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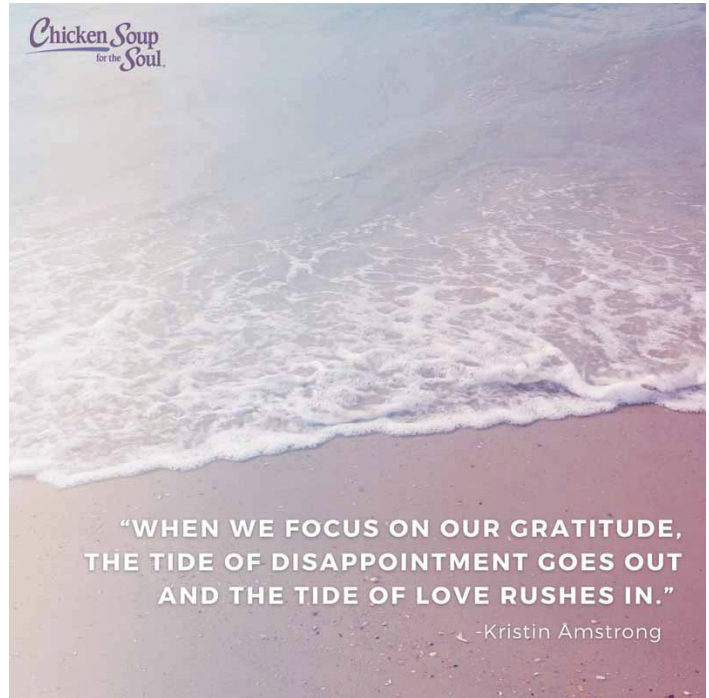
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UpComing Events

Saturday, March 12

Show Choir at Aberdeen Competition

Sunday, March 13

Daylight Savings Time - turn clocks forward 1 hour

Monday, March 14

School Board Meeting, 7 p.m.

Tuesday, March 15

City Council Meeting, 7 p.m.

Thursday, March 17

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

Spring Break - No School

Friday, March 18

State A Tournament in Rapid City

Spring Break - No School

Saturday, March 19

State A Tournament in Rapid City

Mitchell Show Choir Competition

Vender Fair

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

Silver Skates Annual Meeting

It's that time of year again -- time for the Annual Silver Skates meeting. After many years of service to this valuable community activity, several members will be leaving the board. We need your help if you want this activity to continue to flourish! Please consider attending the meeting and offering your service in some way this year. The meeting will be held this Sunday, March 13 at 1:00 p.m. at the warming house. Thank you for your willingness to do your part to keep this special Groton tradition alive!

OPEN: Recycling Trailer in Groton

The recycling trailer is located west of the city shop. It takes cardboard, papers and aluminum cans.

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

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STATE BASKETBALL TOURNAMENT INFORMATION

Groton Area School District

MAR 10, 2022

Congratulations to our Groton Area Tigers for qualifying for the State A Basketball Tournament in Rapid City on March 17, 18, and 19.

The Tigers will enter the tournament at the #5 seed and will take on #4 Flandreau in the second game of the first session the tournament at 1:45 PM Mountain Time.

Ticket Information

All tickets for the tournaments are general admission and are available for purchase at the tournament site, online at <https://themonument.live> (additional fees apply), or by calling 1-800-GOTMINE or 605-394-4111. Doors will open approximately one hour prior to the first game in each session.

Adult Session Tickets: \$15.00

Student Session Tickets: \$10.00

Adult Season Tickets: \$50.00

Student Season Tickets: \$30.00

State Tournament T Shirts

State A Tournament T-shirts are available for sale. Online orders only must be submitted before 11:55 PM on Sunday, March 13. Orders will be available for pickup from the Groton Area High School office on Wednesday, March 16.

[Click here to order.](#)

Dress Up Days (School Dress Code Applies)

Thursday: St. Patrick's Day

Friday: Neon Day - Updated 3/10/22

Saturday: State Shirts/Extreme Black and Gold

Pep Rally

There will be a pep rally for the team at 2:55 PM on Tuesday, March 15 at the Groton Area High School Arena.

Welcome Home

There will be a welcome home reception for the team at 5:00 PM on Sunday, March 20 at the Groton Area High School Arena.

Television Broadcast

All state tournaments will be broadcast on South Dakota Public Broadcasting and sdpb.org.

SDHSAA Spectator Rules

The following rules apply to all district, region and state events.

All member schools, conferences, etc. are encouraged to adopt these rules for all regular season contests.

A. Conduct of spectators, coaches and players.

1. There must be sufficient planning, by the tournament manager and by all participating schools which

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have qualified for the tournament, relative to appropriate crowd control during the duration of the event.

2. All participating schools will be expected to emphasize the necessity for proper crowd behavior. Administrators from member schools are expected to position themselves near their student cheering section whenever their team is playing.

3. Coaches will be expected at all times to display the type of conduct which contributes good sportsmanship and which does not incite the spectators in attendance.

4. Coaches will be expected to impress upon their athletes the importance of displaying good sportsmanship at all times, including players on the court, substitutes sitting on the bench, or following the conclusion of a game.

5. Administrators will be expected to impress upon their coaches the importance of displaying good sportsmanship at all times.

6. All fans will be expected to remain off the playing area until after the awarding of medals and trophies. Failure to remain off the playing floor will result in the offending team not being recognized by the public address announcer. Medals and trophy will be awarded to school personnel following the awards ceremony. Fans will be allowed on the playing area following the presentation of all awards.

B. Equipment and facilities.

1. Removal of the nets following the championship game will be under the direction and supervision of the tournament manager.

2. The breaking of a backboard will become the financial liability of the school whose fan(s) caused the damage.

3. Vandalism to locker room facilities, motel rooms, etc. shall be the responsibility of the member school whose player/team was responsible for the damage.

C. No banners - no signs - no noisemakers

1. Temporary banners and signs of all kinds are prohibited except those displayed by the SDHSAA, the Association's corporate partners, the tournament band, the arena, the tournament manager, and licensed radio and television stations. Cheer cards displayed by cheerleaders are permissible.

2. All types of noisemakers are prohibited. This includes plastic hand shakers, thunder sticks, as well as all sorts of projectiles.

3. Paper confetti and silly string are prohibited.

4. Balloons are prohibited.

5. Megaphones are prohibited except when used by a cheerleader.

6. Musical instruments are prohibited except when the band is performing.

7. Stereo tape decks and related radio equipment are prohibited during official tournament play. (Host management may provide music that may be played during warm-ups, quarter and half-time breaks, or breaks in the action such as dead balls, etc.)

D. Hoops, mini-tramps and tunnels.

1. The use of "break-through" hoops, mini-tramps, rebounding devices & related pieces of equipment is prohibited.

2. Human tunnels created by student and/or adult fans are prohibited.

E. Pennants, Number 1 Fingers, Homer Hankies, Rooter Poms, etc. will be permitted.

F. Laser Pointers are prohibited. If used, the laser pointers will be permanently confiscated.

G. Re-Entry. As per local venue policy, individuals wishing to leave the venue during a session will receive a hand stamp/accommodation pass for re-admittance to the venue for that session only.

H. Smoking is not allowed inside the venue. As per local venue policy, adult smokers will be given a hand stamp/accommodation pass for re-admittance to the venue for that session only.

I. The management will designate each participating team's section of the bleachers.

J. Students are asked not to stand on the seats. Students may stand in the foot wells in the student section.

K. Jumping up and down in unison is prohibited.

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L. Adult cheerleaders are not permitted in the student cheering sections. However, adults will be permitted to sit in the student section if space allows.

M. Cheerleaders, spirit or yell leaders will be allowed, provided they are so designated by their school and appear in a school approved uniform.

N. All fans must wear shirts. Body paint is not allowed for either students or adults. Face paint is allowed.

O. Face masks are prohibited. (NOTE- Masks to prevent infectious disease are allowed).

P. Gambling and alcoholic beverages are prohibited.

SDHSAA Arena Rules

The following rules and regulation are applicable to all venues hosting SDHSAA State Events:

1. All fans must wear shirts.
2. Face masks are prohibited. (NOTE- Masks to prevent infectious disease are allowed).
3. Fans are not prohibited from wearing face paint.
4. Human tunnels and/or break through hoops are prohibited.
5. Signs, banners, and noisemakers are prohibited.
6. Smoking inside the venue is not allowed. Adults wishing to smoke will be issued an accommodation pass or stamp to exit through a specific door and re-enter through said door.
7. Spectators must remain off the playing floor at all times.
8. No one is allowed to sit, stand or hang on the basket or the basket supports.
9. Students with bleacher tickets must use the facilities on the main floor.
10. The throwing of objects of any kind onto the playing floor is prohibited.
11. Gambling or use of intoxicating beverages is not permitted in the arena. Anyone found indulging in either would be required to leave the building.
12. Laser pointers are prohibited and will be confiscated by meet management.
13. Jumping up and down on the bleachers, in unison, is prohibited.
14. All fans will be expected to remain off the playing floor until after the awarding of medals and trophies. Failure to remain off the playing floor will result in the offending team not being recognized by the public address announcer. Medals and trophy will be awarded to school personnel following the awards ceremony. Fans will be allowed on to the playing floor following the presentation of all awards.

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Sixth Annual Groton Area Middle School Talent Show



Natalia Warrington - Oceans. Accompanied by her mom, Amy. (Photo by Paul Kosel)



6th Grade boys band - Star Wars. (Photo by Paul Kosel)



JH Band - Pirates of the Caribbean. (Photo by Paul Kosel)

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Tiger cheerleaders. (Photo by Paul Kosel)



Masters of Cermony
were JD Schwan and
Garrett Schultz. (Photo
by Paul Kosel)

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JH Choir - Disney Villains. (Photo by Paul Kosel)



6th Grade Band Girls - Beauty and the Beast. (Photo by Paul Kosel)

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Addison Hoeft - Popular. (Photo by Paul Kosel)



Teagan Hanten - Colors of the Wind. (Photo by Paul Kosel)

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Junior High Band - Thunder. (Photo by Paul Kosel)



Sixth Grade Band - We Know the Way. (Photo lifted from GDILIVE.COM video)



Liby Althoff and Ashlynn Warrington did a flute duet - Hey Soul Sister. (Photo lifted from GDILIVE.COM video)

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Groton Prairie Mixed

Team Standings: Jackelopes 15, Coyotes 12 ½, Foxes 10, Shih Tzus 9 ½, Chipmunks 8, Cheetahs 5

Men's High Games: Lance Frohling 222, 217, 214, Brad Waage 218, Brad Larson 196

Women's High Games: Vicki Walter 195, Alexa Schuring 186, Darci Spanier 185

Men's High Series: Lance Frohling 653, Brad Waage 514, Roger Spanier 513

Women's High Series: Alexa Schuring 519, Vicki Walter 510, Lori Wiley 486

Conde National League

March 7 Team Standings: Pirates 31, Cubs 28 ½, Giants 27, Braves 22 ½, Mets 21, Tigers 14

Men's High Games: Dalton Locke 217, Ryan Bethke 213, Brody Somke 181

Men's High Series: Ryan Bethke 584, Dalton Locke 523, Austin Schuelke 498

Men's High Games: Vickie Kramp 178, Nancy Radke 177, Joyce Walter 169, Michelle Johnson 169

Women's High Series: Vickie Kramp 463, Nancy Radke 431, Joyce Walter 426

American News to drop Monday print edition

Beginning Monday, April 25, you will no longer receive a print edition of the Aberdeen American News. At that time, the Monday edition will be available only on-line.

Gov. Noem Signs Bills into Law

PIERRE, S.D. – Today, Governor Kristi Noem signed three bills into law:

[HB 1047](#) makes an appropriation to the Department of Education to improve and renovate the Cultural Heritage Center.

[HB 1092](#) makes an appropriation for the precision agriculture cybersecurity CyberAg partnership initiative.

