ROB HARRIS AP Global Soccer Writer

LONDON (AP) — A ban on transfers and selling new tickets were among unprecedented restrictions placed on Chelsea by the British government on Thursday after owner Roman Abramovich was sanctioned over Russia's war on Ukraine.

The reigning European and world champions have to operate under a special government "Russia Regulations" license that stymies Abramovich's rapid plan to sell the club. However, Chelsea is allowed to keep playing.

The west London club was put up for sale only last week as calls for him to be sanctioned grew over his close links to Russian President Vladimir Putin's regime.

The government called Abramovich a "pro-Kremlin oligarch" who is worth more than 9 billion pounds (\$12 billion), and should be punished due to his association with Putin. Abramovich was also linked with "destabilizing," undermining and threatening Ukraine.

Abramovich has not condemned Russia's invasion of its neighbor in two statements since the war began two weeks ago. The British government said Abramovich has obtained financial benefits from Putin's administration, including contracts in the buildup to Russia hosting the 2018 World Cup.

The ripples are being felt at Chelsea, the club Abramovich has pumped more than \$2 billion into over 19 years, transforming the team into a force in European football.

Anyone with tickets until the end of the season in May can keep on going to matches but no new tickets can be purchased, which impacts the ability of any away fans to go to Stamford Bridge. The club also has to stop selling merchandise at its shop.

Staff, including players, can continue to be paid. The club's wage bill was almost 28 million pounds (\$37 million) a month in the most recent accounts.

The club has been effectively placed under a transfer ban since it cannot spend on registering new players, while there are doubts over the ability to offer new contracts.

Only 500,000 pounds (\$657,000) can be spent on staging each match at Stamford Bridge, including on security and catering. A maximum of 20,000 pounds can be spent on travel to matches. Chelsea plays in France at Lille in the Champions League next week.

Abramovich was among seven wealthy Russians who had their assets frozen under British sanctions on Thursday as Boris Johnson's administration deployed financial measures to put pressure on Putin while Britain is not getting militarily involved in the war.

These sanctions are about "depriving Abramovich of benefiting from his ownership of the club," Culture Secretary Nadine Dorries tweeted. "I know this brings some uncertainty, but the Government will work with the league & clubs to keep football being played while ensuring sanctions hit those intended. Football clubs are cultural assets and the bedrock of our communities. We're committed to protecting them."

## Ukrainian embassy draws US citizens seeking to fight in war

By BEN FOX Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — Russia's invasion of Ukraine has given the smaller nation's embassy in Washington an unexpected role: recruitment center for Americans who want to join the fight.

Diplomats working out of the embassy, in a townhouse in the Georgetown section of the city, are field-

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ing thousands of offers from volunteers seeking to fight for Ukraine, even as they work on the far more pressing matter of securing weapons to defend against an increasingly brutal Russian onslaught.

"They really feel that this war is unfair, unprovoked," said Ukraine's military attaché, Maj. Gen. Borys Kremenetskyi. "They feel that they have to go and help."

U.S. volunteers represent just a small subset of foreigners seeking to fight for Ukraine, who in turn comprise just a tiny fraction of the international assistance that has flowed into the country. Still, it is a reflection of the passion, supercharged in an era of social media, that the attack and the mounting civilian casualties have stirred.

"This is not mercenaries who are coming to earn money," Kremenetskyi said. "This is people of goodwill who are coming to assist Ukraine to fight for freedom."

The U.S. government discourages Americans from going to fight in Ukraine, which raises legal and national security issues.

Since the Feb. 24 invasion, the embassy in Washington has heard from at least 6,000 people inquiring about volunteering for service, the "vast majority" of them American citizens, said Kremenetskyi, who oversees the screening of potential U.S. recruits.

Half the potential volunteers were quickly rejected and didn't even make it to the Zoom interview, the general said. They lacked the required military experience, had a criminal background or weren't suitable for other reasons such as age, including a 16-year-old boy and a 73-year-old man.

Some who expressed interest were rejected because the embassy said it couldn't do adequate vetting. The general didn't disclose the methods used to screen people.

Kremenetskyi, who spoke to The Associated Press just after returning from the Pentagon for discussions on the military hardware his country needs for its defense, said he appreciates the support from both the U.S. government and the public.

"Russians can be stopped only with hard fists and weapons," he said.

So far, about 100 U.S. citizens have made the cut. They include veterans of the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan with combat experience, including some helicopter pilots, the attaché said.

They must make their own way to Poland, where they are to cross at a specified point, with their own protective gear but without a weapon, which they will get after they arrive. They will be required to sign a contract to serve, without pay, in the International Legion for the Territorial Defense of Ukraine.

The Ukrainian government says about 20,000 foreigners from various nations have already joined.

Borys Wrzesnewskyj, a former Liberal lawmaker in Canada who is helping to facilitate recruitment there, said about 1,000 Canadians have applied to fight for Ukraine, the vast majority of whom don't have any ties to the country.

"The volunteers, a very large proportion are ex-military, these are people that made that tough decision that they would enter the military to stand up for the values that we subscribe to," Wrzesnewskyj said. "And when they see what is happening in Ukraine they can't stand aside."

It's not clear how many U.S. citizens seeking to fight have actually reached Ukraine, a journey the State Department has urged people not to make.

"We've been very clear for some time, of course, in calling on Americans who may have been resident in Ukraine to leave, and making clear to Americans who may be thinking of traveling there not to go," Secretary of State Antony Blinken told reporters recently.

U.S. citizens aren't required to register overseas. The State Department says it's not certain how many have entered Ukraine since the Russian invasion.

Under some circumstances, Americans could face criminal penalties, or even risk losing their citizenship, by taking part in an overseas conflict, according to a senior federal law enforcement official.

But the legal issues are only one of many concerns for U.S. authorities, who worry about what could happen if an American is killed or captured or is recruited while over there to work for a foreign intelligence service upon their return home, said the official, who spoke on condition of anonymity to discuss sensitive security matters.

The official and independent security experts say some of the potential foreign fighters may be white



supremacists, who are believed to be fighting on both sides of the conflict. They could become more radicalized and gain military training in Ukraine, thereby posing an increased danger when they return home.

"These are men who want adventure, a sense of significance and are harking back to World War II rhetoric," said Anne Speckhard, who has extensively studied foreigners who fought in Syria and elsewhere as director of the International Center for the Study of Violent Extremism.

Ukraine may be getting around some of the potential legal issues by only facilitating the overseas recruitment, and directing volunteers to sign their contracts, and receive a weapon, once they arrive in the country. Also, by assigning them to the territorial defense forces, and not front-line units, it reduces the chance of direct combat with Russians, though it's by no means eliminated.

The general acknowledges the possibility that any foreigners who are captured could be used for propaganda purposes. But he didn't dwell on the issue, focusing instead on the need for his country to defend itself against Russia.

"We are fighting for our existence," he said. "We are fighting for our families, for our land. And we are not going to give up."

## After Ukraine, Europe wonders who's next Russian target

By DUSAN STOJANOVIC Associated Press

BELGRADE, Serbia (AP) — For some European countries watching Russia's brutal war in Ukraine, there are fears that they could be next.

Western officials say the most vulnerable could be those who aren't members of NATO or the European Union, and thus alone and unprotected — including Ukraine's neighbor Moldova and Russia's neighbor Georgia, both of them formerly part of the Soviet Union — along with the Balkan states of Bosnia and Kosovo.

But analysts warn that even NATO members could be at risk, such as Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania on Russia's doorstep, as well as Montenegro, either from Moscow's direct military intervention or attempts at political destabilization.

Russian President Vladimir Putin "has said right from the start that this is not only about Ukraine," said Michal Baranowski, director of the German Marshall Fund's Warsaw office.

"He told us what he wants to do when he was listing his demands, which included the change of the government in Kyiv, but he was also talking about the eastern flank of NATO and the rest of Eastern Europe," Baranowski told The Associated Press in an interview.

As Ukraine puts up stiff resistance to the two-week-old Russian attack, Baranowski said "it's now not really clear how he'll carry out his other goals."

But the Biden administration is acutely aware of deep concerns in Eastern and Central Europe that the war in Ukraine may be just a prelude to broader attacks on former Warsaw Pact members in trying to restore Moscow's regional dominance.

EU foreign policy chief Josep Borrell has said that "Russia is not going to stop in Ukraine."

"We are concerned for neighbors Moldova, Georgia, and the Western Balkans," he said. "We have to keep an eye on Western Balks, particularly Bosnia, which could face destabilization by Russia."

A look at the regional situation:

### MOLDOVA

Like its neighbor Ukraine, the ex-Soviet republic of Moldova has a separatist insurgency in its east in the disputed territory known as Trans-Dniester, where 1,500 Russian troops are stationed. Although Moldova is neutral militarily and has no plans to join NATO, it formally applied for EU membership when the Russian invasion began in a quick bid to bolster its ties with the West.

The country of 2.6 million people is one of the poorest countries in Europe, and it's hosting tens of thousands of Ukrainians who fled the war. The invasion has prompted heightened concerns in Moldova not only over the humanitarian crisis, but also because of fears that Putin might try to link the separatists east of the Dniester River with Ukraine via the latter's strategic port of Odesa.

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U.S. Secretary of State Antony Blinken visited Moldova last week and pledged: "We stand with Moldova and any other country that may be threatened in the same way."

Moldovan President Maia Sandu said there was no indication yet the Russian forces in Trans-Dniester had changed their posture, but stressed that the concern was there.

"In this region now there is no possibility for us to feel safe," Sandu said.

## GEORGIA

War erupted between Russia and Georgia in August 2008 when Georgian government troops tried unsuccessfully to regain control over the Moscow-backed breakaway province of South Ossetia. Russia routed the Georgian military in five days of fighting and hundreds were killed. Afterward, Russia recognized South Ossetia and another separatist region, Abkhazia, as independent states and bolstered its military presence there.

The government of West-leaning Georgia condemned Russia's invasion of Ukraine, but hasn't shown the same solidarity that Kyiv displayed during the Georgia-Russia war. Hundreds of Georgian volunteers were stopped by authorities from joining an international brigade fighting Russia in Ukraine.

Georgia's seemingly neutral stance has turned out thousands in nightly rallies in central Tbilisi in solidarity with Ukraine. Last week, Georgia's government applied for EU membership just days after declaring it wouldn't accelerate its application as fears of a Russian invasion grew.

## THE BALTICS

Memories of Soviet rule are still fresh in Latvia, Lithuania and Estonia. Since the invasion of Ukraine, NATO has moved quickly to boost its troop presence in its eastern flank allies, while Washington has pledged additional support.

To residents of the Baltic nations — particularly those old enough to have lived under Soviet control — the tensions prior to the Feb. 24 invasion recalled the mass deportations and oppression. The three countries were annexed by Josef Stalin during World War II and only regained their independence with the breakup of the Soviet Union in 1991.

They joined NATO in 2004, putting themselves under the military protection of the U.S. and its Western allies. They say it is imperative that NATO show resolve not just in words but with boots on the ground.

"Russia always measures the military might but also the will of countries to fight," said Janis Garisons, state secretary at Latvia's Defense Ministry. "Once they see a weakness, they will exploit that weakness."

Blinken, who visited Latvian capital Riga on Monday, said the Baltics have "formed a democratic wall that now stands against the tide of autocracy" that Russia is pushing in Europe.

## THE BALKANS

It would be hard for Russian troops to reach the Balkans without engaging NATO forces stationed in all the neighboring countries. But Moscow could destabilize the region, as it already does, with the help of Serbia, its ally which it has been arming with tanks, sophisticated air defense systems and warplanes.

The Kremlin has always considered the region its sphere of influence although it was never part of the Soviet bloc. A devastating civil war in the 1990s left at least 120,000 dead and millions homeless. Serbia, the largest state in the Western Balkans, is generally blamed for starting the war by trying to prevent the breakup of Serb-led Yugoslavia with brutal force -- a move resembling Moscow's current effort to pull Ukraine back into its orbit by military force.

There are fears in the West that the pro-Moscow Serbian leadership, which has refused to join international sanctions against Russia, could try to use the attention focused on Ukraine to further destabilize its neighbors, particularly Bosnia, where minority Serbs have been threatening to split their territories from the joint federation to join Serbia. Serbian officials have repeatedly denied they are meddling in the neighboring states, but have given tacit support to the secessionist moves of the Bosnian Serbs and their leader, Milorad Dodik.

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The Russian Embassy in Bosnian capital Sarajevo warned last year that should Bosnia take steps towards joining NATO, "our country will have to react to this hostile act." Joining NATO will force Bosnia to take a side in the "military-political confrontation," it said.

EU peacekeepers in Bosnia have announced the deployment of about 500 additional troops to the country, citing "the deterioration of the security internationally (which) has the potential to spread instability."

Kosovo, which split from Serbia 1999 after a NATO air war against Serbian troops, has asked the U.S. to establish a permanent military base in the country and speed up its integration into NATO after Russia's invasion of Ukraine.

"Accelerating Kosovo's membership in NATO and having a permanent base of American forces is an immediate need to guarantee peace, security and stability in the Western Balkans," Kosovo Defense Minister Armend Mehaj said on Facebook.

Serbia said the move is unacceptable.

Kosovo's 2008 declaration of independence is recognized by more than 100 countries, mainly Western nations, but not by Russia or Serbia.

Montenegro, a former ally that turned its back on Russia to join NATO in 2017, has imposed sanctions on Moscow over the war in Ukraine and is seen as next in line in the Western Balkans to join the EU. The country is divided between those favoring pro-Western policies and the pro-Serbian and pro-Russian camps, raising tensions.

Russia has repeatedly warned Montenegro's pro-Western President Milo Djukanovic, who led the small Adriatic state into NATO, that the move was illegitimate and without the consent of all Montenegrins.

Russia may hope to eventually improve its ties with Montenegro in a bid to strengthen its presence in the Mediterranean.

## S. Korea's president-elect wants tougher stance on N. Korea

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

SEOUL, South Korea (AP) — South Korea's president-elect Yoon Suk Yeol said Thursday he would solidify an alliance with the United States, build up a powerful military and sternly cope with North Korean provocations, hours after he won the country's hard-fought election to become its next leader.

Yoon, whose single five-year term is to begin in May, said during his campaigning he would make a boosted alliance with the United States the center of his foreign policy. He's accused outgoing liberal President Moon Jae-in of tilting toward Pyongyang and Beijing and away from Washington. He's also stressed the need to recognize the strategic importance of repairing ties with Tokyo despite recent bilateral historical disputes.

Some experts say a Yoon government will likely be able to reinforce ties with Washington and improve relations with Tokyo but can't really avoid frictions with Pyongyang and Beijing.

"I'll rebuild the South Korea-U.S. alliance. I'll (make) it a strategic comprehensive alliance while sharing key values like a liberal democracy, a market economy and human rights," Yoon told a televised news conference.

"I'll establish a strong military capacity to deter any provocation completely," Yoon said. "I'll firmly deal with illicit, unreasonable behavior by North Korea in a principled manner, though I'll always leave door for South-North talks open."

After his election win, he spoke with U.S. President Joe Biden on the phone. According to a White House statement, Biden congratulated Yoon on the election and emphasized the U.S. commitment to the defense of South Korea. The statement said the two also committed to maintain close coordination on addressing the threats posed by North Korea's nuclear and missile programs.

North Korea hasn't made any comments on Yoon's election. In recent weeks, it's launched a spate of sophisticated, nuclear-capable ballistic missiles in what experts call an attempt to modernize its weapons arsenal and pressure the Biden administration to making concessions like sanctions relief amid stalled diplomacy.

Last week, North Korea said it tested cameras and other systems needed to operate a spy satellite. Its state media on Thursday cited leader Kim Jong Un as saying his country needs reconnaissance satellites

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to monitor "the aggression troops of the U.S. imperialism and its vassal forces."

On Japan, Yoon said that Seoul and Tokyo should focus on building future-oriented ties. "The focus in South Korea-Japan relations should be finding future paths that would benefit the people of both countries," he said.

The two countries are both key U.S. allies and closely linked to each other economically and culturally, but their relations sank to post-war lows during Moon's presidency over disputes related to Japan's 1910-45 colonization of the Korean Peninsula.

Japanese Prime Minister Fumio Kishida on Thursday expressed a desire to communicate with Yoon to bring back good ties. But he still said Tokyo will stick to its position that all compensation issues have been settled by a 1965 bilateral treaty.

Yoon, who ran on the ticket of the main opposition People Power Party, had previously served as Moon's prosecutor general. But he left the Moon government and joined the opposition last year after high-profile infighting over his investigations on some of Moon's allies.

Wednesday's election was largely a two-way showdown between Yoon and liberal ruling party candidate Lee Jae-myung. The two spent months slamming, mocking and demonizing each other in one of the most bitter political campaigns in recent memory, aggravating the country's already severe domestic division.

Lee and his allies attacked Yoon over his lack of experience in foreign policy and other major state affairs.

They said Yoon's hardline stance on North Korea would unnecessarily provoke the North, and picking a side between Washington and Beijing would pose greater security threats to Seoul. Yoon has accused the Moon administration of being "submissive" to Pyongyang and Beijing at the expense of Seoul's 70-year alliance with Washington.

Yoon's razor-thin victory against Lee was partly seen as a referendum on the liberal government, whose popularity waned in recent years over failures to deal with stark economic inequalities, decaying job markets and soaring house prices that paint bleak financial futures for many people in their 20s and 30s.

Yoon during the campaign focused much of his message on vows to create more jobs and restore social mobility by creating a fairer, competitive environment for young people. He fiercely criticized Moon's government over the policy failures and high-profile investment scandals surrounding Moon's allies that he said exposed hypocrisy and disregard for law.

On domestic agendas, Yoon faces urgent tasks to suppress a record-breaking COVID-19 surge, ease widening economic inequalities and runaway house prices and heal a nation sharply split along regional antagonism, ideologies, age and gender.

Yoon was criticized during the campaign for stoking gender animosities by promising to abolish the country's Gender Equality and Family Ministry, which he accused of pushing policies unfair toward men.

While he was apparently trying to win the votes of young men who decry gender equality policies and the loss of traditional privileges in a hyper-competitive job market, exit polls released after Wednesday's election indicated that his gains in male votes were largely canceled out by young women who swung toward Lee.

During Thursday's conference, Yoon rejected accusations that his campaign raised gender tensions but repeated a view that the country no longer had structural barriers to women's success.