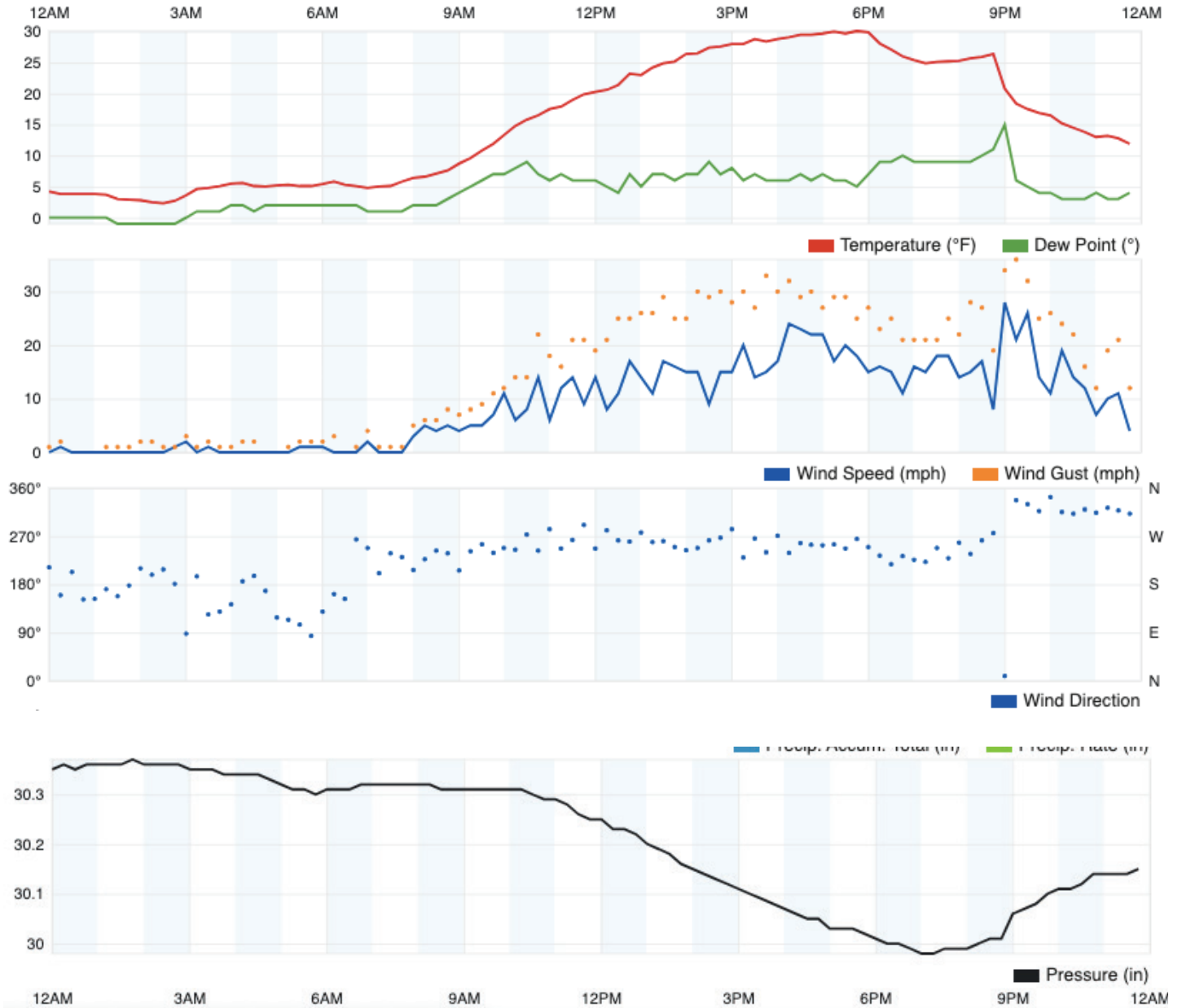
[HB 1137](#) makes an appropriation for high performance computing and data storage systems at South Dakota State University.

Governor Noem has signed 128 bills into law and vetoed one this legislative session.

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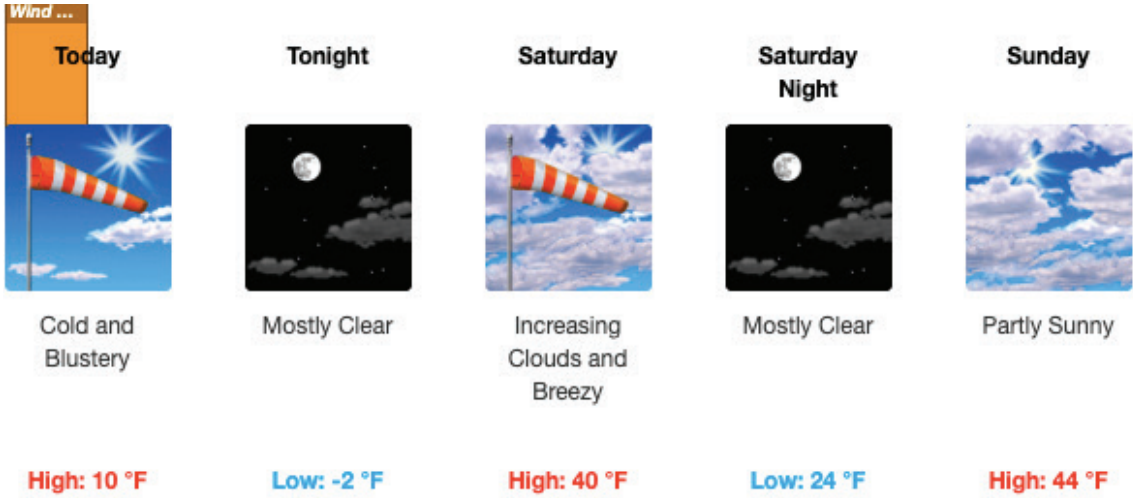
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Yesterday's Groton Weather Graphs



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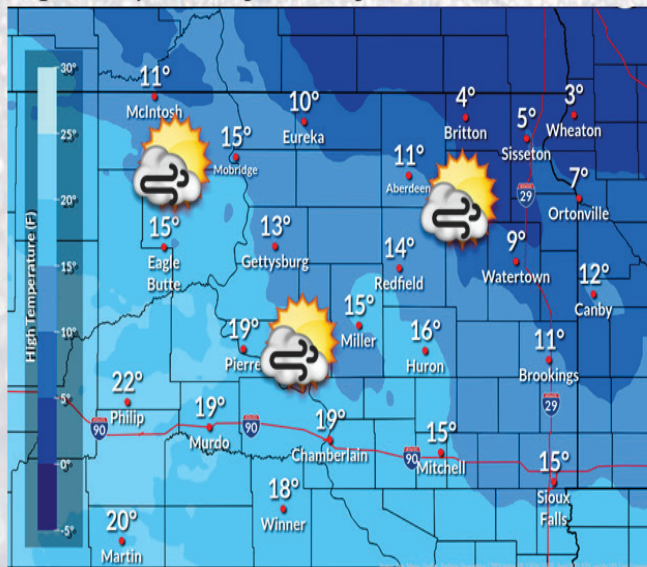
One More Cold & Breezy Day

with high temps 25 to 35 F below normal, and wind chills remaining below zero all day.

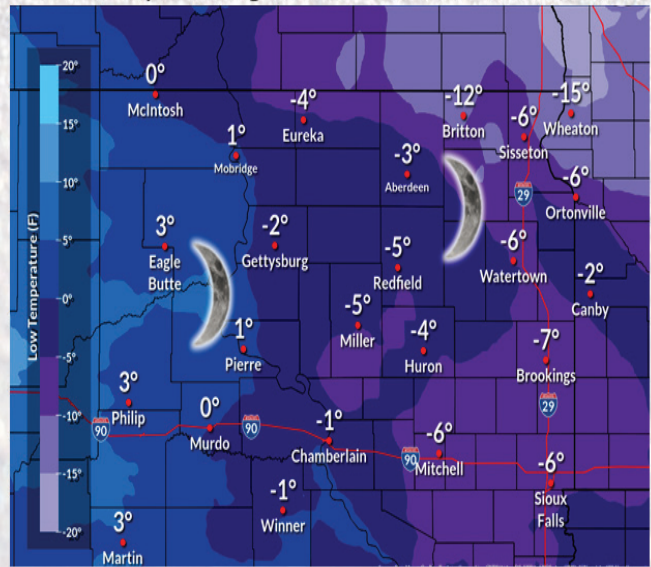
And One More Cold Night

with wind chills between 15 and 30 below zero for parts of ne SD & wc MN.

High temps today, Friday March 11th



Low temps tonight into Sat AM, March 12th



Visit www.weather.gov/abr for a detailed local forecast

Updated: 3/11/2022 6:02 AM CT

NATIONAL WEATHER SERVICE
OCEANIC AND ATMOSPHERIC ADMINISTRATION

Expect one more cold and breezy day, and one more cold night tonight into Saturday morning, before much milder air moves in to stay beginning Saturday afternoon.

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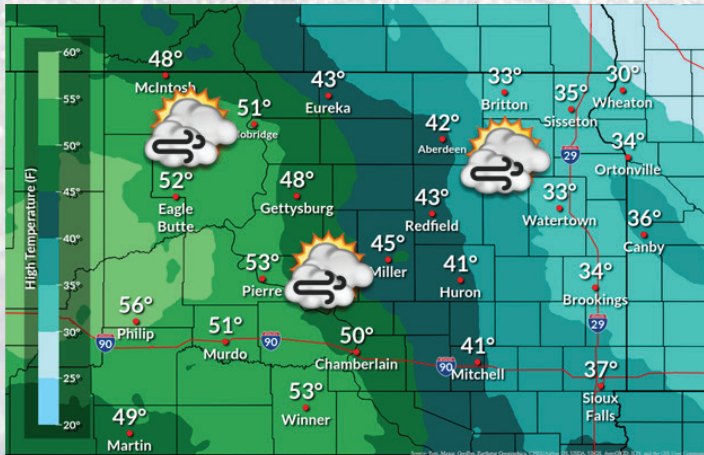
Much Warmer by Saturday Afternoon

but still breezy, this time out of the south-southwest.

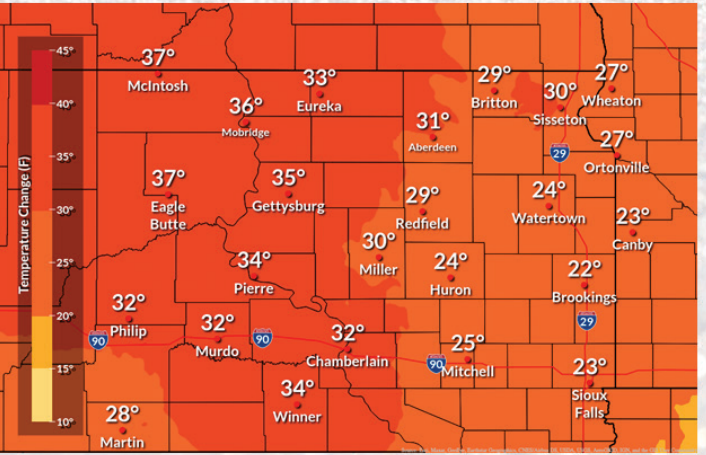
A Big Change From 24 Hours Earlier

and this warmth will continue throughout the following work-week.

High temps Saturday, March 12th



How much warmer Saturday VS Friday



Visit www.weather.gov/abr for a detailed local forecast

Updated: 3/11/2022 6:05 AM CT

NATIONAL WEATHER SERVICE
OCEANIC AND ATMOSPHERIC ADMINISTRATION

Expect one more cold and breezy day, and one more cold night tonight into Saturday morning, before much milder air moves in to stay beginning Saturday afternoon.