"Regarding gender issues, laws and systems are pretty much in place now," he said. "Instead of approaching the issue as a matter of equality and fairness between groups, I think the government should provide stronger response and protection regarding individual cases of unfairness."

Yoon said building a better pandemic response would be a priority for his power transition committee, which will have a dedicated team designing plans to reinforce the country's medical capacities and more effective financial packages to help devastated service sector businesses.

## Closed for decades, theater returns to Lebanon's Tripoli

By AJ NADDAFF Associated Press

TRIPOLI, Lebanon (AP) — The hissing of a water hose spraying the ground reverberates around the walls of the dimly lit Empire Cinema in Lebanon's northern city of Tripoli. From the floor of a paint-chipped room that was once a ticket office, a man sorts through rusty bolts and screws, while in the adjacent

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foyer, a woman sweeps dust off a mirror.

The person leading the restoration efforts is 35-year-old actor and director Kassem Istanbouli, known for his theater work throughout Lebanon.

Several days a week, his team — which includes a Syrian, a Palestinian, a Lebanese and a Bangladeshi — drives three hours from their homes in the country's south to work on the space, built in the early 1940s but abandoned for decades.

The restoration project launched last month is the first of its kind in hardscrabble Tripoli, Lebanon's second largest city more often known in recent years for sectarian and other violence.

"What we are trying to say is that Tripoli is a city of culture and art," Istanbouli said. "When you open a cinema and a theater, people will come and attend. But if you give them a gun, of course they will shoot at each other and kill each other," he added.

For much of the rest of Lebanon, Tripoli's artistic history is considered a relic of the past, overshadowed by crushing poverty, corruption, and migration.

But Tripoli has an especially long cinematic tradition, once boasting up to 35 movie houses, including Lebanon's first.

Cinema Empire is the last of five historic cinemas still standing in Tripoli's Tell Square, which encircles a clock tower gifted by Ottoman Sultan Abdul Hamid II in the early 20th century. It shut down in 1988 as massive cinema complexes opened inside malls, and home video players grew in popularity.

Istanbouli, founder of the Tiro Association for Arts in the southern city of Tyre, has already transformed three abandoned cinemas there into theater and film venues.

Much like Tyre's Rivoli theatre which he restored in early 2018, Istanbouli aims to transform the Empire into a multi-purpose venue featuring not only arts festivals and plays, but also a library, a visual arts studio and area for workshops.

That's no small order these days, given a crippled economy and over 80% of the population living in poverty.

Even before a financial crisis led to the current depression, Tripoli was already Lebanon's poorest city — plagued by government neglect and a lack of investment. It has been a major point of departure for illegal migration, with Lebanese now following the same precarious path as Syrians fleeing their civil war, trying to reach Europe via the Mediterranean.

The director's project was inspired by his father, an electrician who used to repair movie houses in the south, and his grandfather, who was a sailor and hakawati — a storyteller who sported a red fez while recounting folkloric tales in Tyre's old cafes.

"This project will improve the city economically. It will bring tourism and change to its reputation," Istanbouli said.

Charles Hayek, a 39-year-old historian and conservationist said that Istanbouli's project will do more than just fight negative perceptions.

"Kassem is saving one of the heritage buildings and giving it back life," he said.

Tripoli has lost much of its architectural heritage — especially around Tell Square — in the past decade due to neglect. Before the 1975-1990 civil war, the square's oldest cinema, Inja, once attracted two of the Arab world's biggest music celebrities: Umm Kalthoum and Mohamed Abdel Wahab.

That building has now been demolished, replaced by a parking garage.

For rehabilitation funds, Istanbouli has partnered with the DOEN Foundation and The Euro-Mediterranean Foundation of Support to Human Rights Defenders. The cinema contract from a private owner is for five years, and he hopes to officially open within six months.

One afternoon, Istanbouli led volunteers who had finished with repairs through acting exercises.

"Pretend that you're an animal," he said to a woman who then announced she was a panda. "Now I want you to face off against a dog... who wants to be a dog?" he asked.

Maha Amin, one of the attendees from Tyre who was sweeping dust off mirrors in the morning and was now on stage, never thought about the possibility of acting, let alone visiting Tripoli.

"The environment we live in doesn't accept a woman who is my age to do this," the 57-year-old special needs teacher said. She initially went to Istanbuli's Rivoli theater in Tyre to enroll her seven grandchildren, but ended up joining them.

"Especially in the tough times today, people need to breathe and express themselves," she said. "It's here on stage after a long day of work that I'm able I'm able to say what I want, in total freedom."

## Opioid crisis victims to confront Purdue Pharma's owners

By GEOFF MULVIHILL Associated Press

Their advocacy helped send Purdue Pharma into bankruptcy and is forcing the family that has controlled the company for generations to relinquish ownership and provide billions of dollars for communities to combat opioid addiction.

But what victims of opioid abuse and those who have lost loved ones to America's long battle with addiction have wanted most was a chance to confront members of the Sackler family, who they blame for touching off a crisis that has cost some 500,000 lives over the past two decades.

On Thursday, some of them will finally get their chance.

In a hearing that will be virtual but is certain to be packed with emotion, roughly 20 people whose lives and families have been wracked by opioid abuse will give statements in U.S. Bankruptcy Court with some members of the Sackler family listening. They are likely to tell about the pain of losing children after years of trying to get them adequate treatment, about their own journeys through addiction and about caring for babies born into withdrawal and screaming in pain.

The forum is an unconventional hearing for the White Plains, New York, courtroom of Bankruptcy Judge Robert Drain, who on Wednesday gave tentative approval to key elements of a plan to settle thousands of lawsuits against the company.

"No one can possibly underestimate how historic (Thursday's) session will be," Arik Preis, a lawyer representing Purdue's creditors, told the judge Wednesday.

The settlement agreement is estimated to be worth at least \$10 billion over time. It calls for members of the Sackler family to contribute \$5.5 billion to \$6 billion over 17 years to fight the opioid crisis. That's an increase of more than \$1 billion over a previous version that was rejected by another judge on appeal. Most of the money would be used for efforts to combat the crisis, but \$750 million would go directly to victims or their survivors.

The overall settlement, which still requires actions by multiple courts to take effect, provides more than \$150 million for Native American tribes and over \$100 million for medical monitoring and payments for children born in withdrawal from opioids.

As the settlement was hashed out with a mediator, the terms went beyond money. The plan also calls for family members to give up ownership of the company so it could become a new entity with its profits dedicated to stemming the epidemic. In exchange, Sackler family members would get protection from civil lawsuits over opioids.

The family also agreed not to oppose any efforts to remove the Sackler name from cultural and educational institutions they have supported and to make public a larger cache of company documents.

The mediator, U.S. Bankruptcy Judge Shelley Chapman, also recommended the virtual hearing to be attended by at least two members of the Sackler family.

The hearing is to last two hours. Drain said members of the Sackler family and others will not be given a chance to respond to the statements from the group of victims selected to speak by lawyers for creditors in the case. Some of the victims will address the Sacklers from a law office in New York; others will be at their homes in communities across the U.S.

It has not yet been made public which Sacklers will attend the hearing or which victims will give statements.

The hearing may be the closest thing to a trial for Sackler family members, who victims say helped spark and prolong the epidemic through the marketing of their signature painkiller OxyContin. It's a crisis

that has grown deadlier in recent years, driven largely by deaths from illicit forms of the potent synthetic opioid fentanyl.

It's not the first time for family members to appear in public venues dedicated to Purdue's role in the opioid crisis. Two testified before a congressional subcommittee in 2020 and some were part of a virtual Purdue bankruptcy hearing last year.

Sackler family members have expressed regret for the crisis, but they've never offered an unequivocal apology. Last week, they released a statement saying in part, "While the families have acted lawfully in all respects, they sincerely regret that OxyContin, a prescription medicine that continues to help people suffering from chronic pain, unexpectedly became part of an opioid crisis that has brought grief and loss to far too many families and communities."

Purdue Pharma starting selling OxyContin, a pioneering extended-release prescription painkiller, in 1996. At the same time, Purdue and other drug companies were funding efforts to get doctors and other prescribers to think differently about opioids – suggesting they be used for some pain conditions in which the potent drugs were previously considered off-limits.

Over the decades, there were waves of fatal overdoses — first associated with prescription drugs and then, as prescriptions became harder to obtain and some drugs became harder to manipulate for a quick high, from heroin. More recently, fentanyl and similar drugs have become the biggest killer.

Purdue has twice pleaded guilty to criminal charges, but no members of the Sackler family have been charged with crimes. There are no indications that any such charges are forthcoming, although seven U.S. senators last month asked the Department of Justice to consider charges.

Other drugmakers, distributors, marketers and pharmacies involved in the opioid industry have faced similar lawsuits from state and local governments, Native American tribes and other entities.

Last month, drugmaker Johnson & Johnson and wholesalers AmerisourceBergen, Cardinal Health and McKesson announced they were finalizing settlements worth a combined \$26 billion. As in the proposed Purdue settlement, most of that money is required to be used to fight the crisis.

## How has the COVID-19 pandemic changed after two years?

By VICTORIA MILKO AP Science Writer

How has the COVID-19 pandemic changed after two years?

More countries are shifting toward a return to normal and learning to live with the virus. Safe, effective vaccines have been developed and there's better understanding of how to treat people sickened by the virus.

Two years after the pandemic began, questions remain about the coronavirus. But experts know a lot more about how to keep it under control.

The virus mainly spreads through the air when an infected person exhales, talks, coughs or sneezes. It's why health officials have encouraged the use of masks and ventilating spaces, instead of focusing on advice to wipe down surfaces as they did early on.

Treatment has also evolved for people who get sick or need to be hospitalized. Among the options are antivirals, such as the drug remdesivir, or newer pills from Pfizer and Merck; anti-inflammatory drugs including steroids; and depending on what variant is circulating, lab-made antibodies to attack the virus.

"The world has watched us learn in real-time how to treat COVID-19," says Neil J. Sehgal, an assistant professor of health policy and management at the University of Maryland School of Public Health.

COVID-19 vaccines were also developed in record time. As of early March, 10 vaccines have been cleared for emergency use by the World Health Organization.

Still, distribution of vaccines has been unequal despite an international effort to deliver shots more fairly and misinformation has fueled hesitancy about the shots.

And there's still much left to learn. Studies are underway to better understand long COVID-19, which can persist for months after an initial infection. And scientists are on the lookout for the next fast-spreading variant.

"Eventually every country will have to learn to live with COVID," says Sehgal.

## Airstrike hits Ukraine maternity hospital, 17 reported hurt

By EVGENIY MALOLETKA Associated Press

MARIUPOL, Ukraine (AP) — A Russian airstrike devastated a maternity hospital Wednesday in the besieged port city of Mariupol amid growing warnings from the West that Moscow's invasion is about to take a more brutal and indiscriminate turn. Ukrainian officials said the attack wounded at least 17 people.

The ground shook more than a mile away when the Mariupol complex was hit by a series of blasts that blew out windows and ripped away much of the front of one building. Police and soldiers rushed to the scene to evacuate victims, carrying out a heavily pregnant and bleeding woman on a stretcher as light snow fell on burning and mangled cars and trees shattered by the blast.

Another woman wailed as she clutched her child. In the courtyard, a blast crater extended at least two stories deep.

"Today Russia committed a huge crime," said Volodymyr Nikulin, a top regional police official, standing in the ruins. "It is a war crime without any justification."

In Zhytomyr, a city of 260,000 to the west of Kyiv, bombs fell on two hospitals, one of them a children's hospital, Mayor Serhii Sukhomlyn said on Facebook. No one was wounded, he said.

President Volodymyr Zelenskyy said the Mariupol strike trapped children and others under the rubble.

"A children's hospital. A maternity hospital. How did they threaten the Russian Federation?" Zelenskyy asked in his nightly video address, switching to Russian to express his horror at the airstrike. "What kind of country is this, the Russian Federation, which is afraid of hospitals, afraid of maternity hospitals, and destroys them?"

He urged the West to impose even tougher sanctions, so Russia "no longer has any possibility to continue this genocide."

Video shared by Zelenskyy showed cheerfully painted hallways strewn with twisted metal.

"There are few things more depraved than targeting the vulnerable and defenseless," British Prime Minister Boris Johnson tweeted, adding that Russian President Vladimir Putin will be held "to account for his terrible crimes."

The World Health Organization said it has confirmed 18 attacks on health facilities and ambulances since the fighting began, killing 10 people. It was not clear if that number included the assault on the maternity hospital.

U.S. Secretary of State Antony J. Blinken condemned Russia's "unconscionable attacks" in a call with his Ukrainian counterpart, Dmytro Kuleba, the State Department said.

Two weeks into Russia's assault on Ukraine, its military is struggling more than expected, but Putin's invading force of more than 150,000 troops retains possibly insurmountable advantages in firepower as it bears down on key cities.

Despite often heavy shelling on populated areas, American military officials reported little change on the ground over the past 24 hours, other than Russian progress on the cities of Kharkiv and Mykolaiv. The officials spoke on condition of anonymity to assess the larger military situation.

Authorities announced new cease-fires to allow thousands of civilians to escape bombarded towns. Zelenskyy said three humanitarian corridors operated on Wednesday, from Sumy in the northeast near the Russian border, from suburbs of Kyiv and from Enerhodar, the southern town where Russian forces took over a large nuclear plant.

In all, he said, about 35,000 people got out. More evacuations were planned for Thursday.

People streamed out of Kyiv's suburbs, many headed for the city center, as explosions were heard in the capital and air raid sirens sounded repeatedly. From there, the evacuees planned to board trains bound for western Ukrainian regions not under attack.

Civilians leaving the Kyiv suburb of Irpin were forced to make their way across the slippery wooden planks of a makeshift bridge, because the Ukrainians blew up the concrete span leading to Kyiv days ago



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to slow the Russian advance.

With sporadic gunfire echoing behind them, firefighters dragged an elderly man to safety in a wheelbarrow, a child gripped the hand of a helping soldier, and a woman inched her way along, cradling a fluffy cat inside her winter coat. They trudged past a crashed van with the words "Our Ukraine" written in the dust coating its windows.

"We have a short window of time at the moment," said Yevhen Nyshchuk, a member of Ukraine's territorial defense forces. "Even if there is a cease-fire right now, there is a high risk of shells falling at any moment."

Previous attempts to establish safe evacuation corridors over the past few days largely failed because of what the Ukrainians said were Russian attacks. But Putin, in a telephone call with Germany's chancellor, accused militant Ukrainian nationalists of hampering the evacuations.

In Mariupol, a strategic city of 430,000 people on the Sea of Azov, local authorities hurried to bury the dead from the past two weeks of fighting in a mass grave. City workers dug a trench some 25 meters (yards) long at one of the city's old cemeteries and made the sign of the cross as they pushed bodies wrapped in carpets or bags over the edge.

About 1,200 people have died in the nine-day siege of the city, Zelenskyy's office said.

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

The fighting knocked out power to the decommissioned Chernobyl nuclear plant, raising fears about the spent radioactive fuel that is stored at the site and must be kept cool. But the U.N. nuclear watchdog agency said it saw "no critical impact on safety" from the loss of power.

The crisis is likely to get worse as Moscow's forces step up their bombardment of cities in response to what appear to be stronger Ukrainian resistance and heavier Russian losses than anticipated.

Echoing remarks from the director of the CIA a day earlier, British Defense Secretary Ben Wallace said Russia's assault will get "more brutal and more indiscriminate" as Putin tries to regain momentum.

The Biden administration warned that Russia might seek to use chemical or biological weapons in Ukraine, rejecting Russian claims of illegal chemical weapons development in the country it has invaded.

This week, Russian Foreign Ministry spokeswoman Maria Zakharova — without evidence — accused Ukraine of running chemical and biological weapons labs with U.S. support. White House press secretary Jen Psaki called the claim "preposterous" and said it could be part of an attempt by Russia to lay the groundwork for its own use of such weapons against Ukraine.

Britain's Defense Ministry said fighting continued northwest of Kyiv. Kharkiv, Chernihiv, Sumy and Mariupol were being heavily shelled and remained encircled by Russian forces.

Russian forces are placing military equipment on farms and amid residential buildings in the northern city of Chernihiv, Ukraine's military said. In the south, Russians 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, authorities said.

On Wednesday, some of Ukraine's volunteer fighters trained in a Kyiv park with rocket-propelled grenade launchers.

"I have only one son," said Mykola Matulevskiy, a 64-year-old retired martial arts coach, who was with his son, Kostyantyn. "Everything is my son."

But now they will fight together: "It's not possible to have it in another way because it's our motherland. We must defend our motherland first of all."

In Irpin, a town of 60,000, police officers and soldiers helped elderly residents from their homes. One man was hoisted out of a damaged structure on a makeshift stretcher, while another was pushed toward Kyiv in a shopping cart. Fleeing residents said they had been without power and water for the past four days.

Regional administration head Oleksiy Kuleba said the crisis for civilians is deepening in and around Kyiv,

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with the situation particularly dire in the suburbs.

The situation is even worse in Mariupol, where efforts to evacuate residents and deliver badly needed food, water and medicine failed Tuesday because of what the Ukrainians said were continued Russian attacks.

The city took advantage of a lull in the shelling Wednesday to hurriedly bury 70 people. Some were soldiers, but most were civilians.

The work was conducted efficiently and without ceremony. No mourners were present, no families to say their goodbyes.

One woman stood at the gates of the cemetery to ask whether her mother was among those being buried. She was.

## Yet another 4-decade inflation high is expected for February

By CHRISTOPHER RUGABER AP Economics Writer

WASHINGTON (AP) — Consumer inflation in the United States likely set another 40-year high in February — and it won't even reflect the oil and gas spikes of the past week, which will likely catapult prices even higher in coming months.

Energy prices, which soared after Russia's invasion of Ukraine on Feb. 24, jumped again this week after President Joe Biden said the United States would bar oil imports from Russia.

A report Thursday from the government is expected to show that consumer inflation leapt 7.9% in February compared with 12 months earlier, according to data provider FactSet. That would be the biggest such increase since January 1982. Analysts have also estimated that prices rose 0.7% from January to February.

For most Americans, inflation is running far ahead of the pay raises that many have received in the past year, making it harder for them to afford necessities like food, gas and rent. As a consequence, inflation has become the top political threat to Biden and congressional Democrats as the midterm elections draw closer. Small business people now say in surveys that it's their primary economic concern, too.

Seeking to stem the inflation surge, the Federal Reserve is set to raise interest rates several times this year beginning with a modest hike next week. The Fed faces a delicate challenge, though: If it tightens credit too aggressively this year, it risks undercutting the economy and perhaps triggering a recession.

For now, solid consumer spending, spurred in part by a further reopening of the economy as omicron fades, on top of higher wages and pricier gas, will likely send inflation higher for months. Gas prices spiked to \$4.25 Wednesday, up about 55 cents a gallon just since the end of February.

Oil prices did fall back Wednesday on reports that the United Arab Emirates will urge fellow OPEC members to boost production. U.S. oil was down 12% to \$108.70 a barrel, though still up sharply from about \$90 before Russia's invasion.

Yet energy markets have been so volatile that it's impossible to know if the decline will stick. If Europe were to join the U.S. and the United Kingdom and bar Russian oil imports, analysts estimate that prices could soar as high as \$160 a barrel.

The economic consequences of Russia's war against Ukraine have upended a broad assumption among many economists and at the Fed: That inflation would begin to ease this spring because prices rose so much in March and April of 2021 that comparisons to a year ago would decline.

"Any hope that inflation will peak in the near term is long gone," said Eric Winograd, senior economist at asset manager AllianceBernstein.

Should gas prices remain near their current levels, Winograd estimates that inflation could reach as high as 9% in March or April.

The cost of wheat, corn, cooking oils and such metals as aluminum and nickel have also soared since the invasion. Ukraine and Russia are leading exporters of those commodities.

Even before Russia's invasion, inflation was not only rising sharply but also broadening into additional sectors of the economy. Many prices have jumped over the past year because heavy demand has run into short supplies of items like autos, building materials and household goods.

But in other areas unaffected by the pandemic, like rents, costs are also surging at the fastest pace in

decades. Steady job growth is encouraging more people to move into their own apartments, elevating rental costs by the most in two decades. Apartment vacancy rates have reached their lowest level since 1984.

In the final three months of last year, wages and salaries jumped 4.5%, the sharpest such increase in at least 20 years. Those pay increases have, in turn, led many companies to raise prices to offset their higher labor costs.

Soaring energy costs pose a particular challenge for the Fed. Higher gas prices tend to both accelerate inflation and weaken economic growth. That's because as their paychecks are eroded at the gas pump, consumers typically spend less in other ways.

That pattern is similar to the "stagflation" dynamic that made the economy of the 1970s miserable for many Americans. Most economists, though, say they think the U.S. economy is growing strongly enough that another recession is unlikely, even with higher inflation.

## Pressure builds on Biden to repay Venezuela's goodwill moves

By JOSHUA GOODMAN and REGINA GARCIA CANO Associated Press

MIAMI (AP) — Pressure is building on the Biden administration to begin unwinding sanctions on Venezuela after President Nicolas Maduro freed two American prisoners and promised to resume negotiations with his opponents.

Maduro's goodwill gesture came during a weekend trip to Caracas by senior White House and State Department officials that caught off guard Maduro's friends and foes alike.

While the Biden administration is saying little about what was discussed behind closed doors, a smug Maduro — who has sought face-to-face talks with the U.S. for years — bragged that careful protocol was followed, with the flags of the two nations "beautifully united, as they should be."

For the past five years, the U.S. has, with little success, tried everything from punishing oil sanctions to criminal indictments and support for clandestine coups in its campaign to remove Maduro and restore what it sees as Venezuela's stolen democracy.

But Russia's invasion of Ukraine has upended the world order, forcing the U.S. to rethink its national security priorities. Hostile petrostates under U.S. sanctions like Iran and Venezuela are seen as the most likely to benefit as President Joe Biden seeks to mitigate the impact from a ban on Russian oil imports that is adding to already rising prices that have pushed inflation to its highest level in four decades.

"Clearly at some level a decision was made to abandon some of the pillars of the U.S. policy toward Venezuela these past few years," said Brian Winter, vice president of the Council of the Americas. "But until we know precisely what the Biden administration is trying to achieve, it'll be difficult to evaluate how far this détente can go."

U.S. officials have not detailed any other specific outcomes of the talks, which were led by Juan González, who is responsible for Latin America on the National Security Council. It was the first Venezuela visit by a White House official since Hugo Chávez 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" that did not entail any quid pro quo but allowed the Biden administration to share its "view of the world" with Maduro.

White House press secretary Jen Psaki said Wednesday that it was an encouraging sign that Maduro decided to return to negotiations in Mexico with his opponents. But neither she nor anyone else in the administration would say how the U.S. would reciprocate, if at all.

"There are a range of issues moving forward, but right now we're just celebrating the return of two Americans," Psaki said.

One of the Americans released, oil executive Gustavo Cardenas, had been imprisoned in Venezuela since 2017, when he and several colleagues at Houston-based Citgo were lured to Caracas for what they thought was a board meeting with their parent company, state run oil giant PDVSA.

Instead, masked security officers bearing assault rifles burst into a conference room and arrested the men. Later they were sentenced on corruption charges stemming from a never-executed plan to refinance

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some \$4 billion in Citgo bonds by offering a 50% stake in the company as collateral.

Cardenas, in a statement Wednesday, said his imprisonment of more than four years "has caused a lot of suffering and pain, much more than I can explain with my words."

The eight Americans who remain imprisoned in Venezuela, including five of Cardenas' colleagues from Citgo, are an important obstacle to normal relations with Maduro.

But even if a release of the remaining prisoners seems remote, Winter says there is a small window now to keep momentum building, as the U.S. gears up for a long geopolitical standoff with Russia.

Among the options available to the U.S. is allowing Chevron — the last remaining American oil company in Venezuela — to boost production and possibly resume oil exports to Gulf Coast refineries tailor made to process the country's tar-like crude, a U.S. official said prior to the weekend's shuttle diplomacy. Under U.S. sanctions, Chevron is banned from negotiating with Maduro and doing all but basic upkeep on wells it operates in connection with PDVSA.

There has also been speculation the U.S. could seek to reopen its embassy in Caracas, which has been shuttered since the Trump administration and other governments in 2019 recognized opposition leader Juan Guaidó as Venezuela's legitimate leader.

Much depends on how much Maduro sets aside his authoritarian impulses.

Even as he hosts top U.S. officials, Maduro has shown little sign he is willing to abandon Russian President Vladimir Putin. He spoke by phone with the Russian leader last week in a show of support and attended a rally in Caracas where Putin's ambassador received a roaring ovation from ruling socialist party stalwarts.

Winter said Maduro will also have to show a real willingness to negotiate in earnest with his opponents and not use the talks as he has in the past as a delaying tactic to ease international pressure.

Opposition hardliners, as well as their allies in the U.S., have started to chastise Biden for abandoning a multilateral policy of isolating Maduro.

In contrast, some Venezuelan government insiders are already giddy over the prospects of a better future if not the return to the days when they could buy up real estate in the U.S. and spend weekends in Miami.

"It's the beginning of the end of the conflict," quipped one wealthy Venezuelan businessman who has been a longtime target of U.S. federal investigators. He spoke on the condition of anonymity to discuss sensitive bilateral issues. "Now you'll have to write about Russia and the oligarchs that the U.S. is going to pursue there."

## Live updates: U.S. House approves Russia oil import ban bill

By The Associated Press undefined

The latest developments on the Russia-Ukraine war:

WASHINGTON -- The U.S. House overwhelmingly approved legislation that would ban Russian oil imports to the United States, an effort to put into law the restrictions announced by President Joe Biden in response to the escalating war in Ukraine.

Going further than Biden's import ban on Russian oil, the bill making its way through Congress would also encourage a review of Russia's status in the World Trade Organization and signal U.S. support for sanctions on Russian officials over human rights violations, as the U.S. works to economically isolate the regime.

Lawmakers in both parties have been eager to act, willing to risk higher gas prices at home in order to support Ukraine with a show of U.S. bipartisanship. The legislation was approved Wednesday, 414-17, and now goes to the Senate.

Rep. Lloyd Doggett, D-Texas, who helped draft the bill, acknowledged it may cost more to fill up tanks at home to stop Russian President Vladimir Putin's tanks abroad.

"It is one way to demonstrate our solidarity," Doggett said during the debate.

TOKYO — Japanese electronics and entertainment giant Sony is suspending all shipments of its PlayStation video game consoles as well as game software to Russia because of the war in Ukraine.

Launch of "Gran Turismo 7," a popular racing car game, is being suspended, and the PlayStation store

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in Russia will close, Sony Interactive Entertainment said in a statement Thursday.

The company "joins the global community in calling for peace in Ukraine," it said.

Sony, which has movies and music businesses, earlier said it's halted theatrical releases of its movies in Russia. Sony Group Corp. has also announced \$2 million in humanitarian aid to the U.N. High Commissioner for Refugees and the international aid group Save the Children to help war victims.

**TOKYO** — Japanese machinery and technology company Hitachi Group is suspending exports to Russia and has temporarily stopped manufacturing there.

Hitachi said Thursday products and services related to electric power equipment "indispensable to the daily lives of people" will continue. Operations in Ukraine have resumed by moving employees and families to safer areas, it said.

"Hitachi Group considers the safety and health of all employees and their families as its top priority. In Ukraine, the company is engaged in various activities to realize this goal and hopes that peace will return as soon as possible," it said.

**IRPIN**, Ukraine — Hundreds of Ukrainians living in towns occupied by Russian troops on the outskirts of Kyiv fled Wednesday.

Streams of cars -- some fixed with white flags -- filed down the road, joined by lines of yellow buses marked with red crosses.

The Interior Ministry said about 700 people were evacuated from Vorzel and Irpin. People from three other Kyiv suburbs were unable to leave. Some who managed to get out said they hadn't eaten in days.

"I forgot when I ate last," said an Irpin resident who gave only her first name, Olena. "I'm so scared. I need to keep walking."

Iuliia Bushinska, a Vorzel resident, said: "Occupiers came to our house and they were ready to shoot us."

"They took away our house, our car, they took away our documents. So we need to start our life from the beginning. We survived things that I never experienced in my life," Bushinska said.

**WASHINGTON** — The U.S. government publicly warned that Russia might seek to use chemical or biological weapons in Ukraine, after Russia, without evidence, accused Ukraine of having chemical weapons labs.

White House press secretary Jen Psaki called Russia's claim "preposterous" and said it could be part of an attempt by Russia to lay the groundwork for using such weapons of mass destruction against Ukraine itself.

"This is all an obvious ploy by Russia to try to justify its further premeditated, unprovoked, and unjustified attack on Ukraine," said Psaki.

"Now that Russia has made these false claims, and China has seemingly endorsed this propaganda, we should all be on the lookout for Russia to possibly use chemical or biological weapons in Ukraine, or to create a false flag operation using them."

Russia has used chemical weapons before in carrying out assassination attempts against Putin enemies like Alexey Navalny and former spy Sergei Skripal. It also supports the Assad government in Syria which has used chemical weapons against its people in a decade-long civil war.

**LVIV**, Ukraine — Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy called on the West to impose even tougher sanctions on Russia after the airstrike on the maternity hospital in Mariupol.

"A genocide of Ukrainians is taking place," Zelenskyy said Wednesday in his daily late evening video address to the nation. Wearing his now traditional wartime army green, he said the West should strengthen the sanctions so Russia "no longer has any possibility to continue this genocide."

He said 17 people were injured in the attack, including pregnant women.

Mariupol has been blockaded by Russian troops for nine days. City officials said Wednesday that about 1,200 residents have been killed.

Zelenskyy again called on Western leaders to impose a no-fly zone over Ukraine, something NATO mem-

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bers have refused to do for fear of provoking a wider war with Russia. Short of that, Zelenskyy called for the delivery of more fighter jets to Ukraine, a proposal the Pentagon rejected on Wednesday.

Zelenskyy said about 35,000 civilians have used humanitarian corridors to flee to western Ukraine to escape the fighting.

**NEW YORK** — Wall Street titan Citigroup said it would wind down its Russian banking business, with the ultimate goal of finding a seller. But the bank also acknowledged that selling the business may be difficult due to the Russian economy “being disconnected from the global financial system.”

Citigroup had a robust presence in Russia for several years, operating branches in Moscow, St. Petersburg and other major Russian cities. The company also did investment banking and business banking in the region.

Until the business is sold, Citi said it is “operating the business on a more limited basis” and is helping its U.S. and other corporate clients unwind or suspend their businesses in Russia.

Weeks before Russia invaded, Citi had announced it was leaving several Asian markets including Russia as part of a company-wide strategic review of its major markets. Citi is probably the most global of the Wall Street banks, operating consumer banking franchises in Asia, Latin America and Europe.

**WASHINGTON** — The Pentagon slammed the door Wednesday on any plans to provide MiG fighter jets to Ukraine, even through a second country, calling it a “high-risk” venture that would not significantly change the Ukrainian Air Force’s effectiveness.

Pentagon press secretary John Kirby told reporters that Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin spoke with his Polish counterpart on Wednesday and told him the U.S. assessment. He said the U.S. is pursuing other options that would provide more critical military needs to Ukraine such as air defense and anti-armor weapons systems.

Poland had said it was prepared to hand over MiG-29 planes to NATO that could then be delivered to Ukraine, but Kirby said U.S. intelligence concluded that it could trigger a “significant” Russian reaction.

**LVIV, Ukraine** — Russian aircraft bombed Zhytomyr on Wednesday evening, while artillery fire continued pounding the suburbs of Kyiv and Kharkiv, the country’s second largest city.

In Zhytomyr, a city of 260,000 to the west of Kyiv, bombs fell on two hospitals, one of them a children’s hospital, Mayor Serhii Sukhomlyn said on Facebook. He said the number of casualties was still being determined.

“Oh, this is a hot night,” he said in a video address to city residents. “Russia understands that it is losing strategically, but we have to hold out.”

Russian artillery shelled Kharkiv, destroying a police headquarters, killing at least four people and wounding 15, prosecutors office representative Serhii Bolvinov said on Facebook. He said since the invasion began nearly two weeks ago, 282 city residents have been killed, including six children.

After darkness fell, Russian artillery again began shelling Kyiv suburbs.

“Russian troops are methodically turning our life into a hell. People day and night have to sit underground without food, water or electricity,” the head of the Kyiv region, Oleksiy Kuleba, said on Ukrainian television.

**UNITED NATIONS** — The United Nations has received official notification from Ukraine that it intends to withdraw about 250 troops serving in the U.N. peacekeeping mission in Congo as well as military equipment, including some aircraft.

U.N. spokesman Stephane Dujarric confirmed the withdrawal on Wednesday stressing that every country has a right to withdraw military forces contributed to peacekeeping operations. He acknowledged “the tremendous role Ukraine has played, especially on issues of transport and helicopters.”

Dujarric said it is up to the Ukrainian government to explain why it asked to pull out the troops and the U.N. will be contacting other countries to replace the troops and equipment in the Congo mission known

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as MONUSCO which has about 17,800 personnel.

The U.N. spokesman said Ukrainians remain present in smaller numbers in other U.N. peacekeeping missions — 13 in South Sudan, 12 in Mali, five in Cyprus, four in Abyei and three in the U.N. political mission in Kosovo.

WASHINGTON — U.S. House Speaker Nancy Pelosi said that President Volodymyr Zelenskyy has told her that it will take “everybody’s help” in rebuilding Ukraine after the war with Russia.

Pelosi said she had a more than 45 minute call Wednesday with Zelenskyy. She said the Ukrainian president again asked for U.S. help in sending warplanes, anti-aircraft missiles and tanks to fight the Russian invasion.

But Pelosi said Zelenskyy also told her: “We’re going to need everybody’s help in rebuilding Ukraine as soon as we end this war.”

Pelosi said she hopes the U.S. can help facilitate the transfer of Soviet-era MiG fighter planes that Ukraine has requested from neighboring NATO allies. But she noted there’s a school of thought that suggests anti-aircraft missiles could also help Ukraine in its fight against Russia.

The Pentagon has rejected the idea of sending any fighter jets to Ukraine.

UNITED NATIONS — Russia’s “illegal, unprovoked” and “cruel” war against Ukraine is underscoring the many different ways in which peace, security and a stable climate are linked, U.S. climate envoy John Kerry said Wednesday.

Kerry told an informal U.N. Security Council meeting on Climate Finance for Sustaining Peace that “the crisis in Ukraine really does underscore the risks that we face in the current volatile and uncertain energy markets.”

The U.S. special presidential envoy for climate said in a virtual speech that “Russia has attacked a nuclear facility in Ukraine, dangerous in and of itself, risky.”

There was increasing concern Wednesday over the safety of the decommissioned Chernobyl nuclear plant, which Russian troops seized early in the invasion and which lost power and had to revert to backup generators. And there is also concern about the Zaporizhzhia nuclear plant, the largest in Europe, which Russia seized last week.

The United States is responding by banning the import of Russian oil, liquefied natural gas and coal, “and many other nations are now rethinking their reliance on Russian energy sources,” Kerry said. The “instability, conflict, death destruction” in Ukraine is happening in the context of “a global existential crisis” of global warming that scientists have warned about for decades, he said.

“We are actually living through the consequences of that crisis,” Kerry said.

WASHINGTON — The United Arab Emirates said Wednesday it will urge OPEC to consider boosting oil output.

The announcement followed a U.S. ban on imports of Russian oil, the latest in a series of sanctions designed to punish Russia for the war in Ukraine. Oil prices have risen sharply since Russia — the world’s third-largest oil producer — invaded Ukraine late last month.

“We favor production increases and will be encouraging OPEC to consider higher production levels,” UAE’s ambassador to the United States, Yousef Al Otaiba, said in a statement posted on his embassy’s website. He said his country believes that stability in energy markets is critical to the global economy.

The UAE is a longtime member of the Organization of the Petroleum Exporting Countries, which last week, along with its oil-producing allies including Russia, said it was sticking to its plan to gradually increase oil production rather than opening the spigots further.

The UAE was the world’s seventh-largest oil producing nation in 2020, according to U.S. Department of Energy figures published in December of last year.

Oil prices surged Tuesday after President Joe Biden announced the U.S. ban on Russian oil. But the possibility of increased OPEC output helped send prices tumbling Wednesday. A barrel of U.S. crude oil

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dropped 11% to \$110.12.