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Today in Weather History

March 11, 1991: A developing winter storm, centered to the south of the Black Hills, caused heavy snow to fall on the northern Black Hills the evening of March 11 until the morning of March 12th. Snowfall totals of 3-9 inches were reported, including 9 inches at Custer, 8 inches at Deerfield, and 8 inches at Lead.

March 11, 2011: A very intense low-pressure area moving across North Dakota brought widespread blizzard conditions to central and northeast South Dakota. The low-pressure area brought 1 to 3 inches of snowfall to the region. This new snow combined with 30 to 50 mph winds with gusts to 60 to 70 mph brought widespread whiteout conditions. Traffic was brought to a standstill, with many motorists having to be rescued and taken to a shelter. Hundreds of cars were stranded on mainly Highway 12 and Interstate-29. Two people traveling on Highway 10 in McPherson County told about how they became stuck and were picked up by another vehicle and that it took them over 2 1/2 hours to travel just a few miles to safety. Interstate-29 was closed from Watertown to Sisseton from 6 pm on the 11th until noon on the 12th. Many events were affected, including the Girls State Basketball Tournament in Watertown. There were several overturned semis along with several vehicle accidents across the area. Some of the highest wind gusts included 56 mph at Watertown; 58 mph at Mobridge, Sisseton, and Faulkton; 59 mph at Aberdeen; 61 mph at Bowdle; 66 mph near Hillhead, and 71 mph west of Long Lake.

1888: The Great Blizzard of 1888 paralyzed the east coast from the Chesapeake Bay to Maine on March 11 through the 14th. The blizzard dumped as much as 55 inches of snow in some areas, and snowdrifts of 30 to 40 feet were reported. An estimated 400 people died from this blizzard.

1897: The coldest March reading at Medicine Hat, Alberta Canada, occurred as the temperature dropped to 38 degrees below zero.

1911: Tamarack, California, reported 451 inches of snow on the ground, a record for the U.S.

1948 - Record cold followed in the wake of a Kansas blizzard. Lows of -25 degrees at Oberlin, Healy and Quinter established a state record for the month of March. Lows of -15 at Dodge City, -11 at Concordia, and -3 at Wichita were also March records. (The Weather Channel)

1962 - One of the most paralyzing snowstorms in decades produced record March snowfalls in Iowa. Four feet of snow covered the ground at Inwood following the storm. (David Ludlum)

1987 - Unseasonably cold weather prevailed in the southeastern U.S., and a storm over the Gulf of Mexico spread rain and sleet and snow into the Appalachian Region. Sleet was reported in southern Mississippi. (The National Weather Summary)

1988 - A blizzard raged across the north central U.S. Chadron NE was buried under 33 inches of snow, up to 25 inches of snow was reported in eastern Wyoming, and totals in the Black Hills of South Dakota ranged up to 69 inches at Lead. Winds gusted to 63 mph at Mullen NE. Snow drifts thirty feet high were reported around Lusk WY. (The National Weather Summary) (Storm Data)

1989 - Twenty-one cities in the central and southwestern U.S. reported new record high temperatures for the date. The afternoon high of 95 degrees at Lubbock TX equalled their record for March. (The National Weather Summary)

1990 - Forty-four cities in the central and eastern U.S. reported record high temperatures for the date. Record highs included 71 degrees at Dickinson ND and Williston ND, and 84 degrees at Lynchburg VA, Charleston WV and Huntington WV. Augusta GA and Columbia SC tied for honors as the hot spot in the nation with record highs of 88 degrees. A vigorous cold front produced up to three feet of snow in the mountains of Utah. (The National Weather Summary) (Storm Data)

2006 - Phoenix's record run for dry days finally ends at 143 days. The last measured rain fell on October 18, 2005. Not only did the rain break the dry spell, the 1.40 inches that fell was a record amount for the date.

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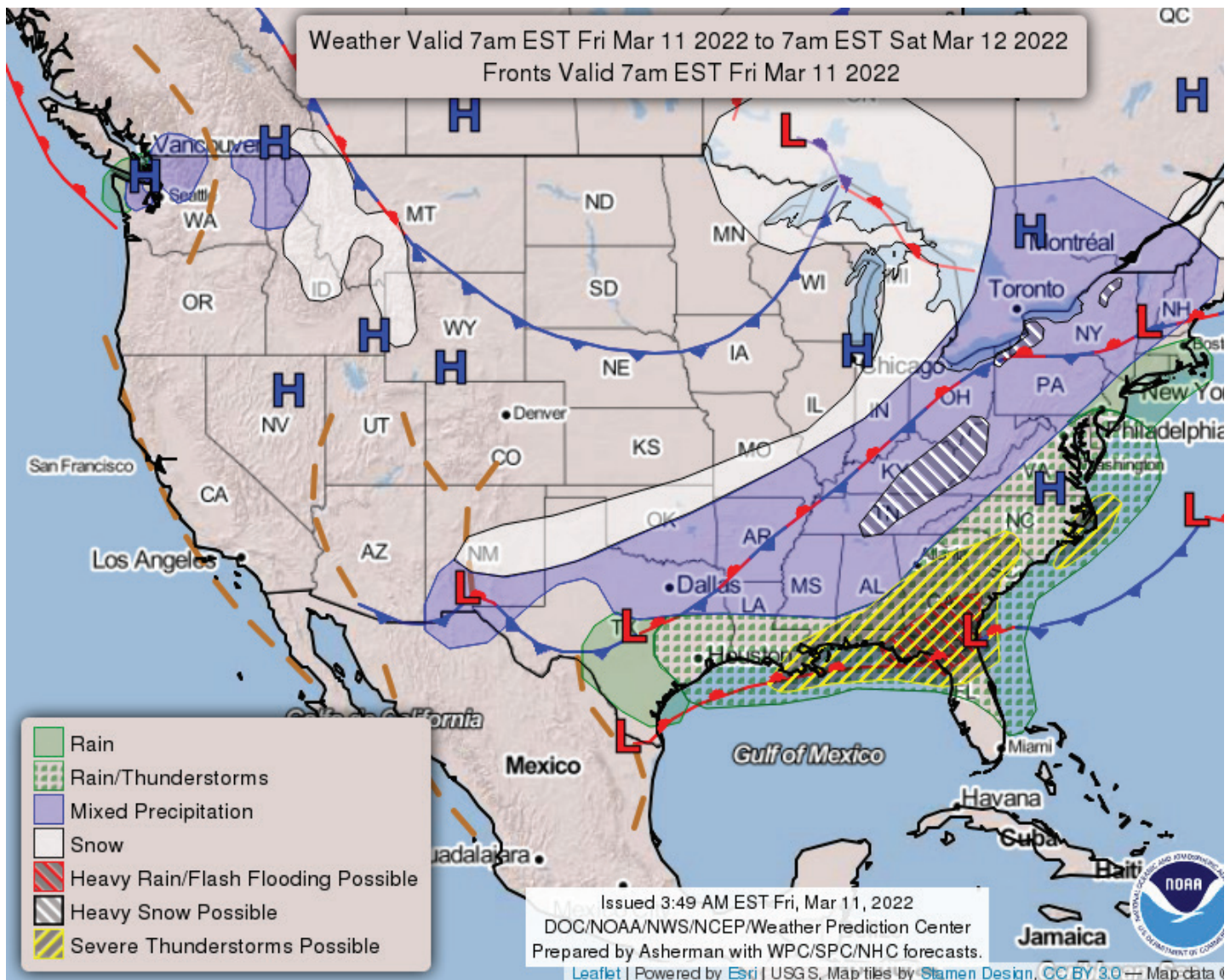
Yesterday's Groton Weather

High Temp: 30 °F at 5:48 PM
Low Temp: 2 °F at 2:29 AM
Wind: 36 mph at 9:08 PM
Precip: 0.00

Day length: 11 hours, 44 minutes

Today's Info

Record High: 71 in 2016
 Record Low: -27 in 1948
 Average High: 39°F
 Average Low: 17°F
 Average Precip in Mar.: 0.27
 Precip to date in Mar.: 0.00
 Average Precip to date: 1.44
 Precip Year to Date: 0.97
 Sunset Tonight: 6:34:22 PM
 Sunrise Tomorrow: 6:48:24 AM



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CHOOSING WISELY

Everyone has an "attitude." Sometimes it is not obvious. But the more time we spend with people and get to know them, the sooner we will realize "who they are." No one can hide his true identity forever.

When I was a child, my mother and I seemed to constantly "disagree" with my selection of friends. I remember hearing her say quite frequently, "Larry, you are not to go to Al's home," or "You are not going to play baseball with Bruce," or "If I see you playing marbles with Steve, I'm going to take all of your marbles from you." Only later in life did I realize what was "going on." It was important to her that my friends have the same values and beliefs that she wanted me to have.

God gave our Psalmist great insight about friends when he wrote, "Away from me evildoers, that I may keep the commands of my God!"

We all need friends. But we need friends who will lead us to paths of righteousness. Unfortunately, we are often attracted to people with bright, happy and fun-filled personalities. They like to laugh, have good times and live exciting lives. They are a pleasure to be with and bring a sense of optimism into our life. But they may lead us away from the Lord as we pursue a life filled with things that pass.

We need to be careful when we select our friends and companions. We need friends who will encourage us and challenge us to be Christ-like, who will lift us up in our faith and draw us closer to God. Before we get close to anyone, we must know if this person is close to God. If Jesus is our best friend, then, our best friends must be like Jesus.

Prayer: Give us great care, Father, when we choose our friends. Guard us from befriending those who will lead us astray. Keep us steadfast in You. In Jesus' Name, Amen.

Scripture For Today: Away from me evildoers, that I may keep the commands of my God. Psalm 119:115

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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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- Colored \$42.60/6 months
- E-Weekly* \$21.30/year

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News from the Associated Press

Thursday's Scores

The Associated Press
GIRLS PREP BASKETBALL
SDHSAA State Tournament
First Round

Class A

Hamlin 47, Sioux Falls Christian 34
St. Thomas More 37, Lakota Tech 35
Wagner 68, Red Cloud 62
West Central 65, Dakota Valley 52

Class AA

Brandon Valley 43, Harrisburg 39
Rapid City Stevens 40, Rapid City Christian 34
Sioux Falls Jefferson 47, Sioux Falls Washington 43
Sioux Falls O'Gorman 55, Sioux Falls Lincoln 35

Class B

Corsica/Stickney 49, White River 43
De Smet 52, Aberdeen Christian 44
Faith 54, Wall 34
Viborg-Hurley 69, Aberdeen Roncalli 58

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

South Dakota AG impeachment committee meets amid new claims

By STEPHEN GROVES Associated Press

PIERRE, S.D. (AP) — A South Dakota House committee examining whether Attorney General Jason Ravensborg should be impeached for his conduct after killing a pedestrian with his car in 2020 detailed Thursday how it planned to wrap up its investigation, while attempting to keep out fresh allegations from one of Gov. Kristi Noem's top officials.

After meeting behind closed doors for nearly two hours late Thursday, lawmakers announced they would be delivering a report, which will include the crash investigation with some parts redacted, to House lawmakers and the public by the end of the month. The committee of seven Republicans and two Democrats also planned to meet March 28 to discuss whether to recommend Ravensborg face impeachment charges from the House.

The committee's decision may be complicated by a letter the committee received Wednesday from Craig Price, Noem's public safety secretary who oversaw the crash investigation. The letter said Ravensborg had been pulled over for traffic offenses eight times between taking office in 2019 and the fatal crash, including five in which he either identified himself as the attorney general or displayed a badge.

Although he wasn't ticketed for any of those eight stops, Ravensborg previously accumulated eight traffic tickets since 2014, including six speeding tickets.

The letter irked some members of the committee as an intrusion into their deliberations, even as it raised new allegations about Ravensborg's conduct beyond the immediate scope of the crash.