**BERLIN** — The head of the United Nations nuclear watchdog said he will travel to Antalya in Turkey on Thursday at the invitation of Turkish Foreign Minister Mevlut Cavusoglu as concerns rise over the security of Ukraine's nuclear reactors.

Cavusoglu will host a meeting between the Russian and Ukrainian foreign ministers in Antalya as the two-week-long war in Ukraine claims more victims. IAEA Director General Rafael Grossi tweeted Wednesday evening that he will attend meetings and hopes "to make progress on the urgent issue of ensuring the safety and security of #Ukraine's nuclear facilities. We need to act now!"

Concerns rose Wednesday over the safety of the decommissioned Chernobyl nuclear plant, which Russian troops seized early in the invasion and which lost power and had to revert to backup generators. The state communications agency said the power outage could put systems for cooling nuclear material at risk. The site has been under control of Russian troops since last week.

Ukraine's nuclear regulator said remote data transmission from monitoring systems at Chernobyl has been lost.

The Vienna-based U.N. nuclear watchdog said it saw no critical impact on safety at Chernobyl because there could be "effective heat removal without need for electrical supply" from spent nuclear fuel at the site.

**SEATTLE** — Amazon said it will suspend shipments of products sold on its website to customers based in Russia and Belarus.

The e-commerce giant said late Tuesday in a blog update on its website that it will also suspend Prime Video access for customers based in Russia and will stop taking orders for New World, the only video game the company says it sells directly in the Russia. The retailer added new Russia and Belarus-based third-party sellers won't be able to sell on its site.

The retailer had said earlier in the day that its cloud computing network, Amazon Web Services, will also stop allowing new sign-ups in Russia and Belarus. Ukrainian Vice Prime Minister Mykhailo Fedorov had called on the company to stop providing AWS in Russia, suggesting in a letter sent to Amazon founder Jeff Bezos that not doing so could be supporting "bloodshed and disinformation that can be leveraged through digital infrastructures."

**KYIV, Ukraine** — Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy said he discussed humanitarian corridors and other issues with European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen on Wednesday.

Zelenskyy tweeted that they agreed on "the need to ensure effective humanitarian corridors for civilians" during the call.

The Ukrainian president noted that he again raised the issue of EU membership for Ukraine and expressed his gratitude for another EU sanctions package against Russia.

**WASHINGTON** — U.S. gasoline prices hit another record on Wednesday, with the national average rising to \$4.25 a gallon, an overnight increase of eight cents, according to the AAA auto club.

Motorists in California continue to pay the highest prices, with the statewide average at \$5.57 a gallon. Prices topped \$4.50 in Illinois, Oregon, Washington, Nevada, Alaska and Hawaii.

Gasoline prices have been rising for nearly two years, following the trend in oil prices. Production fell at the outset of the pandemic, and producers have not pumped enough oil since then to meet rising demand.

The national average for gas has spiked 60 cents in just the past week, which analysts say is almost entirely due to Russia's invasion of Ukraine, which led President Joe Biden to announce Tuesday that the U.S. will ban the import of Russian oil.

**WASHINGTON** — The Pentagon said Wednesday that two U.S. Army Patriot air defense batteries have been shifted from Germany to Poland as a precautionary defensive move.

It said the decision was made by Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin in consultation with the Polish government, which asked for the Patriots.



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**TIRANA, Albania** — The U.S. Special Operations Command Europe, or SOCEUR, opened its forward-based headquarters in Albania on Wednesday, aiming at enhancing regional stability, its head Maj. Gen. David Tabor said.

A 12- to 15-member Task Force Balkans group will be based in Tirana to coordinate joint and combined exchange training and civil military support element engagements, Tabor said. Tabor said Albania's central location in the Balkans was behind the decision to open the command there, he said.

It will be the first-ever U.S. permanent military presence in Albania, said U.S. Ambassador in Tirana Yuri Kim.

Albanian senior officials said that opening such a U.S. military office is more important now.

The opening of the command in Tirana "came at the proper moment, at the culmination of the insecurity due to the gloomy situation in the continent after Russian aggression," said Defense Minister Niko Peleshi.

**PRAGUE** — The Czech government has agreed to give refugees from Ukraine free access to the labor market without any work permit.

Labor and Social Affairs Minister Marian Jurecka said Wednesday that the refugees will be in a position "of any other citizen" if they want to get a job.

The refugees will only need to get a visa for their stay in the Czech Republic to work. Assistance centers in all regions of the Czech Republic are working around the clock to provide all necessary documents and other initial help, including housing, to the refugees.

It's estimated some 150,000 people have arrived in the country that doesn't border Ukraine invaded by the Russian troops.

Jurecka said there are some 350,000 jobs currently available in the Czech Republic.

The government also approved a plan to give all the refugees a financial contribution of \$215 on arrival. They would be able to receive it monthly six times if needed.

**NICOSIA, Cyprus** — Cyprus said the first 165-ton batch of humanitarian aid for the people of Ukraine has been shipped to Poland via the Greek port city of Thessaloniki.

The foreign ministry said in a statement Wednesday that the shipment will reach a European Union logistics hub set up in conjunction with Polish authorities.

The aid — collected mainly from individual donations — includes 88 tons of foodstuffs, sleeping bags, tents blankets and portable toilets, 5,000 pairs of shoes, bottled water, an electricity generator, personal hygiene kits and 14 tons of medical supplies.

The aid is a "tangible demonstration of the solidarity of Cyprus to the Ukrainian people," the ministry said. Freight costs were covered by the ministry.

**Russian President Vladimir Putin** has blamed Ukrainian "nationalists" for hampering the evacuation of civilians from besieged Ukrainian cities.

The Kremlin said that Putin discussed the situation in Ukraine in Wednesday's phone call with German Chancellor Olaf Scholz, with a "special emphasis given to the humanitarian aspects." It said that Putin told Scholz about Russian "efforts to organize humanitarian corridors for civilians to exit areas of fighting and attempts by militants from nationalist units to hamper safe evacuation of people."

Ukrainian officials said that the continuous Russian shelling has derailed efforts to evacuate civilians from areas affected by fighting.

**LONDON** — British American Tobacco said it has suspended all planned capital investment in Russia but continues to operate there, even as many other Western brands announce they're halting all business in the country because of the Ukraine invasion.

The company, one of the so-called Big Four tobacco producers, said Wednesday that it has a "duty of

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care" to all its 2,500 employees in Russia. BAT said it's focusing on its locally produced tobacco products in Russia, where it has substantial manufacturing and has been operating since 1991.

"Furthermore, we are scaling our business activities appropriate to the current situation, including rationalising our marketing activities," the company said, adding it's complying with all international sanctions related to the conflict.

The company said it is "deeply concerned about the conflict in Ukraine," where it employs 1,000 people and has suspended all business and manufacturing.

In contrast, another major tobacco producer, Imperial Brands, said earlier Wednesday it would halt all operations in Russia, including production at its factory in Volgograd and ceasing all sales and marketing activity.

Separately, S&P Global Ratings said it has suspended commercial operations in Russia. The credit rating agency said it would maintain analytical coverage from outside Russia.

LYIV, Ukraine — Ukrainian officials say a Russian strike has hit a children's hospital and maternity facility in the besieged southeastern port city of Mariupol.

A statement on the city council's social media account on Wednesday said the hospital suffered "colossal" damage.

Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy tweeted that there were "people, children under the wreckage." He called the strike an "atrocious."

The deputy head of Zelenskyy's office, Kyrylo Tymoshenko, said authorities are trying to establish the number of people who may have been killed or wounded.

GENEVA — The international Red Cross says civilians caught up in places affected by fighting between Russian and Ukrainian forces should have "broader relocation alternatives" for evacuation — including to other parts of Ukraine — beyond the Russian government's offer to take them into Russian territory.

The International Committee of the Red Cross, which in particular is trying to arrange evacuations of civilians from the hard-hit port city of Mariupol, made the comments Wednesday after Russia offered in recent days to allow safe-passage corridors for Ukrainian civilians across the Russian border. Ukrainian authorities have rejected that idea.

ICRC has said authorities on both sides need to agree on any evacuation plan, and evacuations should be voluntary for the civilians concerned.

Some civilians might refuse evacuation "if the only escape route available to them implies resettling in the Russian Federation or the Republic of Belarus," said ICRC spokesman Jason Straziuso in an email, referring to Russian ally Belarus. "In the view of the ICRC, civilians affected by the hostilities should be given broader relocation alternatives, including within Ukraine itself."

NEW YORK — Russia has admitted that conscript soldiers have been sent into Ukraine and that some have been captured by Ukrainian troops.

The admission comes after President Vladimir Putin vowed that conscripts would not be deployed and that Russian forces would rely on professional troops.

Defense Ministry spokesman Maj. Gen. Igor Konashenkov said that "unfortunately there have been detected several instances of the presence of conscript-service military personnel" with units in Ukraine but that "almost all" of them had been recalled to Russia.

He added that some conscripts were taken prisoner by Ukrainian forces while serving in a logistics unit and efforts are under way to free them. Konashenkov didn't specify how many conscripts had served in Ukraine or how many were captured.

## Deportation agents use smartphone app to monitor immigrants

By AMY TAXIN and AMANCAI BIRABEN Associated Press

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LOS ANGELES (AP) — U.S. authorities have broadly expanded the use of a smartphone app during the coronavirus pandemic to ensure immigrants released from detention will attend deportation hearings, a requirement that advocates say violates their privacy and makes them feel they're not free.

More than 125,000 people — many of them stopped at the U.S.-Mexico border — are now compelled to install the app known as SmartLink on their phones, up from around 5,000 less than three years ago. It allows officials to easily check on them by requiring the immigrants to send a selfie or make or receive a phone call when asked.

Although the technology is less cumbersome than an ankle monitor, advocates say tethering immigrants to the app is unfair considering many have paid bond to get out of U.S. detention facilities while their cases churn through the country's backlogged immigration courts. Immigration proceedings are administrative, not criminal, and the overwhelming majority of people with cases before the courts aren't detained.

Advocates said they're concerned about how the U.S. government might use data culled from the app on immigrants' whereabouts and contacts to round up and arrest others on immigration violations.

"It's kind of been shocking how just in a couple of years it has exploded so quickly and is now being used so much and everywhere," said Jacinta Gonzalez, senior campaign director for the Latino rights organization Mijente. "It's making it much easier for the government to track a larger number of people."

The use of the app by Immigration and Customs Enforcement soared during the pandemic, when many government services went online. It continued to grow as President Joe Biden called on the Department of Justice to curb the use of private prisons. His administration has also voiced support for so-called alternatives to detention to ensure immigrants attend required appointments such as immigration court hearings.

Meanwhile, the number of cases before the long-backlogged U.S. immigration court system has soared to 1.6 million. Immigrants often must wait for years to get a hearing before a judge who will determine whether they can stay in the country legally or should be deported.

Since the pandemic, U.S. immigration authorities have reduced the number of immigrants in detention facilities and touted detention alternatives such as the app.

The SmartLink app comes from BI Inc, a Boulder, Colorado-based subsidiary of private prison company The GEO Group. GEO, which runs immigration detention facilities for ICE under other contracts, declined to comment on the app.

Officials at Immigration and Customs Enforcement, which is part of the Department of Homeland Security, declined to answer questions about the app, but said in a statement that detention alternatives "are an effective method of tracking noncitizens released from DHS custody who are awaiting their immigration proceedings."

In recent congressional testimony, agency officials wrote that the SmartLink app is also cheaper than detention: it costs about \$4.36 a day to put a person on a detention alternative and more than \$140 a day to hold someone in a facility, agency budget estimates show.

Advocates say immigrants who spent months in detention facilities and were released on bond are being placed on the app when they go to an initial meeting with a deportation officer, and so are parents and children seeking asylum on the southwest border.

Initially, SmartLink was seen as a less intensive alternative to ankle monitors for immigrants who had been detained and released, but is now being used widely on immigrants with no criminal history and who have not been detained at all, said Julie Mao, deputy director of the immigrant rights group Just Futures. Previously, immigrants often only attended periodic check ins at agency offices.

"We're very concerned that that is going to be used as the excessive standard for everyone who's in the immigration system," Mao said.

While most people attend their immigration court hearings, some do skip out. In those cases, immigration judges issue deportation orders in the immigrants' absence, and deportation agents are tasked with trying to find them and return them to their countries. During the 2018 fiscal year, about a quarter of immigration judges' case decisions were deportation orders for people who missed court, court data shows.

Advocates questioned whether monitoring systems matter in these cases, noting someone who wants to avoid court will stop checking in with deportation officers, trash their phone and move, whether on

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SmartLink or not.

They said they're concerned that deportation agents could be tracking immigrants through SmartLink more than they are aware, just as commercial apps tap into location data on people's phones.

In the criminal justice system, law enforcement agencies are using similar apps for defendants awaiting trial or serving sentences. Robert Magaletta, chief executive of Louisiana-based Shadowtrack Technologies, said the technology doesn't continually track defendants but records their locations at check ins, and that the company offers a separate, full-time tracking service to law enforcement agencies using tamperproof watches.

In a 2019 Congressional Research Service report, ICE said the app wasn't continually monitoring immigrants. But advocates said even quick snapshots of people's locations during check ins could be used to track down friends and coworkers who lack proper immigration authorization. They noted immigration investigators pulled GPS data from the ankle monitors of Mississippi poultry plant workers to help build a case for a large workplace raid.

For immigrants released from detention with ankle monitors that irritate the skin and beep loudly at times, the app is an improvement, said Mackenzie Mackins, an immigration attorney in Los Angeles. It's less painful and more discreet, she said, adding the ankle monitors made her clients feel they were viewed by others as criminals.

But SmartLink can be stressful for immigrants who came to the U.S. fleeing persecution in their countries, and for those who fear a technological glitch could lead to a missed check in.

Roseanne Flores, a paralegal at Hilf and Hilf in Troy, Michigan, said she recently fielded panicked calls from clients because the app wasn't working. They wound up having to report in person to immigration agents' offices instead.

"I see the agony it causes the clients," Flores said. "My heart goes out to them."

## House approves ban on Russian oil to US, bolstering Biden

By LISA MASCARO AP Congressional Correspondent

WASHINGTON (AP) — The House overwhelmingly approved legislation Wednesday night that would ban Russian oil imports to the United States, an effort to put into law the restrictions announced by President Joe Biden in response to the escalating war in Ukraine.

Going further than Biden's import ban on Russian oil, the bill making its way through Congress would also encourage a review of Russia's status in the World Trade Organization and signal U.S. support for sanctions on Russian officials over human rights violations, as the U.S. works to economically isolate the regime.

Lawmakers in both parties have been eager to act, willing to risk higher gas prices at home in order to support Ukraine with a show of U.S. bipartisanship. The legislation was approved Wednesday, 414-17, and now goes to the Senate.

Rep. Lloyd Doggett, D-Texas, who helped draft the bill, acknowledged it may cost more to fill up tanks at home to stop Russian President Vladimir Putin's tanks abroad.

"It is one way to demonstrate our solidarity," Doggett said during the debate.

The remarkable bipartisan resolve in Congress to deter Russia and help Ukraine has acted as an accelerant on the White House's own strategy, pushing the Biden administration to move more quickly than it would have — a rare example of the legislative branch muscling its way into foreign policy.

Just days ago, the Biden administration was reluctant to ban Russian oil imports, worried about reducing the global energy supply and causing spikes in gas prices at a time when U.S. households already face record-setting inflation.

"We've been talking about doing the Russian (energy) ban for a while, and we're so pleased the president has done that," House Speaker Nancy Pelosi said ahead of the vote.

While Russian oil makes up only a small part of U.S. imports, it carries a high price for lawmakers in Congress who viewed the ban as a moral test in blocking an economic lifeline for Putin's regime. Lawmakers appeared especially moved by Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy's "desperate plea" for help during

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a weekend video call with lawmakers.

"We stand with the people of Ukraine, Democrats and Republicans alike," said Rep. Lloyd Smucker, R-Pa. House GOP leader Kevin McCarthy said Republicans would have preferred a tougher bill on Russia, alongside efforts to allow more energy production in the U.S. Nevertheless, they wanted to send a show of support.

"Our conference overwhelmingly does not want Russian oil; we want American oil," McCarthy said.

The GOP leader distanced himself from former President Donald Trump's views that Putin is a "genius" for his Ukraine strategy.

"I do not think anything savvy or genius about Putin. I think Putin is evil. He's a dictator," McCarthy said.

The action comes as Congress is on track to approve nearly \$14 billion in military and humanitarian aid for Ukraine, a package that has swelled in size as the brutality of the war intensifies. More than 2 million Ukrainians have fled the country in the most rapid exodus since World War II.

The legislation in many ways is symbolic, since Biden has already announced the Russian oil ban. But the legislative push sets up the next showdown over Russia's trade status as Congress presses for restrictions on other imports from Russia that the administration has so far resisted.

The White House intervened over the weekend as key lawmakers from both the House and Senate prepared a more punitive bill that would begin to strip Russia of its permanent normal trade relation status — a move that would have opened the door to tariffs on other goods coming from Russia to the U.S.

Amid the administration's objections, Democratic leaders in Congress shelved the emerging bill rather than forcing a confrontation with their party's president.

Instead, the new legislation approved by the House stops short of suspending Russia's normal trade status. Rather, it calls for a review of Russia's status at the World Trade Organization. The House bill also says the Global Magnitsky Human Rights Accountability Act should be bolstered to allow the president to impose sanctions on any foreign person who has "directly or indirectly engaged in serious human rights abuse."

The Democrats in Congress are toggling between pushing their priorities and allowing the Biden administration leeway as it works with allies in Europe and beyond to stop Putin's war.

Senators, though, remain eager to curb Russian trade with restrictions on imports to the U.S., and Republican senators may try to amend the bill once it comes up for a Senate debate, likely in the week ahead. The bipartisan bill as initially drafted would have suspended normal trade relations with Russia as well as Belarus, the neighboring Russian ally that has been used as a launch point for incursions into northern Ukraine.

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

By FATIMA HUSSEIN Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — President Joe Biden on Wednesday signed 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.

Treasury Secretary Janet Yellen said the effort would "promote a fairer, more inclusive, and more efficient financial system" while countering illicit finance and preventing risks to financial stability and national security.