House Speaker Spencer Gosch, a Republican overseeing the impeachment investigation, said Thursday the committee would send a letter to Noem telling her not to release any more information about the crash investigation.

"What she's doing is inappropriate," Gosch said. "We have a job to do. We've asked her numerous times

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to stop.”

The House has limited its investigation to Ravensborg’s actions surrounding the death of Joseph Boever, the man he struck and killed along a rural highway in September 2020. The attorney general has cast it as a tragic accident and pleaded no contest last year to a pair of traffic misdemeanors in the crash.

His spokesman has not responded to requests for comment. Ravensborg has mostly stayed silent throughout the impeachment investigation, including to the committee. Gosch said he did not respond to two invitations from the House committee to present his side of events.

Ravnsborg, in limited public comments, has defended his conduct surrounding the crash.

The attorney general has said he did not realize he struck a man until he returned to the scene the next day and discovered Boever’s body. Criminal investigators doubted that account, but prosecutors said they were unable to prove that Ravensborg saw Boever’s body the night of the crash.

Noem and Price have been displeased by lawmakers who raised questions about whether Noem’s administration applied undue pressure on prosecutors as she pushed for Ravensborg to be forced from office.

In Wednesday’s letter, Price urged the committee to consider impeachment, calling Ravensborg “unfit” to be the state’s top law enforcement officer. He alleged that the attorney general and his top aides made “disparaging and offensive statements” in text messages about other state officials and made untruthful statements to criminal investigators.

Price also alleged Ravensborg was untruthful about only using his state-owned car for work because he used it to travel for military duty.

Price didn’t reveal specifics about text messages between Ravensborg and his top aides except for one that the attorney general allegedly received from a political consultant two days after the crash.

“Well, at least the guy was a Democrat,” the political consultant texted Ravensborg, according to Price’s letter.

Nick Nemec, Boever’s cousin, has pushed for the attorney general’s removal. He noted that Price didn’t say how Ravensborg responded and that the text may have been a “flippant” remark. But he said it showed that Ravensborg was thinking about himself after the crash.

“Ravnsborg was more concerned about his political future than the man he killed and left laying in a ditch all night,” Nemec said.

It’s not clear whether Price’s letter will change the course of the House impeachment investigation. Gosch said they’re irrelevant to the crash.

“Trying to influence the public in an opinion and events that aren’t even surrounding what we’re trying to do is inappropriate,” he said of Price’s letter. “We’re going to have to make a difficult decision one way or the other. And we are going to ultimately make some people angry, and some people not.”

SD lawmakers strike deal to defy Noem, pass \$5.8B budget

By STEPHEN GROVES Associated Press

PIERRE, S.D. (AP) — The South Dakota Legislature on Thursday passed a proposal to give state lawmakers more control over how federal funds are spent, defying Gov. Kristi Noem and clearing the way for the House and Senate to find agreement on a \$5.8 billion state budget.

The bipartisan proposal passed on the penultimate day of the legislative session with over two-thirds support in each chamber. It passed despite the Republican governor’s ardent objections. She will next have an opportunity to veto the bill, but if the two-thirds support in both chambers holds, the Legislature could override a veto.

The Republican-controlled House has sparred with Noem over the authority to spend federal funds this year. During budget negotiations, those lawmakers gained support from the Republican-controlled Senate, as well Democrats, and the proposal emerged to require a legislative budgeting committee to approve state government spending of federal funds if it requires a policy change.

As talks between the governor’s office and lawmakers broke down Thursday, Noem made a public appeal in an attempt to stop the federal spending oversight bill’s passage, calling it “bad government” in a

Youtube video.

"It's going to slow it down for people who utilize federal funds to help individuals in our state," she said.

The governor made a last-ditch attempt to recruit lobbyists for industries that receive federal funding to halt the bill's passage, but lawmakers remained undeterred.

Republican Rep. Chris Karr, who chairs the House Appropriations committee, argued the legislative oversight was necessary as the federal government has pumped billions of dollars through state government in packages covering pandemic recovery and infrastructure development.

"This is going to provide more transparency," said Republican Rep. Taffy Howard, who has often been critical of government spending. "This was a hard-fought agreement worked out between the two chambers."

The agreement between the House and Senate cleared the way for them to pass the \$5.8 billion state budget that will take effect July 1. It includes a 6% raise proposed by Noem for state employees, school funding and health care providers.

Republican Sen. Jean Hunhoff, who led the Senate budget process, called it a "fiscally conservative" budget that made sure the windfall of funds that came from the federal government was allocated to one-time projects.

She said that teachers, state employees and health care workers, who have often been on the frontlines of the pandemic, deserved to be paid at competitive wages that kept up with inflation.

Democratic Sen. Reynold Nesiba said the funding increases should have been even higher to keep track with inflation, but called the budget "really good" for state government.

The governor's spokesman Ian Fury said lawmakers passed "pretty much every budget coming to her desk," and added that she was "working on interpreting" the implications of the federal spending oversight bill.

Lawmakers also approved \$600 million in federal funding for water supply projects, \$200 million to spur infrastructure projects around housing developments and over \$100 million in projects for the state's universities and technical colleges.

Republican Senate leader Sen. Gary Cammack lauded the funding packages as transformational for the state, saying they would impact quality of life, economic development and the agriculture industry.

He acknowledged the oversight of federal funding was not as popular in the Senate, but was a necessary concession to getting the budget passed.

"It's a situation that in the end, we've got to work together," he said.

EU foreign policy chief says 'pause' needed in Iran talks

By JON GAMBRELL Associated Press

DUBAI, United Arab Emirates (AP) — The European Union's foreign policy chief said Friday that "a pause" was needed in ongoing talks over Iran's tattered nuclear deal with world powers, blaming "external factors" for the delay.

The comments by Josep Borrell come as a roadmap appeared imminent for the U.S. to rejoin an accord it unilaterally withdrew from in 2018 and for Iran to again limit its rapidly advancing nuclear program. And while Borrell didn't elaborate, it also comes as Russia last week tied the ongoing negotiations to sanctions Moscow faces over its war on Ukraine.

"A pause in (hashtag)ViennaTalks is needed, due to external factors. A final text is essentially ready and on the table," Borrell wrote on Twitter. "As coordinator, I will, with my team, continue to be in touch with all (hashtag)JCPOA participants and the U.S. to overcome the current situation and to close the agreement."

The JCPOA, or the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action, is the 2015 nuclear deal's formal name. Talks have been going on for months in Vienna over trying to come up with a way to restart the deal.

Responding to Borrell, Iranian Foreign Ministry spokesperson Saeed Khatibzadeh said the pause "could be a momentum for resolving any remaining issue and a final return."

"Successful conclusion of talks will be the main focus of all," Khatibzadeh wrote on Twitter. "No external factor will affect our joint will to go forward for a collective agreement."

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Khatibzadeh as well did not identify the "external" issue. However, Iran has been careful in the waning days of the talks not to upset Russia, which it views as an ally against the U.S.

Iran also partnered with Russia in Syria to support President Bashar Assad. But historic distrust between the nations also remains over Russia's invasion of Iran during World War II and later refusing to leave afterward.

A report by Iran's state-run IRNA news agency, quoting an anonymous source it described as close to Tehran's negotiators, also suggested Russia's demands caused the pause.

"There are some issues such as the issues between Russia and the United States, which, of course, will be unrelated to the issue of Iran's talks ... and that need to be resolved between the U.S. and Russia," IRNA quoted the source as saying.

However, Russian ambassador to Vienna Mikhail Ulyanov, speaking to journalists outside of the Vienna hotel where the talks took place, said: "I'm not aware of any impasse."

"Contacts will continue," he said. "The conclusion of the deal does not depend on Russia only."

In Germany, Foreign Ministry spokeswoman Andrea Sasse also said "the work is done" in terms of an agreement, but decisions needed to be made in foreign capitals.

"We hope and expect that this will now happen," Sasse said.

On Thursday, State Department spokesperson Ned Price had said America was "close to a possible deal — it's really down to a very small number of outstanding issues."

But last week, Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov said he wanted "guarantees at least at the level of the secretary of state" that the U.S. sanctions would not affect Moscow's relationship with Tehran. That threw into question the months of negotiations held so far on restoring the 2015 deal, which saw Iran agree to drastically limit its enrichment of uranium in exchange for the lifting of economic sanctions.

"The new Russia-related sanctions are wholly unrelated to the JCPOA and should not have any impact on a potential mutual return to compliance with it or its ultimate implementation," Price said Thursday.

"We also have no intention of offering Russia anything new or specific as it relates to the (Ukraine) sanctions, nor is anything new required to successfully reach an agreement on a mutual return to full compliance with the" deal.

The 2015 nuclear deal saw Iran put advanced centrifuges into storage under the watch of the International Atomic Energy Agency, while keeping its enrichment at 3.67% purity and its stockpile at only 300 kilograms (661 pounds) of uranium. It also halted enrichment at its underground Fordo nuclear facility.

But then-President Donald Trump unilaterally withdrew America from the accord in 2018, fulfilling a campaign pledge to tear up the deal as it didn't address Iran's ballistic missile program and support for regional militias. Iran in 2019 then began methodically breaking all the deal's limits as a series of escalating attacks put the wider Mideast on edge.

As of Feb. 19, the IAEA says Iran's stockpile of all enriched uranium was nearly 3,200 kilograms (7,055 pounds). Some has been enriched up to 60% purity — a short technical step from weapons-grade levels of 90%. Meanwhile, Iran has stopped the IAEA from accessing its surveillance camera footage and has resumed enrichment at Fordo.

That worried nuclear nonproliferation experts. While Iran insists its program is peaceful, the IAEA and Western governments say Iran had an organized military nuclear program up until the end of 2003.

Trump left office without ever meaningfully engaging in diplomacy with Iran over the nuclear deal. President Joe Biden entered the White House last year, saying he was willing to see America rejoin the agreement.

Seeing Iran able to sell its crude oil and natural gas in the global market also could push down energy prices. Americans now are paying the highest-ever prices at the pump for gasoline, fueled by Russia's war on Ukraine.

Warsaw overwhelmed as it becomes key refugee destination

By VANESSA GERA Associated Press

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WARSAW, Poland (AP) — Warsaw's mayor is appealing for international help as the city becomes overwhelmed by refugees, with more than a tenth of all those fleeing the war in Ukraine arriving in the Polish capital.

Some seek to wait out the war or settle in the city, while others merely use Warsaw as a transit point to head further west, turning the city's train stations into crowded hubs where people are camping out on floors.

"We are dealing with the greatest migration crisis in the history of Europe since World War II. ... The situation is getting more and more difficult every day," Mayor Rafal Trzaskowski said, adding that "the greatest challenge is still ahead of us."

To be sure, the welcome Warsaw has given Ukrainians as the nation struggles to resist Russia's invasion is wholehearted. Across the city, people have mobilized to help by collecting donations and volunteering at reception centers. City monuments and buses fly Ukraine's blue-and-yellow flag to show solidarity with the neighboring nation.

But the challenge is enormous. Much of the burden so far is being carried by volunteers taking time off work, a situation not sustainable in the long run.

Trzaskowski noted on Friday that psychologists, giving just one example, had been volunteering to help refugees but soon will need to return to their jobs.

The decline in the city's ability to absorb a massive number of new arrivals comes as the people fleeing war are those who have witnessed greater trauma than those who arrived earlier.

"At the beginning the people who came here were running away in panic from the war they saw in the media and that they heard about. Now we find there are people escaping from bombs," said Dorota Zawadzka, a child psychologist volunteering at a center for refugees set up in the Torwar sports center.

"This is a completely different kind of refugee. They are afraid of everything. They sit in their jackets. Children are scared, they don't want to play, their mothers have such empty eyes."

The war has already forced 2.5 million people to flee, according to the International Organization for Migration on Friday, and more than half of those go to Poland. As of Friday more than 1.5 million refugees had entered Poland, according to Poland's Border Guard agency.