The Biden administration views the explosive popularity of cryptocurrency as an opportunity to examine the risks and benefits of digital assets, said a senior administration official who previewed the order Tuesday on the condition of anonymity, terms set by the White House.

Under the executive order, Biden also directed the Treasury Department and other federal agencies to study the impact of cryptocurrency on financial stability and national security.

Brian Deese and Jake Sullivan, Biden's top economic and national security advisers, respectively, said the order establishes the first comprehensive federal digital assets strategy for the United States.

"That will help position the U.S. to keep playing a leading role in the innovation and governance of the digital assets ecosystem at home and abroad, in a way that protects consumers, is consistent with our democratic values and advances U.S. global competitiveness," Deese and Sullivan said Wednesday in a

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joint statement.

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.

Daleep Singh, a deputy national security and economic adviser to Biden, told CNN on Wednesday that "crypto's really not a workaround for our sanctions."

The executive order had 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.

Bitcoin and cryptocurrency related stocks got a boost Wednesday following Biden's executive order.

The price of Bitcoin was up 9.8% at \$42,211, according to Coindesk. Shares in cryptocurrency exchange Coinbase Global surged 9.3% in midday trading, while online brokerage Robinhood Markets rose 4.5%.

Riot Blockchain, which focuses on cryptocurrency mining, jumped 11.5%. Digital payments platforms also rose. PayPal added 4.9% and Block climbed 10.55%.

**MLB cancels 93 more games, gap narrows in bargaining**

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By RONALD BLUM AP Baseball Writer

NEW YORK (AP) — Baseball Commissioner Rob Manfred canceled 93 more games Wednesday, appearing to cut off the chance to play a full 162-game schedule and threatening locked out players with loss of salary and service time.

As the sides narrowed many economic differences to a small margin, they became bogged down over management's attempt to gain an international amateur draft. Talks on that narrow topic were to continue Wednesday night.

In the meantime, at 6:30 p.m. on the 98th day of the lockout, Manfred announced two additional series had been canceled through April 13. That raised the total to 184 games wiped out from the 2,430-game regular season, or 7.6%.

"Because of the logistical realities of the calendar, another two series are being removed from the schedule, meaning that opening day is postponed until April 14," Manfred said.

Given how close the sides are on economic issues, a breakdown over an international draft was both puzzling and stunning. But following years of simmering distrust that have heated to a boil, it also was predictable.

"There's a lot going on in the world right now where you can certainly look out of touch," Arizona Diamondbacks president CEO Derrick Hall said during a news conference. "I'm saddened by all this, saddened by everything."

The union's latest counteroffer was hand delivered by chief negotiator Bruce Meyer to MLB's office shortly before 2 p.m. after he walked three blocks through a wintry mix from union headquarters.

While the gaps shrunk on the luxury tax, pre-arbitration bonus pool and minimum salary, management continued to press for its long-held goal of an international amateur draft. Players have repeatedly rejected the proposal since it was made on July 28.

"We never offered the Int'l Draft" tweeted Mets pitcher Max Scherzer, among the eight players on the union's executive subcommittee. "We did discuss it, but MLB told us they were NOT going to offer anything for it. At that point, we informed all players & agreed to no draft."

The union reacted angrily to Manfred's announcement.

"The owners' decision to cancel additional games is completely unnecessary," it said in a statement. "After making a set of comprehensive proposals to the league earlier this afternoon and being told substantive responses were forthcoming, players have yet to hear back."

Manfred had set a Tuesday deadline for a deal to preserve a 162-game schedule, and staff had started planning for opening day on April 6/7, back from the original March 31. The deadline was extended it to 2 p.m. Wednesday and then to 6 p.m.

MLB said it would not make a new counteroffer to players unless the union first chose one of three options:

— Agree to the international draft in exchange for the elimination of direct amateur draft pick compensation for qualified free agents.

— Keep compensation in exchange for MLB dropping the international draft proposal.

— Drop compensation while giving players until Nov. 15 to accept an international draft starting in 2024 and giving MLB the right to re-open the labor contract after the 2024 season if players fail to accept the draft.

Players rejected all three options and instead proposed to drop compensation for this year, have the sides agree to a draft by Nov. 15 or then revert to compensation for the 2022-23 offseason. MLB said it did not receive that until after the 6 p.m. deadline.

"In a last-ditch effort to preserve a 162-game season, this week we have made good-faith proposals that address the specific concerns voiced by the MLBPA and would have allowed the players to return to the field immediately," Manfred said. "The clubs went to extraordinary lengths to meet the substantial demands of the MLBPA. On the key economic issues that have posed stumbling blocks, the clubs proposed ways to bridge gaps to preserve a full schedule. Regrettably, after our second late-night bargaining session in a week, we remain without a deal."

Manfred had called off the first two series on March 1, a day after his initial deadline for a deal. The

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latest cancellations included four series finales on April 14.

While Manfred did not use the word "canceled," he left the appearance 162 games no longer could be played due to baseball's ninth work stoppage, its first since 1995.

"We were talking these last few days about taking those first two series and finding a way to get them back in the schedule," Hall said. "From what I'm hearing now, these four series are out."

If games are canceled on April 14 and players do not receive credit for service time in the eventual settlement, free-agent eligibility would be pushed back for many players, including Shohei Ohtani from 2023 to 2024, Pete Alonso from 2024 to 2025, Jake Cronenworth from 2025 to 2026 and Jonathan India from 2026 to 2027.

If cancellations go through April 15, the stoppage would spill onto the 75th anniversary of Jackie Robinson breaking the major league color barrier.

Players dropped their threshold for the luxury tax to \$232 million this year, with increases to \$235 million in 2023, \$240 million in 2024 and \$245 million in 2025 and \$250 million in 2026.

Players had been at \$238 million to \$263 million in their previous proposal of a week earlier. They were within 2.5% of management's starting figure of \$230 million in Tuesday's proposal. Players were within 3.2% of MLB's \$242 million for 2026.

Management's desire for an additional fourth tax threshold at \$60 million above the first threshold is among the contentious points remaining.

Players dropped to \$65 million from \$80 million for their proposed bonus pool for pre-arbitration-eligible players, a day after MLB raised its offer from \$30 million to \$40 million. The union is asking for \$5 million annual increases, while management's offer is the same for all five years.

The union dropped its proposed minimum salary to \$710,000 from \$725,000, a figure rising to \$780,000 by 2026. Management is at \$700,000 this year, rising to \$770,000. The union's proposals on the tax threshold and bonus pool were first reported by The Athletic.

In the proposal for an international draft, teams would rotate picking in different quadrants of the first round over a four-year period. A slotting system would be installed similar to what the union agreed to starting in 2012 for the amateur draft covering residents of the U.S., Puerto Rico and Canada.

The international draft proposal includes hard slots that could not be negotiated by individuals. MLB estimates \$17 million in additional spending for the drafted international players above the \$166.3 million spent by the 30 teams in 2021, plus an additional \$6 million on non-drafted players. The draft would start in 2024.

International players would lose the right to pick which team they sign with. The age for the draft would be in the year a player turns 16.

## Unvaccinated Djokovic says he is out of Indian Wells, Miami

By HOWARD FENDRICH AP Tennis Writer

Novak Djokovic said that he will not be able to compete at the hard-court tennis tournaments in Indian Wells, California, or Miami because he is unvaccinated and can't travel to the United States.

The 20-time Grand Slam champion tweeted Wednesday that the Centers for Disease Control "confirmed the regulations won't be changing so I won't be able to play in the U.S."

Djokovic, who recently dropped to No. 2 in the ATP rankings, has played in only one tournament so far in 2022 because he has not received any shots to protect against COVID-19. He was deported from Australia in January and was not allowed to try to defend his title at Melbourne Park.

Rafael Nadal wound up winning the Australian Open for his 21st major trophy, breaking a tie with Djokovic and Roger Federer for the most claimed by a man in the history of tennis.

Djokovic is a 34-year-old from Serbia who said in April 2020, as the coronavirus pandemic raged, that he was opposed to needing to be vaccinated to travel. In June of that year, with professional tennis on hiatus, he organized a series of exhibition matches in Serbia and Croatia with no rules requiring social distancing or masking — a tour that was called off after some players, including Djokovic, got COVID-19.

His name was put in the draw for the BNP Paribas Open in California on Tuesday, even though his status



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was up in the air because the U.S. has been requiring foreign visitors to be vaccinated to enter the country. In addition, the tournament had previously announced that everyone on-site at Indian Wells would need to be fully inoculated.

"While I was automatically listed in the @BNPPARIBASOPEN and @MiamiOpen draw," Djokovic wrote Wednesday, "I knew it would be unlikely I'd be able to travel."

Indian Wells is under way this week; the Miami Open starts on March 21.

"We understood from the beginning that Novak's participation at the Miami Open was determinant on his entry into the United States, which we knew would be a long shot," said James Blake, the tournament director in Miami. "We have an incredibly deep and talented player field, and look forward to hosting a great event."

Chris Widmaier, a spokesman for the U.S. Tennis Association, which runs the U.S. Open, said the organization would have no comment other than to note that the event follows government guidelines. The American Grand Slam tournament is scheduled to begin on Aug. 29.

It has been a turbulent start to 2022 for Djokovic, who went through detention and a court case during an 11-day saga in Australia before he was sent home. During the legal back-and-forth, Djokovic said he wasn't vaccinated and thought he should get a medical exemption to rules requiring the shots because, he said, he tested positive for COVID-19 again in December. He also said he attended an in-person interview with a reporter despite having that result.

In February, Djokovic said in an interview that he would not get vaccinated, even if he needs to be in order to participate in events such as the French Open or Wimbledon.

On the last day of last month, Djokovic dropped out of the No. 1 ranking for the first time in two years, sliding to No. 2 behind Daniil Medvedev. Djokovic's 361 total weeks atop the ATP are a record, as are his seven times finishing a season at No. 1.

And on March 1, Djokovic announced that he and coach Marian Vajda were splitting up after 15 years together.

In his lone tournament of the year, Djokovic lost to Jiri Vesely in the quarterfinals of the Dubai Championships.

## Firm Pentagon 'no' to Polish plan to send jets to Ukraine

By ROBERT BURNS and VANESSA GERA Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — The Pentagon on Wednesday slammed the door on a Polish proposal for providing Ukraine with MiG fighter jets, saying allied efforts against the Russian invasion should be focused on more useful weaponry and the MiG transfer with a U.S. and NATO connection would run a "high risk" of escalating the war.

By rebuffing the proposal involving the the Polish jets, the Pentagon appeared anxious to move beyond what had become an awkward disconnect with a NATO ally at a time when President Joe Biden has stressed the need for a unified and coordinated response to Russia's war.

Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy has pleaded repeatedly for the U.S. to provide his military with more aircraft — presented as an apparent alternative to establishing a "no-fly zone" over Ukraine to suppress Russian air power. The "no-fly" idea was rejected earlier by Washington and NATO as an unnecessary risk of escalation.

Last week, Secretary of State Antony Blinken had said Washington was looking at a proposal under which Poland would supply Kyiv with the Soviet-era fighters, which Ukrainian pilots are trained to fly, and in turn receive American F-16s to make up for the loss.

But Poland wanted no part of that, concerned about involving itself too directly in conflict with Russia. Poland then said it was prepared to hand over all 28 of its MiG-29 planes — but to NATO by flying them to the U.S. air base in Ramstein, Germany, from where they would somehow be flown to Ukraine.

That was the arrangement the Pentagon turned aside.

Marek Magierowski, Poland's ambassador to the United States, indicated the Polish government had

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gotten the message.

"Our American partners rejected this proposal, because they have come to the conclusion that it was too escalatory," Magierowski told CNN. He said Poland understands and "this is what we need now to emphasize again -- the unity and cohesion of NATO. So, let's move on."

U.S. House Speaker Nancy Pelosi said that in a phone call, Zelenskyy on Wednesday again asked urgently for the United States to provide warplanes, anti-aircraft missiles and other weaponry.

However, Pentagon press secretary John Kirby told reporters that Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin discussed the MiG transfer proposal with his Polish counterpart and explained why Washington found it untenable.

Kirby said the Biden administration is talking with other countries about "alternative options" for supporting Ukraine's most pressing defense needs two weeks into its war, especially more ground-based weapons to counter Russian tanks and aircraft in what has been largely a ground war. Kirby said those could include surface-to-air missile batteries and shoulder-fired anti-aircraft missiles.

"Secretary Austin thanked the minister for Poland's willingness to continue to look for ways to assist Ukraine," Kirby said. "He stressed that we do not support the transfer of additional fighter aircraft to the Ukrainian air force at this time and therefore have no desire to see them in our custody, either."

U.S. Vice President Kamala Harris arrived in Warsaw Wednesday night for consultations, but the White House said she was not directly involved with the matter of the planes.

Kirby cited three main reasons Austin rejected the Polish offer, starting with the U.S. view that it would be wiser to provide Ukraine with weaponry that would more directly strengthen its defenses, including anti-armor and air defense systems. Kirby said the Russian air force, while much larger than Ukraine's, has not played a lead role in the Russian offensive and has been of limited effectiveness due to Ukraine's use of ground-based air defenses, which include Stinger missiles.

Kirby said Ukraine still has a significant number of its own aircraft, and the U.S. believes that adding aircraft from other nations "is not likely to significantly change the effectiveness of the Ukrainian air force relative to Russian capabilities."

Also, the U.S. intelligence community has assessed that transferring MiG fighters to Ukraine "may be mistaken as escalatory and could result in significant Russian reaction that might increase the prospects of a military escalation with NATO," Kirby said. Ukraine is not a NATO member, but some of its neighbors are, and the alliance is trying to avoid a spillover of the war.

While Kirby's statement appeared to bring an end to the Polish proposal, the appearance of a public disagreement among allies could have more lasting impact. Last week, the U.S. government threw Poland a hot potato with the request to send the Soviet-made fighter jets.

That plan took the U.S. off guard. By late Tuesday, the Pentagon called it "untenable." On Wednesday, Secretary of State Blinken said that ultimately each country would have to decide for itself how to help Ukraine.

Poland is a crucial ally in the Ukraine crisis. It is hosting thousands of American troops and is taking in more people fleeing the war in Ukraine than any other nation in the midst of the largest European refugee crisis in decades.

It has suffered invasions and occupations by Russia for centuries and still fears Russia despite being a member of NATO. It already had to contend with the Russian territory of Kaliningrad on its northeastern border and is uncomfortably aware of Russian troops across another border, with Belarus.

In a visit Wednesday to Vienna, Polish Prime Minister Mateusz Morawiecki insisted that Poland is not a party to the Ukraine war and that any decision on whether to send the fighter jets could not be one for Warsaw alone.

It carries the risk of "very dramatic scenarios, even worse than those we are dealing with today," Morawiecki argued.

Michal Baranowski, director of the Warsaw office of the German Marshall Fund think tank, told The Associated Press the Warsaw government "was blindsided and surprised" by Blinken's public statement last week. "This was seen as pressure from the U.S. on Warsaw. And therefore the reaction was to put the

ball back in the U.S. government's court," Baranowski said.

It all "should have been dealt with behind the scenes," he said.

## Texas flagged 27,000 mail ballots for rejection in primary

By PAUL J. WEBER and ACACIA CORONADO Associated Press

AUSTIN, Texas (AP) — More than 27,000 mail ballots in Texas were flagged for rejection in the first test of new voting restrictions enacted across the U.S., jeopardizing votes cast by Democrats and Republicans alike and in counties big and small, according to an analysis by The Associated Press.

It puts the rate of rejected mail ballots in Texas on track to significantly surpass previous elections. The preliminary figures — reported by Texas counties after votes were counted in the state's March 1 primary — is the fullest picture to date of how new election rules rushed into place by Republicans following the 2020 election made it harder for thousands of voters in both parties. Some will wind up not having their ballots count at all.

Rejected mail ballots are relatively uncommon in a typical election. But the initial rejection rate among mail voters in the Texas primary was roughly 17% across 120 counties, according to county-by-county figures obtained by AP. Those counties accounted for the vast majority of the nearly 3 million voters in Texas' first-in-the-nation primary.

Although the final number of discounted ballots will be lower, the early numbers suggest Texas' rejection rate will far exceed the 2020 general election, when federal data showed that less than 1% of mail ballots statewide were rejected.

"It took me three tries and 28 days but I got my ballot and I voted," said Pamiel Gaskin, 75, of Houston. Like many rejected mail voters, she did not list a matching identification number that Texas' new law requires.

For now, the numbers do not represent how many Texas ballots were effectively thrown out. Voters had until Monday to "fix" rejected mail ballots, which in most cases meant providing identification that is now required under a sweeping law signed last fall by Republican Gov. Greg Abbott.

New requirements include listing an identification number — either a driver's license or a Social Security number — on the ballot's carrier envelope. That number must match the county's records. If a ballot is rejected, voters could add an ID number via an online ballot tracking system, go to the county's election offices and fix the problem in person, or vote with a provisional ballot on election day.

County election officers say they worked feverishly to contact those voters in time, in many cases successfully, and a full and final tally of rejected ballots in Texas is expected to come into focus in the coming days.

But already, scores of mail ballots have been disqualified for good.

Along the Texas border, El Paso County reported that 725 mail ballots were officially rejected and not counted after a final canvass Monday — about 16% of all such ballots cast. In the booming suburbs of Austin, Williamson County had a final number of 521 rejected ballots, nearly evenly split between Republican and Democratic primary voters.

Roughly 8,300 mail ballots in Texas were rejected in the 2020 election, according to the U.S. Elections Assistance Commission.

Some rejected mail voters could have casted a ballot in person later. Antonio Riveria, El Paso County's assistant elections administrator, said Wednesday that number is unknown in his office. But they typically reject significantly fewer mail ballots.

"It's a lot less. Maybe 10," he said.

The numbers underline how voters across Texas — in big cities and rural outposts, red and blue — were tripped up by the new law that Abbott and other Republicans assured would make it "easier to vote and harder to cheat."

At least 17 other states will also vote this year under new voting laws, many pushed by Republican lawmakers who especially took aim at mail ballots after states expanded options to make voting safer during

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the coronavirus outbreak. Some of the restrictions were fueled by the continued false claims in the GOP about widespread fraud in President Joe Biden's victory.

Abbott's office did not return requests for comment about the number of rejected ballots.

Texas Secretary of State John Scott, who Abbott appointed as the state's chief election officer, has called the high rate of rejections a matter of voters not being familiar with the new rules and expressed confidence that the numbers will drop in future elections.