Trzaskowski said Friday that 300,000 refugees have arrived in the capital since the war began on Feb. 24. Poland's train stations have become major transfer points for Ukrainians who fled the war, with people arriving and transferring to trains to points further west.

This week the central station was filled with people, some in a state of limbo as they awaited their next move, with people sleeping on the floors of the station, others reading on their phones, petting cats and dogs or playing with children.

Volunteers moved about, bringing snacks to people and helping them to sort through used clothes. Some handed out books to children in an attempt to cheer up the youngest of those whose lives had been turned upside down by Russia's invasion.

Train after train pulled into the station carrying people who had crossed from Ukraine into Poland, while trains to Vienna and other destinations carried them onward.

China amplifies unsupported Russian claim of Ukraine biolabs

By DAVID RISING Associated Press

BANGKOK (AP) — As Russia intensifies its assault on Ukraine, it is getting a helping hand from China in spreading inflammatory and unsubstantiated claims that the U.S. is financing biological weapons labs in Ukraine.

The U.S. has been quick to refute Russia's conspiracy theory, and the United Nations has said it has received no information that would back up the claim, but that hasn't stopped it from proliferating.

The partnership between the two authoritarian countries, which weeks ago said their ties had "no limits," appears aimed at muddying the waters of the rationale for Russia's invasion in what American officials have called an "information war" that some fear could lay the groundwork for a "false-flag" operation.

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China's Foreign Ministry has helped fuel the fire this week, repeating the Russian claim several times and calling for an investigation.

"This Russian military operation has uncovered the secret of the U.S. labs in Ukraine, and this is not something that can be dealt with in a perfunctory manner," ministry spokesperson Zhao Lijian said Thursday.

"It is not something they can muddle through by saying that China's statement and Russia's finding are disinformation, and are absurd and ridiculous."

Indeed, Pentagon press secretary John Kirby called the Russian claim "a bunch of malarkey," but in testimony to the Senate Intelligence Committee on Thursday, CIA Director William Burns also noted grave concern that Russia might be laying the groundwork for a chemical or biological attack of its own, which it would then blame on the U.S. or Ukraine in a false flag operation.

"This is something, as all of you know very well, is very much a part of Russia's playbook," he said. "They've used these weapons against their own citizens, they've at least encouraged the use in Syria and elsewhere, so it's something we take very seriously."

Russia, China and the U.S. are all signatories to international conventions against the use of chemical or biological weapons, but the international community has assessed that Russia has used chemical weapons in carrying out assassination attempts against enemies of President Vladimir Putin. Russia also supports the Assad government in Syria, which has used chemical weapons against its people in a decade-long civil war.

Moscow initially claimed that its invading forces had found evidence of hasty attempts to conceal biological weapons research in Ukraine.

The head of the Russian military's radiation, chemical and biological protection troops, Igor Kirillov, doubled down on Thursday, saying that U.S.-sponsored labs in Kyiv, Kharkiv and Odesa were working on dangerous pathogens custom-designed to target Russians and other Slavs.

"We can say with a high probability that one of the goals of the United States and its allies is the creation of bioagents capable to selectively infect various ethnic groups," Kirillov said.

Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov made a similar claim Thursday, alleging that U.S.-directed labs in Ukraine were working to "develop ethnically targeted biological weapons."

The U.N. Security Council scheduled a meeting Friday at Russia's request to discuss Moscow's claim. Olivia Dalton, spokesperson for the U.S. Mission to the U.N., said the American delegation would not let it become "a venue for promoting their disinformation."

China has been actively promoting the claim, however, with headlines like "Russia reveals evidence of U.S.-funded bio-program in Ukraine" and "China urges U.S. to disclose more details about biolabs in Ukraine" on state-run China Global Television Network's website. The Communist Party's Global Times newspaper published a story Thursday with the headline "US tries to refute 'rumors' about its biolabs in Ukraine, but can we believe it?"

A nearly three-minute video of a Russian Defense Ministry news conference repeating the allegations has been viewed more than 10 million times on Sina Weibo, a popular Chinese social media platform akin to Twitter, and liked more than 90,000 times.

Following years of anti-U.S. rhetoric from Communist Party leaders and the state-controlled media, many Chinese are convinced the U.S. cannot be trusted and that the West is on the decline while seeking to contain China's rise.

The claim has also picked up traction with far-right groups and media in the U.S.

China is broadly seen as taking Russia's side in the conflict, most conspicuously in refusing to refer to it as a war or an invasion in keeping with Moscow's usage. It has also toed Russia's line on the root causes of the conflict, pointing to NATO's eastward expansion and a failure to acknowledge Russia's "legitimate security concerns."

At the same time, it is also seeking to avoid fully casting its lot in with Russia as Belarus has, seeking to present itself as merely a concerned third party.

China has abstained on U.N. votes censuring Russia and has criticized economic sanctions against it. It has expressed its support for peace talks and offered its services as a mediator, despite having little experience in such a role and questions about its neutrality.

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Chinese officials have also said Washington shouldn't be able to complain about Russia's actions because the U.S. invaded Iraq under false pretenses, maintaining it had evidence Saddam Hussein was stockpiling weapons of mass destruction though none was ever found.

China has also used the opportunity to repeat its claim that the U.S. created the virus that causes COVID-19 at a lab in Fort Detrick in Maryland, which it first floated in an apparent attempt to deflect American claims from then-U.S. President Donald Trump and other senior American officials that the coronavirus originated in a research laboratory in Wuhan, China.

Two extensive studies released last month point to an animal market in the city as the likely origin.

"The international community has long been highly concerned about the biological military activities of the United States," Zhao said in response to a question about what evidence China had to back up Russia's claims. "What did the U.S. do at the Fort Detrick base within its territory?"

It is not the first time Russia has spread disinformation about American biological weapons research.

During the Cold War in the 1980s, Russian intelligence spread the claim that the U.S. created HIV, the virus that causes AIDS, in a lab. More recently, Russian state media have promoted theories about dangerous research at labs in Ukraine and Georgia.

In this case, Russia has tried to counter the U.S. pushback by saying that it is Ukraine, not Russia, that could be preparing a false flag attack.

Russian Defense Ministry spokesperson Maj. Gen. Igor Konashenkov said Wednesday that Ukrainian "nationalists" have stockpiled about 80 tons of ammonia in Zolochiv near Kharkiv in preparation for a possible "provocation with toxic agents to accuse Russia of chemical weapons use."

Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy said the accusation itself was ominous.

"That worries me very much because we have often been convinced that if you want to know Russia's plans, they are what Russia accuses others of," he said in his nightly address to the nation Thursday.

"I am a reasonable person. The president of a reasonable country and reasonable people. I am the father of two children," he said. "And no chemical or any other weapon of mass destruction has been developed on my land. The whole world knows this."

In his testimony to the Senate panel, Burns said the U.S. strategy in the current conflict of declassifying and publicly releasing what is known about false narratives and possible Russian false-flag operations has paid dividends so far.

"I think we have had a great deal of effect in disrupting their tactics and their calculations and demonstrating to the entire world that this is a premeditated and unprovoked aggression built on a body of lies and false narratives," Burns said.

"This is one information war that I think Putin is losing."

Live updates: Civilian casualties keep rising in Ukraine war

By The Associated Press undefined

The latest developments on the Russia-Ukraine war:

GENEVA -- The U.N. human rights office says it has documented 549 civilian deaths and 957 injuries so far following the Russian invasion of Ukraine, saying the toll and "general human suffering" are rising.

Meanwhile, the World Health Organization said Friday it has verified 29 attacks on health care facilities, workers and ambulances in the hostilities, including a high-profile one on a maternity hospital in southeastern Mariupol on Wednesday. In those, 12 people have been killed and 34 injured, WHO spokesperson Dr. Margaret Harris said in an email.

The figures from the office of the U.N. High Commissioner for Human Rights, which run through the Feb. 24 start of the fighting to midnight Wednesday, focus on civilians in general. It uses a strict methodology and counts only confirmed casualties. It acknowledges that its tally is likely to underestimate the real toll.

"Civilians are being killed and maimed in what appear to be indiscriminate attacks, with Russian forces using explosive weapons with wide area effects in or near populated areas," spokeswoman Liz Throssell told a U.N. briefing.

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"Civilian casualties are rising daily, as is general human suffering," Throssell said.

LVIV, Ukraine — A team of U.S. and U.K.-based doctors and nurses have begun a tour of medical facilities in Lviv, offering help and advice to Ukrainian doctors during the Russian invasion.

The team of nine brought in aid and medical equipment in 167 bags, including ventilators, ultrasound machines and gas masks, worth about \$500,000, said Zaher Sahloul, a Chicago-based doctor.

"There is huge shortage of medical supplies and equipment, especially for trauma, and medication for chronic diseases," he said. "It looks like the healthcare system is about to collapse because of the impact of the war, the huge displacement of the population, and the large number of injured people in many areas in Ukraine."

Sahloul is a native of Syria and has visited that war-stricken country several times, working with volunteers and medical staff to establish or restore health services in opposition-held areas heavily bombed by the Russian air force over the years.

Sahloul said Ukrainian doctors mostly need basic supplies, such as tactical first aid kits. He said that, like in Syria, many of the doctors in Kyiv are working in basements to avoid being targeted by Russian forces.

LONDON — Britain has slapped sanctions on 386 Russian lawmakers who recognized two regions of eastern Ukraine as independent, the precursor to Russia's invasion of Ukraine.

Foreign Secretary Liz Truss says the Duma members who voted to recognize the independence of Luhansk and Donetsk face a U.K. travel ban and a freeze on any assets they have in Britain.

Truss said U.K. sanctions were targeting "those complicit in Putin's illegal invasion of Ukraine and those who support this barbaric war."

Friday's announcement follows through on Britain's promise two weeks ago to sanction the Duma members.

Britain has also slapped sanctions on Russian banks and on 18 wealthy individuals.

BERLIN — The German government says that more than 100,000 people fleeing Ukraine are known to have entered Germany, but the true number could be much higher.

Interior Ministry spokesman Marek Wede said Friday that federal police so far have recorded 109,183 people coming from Ukraine entering the country, more than 99,000 of them Ukrainian citizens.

He noted that the number may be higher because Germany doesn't have full regular border checks on its eastern frontiers with Poland and the Czech Republic. However, federal police have stepped up checks on the Polish border.

Wede said it's also unclear how many of the refugees who entered Germany may have traveled onward to other countries.

As of Friday, U.N. agencies said that more than 2.5 million people had fled Ukraine since the Russian invasion started on Feb. 24. More than 1.5 million of those went to Poland.

NEW DELHI — Hundreds of Indian medical students who sheltered in bunkers while Russia shelled a Ukrainian city have returned home to bouquets and hugs from their parents in emotional scenes at New Delhi's international airport.

Thousands of Indians studying in Ukraine suddenly found themselves in the middle of a war after Russia invaded the country last month.

The group arriving home Friday were studying in the northeastern Ukrainian city of Sumy.

"It was very, very scary for us," Lakshyaa Dahiya, a medical student, said. "Seeing this much army with tanks... it was very dangerous also. We will not forget that thing ever, in our whole life."

Arindam Bagchi, an External Affairs Ministry spokesman, said India has evacuated nearly 23,000 of its citizens, mostly students, from Ukraine.

Pressure on the Indian government to pull out its citizens intensified after one student died in shelling in Kharkiv last month.

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TOKYO — Japan's government is freezing the assets of three Belarusian banks in Japan and banning exports of high technology equipment to Russia and Belarus, as Tokyo steps up sanctions against Russia's invasion of Ukraine.

Japan is taking additional steps to remain in concert with the United States and European countries in their effort to pressure Russia and Belarus, which is helping Moscow, to stop the war.