Texas' new mail voting rules require voters to return ballots with a personal identification number — such as a driver's license number — which then must match the number in voter registration files. Other new rules in Texas ban drive-thru voting and 24-hour polling centers and make it a felony for a government official to solicit mail ballots. In Texas, mail ballots are generally limited to people who are over the age of 65, have a disability or are out of the county.

The law also requires counties to publicly post a one-page "reconciliation report" of voters and ballots after each election as an extra measure of transparency. The report instructs counties to include the number of mail ballots and how many were flagged for rejection.

The AP obtained reports from 120 counties — nearly half of the 254 in Texas — through county websites and contacting all counties that had not posted a report publicly.

In Texas' largest county, around Houston, Harris County officials said more than 11,000 mail ballots had been flagged for rejection as of March 2. But in the county's preliminary report that is dated a day later, the number of rejected mail ballots was listed at 3,277. On Tuesday, Harris County Elections Administrator Isabel Longoria said she was stepping down following a bungled vote count.

Houston Democrats have been among the most outspoken over Texas' new voting laws, which they say are designed to weaken minority turnout. But Republican-leaning counties struggled with the new rules as well.

In Parker County, which former President Donald Trump carried by a 4-to-1 margin in 2020, the county reported 250 mail ballots as rejected or pending out of 1,100 mail votes — about 23%. Along the Texas coast in Nueces County, which Trump narrowly won, the rejection rate was 8%.

According to the county reports, in the five counties won by Trump that had the most mail-in voters, a combined 4,216 mailed ballots were rejected or still pending after the day of the election, a rate of 21% of the total. In the counties won by Biden with the most mail-in voters, which include most of Texas' biggest cities, a combined 11,190 votes were similarly rejected or pending, which amounted to 13%.

Kara Sands, the election administrator in Nueces County, said her office pressed voters to include more than one identification number as a guardrail against having their ballot rejected. But she said her office wasn't inundated with voter frustration.

"We really didn't get a lot of folks complaining about that," she said.

Texas holds primary runoffs in May, and elections officials say their goal now is to educate voters to avoid a repeat next time. Christopher Davis, the elections administrator in Williamson County, said the final rejection rate of 11.5% was "by far the highest we have ever seen" in the county of more than 600,000 people.

"The hope is we knock down that rejection rate," he said.

## A look inside the 1st official 'safe injection sites' in US

By JENNIFER PELTZ Associated Press

NEW YORK (AP) — Jose Collado settled in at a clean white table in a sunlit room, sang a few bars and injected himself with heroin.

After years of shooting up on streets and rooftops, he was in one of the first two facilities in the country where local officials are allowing illegal drug use in order to make it less deadly.

Equipped and staffed to reverse overdoses, New York City's new, privately run "overdose prevention centers" are a bold and contested response to a storm tide of opioid overdose deaths nationwide.

Supporters say the sites — also known as safe injection sites or supervised consumption spaces — are humane, realistic responses to the deadliest drug crisis in U.S. history. Critics see them as illegal and de-

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feartist answers to the harm that drugs wreak on users and communities.

To Collado, 53, the room he uses regularly is simply “a blessing.”

“They always worry about you, and they’re always taking care of you,” he says.

“They make sure that you don’t die,” adds his friend Steve Baez. At 45, he’s come close a couple of times.

In their first three months, the sites in upper Manhattan’s East Harlem and Washington Heights neighborhoods halted more than 150 overdoses during about 9,500 visits — many of them repeat visits from some 800 people in all. The sites are planning to expand to round-the-clock service later this year.

“It’s a loving environment where people can use safely and stay alive,” says Sam Rivera, the executive director of OnPoint NYC, a nonprofit that runs the centers. “We’re showing up for people who too many people view as disposable.”

Supervised drug-consumption sites go back decades in Europe, Australia and Canada. Several U.S. cities and the state of Rhode Island have approved the concept, but no authorized sites were actually operating until New York’s opened in November (researchers have documented an underground site in an undisclosed U.S. location for several years). New York’s announcement came six weeks after the U.S. Supreme Court let stand a lower court ruling that a planned Philadelphia site was illegal under a 1986 federal law against running a venue for illicit drug use.

Despite winning the Philadelphia case, the U.S. Justice Department indicated last month it might stop fighting such sites, saying it was evaluating them and discussing “appropriate guardrails.”

New York City’s only Republican in Congress, Rep. Nicole Malliotakis, has pressed the Justice Department to shutter what she sees as “heroin shooting galleries that only encourage drug use and deteriorate our quality of life.”

She has proposed to strip federal money from any private group, state or local government that “operates or controls” a safe injection site. (Her efforts spurred a protest in lower Manhattan Wednesday by VOCAL-NY, a social service group interested in eventually opening a consumption site.)

Another New Yorker in Congress, Democratic Rep. Carolyn Maloney, is a leading sponsor of an addiction-fighting proposal that could make money available for such facilities. Organizers say the New York sites currently run on private donations, though their parent group gets city and state money for syringe exchange, counseling and many other services offered alongside the consumption rooms.

Several state and city officials have embraced them. But they also fueled a December protest that drew over 100 people, including U.S. Rep. Adriano Espaillat, a New York Democrat, to complain that drug programs in general are unfairly concentrated in the injection sites’ neighborhoods and kept out of whiter, wealthier areas.

“The safe consumption site is doing God’s work, but they’re doing it in the wrong place,” says Shawn Hill, who co-founded a neighborhood group called the Greater Harlem Coalition.

People bring their own drugs — of whatever type — to the consumption rooms, but they’re stocked with syringes, alcohol wipes, straws for snorting, other paraphernalia and, crucially, oxygen and the opioid-overdose-reversing drug naloxone.

Staffers, some of whom have used illegal drugs themselves, watch for signals of overconsumption or other needs, from advice on injection technique to more complicated help.

Resting a supportive hand on the shoulder of a slumping, dejected man, Adrian Feliciano encouraged him to talk with a mental health counselor — and brought one in — on a recent afternoon.

“For a lot of our folks, just providing a safe space is an introduction to services,” Feliciano, the center’s clinical and holistic care director, said afterward.

For all the services it offers and the overdoses it has turned around, OnPoint has also come up against its limits. During a 10-day span in February, two regulars died and a third was in a coma for a time after apparent overdoses elsewhere when the sites were closed at night, according to senior program director Kailin See, who believes longer hours would have saved those who died (the third person recovered).

There have been no recorded deaths in supervised injection facilities in countries that permit them, and there’s some evidence linking them to fewer overdose deaths and ambulance calls in their neighborhoods, according to a 2021 report that compiled existing studies.

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The report, by the Boston-based Institute for Clinical and Economic Review, found no link between safe injection sites and the rates of various crimes, though public drug use dropped off in some places.

"If you believe in harm reduction, here's harm reduction that saves you money" in ambulance runs, said Dr. David Rind, the think tank's chief medical officer.

But to Jim Crotty, a former Drug Enforcement Administration official during the Obama and Trump administrations, the sites' lifesaving purpose comes at steep social cost.

"The goal can't simply be to keep people alive," said Crotty, who argues that policymakers should concentrate instead on expanding drug treatment. "If you believe, like me, that doing drugs is very destructive, then the goal has to be to stop doing drugs."

Rivera, for his part, stresses the need to stanch the flow of drugs into the U.S., rather than what he sees as blaming people in poor communities "for using the drugs that were let in." OnPoint says staffers regularly foster, but don't force, conversations about treatment, which many clients have already tried.

"You need to be alive to try again," See says.

Collado has tried to quit drugs, stopping at times during his four decades of using, he said. Like many of people who use the consumption rooms, he lives on the streets.

He and Baez look out for each other. They've helped one another solve problems, shared money when one was broke, and tried to make sure that neither would overdose and die alone. The room, and everything offered along with it, fill that last role now, and more.

"This is my home right here," Collado said. "This is my family."

## American freed from Venezuela says his 'nightmare' has ended

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

MIAMI (AP) — An American oil executive freed from custody in Venezuela said that even as he celebrates with his family the end of a long "nightmare," he's praying for the release of five colleagues who are still imprisoned and "deserve the same blessings."

Gustavo Cardenas arrived to his home in Houston at 4 a.m. Wednesday after flying overnight from Caracas with a senior State Department official sent to negotiate the release of American prisoners in the South American country.

In a statement to The Associated Press, he said his imprisonment of more than four years "has caused a lot of suffering and pain, much more than I can explain with my words."

"I got out of jail and got my freedom after about 1,570 days of wrongful captivity. It was a very hard time marked by deep pain, but also by faith, hope, love and survival," he said.

He called for the prompt release of the remaining members of the Citgo 6 — for the Houston oil company where they all worked. "They and their families deserve the same blessings and freedom that I got last night," he said.

He credited his release to President Joe Biden and other U.S. officials as well as the support received from former New Mexico Gov. Bill Richardson and Mickey Bergman of the Richardson Center, which has worked to secure the release of dozens of Americans detained abroad.

Notably absent was any mention of Venezuelan President Nicolás Maduro, whose government jailed the men when they traveled on a corporate jet to Caracas around Thanksgiving 2017 for what they thought was an emergency meeting with Citgo's parent company, state run oil giant PDVSA.

Instead, masked security forces bearing assault rifles busted into a conference room and arrested the men. Later 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.

They've always maintained their innocence even as the U.S. has accused Maduro of using them a political bargaining chips to extract concessions from the U.S.

The release of Cardenas and Jorge Fernández, an American imprisoned in Venezuela who was not a member of the Citgo 6, came hours after Maduro signaled an interest in improving relations with the U.S.

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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 indicated he would 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.

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 who accompanied Cardenas and Fernandez back to the U.S.

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 Chávez 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" that did not entail any quid-pro-quo but allowed the Biden administration to share its "view of the world" with Maduro.

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.

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 Republic 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.

The U.S.-backed faction of the opposition on Wednesday insisted that it remains open to resuming negotiations with Maduro with the goal of scheduling free and fair presidential and congressional elections and said any easing of economic sanctions must be accompanied by advances toward democracy.

"The lifting of any measure of pressure, if it is not oriented toward democratization, would only strengthen the authoritarianism that threatens the world today," the group said in a statement. "... Only a Venezuela with democratic, institutional and transparency guarantees can be a reliable and efficient energy provider for the world."

## Endurance: Explorer Shackleton's ship found after a century

By CHRISTINA LARSON and JILL LAWLESS Associated Press

Researchers have discovered the remarkably well-preserved wreck of polar explorer Ernest Shackleton's ship, *Endurance*, in 10,000 feet of icy water, a century after it was swallowed up by Antarctic ice during what proved to be one of the most heroic expeditions in history.

A team of marine archaeologists, engineers and other scientists used an icebreaker ship and underwater drones to locate the wreck at the bottom of the Weddell Sea, near the Antarctica Peninsula.

The Falklands Maritime Heritage Trust's search expedition *Endurance22* announced the discovery on Wednesday.

Images and video of the wreck show the three-masted wooden ship in pristine condition, with gold-leaf letters reading "Endurance" still affixed to the stern and the ship's lacquered wooden helm still standing upright, as if the captain may return to steer it at any time.

"This is by far the finest wooden shipwreck I have ever seen," said Mensun Bound, the director of the exploration. Bound noted the wreck is still upright, clear of the seabed "and in a brilliant state of preservation."

The discovery is "a titanic find" in "one of the world's most challenging environments," said maritime historian Steven Schwankert, who was not involved in the expedition.

The combination of deep, dark waters — no sunlight penetrates to 10,000 feet — frigid temperatures and sea ice have frustrated past efforts to find *Endurance*, but also explain why the wreck is in such good condition today.

The bottom of the Weddell Sea is "a very inhospitable environment for just about everything — especially the kind of bacteria, mites and wood-eating worms that would otherwise enjoy munching on a wooden shipwreck," said Schwankert.

The expedition *Endurance22* embarked from Cape Town, South Africa, in early February in a ship capable of breaking through 3-foot (1-meter)-thick ice.

The team, which included more than 100 researchers and crew members, deployed underwater drones that combed the seafloor for two weeks in the area where the ship was recorded to have sunk in 1915.

"We have made polar history with the discovery of *Endurance*, and successfully completed the world's most challenging shipwreck search," said expedition leader John Shears.

The British explorer Shackleton never achieved his ambition to become the first person to cross Antarctica via the South Pole. In fact, he never set foot on the continent.

"Despite being designed to resist collision with ice floes and to break through pack ice, *Endurance* could not withstand being crushed by heavy sea ice," said Ann Coats, a maritime historian at the University of Portsmouth.

Shackleton himself noted the difficulty of the endeavor in his diary.

"The end came at last about 5 p.m.," he wrote. "She was doomed, no ship built by human hands could have withstood the strain."

Before the ship disappeared 3,000 meters below icy waters, Shackleton's crew loaded food and other provisions into three lifeboats to escape and set up camp on ice floes, where they used sled dogs to carry their provisions, according to Shackleton's diary.

Shackleton and his captain, Frank Worsley, then sailed across 800 miles (1,287 kilometers) of treacherous icy waters in a 22-foot (7-meter) ship to the island of South Georgia, a remote whaling community, to get help. That successful trip is considered a heroic feat of fortitude, and Shackleton's decisive response to imminent tragedy is still held up today as a model of how to lead in difficult circumstances.

"Shackleton was very good at planner and a good improviser — I have a feeling that the polar explorers of today would not survive the same kinds of things he endured," said Anna Wahlin, a polar researcher at the University of Gothenburg, who just returned from a two-month mission studying ice shelves and warming ocean currents in Antarctica.

In Antarctica, "everything is gray or white," and after only a few weeks, explorers "start to miss smelling



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Earth, walking in the forest, hearing birds chirp, seeing things that are green," she said.

The expedition to find Endurance comes a century after Shackleton's death in 1922. British historian and broadcaster Dan Snow, who accompanied the researchers, tweeted that the wreck's discovery on Saturday happened "100 years to the day since Shackleton was buried."

The ship is protected as a historic monument under the 6-decade-old Antarctic Treaty that is intended to protect the region's environment.

Researchers filmed the wreck, but nothing was recovered or disturbed. Instead, expedition organizers say they want to use laser scans to create a 3-D model of the ship that can be displayed in both traveling exhibits and a permanent museum exhibit.

"Shackleton, we like to think, would have been proud of us," the expedition's Bound wrote in a blog post.

## Did Amazon violate federal laws? Lawmakers ask for DOJ probe

By MARCY GORDON AP Business Writer

WASHINGTON (AP) — Lawmakers followed through Wednesday on their threat to seek a criminal investigation of Amazon, asking the Justice Department to investigate whether the tech giant and senior executives obstructed Congress or violated other federal laws in testimony on its competition practices.

The House Judiciary Committee escalated the bipartisan battle against the world's biggest online retailer with a letter to Attorney General Merrick Garland referring the case for a criminal inquiry.

Amazon engaged in misleading conduct that appeared designed to "influence, obstruct or impede" the antitrust subcommittee's 2019-20 investigation into the market dominance of Big Tech, the letter says.

As an example, it cited testimony by a senior Amazon official maintaining that the company doesn't use the data it collects on third-party merchants on its platform to compete with them, and doesn't list its own products in customer search results before those of third parties. Those assertions have been contradicted by credible news reports, the letter says.

News reports have detailed Amazon's alleged practice of undercutting the businesses that sell on its platform by making "knock-offs," or very similar products, and boosting their presence on the site.

"Amazon attempted to clean up the inaccurate testimony through ever-shifting explanations of its internal policies and denials of the investigative reports," the lawmakers said. "The committee uncovered evidence from former Amazon employees, and former and current sellers, that corroborated the reports' claims."

"After Amazon was caught in a lie and repeated misrepresentations, it stonewalled the committee's efforts to uncover the truth," the letter says. It was signed by Judiciary Committee Chairman Jerrold Nadler, D-N.Y., and the Democratic and Republican leaders of the antitrust subcommittee.

The Seattle-based company has previously denied that its executives misled the panel in their testimony.

In a statement Wednesday, Amazon said "there's no factual basis" for the committee's action, "as demonstrated in the huge volume of information we've provided over several years of good-faith cooperation with this investigation."

Amazon's third-party marketplace, with independent merchants listing millions of their products on the site, is a huge part of the company's business. It has about 2 million sellers, and Amazon has said that more than half the goods sold on Amazon.com come from third-party sellers. It also makes money by charging third-party sellers fees, bringing in tens of billions in revenue.

In a May 2020 letter to Amazon founder and then-CEO Jeff Bezos, the antitrust subcommittee threatened a subpoena if Bezos didn't agree voluntarily to appear before the panel.

The Wall Street Journal reported at that time that Amazon used sensitive, confidential information about sellers on its marketplace, their products and transactions to develop its own competing products. An Amazon executive denied such a practice in statements at a subcommittee hearing in July 2019, saying the company has a formal policy against it.

Amazon says it investigates any allegation of violations of its policies and takes appropriate action when warranted.

Bezos testified on the issue in an appearance at a July 2020 hearing on Big Tech's alleged monopolistic

practices, along with Facebook CEO Mark Zuckerberg, Apple CEO Tim Cook and Google CEO Sundar Pichai. Addressing allegations that Amazon has used data generated by independent sellers on its platform to compete against them, Bezos said it would be "unacceptable" if those claims were proven to be true.

Andy Jassy took over the top position from Bezos last July. Bezos became executive chairman.

Some independent merchants who sell products on Amazon.com have complained about the company's practices, such as contract provisions said to prevent sellers from offering their products at lower prices or on better terms on any other online platform, including their own websites.

In its defense, Amazon has said that sellers set their own prices for the products they offer on its platform.

The District of Columbia sued Amazon last year in an antitrust action, accusing the company of anticompetitive practices in its treatment of sellers on its platform. The practices have raised prices for consumers and stifled innovation and choice in the online retail market, the lawsuit alleged.

The suit maintains that Amazon has fixed online retail prices through contract provisions that prevent merchants selling their products on Amazon.com from offering them at lower prices or on better terms on any other online platform, including their own websites. Amazon rejected the allegations.

Amazon has been one of the few retailers that has prospered during the COVID-19 outbreak. It reported profits of \$33.36 billion in 2021, up from \$21.33 billion the year before.