Japan has previously frozen the assets of individuals and organizations from the two countries, including Russian President Vladimir Putin and his top government officials, as well as Belarusian President Alexander Lukashenko, and cut seven Russian banks from the SWIFT messaging system.

Japan is also banning exports of semiconductors, telecommunication equipment and other high-technology goods to Russia and Belarus from March 18 to prevent them from bolstering their military capabilities.

BERLIN — Two German public broadcasters say they will resume reporting from their Moscow studios, after halting operations following the approval of Russian legislation penalizing any reports that authorities deem to be fake information about the country's military.

ARD and ZDF said last weekend that they were suspending reporting from Moscow while they examined the consequences of the measure, which foresees prison sentences of up to 15 years. Several other Western media outlets made similar decisions.

The broadcasters said Friday that they have now decided to resume reporting from their Moscow studios in the coming days on the "political, economic and social situation in Russia." But reporting on the military situation in Ukraine will be done from other locations.

ARD and ZDF said they will be transparent about "the special conditions" of reporting from Russia.

BANGKOK — China is helping Russia spread inflammatory and unsubstantiated claims that the U.S. is financing biological weapons labs in Ukraine, the target of a Russian invasion.

The U.S. has refuted Russia's conspiracy theory, and the United Nations has said it has received no information that would back up the allegations. But that hasn't prevented the claims from proliferating.

The partnership between the two authoritarian countries appears aimed at muddying the waters of the rationale for Russia's invasion — part of what American officials have called an "information war."

China's Foreign Ministry has helped fuel the fire this week, repeating the Russian claim several times and calling for an investigation into "the secret of the U.S. labs in Ukraine."

TOKYO — The Japanese navy has spotted a fleet of 10 Russian warships crossing the Tsugaru Strait between the Sea of Japan and the Pacific Ocean, raising concern about increasing Russian naval activity in the region amid its invasion of Ukraine.

Japan's Defense Minister Nobuo Kishi told reporters Friday that the fleet movement was believed to be part of Russia's ongoing major naval exercises in the region since February.

He said the exercises are "apparently to show off its naval capability spanning from the East to the West, in unison with the Russian military movement in and around Ukraine."

He renewed his condemnation of Russian invasion of Ukraine, calling it a "barbaric act" that shakes the foundations of international order.

Kishi said Japan is watching the Russian military movement "with serious concern" and has raised its warning and reconnaissance levels.

LONDON — The British government is warning military veterans not to join the fighting in Ukraine and says any serving troops who go there will be court-martialed when they return.

Veterans Minister Leo Docherty wrote to British military charities urging ex-soldiers to support the Ukrainian people through donations and volunteering in the U.K.

He said Friday that "veterans always step up in times of need, but they must channel their skills, experi-

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ence and passion into legal routes of support for Ukraine and not engage in the conflict.”

Ukraine has encouraged foreign volunteers to join the fight against Russia’s invasion. A handful of U.K. service members have reportedly gone AWOL to travel to Ukraine.

Prime Minister Boris Johnson said he sympathized with those wishing to go, but “we have very clear laws in this country. You shouldn’t go to Ukraine, and I’m afraid people going from our armed services ... will face court martial.”

Russia said Friday it was planning to bring “volunteers” from countries including Syria into the conflict on its side.

ZAGREB, Croatia — A drone has crashed on the outskirts of Zagreb, the capital of Croatia, and is suspected of having flown all the way from the Ukrainian war zone.

Croatian authorities said Friday the overnight crash caused a loud blast but no injuries.

A statement issued after Croatia’s National Security Council meeting said the “pilotless military aircraft” entered Croatian airspace from neighboring Hungary at a speed of 700 kph (430 mph) and an altitude of 1,300 meters (4,300 feet).

That means the large drone flew at least 350 miles (560 kilometers) apparently undetected by air defenses in Croatia and Hungary. Both countries are members of NATO.

Military experts of The War Zone online magazine said that the aircraft is likely a Soviet-era Tu-141 “Strizh” reconnaissance drone that must have severely malfunctioned. They said that Ukraine is the only known current operator of the Tu-141.

TEL AVIV, Israel — Ukraine’s ambassador to Israel is calling on the country to join its Western allies in slapping sanctions on Russia.

Yevgen Korniychuck told reporters Friday that it was the “moral obligation” of Israeli companies to suspend business in Russia, as many Western firms have done.

Korniychuck also indicated that Israel’s attempt at mediating between Kyiv and Moscow appeared to have stalled, saying it was “unclear” where the mediation stood and that he was not aware of “any immediate tasks” taken up by Israel on the matter.

Israel is one of the few countries with good working relations with both Ukraine and Russia. Israeli Prime Minister Naftali Bennett has repeatedly expressed support for the Ukrainian people, and Israel has sent humanitarian aid to the country, but he has stopped short of condemning Russia for its incursion.

That middle ground helped pave the way for Bennett to meet with Russian President Vladimir Putin last Saturday in an attempt to mediate between the sides.

Mediation efforts by Turkey, which also has ties with both of the warring countries, also have yet to make demonstrable progress.

— This item was previously corrected to show that the Ukraine ambassador said Israeli companies, not the Israeli government, have a moral obligation to suspend business in Russia.

WARSAW, Poland — U.S. Vice President Kamala Harris has wrapped up her visit to Poland by meeting with U.S. and Polish troops, as Russia pressed ahead with its invasion of neighboring Ukraine.

Harris is on a whirlwind trip to meet with the leaders of Poland and Romania. Those two countries are eastern flank NATO allies and have witnessed an influx of refugees since war broke out last month.

“We stand as partners,” Harris said. “We work together, we train together, we form friendships that are based on solidarity, mutual values and shared principles,” she told the troops.

Harris was due to meet later Friday with Romania’s president to discuss a response to the influx of refugees from Ukraine due to the war.

STOCKHOLM — Police in Sweden are donating helmets, flak jackets, binoculars and drones to Ukraine. Swedish Justice Minister Morgan Johansson said Friday that Ukraine police had requested the material via the European police agency Europol, which has 27 member countries.

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The Scandinavian country will donate 367 flak jackets, 94 bulletproof helmets, 62 pairs of binoculars and five drones. Sweden is also sending 3,400 items of protective clothing. All the equipment was either to be thrown away or was not in use but it is in working order, Johansson said.

GENEVA — The International Organization for Migration says 2.5 million people have fled Ukraine since Russia invaded more than two weeks ago.

IOM spokesman Paul Dillon said in a text message that the figures, taken from national governments, were up to date through Friday morning.

He said that more than 1.5 million refugees have gone to neighboring Poland and that some 116,000 of the refugees are "third-country nationals," not Ukrainians.

The U.N. high commissioner for refugees, Filippo Grandi, also gave the 2.5 million total for refugees and said his agency estimates that about two million people are displaced inside Ukraine as well.

NEW YORK — Russian President Vladimir Putin has ordered that so-called volunteer fighters should be brought into Ukraine.

Defense Minister Sergei Shoigu said Russia knew of "more than 16,000 applications" from countries in the Middle East, many of them from people who he said helped Russia against the Islamic State group, according to a Kremlin transcript.

They want "to take part in what they consider a liberation movement," Shoigu said, on the side of Russia-backed separatist regions in eastern Ukraine.

Since 2015, Russian forces have backed Syrian President Bashar al-Assad against various groups opposed to his rule, including Islamic State.

Putin told Shoigu that Russia should help would-be volunteers to "move to the combat zone" and contrasted them with what he called foreign "mercenaries" fighting for Ukraine.

ISTANBUL — Pegasus Airlines, a Turkey-based budget carrier, has suspended flights to and from Russia following sanctions on Moscow over its invasion of Ukraine, the airline announced late Thursday.

The company's operations "related to insurance/reinsurance, leasing, operations and maintenance services on flights" would be halted from Sunday to March 27, it said.

The airline said the suspension was linked to "operational risks" due to European Union sanctions. The EU, Britain, Canada and the U.S. have suspended flights to Russia and closed their airspace to Russian aircraft as part of sanctions.

Pegasus flies to six destinations in Russia, which still has air links to countries such as Turkey, Qatar and the United Arab Emirates. Turkish Airlines maintains its flights to 36 cities in Russia.

LONDON — British defense officials say Russia is rearranging its forces on the ground in Ukraine in an attempt to push forward its struggling invasion plan.

The Ministry of Defence says that "Russia is likely seeking to reset and re-posture its forces for renewed offensive activity in the coming days. This will probably include operations against the capital Kyiv."

In an update on social media Friday, the ministry said Russian ground forces continued to make "limited progress," hampered by logistical problems and strong Ukrainian resistance.

It said it "remains highly unlikely that Russia has successfully achieved the objectives outlined in its pre-invasion plan."

LVIV, Ukraine — Two Ukrainian servicemen were killed and six people wounded in Russian airstrikes Friday on the Lutsk military airfield, according to the head of the surrounding Volyn region, Yuriy Pohulyayko.

The mayor of Ivano-Frankiivsk, Ruslan Martsinkiv, had ordered residents in the neighboring areas to head to shelters after an air raid alert. The mayor of Lutsk had also announced an airstrike near the airport.

The strikes were far to the west from the main Russian offensive and could indicate new direction of

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the war.

The western cities hit Friday are between 130 and 150 kilometers (80-90 miles) from Lviv, the city that has become a refuge for Ukrainians from across the rest of the country and a hub for global humanitarian aid and other support for Ukraine.

LVIV, Ukraine — Ukrainian authorities announced plans for several evacuation and humanitarian aid delivery routes Friday, with the support of the Red Cross.

The top priority remained freeing people from the besieged city of Mariupol and getting aid to its hungry, thirsty, freezing and terrified population.

Deputy Prime Minister Iryna Vereshchuk said in a video message that Ukrainian authorities are trying yet again Friday to send aid into Mariupol and bring evacuees out to the city of Zaporizhzhia. Repeated previous attempts have failed, as aid and rescue convoys were targeted by Russian shelling.

Vereshchuk said buses would be sent Friday to multiple Kyiv suburbs to bring people to the capital, and to bring aid to those staying behind.

She also announced efforts to create new humanitarian corridors to bring aid to people in areas occupied or under Russian attack around the cities of Kherson in the south, Chernihiv in the north and Kharkiv in the east.

LVIV, Ukraine — Russian forces are continuing their offensive toward Kyiv on Friday from the northwest and east, notably trying to break through Ukrainian defenses from Kukhari, 90 kilometers (56 miles) to the northwest through to Demidov, 40 kilometers (25 miles) north of Kyiv, the general staff of Ukraine's armed forces said in a statement.

The general staff said Russian troops had been halted in efforts to take the northern city of Chernihiv, notably by Ukraine's re-taking of the town of Baklanova Muraviika, which Russian troops could use to move toward Kyiv.

Russian forces are blockading Kharkiv and pushing their offensive in the south around Mykolaiv, Zaporizhzhia and Kryvyi Rih, Volodymyr Zelenskyy's hometown.

Rough weather on the Azov and Black Seas has stalled Russian ships' efforts to come ashore, the general staff said.

Three Russian airstrikes hit the important industrial city of Dnipro in eastern Ukraine on Friday, killing at least one person in strikes that hit near a kindergarten and apartment buildings, according to Interior Ministry adviser Anton Herashchenko.

One strike hit a shoe factory, sparking a fire, he said. He released video showing flashes over residential areas of the city, home to nearly 1 million people.

WASHINGTON — President Joe Biden will announce Friday that, along with the European Union and the Group of Seven countries, the U.S. will move to revoke "most favored nation" trade status for Russia over its invasion of Ukraine.

That's according to a source familiar with the matter who spoke on the condition of anonymity to preview the announcement.

Biden's move comes as bipartisan pressure has been building in Washington to revoke what is formally known as "permanent normal trade relations" with Russia.

The move would allow the U.S. and allies to impose tariffs on Russian imports.

Associated Press Writer Zeke Miller contributed to this report.

WASHINGTON — The U.S. Senate has given final congressional approval to a \$13.6 billion emergency package of military and humanitarian aid for besieged Ukraine and its European allies.

The measure passed with a 68-31 bipartisan margin.

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The House easily passed the compromise bill on Wednesday. President Joe Biden is expected to sign it. Around half the \$13.6 billion measure was for arming and equipping Ukraine and the Pentagon's costs for sending U.S. troops to other Eastern European nations skittish about the warfare next door. Much of the rest included humanitarian and economic assistance, strengthening regional allies' defenses and protecting their energy supplies and cybersecurity needs.

Democrats and Republicans have battled this election year over rising inflation, energy policy and lingering pandemic restrictions. But they've rallied behind sending aid to Ukraine, whose stubborn resilience against Russia has been inspirational for many voters.

BEIJING — China's Premier Li Keqiang on Friday called the situation in Ukraine "grave" and offered Beijing's help in playing a "positive role" for peace while continuing to refuse to criticize Russia.

China has largely sided with Russia, refusing to refer to its actions in Ukraine as a war or invasion. Chinese officials and state media have parroted Russian claims while Beijing calls itself neutral and defending national sovereignty above all else.

"We support and encourage all efforts that are conducive to a peaceful settlement of the crisis," Li told reporters at an annual news conference.

"The pressing task now is to prevent tension from escalating or even getting out of control," Li said. "China calls for exercising utmost restraint and preventing a massive humanitarian crisis."

Li spoke following the close of the annual session of China's rubber-stamp legislature.

Russia's war in Ukraine was not openly discussed at the meeting, although it echoes in Beijing's approach to Taiwan — the self-governing island democracy China claims as its own territory, to be annexed by force if necessary.

Russian strikes hit western Ukraine as offensive widens

By YURAS KARMANAU Associated Press

LVIV, Ukraine (AP) — Russia widened its military offensive in Ukraine on Friday, striking near airports in the west of the country for the first time, as observers and satellite photos indicated that its troops, long stalled in a convoy outside the capital Kyiv, were trying to maneuver to encircle the city.

With the invasion now in its third week, the U.S. and its allies prepared to step up their efforts to isolate and sanction Russia by revoking its most favored trading status. The move comes amid mounting outrage after a deadly airstrike hit a maternity hospital in the key Ukrainian port city of Mariupol, under an increasingly constricting 10-day-old siege.

The new airstrikes in western Ukraine were likely a message from Russia that no area was safe, Western and Ukrainian officials say. Russian forces have struggled in the face of heavier-than-expected resistance and supply and morale problems. So far, they have made the most advances on cities in the south and east while stalling in the north and around Kyiv.

Strikes on the western Lutsk airfield killed two Ukrainian servicemen and wounded six people, according to the head of the surrounding Volyn region, Yuriy Pohulyayko. In Ivano-Frankivsk, residents were ordered to shelters after an air raid alert, Mayor Ruslan Martsinkiv said.

Russian Defense Ministry spokesman Igor Konashenkov said Russia used high-precision long-range weapons Friday to put military airfields in Lutsk and Ivano-Frankivsk "out of action." He did not provide details.

New satellite photos, meanwhile, appeared to show a massive Russian convoy outside the Ukrainian capital had fanned out into towns and forests near Kyiv, with artillery pieces raised for firing in another potentially ominous movement.

The 40-mile (64-kilometer) line of vehicles, tanks and artillery had massed outside the city early last week, but its advance appeared to stall as reports of food and fuel shortages circulated. U.S. officials said Ukrainian troops also targeted the convoy with anti-tank missiles.

The satellite imagery, from Maxar Technologies, showed the 40-mile (64-kilometer) line of vehicles, tanks and artillery outside Kyiv had been redeployed, the company said. Armored units were seen in towns

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near the Antonov Airport north of the city. Some vehicles moved into forests, Maxar reported, with towed howitzers nearby in position to open fire.

It appeared the convoy forces were moving west around the city, trying to encircle it to the south, according to Jack Watling, a research fellow at a British defense think-tank, the Royal United Services Institute. "They're about half-way around now, to be able to close off on the south," he told BBC radio.

He said they were likely preparing for a "siege rather than assault" on Kyiv because of continuing low morale and logistical problems.

The British Ministry of Defense said that after making "limited progress" because of logistical mishaps and Ukrainian resistance, Russian forces were trying to "re-set and re-posture" their troops, gearing up for operations against Kyiv.

Moscow also gave new indications that it plans to bring fighters from Syria into the conflict.

Russian Defense Minister Sergei Shoigu said Russia knew of "more than 16,000 applications" from countries in the Middle East, many of them from people who he said had helped Russia against the Islamic State group, according to a Kremlin transcript.

Shoigu did not specify Syria and his numbers could not be confirmed. But since 2015, Russian forces have backed Syrian President Assad against various groups opposed to his rule, including Islamic State.

Responding to Shoigu, President Vladimir Putin approved bringing in "volunteer" fighters and told his defense minister to help them "move to the combat zone."

Increasing the pressure on Moscow, the U.S. and other nations were poised later Friday to announce the revocation of Russia's "most favored nation" trade status, which would allow higher tariffs to be imposed on some Russian imports. Western sanctions have already dealt a severe blow to Russia, causing the ruble to plunge, foreign businesses to flee and prices to rise sharply.

Russian airstrikes also targeted for the first time the eastern city of Dnipro, a major industrial hub and Ukraine's fourth-largest city in a strategic position on the Dnieper River. Three strikes hit early Friday, killing at least one person, according to Ukrainian Interior Ministry adviser Anton Heraschenko.

The head of the Kyiv Region administration, Oleksiy Kuleba, said a missile hit the town of Baryshivka, about 20 kilometers east of Kyiv's main international Boryspil Airport. He reported significant damage to residences but no immediate casualty toll.

In Syria, Russia backed the government in imposing long, brutal sieges on opposition-held cities, wreaking heavy destruction on residential area and causing widespread civilian casualties.

That history — along with the ongoing siege of the Azov Sea port of Mariupol — has raised fears of similar bloodshed in Ukraine.

Russian Defense Ministry spokesman Igor Konashenkov said Russian-backed fighters have advanced up to 800 meters of Mariupol from the east, north and west, further squeezing the city which has the Azov Sea to its south. Konashenkov said the advance was being conducted by fighters from the separatist-held Donetsk region, the standard Russian line for fighting in the east.

Ukrainian authorities are planning to send aid to Mariupol, home to some 430,000, Ukrainian Deputy Prime Minister Iryna Vereshchuk said in a video message.

Repeated previous attempts have failed as aid and rescue convoys were targeted by Russian shelling, even as residents have grown more desperate, scrounging for food and fuel.

More than 1,300 people have died in the city's 10-day siege, Vereshchuk said. "They want to destroy the people of Mariupol. They want to make them starve," she added. "It's a war crime."

Residents have no heat or phone service, and many have no electricity. Nighttime temperatures are regularly below freezing, and daytime ones hover just above it. Bodies are being buried in mass graves. The streets are littered with burned-out cars, broken glass and splintered trees.

"They have a clear order to hold Mariupol hostage, to mock it, to constantly bomb and shell it," Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy said in his nightly video address to the nation Thursday. He said the Russians began a tank attack right where there was supposed to be a humanitarian corridor.

Grocery stores and pharmacies were emptied days ago by people breaking in to get supplies, according to a local official with the Red Cross, Sacha Volkov. A black market is operating for vegetables, meat is

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unavailable, and people are stealing gasoline from cars, Volkov said.

Places protected from bombings are hard to find, with basements reserved for women and children. Residents, Volkov said, are turning on one another: "People started to attack each other for food."

Vereshchuk also announced efforts to create new humanitarian corridors to bring aid to people in areas occupied or under Russian attack around the cities of Kherson in the south, Chernihiv in the north and Kharkiv in the east.

Some 2.5 million people have fled Ukraine since the invasion began, the International Organization for Migration said Friday. Some 100,000 people have been evacuated during the past two days from seven cities under Russian blockade in the north and center of the country, including the Kyiv suburbs, Zelenskyy said.

In addition to those who have fled the country, millions have been driven from their homes. Kyiv Mayor Vitali Klitschko said about 2 million people, half the metropolitan area's population, have left the capital.

"Every street, every house ... is being fortified," he said. "Even people who in their lives never intended to change their clothes, now they are in uniform with machine guns in their hands."

As West tries to force Russia from Ukraine, endgame elusive

By MATTHEW LEE AP Diplomatic Writer

WASHINGTON (AP) — As Western leaders congratulate themselves for their speedy and severe responses to Russia's invasion of Ukraine, they're also scratching their heads with uncertainty about what their actions will accomplish.

The U.S., NATO and the European Union have focused on strangling Russia's economy and arming Ukrainian fighters. But it's unclear how this will stop the war. No one knows what President Vladimir Putin is thinking, but there's no reason to believe that even the toughest measures will shatter his determination to force the Western-leaning former Soviet republic back into Moscow's orbit.

They may not say it publicly, but U.S. officials and their NATO allies don't see a breaking point for Putin — either an economic toll so severe or battlefield losses so devastating — that would convince him to order his troops home and allow Ukraine's leaders to govern in peace.

"Ukraine will never be a victory for Putin," Biden said as he announced a U.S. ban on Russian energy imports on Tuesday. But Ukraine might not be a complete defeat for Putin either.

The sanctions and military aid may have been effective in slowing the Russian advance in Ukraine and perhaps discouraging Putin from targeting other countries. They may serve as a warning for other powerful countries tempted to target weaker neighbors. But Western officials have been vague about how the actions will end the fighting.

One of the most direct answers came from the third-ranking U.S. diplomat, Under Secretary of State for Political Affairs Victoria Nuland. She said Tuesday that internal, rather than external, pressure on Putin will be more effective.

"The way this conflict will end is when Putin realizes that this adventure has put his own leadership standing at risk with his own military, with his own people," she testified before Congress. "He will have to change course, or the Russian people take matters into their own hands."

A more provocative remark came from Republican Sen. Lindsey Graham of South Carolina, who called for the Russian people to assassinate Putin. The White House quickly distanced itself from that comment.

In fact, there is no sign yet that his grip on power has loosened. There's also the frightening uncertainty about how a nuclear-armed Putin, if cornered, would respond to a genuine threat to his power if one were to arise.

And no one is counting on an outright military victory by Ukraine. While Ukrainian fighters have put up a remarkable defense and are determined to fight for as long as Russian forces remain on their soil, they are badly outgunned and would be hard-pressed to push Russian troops back across the border. Meanwhile, NATO nations aren't about to risk triggering World War III by joining the fight in defense of a non-member state.

Against this backdrop, a diplomatic solution appears unlikely. Russia has only hardened its demands

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since launching the invasion last month and attempts at diplomacy by French, Israeli and Turkish leaders have thus far proven fruitless. The top U.S. and Russian diplomats aren't even talking to each other and recent lower-level communications have focused almost entirely on the expulsions of diplomats from their two countries.

"Nobody knows how this is going to end and it's going to take some time to see how the Russians decide to react to the obvious dead-end that they've got themselves into," said Jeff Rathke, a European expert and president of the American Institute for Contemporary German Studies at Johns Hopkins University.

"Until the Russians are ready to negotiate something serious and real, there's not much you can do," he said. He added that the U.S. and Europe should resist the temptation to negotiate themselves with Putin over Ukraine, especially as the economic costs of isolating Moscow mount, particularly in Europe. "The endgame has to be decided by the Ukrainians in terms of what they will accept," he said.

"I can't see this ending in any way good for Ukraine as long as Putin is in power," said Ian Kelly, a retired U.S. diplomat and former ambassador to Georgia who now teaches international relations at Northwestern University. "He's put out his maximalist goal, which is basically surrender, and that's something the Ukrainians aren't going to be able to accept and the Russians are not going to be able to implement."