On Wednesday it announced its board had approved a 20-for-1 split of its stock, which closed the day at \$2,785.58. The split would make buying a single share of Amazon stock more accessible to average investors.

The company's board also approved a \$10 billion stock buyback program.

## Sheltering from bombs, Ukraine's 'cellar violinist' plays on

By PAOLO SANTALUCIA Associated Press

ROME, Italy (AP) — A gentle tune from a violin played by a musician who has been dubbed Ukraine's "cellar violinist" is a lullaby for a child sheltered in the dark basement of an apartment building in the besieged Ukrainian city of Kharkiv.

Vera Lytovchenko has become an internet icon of resilience as images of the concert violinist playing in the basement bomb shelter have inspired an international audience via social media.

When heavy Russian bombing of Ukraine's northeastern city of Kharkiv started two weeks ago, Lytovchenko, her professor father and neighbors sought safety in their building's basement.

"Bombs can fall everywhere in our city, so we decided to go down in the cellar," the 39-year-old violinist told The Associated Press via Skype Wednesday during a brief respite from the bombing during a temporary cease-fire. "We're about 12 people now. We have little boys. We have teenagers. We have old women."

A week into their basement huddle, Lytovchenko decided to try to lift the spirits of her cellar mates by holding small concerts.

"All these people are my brothers and sisters now," she said. "I was trying to make them think about something and not about the war for some minutes while I'm playing."

Later she thought to post her recitals, featuring the calming strains of Vivaldi and even Lytovchenko singing a Russian folk song, on social media. The reaction surprised her: more than 40,000 views on Facebook and thousands more on YouTube.

"I didn't expect that because I was posting just to reach my friends, my relatives. My aunt is near Kyiv and I'm afraid for her," she said.

"My friends are in different cities all over Ukraine and I'm trying to keep a connection with them, I text them several times a day to know if they're alive," Lytovchenko said. "Many people text me now saying that my videos give them such support and hope. They can see that someone stays here" in Kharkiv.

"Someone is alive and someone keeps hope and is optimistic," she said.

On Wednesday, during the temporary cease-fire in Kharkiv, Ukraine's second-largest city, Lytovchenko was able to return to her apartment for a few hours. She told the AP she was happy to see sunlight after spending two weeks in the dark basement, adding that she and her neighbors are lucky because they

have heating in the cellar and food.

Before the war, Lytovchenko played for the Kharkiv City Opera orchestra and taught music lessons.

"It was another life ... a normal life," she said of the time before the war. "I'm an orchestra player. I am a teacher in college. I have my students, I have friends, I play concerts, I play operas and ballets. I play Italian operas in the theater."

Describing Ukraine before the war, Lytovchenko said: "We had a cultural life in our country, our cities, in spite of the coronavirus. We were vaccinated. It was a normal life. ... But now we can't understand what is happening."

Lytovchenko says she hopes that her posts can help raise funds for Kharkiv's music community.

"I dream about my little financial fund, because I received messages from all over the world, from all countries. They texted me, they want to help," she said.

She wants "to help musicians ... and to rebuild our city, our conservatory, our music college, our music school," she said. "To help our musicians who lost their houses and help musicians to return to their own cities and not to be refugees."

Lytovchenko said as frightening as it is, playing in the cellar to lift the spirits of others has given her new encouragement.

"This is why I do these videos, I try to help, I try to do all I can do," she said.

## Lawyers: FBI lured men for Michigan Gov. Whitmer kidnap plot

By MICHAEL TARM, ED WHITE and SARA BURNETT Associated Press

GRAND RAPIDS, Mich. (AP) — The four men charged with planning to kidnap Michigan Gov. Gretchen Whitmer were swayed by informants and federal agents who targeted them for their anti-government views, defense attorneys said Wednesday, portraying the men as big talkers and wannabes who never meant what they said.

Assistant U.S. Attorney Jonathan Roth argued that the men were "willing, eager, if not already preparing" to get Whitmer before investigators infiltrated the group. He said the men — angry about COVID-19 restrictions the Democratic governor imposed early in the pandemic — recruited militia and prepared to break into Whitmer's home, tie her up and take her.

Investigators stepped in and stopped a "tragedy" when the men were planning to acquire a bomb to blow up a bridge near Whitmer's home to stop police from quickly responding, Roth told jurors during his opening statement in federal court in Grand Rapids, Michigan.

"These were not people who were all talk," he said. "These were people who wanted to separate themselves from people who were all talk."

Four men face trial: Adam Fox, Brandon Caserta, Barry Croft Jr. and Daniel Harris. 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 Whitmer's second home and figure out how to blow up the bridge.

After the prosecutor and three of four defense lawyers made opening statements, the U.S. District Judge Robert Jonker took the unusual step of allowing them to speak again to specifically address an entrapment defense — a claim that the government induced the men to commit crimes that they wouldn't otherwise have committed.

Defense attorney Joshua Blanchard said the FBI lined up an informant with a long criminal history to reach out to Croft and lure him to militia meetings and gun training in Ohio, Wisconsin and Michigan. Another informant, Blanchard said, drove Croft all the way to Wisconsin from Delaware.

"There was no plan, there was no agreement and no kidnapping," Blanchard said.

Roth said jurors would see social media posts and hear secretly recorded conversations full of angry, vulgar and sexist language about violence and plans to take down a "tyrant."

Jurors also will hear from two critical insiders, Ty Garbin and Kaleb Franks, who pleaded guilty to the conspiracy and will testify for the government, Roth said.

"They will tell you how real this was. ... They will tell you that they're going to prison for it," he said.

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Roth described Fox and Croft as masterminds of the plot. He said the four wanted to create a "war zone here in Michigan," and urged jurors to set their thoughts aside about the men's views or Whitmer's job.

"What you have is that defendants agreed, planned, trained and were ready to break into a woman's home as she slept with her family in the middle of the night and with violence and at gunpoint they would tie her up and take her from that home," Roth said. "And to accomplish that they would shoot, blow up and kill anybody who got in their way."

As Roth began his opening, he pointed a finger at each defendant, saying they took active steps to implement their plot. The courtroom lights dimmed and prosecutors projected photos of the defendants at different stages of the alleged plot.

Roth pointed at Croft, seated a defense table in a gray suit and tie, and told jurors that he may cut the figure of a "harmless ... middle school teacher" now. As he said that, a picture of Croft clutching a rifle in camouflage clothing appeared on the screen.

"He looked quite a bit different then," the prosecutor said.

But Croft's attorney said when informants secretly recorded Croft and others, all were "stoned, absolutely out-of-your-mind stoned."

"The FBI is supposed to protect us from dangerous criminals and terrorists," Blanchard said. "They're also an agency that's supposed to protect our freedoms. And when they're doing that, they're expected to have thick skin. That means in protecting our rights, they don't punish people for saying mean things about them. And they're not supposed to target people that they're angry with."

Lawyers for Caserta and Harris tried to distance them from Fox and Croft, emphasizing that the pair didn't travel to northern Michigan to scout Whitmer's home.

Defense attorney Julia Kelly said Harris, a veteran, was unhappy with the direction of the country and attended rallies in support of gun rights and protests against Whitmer's stay-home orders. Kelly said Harris joined a group known as the Wolverine Watchmen to keep his military skills sharp for possible security work in Afghanistan, not as part of a sinister plot.

Attorney Christopher Gibbons, representing Fox, told jurors he was practically homeless, living in the basement of a vacuum shop, not a mastermind of the plot as prosecutors allege.

The first witness, FBI agent Todd Reineck, testified about social media posts by Fox and Croft in spring 2020, including some profanity-filled messages between the two. They included a Facebook video in which Fox stated: "We have the numbers. We have the arms. We have the ammunition ... that we need to just go take our country back."

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.

The FBI said it thwarted the kidnapping plot with the arrests of six men in October 2020.

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

## **EXPLAINER: What's behind latest scare at Chernobyl plant?**

By SETH BORENSTEIN AP Science Writer

When fighting from Russia's invasion of Ukraine resulted in power cuts to the critical cooling system at the closed Chernobyl nuclear power plant, some feared that spent nuclear fuel would overheat. But nuclear experts say there's no imminent danger because time and physics are on safety's side.

Because the fuel rods have been cooling for more than 20 years already, it is not a situation like the 2011 Fukushima nuclear disaster or even like the original Chernobyl meltdown nearly 36 years ago, several nuclear energy experts told The Associated Press.

The International Atomic Energy Agency also said it "sees no critical impact on safety" at the plant, which

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was the site of the world's worst nuclear accident in April 1986.

## WHAT HAPPENED IN RECENT DAYS AT CHERNOBYL?

Ukrainian electrical grid operator Ukrenerho said power was cut to all Chernobyl facilities and the diesel generators have fuel for 48 hours. Without power, the "parameters of nuclear and radiation safety" cannot be controlled, it said.

Ukrainian Foreign Minister Dmytro Kuleba said the plant, which was occupied by Russian forces earlier in the Feb. 24 invasion, "lost all electric supply," and he called on the international community "to urgently demand Russia to cease fire and allow repair units to restore power supply."

French government spokesman Gabriel Attal underscored that Russian leader Vladimir Putin had "committed to guarantee the security and safety of nuclear sites in Ukraine" in his phone call with French President Emmanuel Macron on Sunday.

## WHAT WAS THE BIGGEST FEAR IN THE LATEST CRISIS?

The Chernobyl plant, which closed in 2000, has fuel rods containing 230 kilograms (500 pounds) of uranium, and they are submerged in water at least 15 meters (49 feet) deep, with an active cooling system, said Frank von Hippel, a Princeton University physicist who co-founded the Program on Science and Global Security.

The general worry was that the power outage would cause the cooling system's backup generators to stop, the radioactive fuel rods would heat up and boil away the water that also helps cool them, raising the temperature to 800 degrees Celsius (1,470 degrees Fahrenheit), and causing a fire.

But that's "pretty unlikely in the situation because the fuel is so cool," said Edwin Lyman, nuclear power safety director at the Union of Concerned Scientists.

Even that improbable worst-case scenario it would take "weeks to months" for the 2,000 fuel assembly pieces in the Chernobyl deep water pool to boil away, added von Hippel.

Such heating would be "very slow-moving, if it ever gets there," he said, calculating that it would take "about 40 days for the pool to dry out."

In normal circumstances, cooling fuel rods lose a massive amount of energy and radioactivity — by a factor of 10 — every seven days, said Patrick Regan, nuclear physics professor at the University of Surrey.

He said the current scenario wasn't like the 1986 Chernobyl meltdown or the disaster at the Fukushima plant with fuel rods so fresh and hot "that you need to keep water flowing through continually."

After the Fukushima disaster, which was caused by an earthquake and tsunami, the Ukrainian government commissioned a study to look at the meltdown potential from power loss to the cooling of rods. The study found that it wouldn't be possible for the cooling water to reach boiling temperature and the fuel rods would not be uncovered to start a real meltdown, Lyman said.

## THE PHYSICS OF COOLING FUEL RODS

When fuel rods are spent after generating power, they still have lots of internal radioactivity and are still hot. Internal radioactive decay gives off heat and remains in the fuel rods for tens of thousands of years, so they can get hotter unless something is done to cool them, Regan said.

The rods are put in cooling pools or ponds where both water and an active electric-powered system cools them with a heat exchange pump.

"As soon as you stop the coolant, as soon as you stop the mechanism for taking the heat off, it (temperature) will increase," Regan said.

Eventually in most plants, the radioactivity and heat subsides enough that it could eventually switch from water cooling to air cooling.

## NO IMMEDIATE DANGER SEEN

The Swedish Radiation Safety Authority estimates that a power outage at Chernobyl will not lead to any radiological emissions in the next couple weeks.

"The fuel storage ponds are also very deep and would likely take weeks for the water to boil down, even without cooling pumps active. This should hopefully allow enough time for the power to cooling systems to be restored," said Mark Wenman, a nuclear energy expert at Imperial College London.

The IAEA, which is the U.N. nuclear watchdog based in Vienna, said it saw no critical impact on safety at

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Chernobyl because there could be "effective heat removal without need for electrical supply" from spent nuclear fuel at the site.

Lyman and others said they were more concerned about potential damage to cooling systems and other problems at Ukraine's four other operating nuclear power plants, rather than at the defunct Chernobyl site. In 2017, Chernobyl got a new 2 billion euro containment system to go over the old sarcophagus.

## OTHER CONCERNS

The post-Fukushima study did raise issues about hydrogen gas being generated and pooling from the cooling process, which is removed with an electronic system, Lyman said. The concern is that the explosive gas may pool more without the venting system and lead to dangers, including sparks when electricity is turned back on if it ever stops.

Another issue is that lack of electricity means the IAEA's monitoring system, for safety and security, will be blinded, Lyman said.

"It's not just the cooling to the pools, but all the off-site radiation monitoring systems have been lost," Lyman said. "The IAEA doesn't have cameras anymore."

He described the overall situation as not good, but said it isn't an immediate emergency. There are layers of safety that help, but the lack of power peels some of those away.

"It's limping along with kind of less resilience," Lyman said. "So if something else does happen, there's less margin."

Given that experts say a major radioactive release is weeks to months away, if at all, the biggest consequence of the power shutoff or targeting of nuclear plants in the war is fear, said Emma Claire Foley, a policy researcher on U.S.-Russian nuclear policy.

"People hear 'Chernobyl' and think 'nuclear disaster,'" Foley said. "It does cause fear. And it does cause a sense of uncertainty."

If anything bad did happen, Ukraine's neighbor of Belarus, a Russian ally, "would need to be more concerned than anyone else" because of its proximity to the Chernobyl site, said University of Southern California nuclear engineering professor Najmedin Meshkati. The Belarus border is less than 10 miles from Chernobyl, while the Ukrainian capital of Kyiv is about 130 kilometers (80 miles) south of the plant,

"Belarus got the brunt of the Chernobyl impact" from the radioactive cloud released in 1986, he said, adding that Belarus President Alexander Lukashenko should "take the lead in begging Mr. Putin to stop military operations around Chernobyl."

## 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 Wednesday estimated that Russia retains about 90% 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

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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, and on Wednesday the Pentagon said it had moved two U.S. Army Patriot air defense units from Germany to Poland to bolster defenses against potential Russian threats to a NATO ally.

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 militarily 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. On Wednesday the Pentagon said Russian forces had made renewed advances this week on Kharkiv and the southern city of Mykolaiv.

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.

## **SPLC report: Hate groups in decline as views hit mainstream**

By AARON MORRISON Associated Press

The number of white nationalist, neo-Nazi and anti-government extremist groups across the U.S. fell for a third straight year in 2021, even as some groups were reinvigorated by the Jan. 6 attack on the U.S. Capitol last year and by the ongoing culture wars over the pandemic and school curriculums.

In its annual report, released Wednesday, the Southern Poverty Law Center said it identified 733 active hate groups in 2021, down from the 838 counted in 2020 and the 940 counted in 2019. Hate groups had risen to a historic high of 1,021 in 2018, said the law center, which tracks racism, xenophobia and far right militias.

The number of anti-government groups fell to 488 in 2021, down from 566 in 2020 and 576 in 2019. Such groups peaked at 1,360 in 2012, the year former President Barack Obama was elected to a second term.

"Rather than demonstrating a decline in the power of the far right, the dropping numbers of organized hate and anti-government groups suggest that the extremist ideas that mobilize them now operate more openly in the political mainstream," says the new report, shared with The Associated Press ahead of its release.

The Montgomery, Alabama-based law center cited several examples including Fox News' Tucker Carlson, whose discussion of a conspiracy likening immigration from nonwhite countries to a "great replacement" of white Americans last September was welcomed by white nationalists who were linked to the "Stop the Steal" rally that preceded the Jan. 6 Capitol attack. The law center counted 98 active white nationalist groups in 2021.

The report's release comes one day after a federal jury convicted a Texas man of storming the Capitol with a holstered handgun, in an attempt to obstruct Congress' joint session to certify the Electoral College vote that cemented President Joe Biden's victory over former President Donald Trump. Separately on Tuesday, Henry "Enrique" Tarrío, a longtime leader of the far-right Proud Boys extremist group, was arrested on a conspiracy charge related to his alleged role in coordinating the Capitol attack.

Active Proud Boys chapters jumped to 72 in 2021, up from 43 in 2020. The rise in chapters was noteworthy considering that more than three dozen members of the group had been charged in relation to their role in the Capitol attack, according to the law center.

"After Jan. 6, in the immediate aftermath, these groups did lay low," Susan Corke, SPLC's Intelligence Project director, told the AP. "I had a moment of hope that was quickly extinguished when I didn't see more mainstream Republicans condemn these groups."

The extremist ideas expressed by active hate and anti-government groups "are increasingly normalized," Corke added.

Beyond the Capitol attack, the law center's report details how several factions of the far right movement have been reinvigorated by political wedge issues. Issues fueling active hate and anti-government extremist groups include the banning of critical race theory and books that discuss LGBTQ identity in public schools, coronavirus vaccine and mask mandates, and immigration.

"This movement is working feverishly to undermine democracy, but what's more startling is that they are also coalescing around a willingness to engage in violence," Corke said.

Slowing any push toward authoritarianism, according to the SPLC, requires elected leaders to universally embrace democratic institutions, while also protecting the right to vote for communities of color and other marginalized people. The law center has also called for better funding of prevention programs that interrupt the radicalization of young people by hate and anti-government groups.

The SPLC is a liberal advocacy organization that, in addition to monitoring hate groups, files lawsuits over justice issues and offers educational programs to counter prejudice. Frequently criticized by conservative groups as biased, the nonprofit group has faced lawsuits in the past over its designation of various



organizations as hate groups.

## Europe faces pressure to join US, British ban on Russian oil

By RAF CASERT, KELVIN CHAN and DANICA KIRKA Associated Press

BRUSSELS (AP) — Europe faces a tough choice: Is it worth a recession to choke off oil and gas money to Russia while it fights a war in Ukraine?

While U.S. and British bans on Russian oil increase the pressure on Europe to follow suit, the continent's dependence on Russia for energy makes an immediate embargo much more difficult. Still, some officials say it is the only way to stop pouring billions in oil and gas revenue into President Vladimir Putin's coffers, despite the near certainty of record inflation worsening.

Europe gets around 40% of its natural gas and 25% of its oil from Russia, whereas the U.S. gets meager amounts of oil and no natural gas. An EU boycott would mean higher prices at the pump and on utility bills, and ultimately the threat of an energy crisis and recession while the economy is still recovering from the coronavirus pandemic.

Prices for everything from food to electricity are already painfully high partly because of skyrocketing natural gas prices in Europe. Governments have rolled out subsidies to compensate people for high utility bills, while gasoline has risen above 2.01 euros per liter — the equivalent of \$8.33 per gallon, meaning filling up a compact car could cost 90 euros (\$98).

Those costs already are cutting into consumer spending, with inflation at all-time high of 5.8%. The question is: How much more pain can Europeans take to try to stop Putin's attack on Ukraine?

"The consequences to the European economy would be major," said Simone Tagliapietra, an energy policy expert at the Bruegel think tank in Brussels. "And therefore, there would need to be an upfront, clear, political decision that we are willing to compromise our economy, we are willing to afford a recession, in order to hit Putin where it hurts."

U.S. President Joe Biden acknowledged as much when he announced the U.S. ban on Russian oil imports, saying "many of our European allies and partners will not be able to join us."

Efforts to agree on a boycott could be complicated because some EU member countries are much more dependent than others on Russia. Germany and Italy rely heavily on Russian natural gas. Poland gets 67% of its oil from Russia, while Ireland gets only 5%.

"It will be divisive within Europe because one part of Europe risks suffering more," said David Elmes, head of the Global Energy Research Group at the University of Warwick's business school. "So it's going to put the European political system and the European agreements and the European project ... under an awful lot of stress."

The European Commission, the EU's executive arm, announced a plan Tuesday to wean the bloc off two-thirds of Russian natural gas by the end of the year, including by purchasing more liquefied natural gas brought by ship and building up renewables more quickly.

That already will be a massive challenge to accomplish, Netherlands Prime Minister Mark Rutte said, because "we are very much dependent, that's the sad reality."

The EU goal "is a huge task to get there. I'm not sure we can get that, but we have to do everything in our power to make that happen," he said Wednesday.

With the world already facing an energy crunch and oil prices soaring to \$120 per barrel — compared with \$76 at the end of last year — a European boycott would send prices and inflation "to the moon," said Tagliapietra from the Bruegel think tank. And not just for Europe, but energy-consuming countries around the world.

"The price effect is what needs to be considered here, because that is what could drag the global economy into recession," he said.

Yet the intensification of the conflict, the stream of refugees and the heart-rending images of suffering are keeping the issue very much on the table.

There is "considerable pressure both from allies as well as domestically — the public would probably back

this sort of a move as long as it didn't meant too high prices," Caroline Bain, chief commodities economist at Capital Economics said in an online briefing Tuesday.

Bain expected European countries to take a "more measured approach" rather than a complete ban on Russian energy and "look at ways in which they can reduce considerably their reliance on Russian energy."

Oil, which mostly comes by tanker, would be easier to replace with other suppliers than natural gas, which mostly comes by fixed pipeline from Russia.

European refineries that turn crude into gasoline are set up for denser Russian oil and would face challenges switching to other kinds of oil. Russia supplies 14% of Europe's diesel fuel used for trucks and many cars, according to analysts at S&P Global Platts, meaning disruption would "significantly tighten the market."

Europe has made it through most of the heating season, but would face a severe challenge in refilling its natural gas reserves in time for next winter.

The continent could replace all but 10% to 15% of Russian gas, requiring forced rationing that would hit industrial users first, energy analysts at Bruegel say.

Despite the potential fallout, debate on a ban is ongoing. Germany's economy minister, Robert Habeck, defended on Tuesday the decision to exempt Russian energy from sanctions and noted that U.S. officials said they would "neither demand nor ask" Europe's largest economy to join an oil embargo.

But some German lawmakers support it.

Boycotting Russian energy would be "a hard decision, but a possible and therefore necessary one" that would "hit the decisive lifeline of the Putin regime," said Norbert Roettgen, a member of the German parliament's foreign relations committee for the opposition Christian Democrat conservatives.

Dominik Tarczyński, a member of the European parliament for the populist Law and Justice Party of Poland, put it this way: "The ban on Netflix is a joke, because people are dying, so we need a ban on Russian oil and gas now."

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

By JUSTIN SPIKE and RENATA BRITO 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 said she was worried 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 worry, because I don't know where they are," she said, speaking 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 spokesman James Elder called "a dark historical first."

That means that children represent at least half of the more than 2 million people who have fled the war, an exodus the U.N. refugee agency has called the fastest-growing refugee crisis in Europe since World War II. There have even been cases of children having to make the journey alone.

While very young children may not grasp that their lives have been upended, older ones are aware of their hardship and risk suffering the psychological trauma of war and seeking refuge, experts say.

For Margot, a 1-year-old girl who traveled from Kyiv to the Siret border crossing in Romania, the journey was like a "little adventure," said her mother, Viktoria Filonchuk, 37.

But for older children, she suspects they understand the "tragedy" of what they are going through.

"Such little kids maybe don't understand this, but kids of about 3 or 4 years understand all the tragedy. I think it is very hard for them," Filonchuk said.

Daniel Gradinaru, a coordinator of Fight for Freedom, a Christian NGO at the Romanian border, said that

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older children could be "marked for the rest of their lives" by the experience of unexpectedly leaving their homes and traveling for days in the cold.

"I hope that where they are going the people receiving them give them counseling," Gradinaru said.

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.

Many Ukrainians in recent days have attempted to flee their cities through humanitarian corridors opened up to give them safe passage out of conflict areas.

But Natalia Mudrenko, the highest-ranking woman at Ukraine's U.N. Mission, has accused Russia of holding civilians, including women and children, "hostage" in some of Ukraine's embattled cities and assaulting them as they attempt to flee.

Speaking at a U.N. Security Council meeting Tuesday afternoon, Mudrenko said that civilians "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."

She 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."

Valeria Varenko, 9, traveled day and night to Hungary with her mother Julia and her little brother after bombings forced them to shelter in the basement of their apartment building in the Ukrainian capital, Kyiv.

The family reached a temporary refugee reception center in Barabas, Hungary, on Wednesday where Valeria said she wanted to tell children left behind in Ukraine to be careful, and not to touch any objects in the street because "they could be bombs which can hurt them very much."

Her father stayed behind to help defend Kyiv from Russian troops edging closer to the city. She said she was proud of him and misses him "very much."

"I would really like him to come, but unfortunately he isn't allowed," she said.

In addition to children, most other refugees are women — the mothers and grandmothers of the children who 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 already knows she wants to be an actress in the United States, and is proud of speaking English so well.

"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, plan to travel on to Hungary's capital, Budapest, but don't know where they will 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."

## Jussie Smollett to learn fate after staged attack conviction

By DON BABWIN Associated Press

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CHICAGO (AP) — More than three years after Jussie Smollett told police he was the victim of a racist and homophobic attack on a dark, cold Chicago street, all of the questions swirling around the actor — from whether he staged a fake attack to why he would do such a thing — now boil down to two: Will he admit he lied to police and will he be sent to prison?

On Thursday, three months after a jury found him guilty of lying to police, those questions will be answered when Smollett, a onetime star of the television show “Empire,” returns for sentencing to the courtroom where he was found guilty of lying to police about an attack prosecutors contended he orchestrated himself.

Smollett was convicted of five of six felony counts of disorderly conduct — for lying to police. He was acquitted on a sixth count. He faces a maximum sentence of three years in prison per count.

Cook County Judge James Linn can order the maximum sentence, a much shorter sentence or put Smollett on probation, meaning he won’t have to spend time behind bars. And he can order a fine and restitution — the amount of which could reach tens of thousands of dollars.

Defendants convicted of lying to police, one of the least serious felonies in Illinois, rarely go to prison. But this is a rare case.

Prosecutors showed Smollett, who is Black and gay, went to extraordinary lengths in January 2019 to stage a hate crime. He hired and paid two brothers to carry out the attack, prosecutors said, told them what racist and homophobic slurs to shout, and to yell that Smollett was in “MAGA Country,” a reference to the campaign slogan of Donald Trump’s presidential campaign.

The brothers testified that Smollett gave them money to buy the rope they were to fashion into a noose around his neck and the ski masks to hide their faces. He then pointed them to where he wanted the scene to play out in the hopes it would be captured by a surveillance camera.

In doing so, he sparked already raw emotions over issues such as race and sexual identity in the country, and triggered a massive investigation in a city involving dozens of officers in what Smollett has maintained was a very real attack by two men he did not recognize.

During the hearing, prosecutors and Smollett’s attorneys will get a chance to present witnesses and allow Smollett to make a statement. And unlike the trial, Linn has agreed to let photographers and a television camera inside court for the hearing — meaning the public will for the first time get to see and hear Smollett speak in court.

A key question is whether Special Prosecutor Dan Webb will ask Linn to sentence Smollett to jail or prison. Webb, in an interview with The Associated Press, would not say.

“I think this will probably be a point that I make in sentencing,” Webb said, “that not only did Mr. Smollett lie to the police and wreak havoc here in the city for weeks on end for no reason whatsoever, but then he compounded the problem by lying under oath.”

To drive home that point, some legal experts say they expect Webb to call law enforcement officials to testify.

“Somebody from the CPD (Chicago Police Department) can testify how this crime directly impacted the police department, diverted resources away from actual crimes and the cost the city incurred,” said Joe McMahon, who as a special prosecutor won a murder conviction for Chicago Police Officer Jason Van Dyke in the 2014 fatal shooting of black teenager Laquan McDonald.

McMahon and others also said Webb might call witnesses to testify about the impact that Smollett’s scheme may have had on legitimate victims of racist and homophobic attacks.

“They could say that his (Smollett’s) false report made it less likely that real victims will come forward and will continue to suffer in silence,” McMahon said.

Experts say it is almost certain that Smollett will speak. He could cover the same ground as he did during the trial in which he testified about his extensive involvement in charity organizations, including a group that fights AIDS in the Black community. He might again speak of how he’s already been punished, that his career has been devastated.

And Smollett, who made daily appearances outside the courtroom of supporters who vouched for his character, has already received the support of dozens of people, including the Rev. Jesse Jackson and the president of the NAACP. Reminding the judge of the actor’s extensive volunteer work and donations to

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charitable causes, the supporters have sent letters to Linn asking for leniency: probation or community service instead of a prison sentence.

Smollett could admit he staged the attack and then lied repeatedly about it — including on the witness stand under oath. But his lead attorney, Nenyé Uche, proclaimed his client innocent after the trial and vowed an appeal, and has said nothing since to suggest he will reverse course.

In fact, Uche plans to present a motion to dismiss the conviction, but judges rarely grant such motions. What all of it will add up to is unknown. But several experts say they don't think the judge will impose the maximum sentence or that Smollett will see the inside of a prison. But, they say, there is a good chance he lands in county jail for several months.

"What he did was bad and lying about it was bad," said Terry Ekl, a prominent Chicago-area defense attorney who is not involved with the case. "And the fact that you are dividing a community along racial and political lines that is already deeply divided, I think that moves this case out of the probation category."

## 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 what could become a bruising 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.

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 immediate 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.

"Together with Ukraine, we stand firmly on the side of freedom and democracy. Ukraine is part of our European family," European Council President Charles Michel wrote in his invitation letter to the Versailles summit, choosing his 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 or even wishful at this stage.

The leaders of eight eastern member states officially backed Ukraine and one of them, Estonian Prime

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Minister Kaja Kallas, addressed the European Parliament in Strasbourg on Wednesday.

Kallas insisted that "it's not only in our interest to give Ukraine a membership perspective, it is also our moral duty to do so. Ukraine is not fighting for Ukraine. It's also fighting for Europe. If not now, then when?"

But at the same time Wednesday, in Paris, Dutch Prime Minister Mark Rutte made it clear — not now.

After Zelenskyy's emotional address last week, Rutte spoke with him on the phone Tuesday.

"I said, 'I know your ambition for the short term, but this will not happen in the short term because this is a whole process taking many years. So let's see what we can do now and tomorrow and next week or next month.'"

He insisted that possible membership for Moldova and Georgia would be even farther off because it does not face an immediate threat like Ukraine does.

In the draft closing statement of Versailles summit on Russia, seen by The Associated Press, the leaders "invited the (executive European) Commission to submit its opinion on this application. Pending this and without delay, we will further strengthen our bonds and deepen our partnership." It was leaning more Rutte's way than the one Kallas wants.

"You have to be careful because it is a bureaucratic, tedious process," Rutte said in a debate at the Paris Sciences Po university. "There are many questions which have to be answered. It will take many years."

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.

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.

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.

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.

## Today in History

By The Associated Press undefined

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Today is Thursday, March 10, the 69th day of 2022. There are 296 days left in the year.

Today's Highlight in History:

On March 10, 1969, James Earl Ray pleaded guilty in Memphis, Tennessee, to assassinating civil rights leader Martin Luther King Jr. (Ray later repudiated that plea, maintaining his innocence until his death.)

On this date:

In 1496, Christopher Columbus concluded his second visit to the Western Hemisphere as he left Hispaniola for Spain.

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In 1785, Thomas Jefferson was appointed America's minister to France, succeeding Benjamin Franklin.  
In 1864, President Abraham Lincoln assigned Ulysses S. Grant, who had just received his commission as lieutenant-general, to the command of the Armies of the United States.

In 1876, Alexander Graham Bell's assistant, Thomas Watson, heard Bell say over his experimental telephone: "Mr. Watson — come here — I want to see you" from the next room of Bell's Boston laboratory.

In 1906, about 1,100 miners in northern France were killed by a coal-dust explosion.

In 1913, former slave, abolitionist and Underground Railroad "conductor" Harriet Tubman died in Auburn, New York; she was in her 90s.

In 1965, Neil Simon's play "The Odd Couple," starring Walter Matthau and Art Carney, opened on Broadway.

In 1985, Konstantin U. Chernenko, who was the Soviet Union's leader for 13 months, died at age 73; he was succeeded by Mikhail Gorbachev.

In 1988, pop singer Andy Gibb died in Oxford, England, at age 30 of heart inflammation.

In 2015, breaking her silence in the face of a growing controversy over her use of a private email address and server, Hillary Rodham Clinton conceded that she should have used government email as secretary of state but insisted she had not violated any federal laws or Obama administration rules.

In 2019, a Boeing 737 Max 8 operated by Ethiopian Airlines crashed shortly after taking off from the capital, Addis Ababa, killing all 157 people on board; the crash was similar to one in October 2018 in which a 737 Max 8 flown by Indonesia's Lion Air plunged into the Java Sea minutes after takeoff, killing all 189 people on the plane. (The aircraft would be grounded worldwide after the two disasters, bringing fierce criticism to Boeing over the design and rollout of the jetliner.)

In 2020, clusters of the coronavirus swelled on both U.S. coasts, with more than 70 cases linked to a biotech conference in Boston and infections turning up at 10 nursing homes in the Seattle area. Members of a choir in Washington state gathered for a rehearsal that was later found to have been a superspreader event; disease trackers said a choir member with coronavirus symptoms attended, and 52 of the 60 others who were there got sick with confirmed or probable COVID-19, including two who died. (Experts said the public health investigation that followed was key in concluding that the virus was spreading through the air.)

Ten years ago: Rick Santorum won the Kansas caucuses in a rout and Republican presidential front-runner Mitt Romney countered in Wyoming. Israel pounded Gaza for a second day, trading airstrikes and rocket fire with Palestinian militants, killing 15 of them. F. Sherwood Rowland, 84, the Nobel prize-winning chemist who sounded the alarm on the thinning of the Earth's ozone layer, died in Corona del Mar, California.

Five years ago: President Donald Trump chose Scott Gottlieb, a conservative doctor-turned-pundit with deep ties to Wall Street and the pharmaceutical industry, to lead the Food and Drug Administration. Two girls, ages 10 and 3, were killed in a fire in Harrisburg, Pennsylvania, blamed on an exploding hoverboard; a firefighter died in a traffic accident en route to the blaze. South Korea's Constitutional Court formally removed impeached President Park Geun-hye from office over a corruption scandal.

One year ago: The House gave final congressional approval to a landmark \$1.9 trillion COVID-19 relief bill; Republicans in both chambers opposed the measure unanimously, describing it as bloated and crammed with liberal policies. The Senate confirmed Merrick Garland to be U.S. attorney general with a strong bipartisan vote; senators also confirmed longtime Ohio lawmaker Marcia Fudge as housing secretary.

Today's Birthdays: Bluegrass/country singer-musician Norman Blake is 84. Actor Chuck Norris is 82. Playwright David Rabe is 82. Singer Dean Torrence (Jan and Dean) is 82. Actor Katharine Houghton (Film: "Guess Who's Coming to Dinner?") is 80. Actor Richard Gant is 78. Rock musician Tom Scholz (Boston) is 75. Former Canadian Prime Minister Kim Campbell is 75. TV personality/businesswoman Barbara Corcoran (TV: "Shark Tank") is 73. Actor Aloma Wright is 72. Blues musician Ronnie Earl (Ronnie Earl and the Broadcasters) is 69. Producer-director-writer Paul Haggis is 69. Alt-country/rock musician Gary Louis is 67. Actor Shannon Tweed is 65. Pop/jazz singer Jeanie Bryson is 64. Actor Sharon Stone is 64. Rock musician Gail Greenwood is 62. Magician Lance Burton is 62. Actor Jasmine Guy is 60. Rock musician Jeff Ament (Pearl Jam) is 59. Music producer Rick Rubin is 59. Britain's Prince Edward is 58. Rock singer Edie Brickell

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is 56. Actor Stephen Mailer is 56. Actor Philip Anthony-Rodriguez is 54. Actor Paget Brewster is 53. Actor Jon Hamm is 51. Rapper-producer Timbaland is 50. Actor Cristián (kris-tee-AHN') de la Fuente is 48. Rock musician Jerry Horton (Papa Roach) is 47. Actor Jeff Branson is 45. Singer Robin Thicke is 45. Actor Bree Turner is 45. Olympic gold medal gymnast Shannon Miller is 45. Contemporary Christian singer Michael Barnes (Red) is 43. Actor Edi Gathegi is 43. Actor Thomas Middleditch is 40. Country singer Carrie Underwood is 39. Actor Olivia Wilde is 38. R&B singer Emeli Sandé (EH'-mihl-ee SAN'-day) is 35. Country singer Rachel Reinert is 33. Country musician Jared Hampton (LANCO) is 31. Actor Emily Osment is 30.