"Withdrawal for him is death. It's too weak," Kelly said.

Secretary of State Antony Blinken acknowledged the limits of the West's ability to end the conflict.

"What we're looking at is whether or not President Putin will decide to try to finally cut the losses that he's inflicted on himself and inflicted on the Russian people. We can't decide that for him," he said Wednesday.

Appearing beside Blinken, British Foreign Secretary Liz Truss suggested the Western response may go beyond hopes of getting Russia out of Ukraine.

"Putin must fail," she said. "We know from history that aggressors only understand one thing, and that is strength. We know that if we don't do enough now, other aggressors around the world will be emboldened. And we know that if Putin is not stopped in Ukraine, there will be terrible implications for European and global security."

With the uncertainty, U.S. officials have said they are convinced of only one thing: that an angry and frustrated Putin will pour more troops and firepower into Ukraine and the bloodshed will get worse before the situation approaches any return to normalcy.

CIA Director William Burns, a former U.S. ambassador to Russia, told lawmakers this week he believes Putin has profoundly miscalculated the resistance and determination that his forces would meet from Ukrainians. He also said it may soon dawn on Putin that he will not be able to occupy Ukraine or impose a Russia-friendly regime there without facing years, if not decades, of fierce and bloody opposition.

"Where that leads, I think, is for an ugly next few weeks in which he doubles down with scant regard for civilian casualties, in which urban fighting can get even uglier," Burns said.

As West tries to force Russia from Ukraine, endgame elusive

By MATTHEW LEE AP Diplomatic Writer

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"The way this conflict will end is when Putin realizes that this adventure has put his own leadership standing at risk with his own military, with his own people," she testified before Congress. "He will have to change course, or the Russian people take matters into their own hands."

A more provocative remark came from Republican Sen. Lindsey Graham of South Carolina, who called for the Russian people to assassinate Putin. The White House quickly distanced itself from that comment.

In fact, there is no sign yet that his grip on power has loosened. There's also the frightening uncertainty about how a nuclear-armed Putin, if cornered, would respond to a genuine threat to his power if one were to arise.

And no one is counting on an outright military victory by Ukraine. While Ukrainian fighters have put up a remarkable defense and are determined to fight for as long as Russian forces remain on their soil, they are badly outgunned and would be hard-pressed to push Russian troops back across the border. Meanwhile, NATO nations aren't about to risk triggering World War III by joining the fight in defense of a non-member state.

Against this backdrop, a diplomatic solution appears unlikely. Russia has only hardened its demands since launching the invasion last month and attempts at diplomacy by French, Israeli and Turkish leaders have thus far proven fruitless. The top U.S. and Russian diplomats aren't even talking to each other and recent lower-level communications have focused almost entirely on the expulsions of diplomats from their two countries.

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"Until the Russians are ready to negotiate something serious and real, there's not much you can do," he said. He added that the U.S. and Europe should resist the temptation to negotiate themselves with Putin over Ukraine, especially as the economic costs of isolating Moscow mount, particularly in Europe. "The endgame has to be decided by the Ukrainians in terms of what they will accept," he said.

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"Where that leads, I think, is for an ugly next few weeks in which he doubles down with scant regard for civilian casualties, in which urban fighting can get even uglier," Burns said.

China locks down city of 9 million amid new spike in cases

BEIJING (AP) — China on Friday ordered a lockdown of the 9 million residents of the northeastern city of Changchun amid a new spike in COVID-19 cases in the area attributed to the highly contagious omicron variant.

Residents are required to remain home, with one family member permitted to venture out to buy food and other necessities every two days. All residents must undergo three rounds of mass testing, while non-essential businesses have been closed and transport links suspended.

The latest lockdowns, which also include Yucheng with 500,000 people in the eastern province of Shandong, show China is sticking to the draconian approach to the pandemic it has enforced for most of the past two years, despite some earlier indications that authorities would be implementing more targeted measures.

China reported another 397 cases of local transmission nationwide on Friday, 98 of them in Jilin province that surrounds Changchun, a center of the country's auto industry. In the entire province, cases have exceeded 1,100 since the latest outbreak first struck late last week.

Just two cases were reported within Changchun itself on Friday, bringing its total to 78 in recent days. Authorities have repeatedly pledged to lock down any community where one or more cases are found under China's "zero tolerance" approach to the pandemic.

Another 93 cases were confirmed in the nearby city of Jilin that bears the same name as the surrounding province. Authorities have already ordered a partial lockdown in the city and severed travel links with other cities.

Officials of the Jilin Agricultural Science and Technology University have been sacked after a cluster of infections was reported on campus and students complained on social media that those who tested positive were being confined in school libraries and other buildings in poor conditions.

The school has registered 74 confirmed cases and transferred more than 6,000 people to quarantine, according to state broadcaster CCTV.

Aerial images showed students in hazmat suits lining up in the cold and dark waiting to be transferred.

VP Harris heads to Romania as Ukraine refugee crisis grows

By AAMER MADHANI Associated Press

WARSAW, Poland (AP) — U.S. Vice President Kamala Harris and Romania's president will meet Friday to discuss growing concerns about the influx of displaced people fleeing Ukraine for Romania and elsewhere in eastern Europe due to Russia's invasion.

It's a problem that Biden administration officials and European leaders warn will likely get more complicated in the days and weeks ahead.

Harris' talks in Bucharest with President Klaus Iohannis come after she spent Thursday in Poland, which has already welcomed some 1.5 million Ukrainians since the invasion began. She met in Warsaw with Polish President Andrzej Duda and Prime Minister Mateusz Morawiecki, Ukrainian refugees, and others in hopes of getting a fuller picture of the unfolding humanitarian crisis.

The southeastern European country of Romania — a nation of about 19 million — had taken in more than 84,000 displaced people as of Tuesday, according to United Nations data. Other countries on NATO's eastern flank, including Hungary, Moldova and Slovakia, have also welcomed tens of thousands of refugees.

Harris said the U.S. was "absolutely prepared" to support those "who understand the moral obligation we should feel to help people who are fleeing harm and seeking refuge; the burden we should all be

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prepared to take on to support those people who are fleeing their home when they don't want to leave." Duda, in a press conference with Harris, said Polish leaders are "aware that the problem is growing and that this problem is increasing."

"We have to somehow handle it, and we do not have the experience," he said.

Overall, more than 2.3 million people have fled Ukraine since the start of the war, and the number of displaced people continues to grow daily. The United Nations warns that up to 5 million people could flee Ukraine. That would make it the biggest humanitarian crisis in Europe since World War II.

Duda said he had asked Harris to relay to President Joe Biden that Poland would like to see expedited visa procedures for Ukrainians who have family living in the United States so that they could resettle in the U.S. at least temporarily.

Harris said most refugees who have fled Ukraine prefer to remain in Europe. Earlier this month, the administration offered humanitarian relief to Ukrainians in the United States, which could protect thousands from being deported to their war-torn homeland. Ukrainians already in the U.S. would be able to stay in the U.S. for up to 18 months under the federal program known as Temporary Protected Status.

The Pentagon announced last month it was deploying a Stryker squadron of about 1,000 additional soldiers to Romania, a NATO member, as the Biden administration looks to bolster the military alliance's presence on NATO's eastern flank.

U.S. officials remain concerned about Romania's vulnerability in the midst of Russian activity in the Black Sea.

Before departing Warsaw for Romania on Friday, Harris met with U.S. and Polish troops.

US, allies to revoke 'most favored nation' status for Russia

By ZEKE MILLER Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — President Joe Biden will announce Friday that, along with the European Union and the Group of Seven countries, the U.S. will move to revoke "most favored nation" trade status for Russia over its invasion of Ukraine.

That's according to a person familiar with the matter who spoke on the condition of anonymity to preview the announcement. Each country would have to follow its own national processes, the person said. Stripping most favored nation status from Russia would allow the U.S. and allies to impose higher tariffs on some Russian imports, increasing the isolation of the Russian economy in retaliation for the invasion.

Biden's move comes as bipartisan pressure has been building in Washington to revoke what is formally known as "permanent normal trade relations" with Russia. Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy pressed the U.S. and allies to take the action against Russia in remarks to Congress over the weekend. It follows days after the Biden moved to ban imports of Russian oil and gas products.

Biden, after initially slow-walking congressional efforts to take the trade action against Russia, was set to embrace lawmaker efforts to do just that on Friday.

The White House said Biden would speak Friday morning to announce "actions to continue to hold Russia accountable for its unprovoked and unjustified war on Ukraine."

The sanctions on imports of Russian oil, gas and coal cut off about 60% of U.S. imports from the country.

Most favored nation status requires a country to treat all countries with that status the same. Members of the World Trade Organization share that status, though some countries have special privileges due to their status as developing economies.

Cuba and North Korea do not have MFN status.

U.S. tariffs on Russian goods vary, but many of the most important imports are either duty free or would face a negligible increase in such taxes, Ed Gresser of the Progressive Policy Institute in Washington, D.C., said in an online post.

That includes imports of uranium, rhodium and palladium, king crabs and silver bullion.

Instead of the current tariff rate, buyers of Russian goods would pay rates established under the Smoot-Hawley Tariff Act of 1930, which disrupted trade during the Great Depression.

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Duties would surge from zero to 30% for certain kinds of ammunition and to 10% for some kinds of diamonds.

On Monday, Democrats on the powerful House Ways & Means Committee posted, then removed, an announcement on a bipartisan bill to ban Russian oil imports and slap further trade sanctions on the country, according to an aide, because of pushback from the White House against acting before Biden had coordinated with allies and reached a decision on both matters. The House voted Wednesday on a narrower bill to ban Russian energy imports after Biden instituted the ban by executive order.

Canada was the first major U.S. ally to remove most favored nation status for Russia last week. Biden's action was first reported by Bloomberg News.

Russians pounding Ukraine, but Mariupol's no Grozny — yet

By LORNE COOK Associated Press

BRUSSELS (AP) — The Russian airstrike on a children's and maternity hospital in the Ukrainian port city of Mariupol is the latest in a series of attacks that have gutted apartment blocks and killed people in their homes or simply going about their business.

Allegations of war crimes, impossible yet to prove, are mounting and an investigation is underway at the International Criminal Court. Russia's willingness to use overwhelming force — aerial bombardment and artillery in civilian areas — is already drawing comparisons with its attacks in Chechnya and Syria.

But any similarity with the destruction visited on the Chechen capital of Grozny, or Aleppo in northern Syria, is premature, for now. The invasion is only in its third week, and military analysts say that while Russia has expanded its use of airpower, its forces are still not pressing their aerial advantage to the full.

Lest we forget, Russia is not the only culprit in times of war. The Associated Press won Pulitzer Prizes for reporting and photography documenting the massive and indiscriminate U.S. use of airpower and artillery and the civilian suffering it inflicted in Vietnam.

In the wake of Thursday's airstrike in Mariupol — at least three people, including a child, were killed — Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy wondered: "What kind of country is this, the Russian Federation, which is afraid of hospitals, afraid of maternity hospitals, and destroys them?"

Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov dismissed this as "pathetic shrieks" from the enemy.

It was the shrieks of bombs and shells raining down during two wars from 1994 to 2000 that flattened Grozny. In early December 1999, Russian planes dropped flyers on the Chechen capital with a simple ultimatum to rebel fighters and civilians holed up in the battered city: Leave or be destroyed.

Russian forces had entered the breakaway republic in September that year after Chechen rebel fighters moved into neighboring Dagestan. The militants were also blamed for apartment bombings in Russian cities that left 300 people dead.

Grozny was bombed and shelled for weeks to dislodge entrenched rebels. Moscow's initial upbeat forecasts of quick victory — echoing its predictions for the rapid surrender of Ukraine — were revised as commanders realized they faced a longer, harsher war.

Airpower was the weapon of choice. The Russian army balked at storming Grozny for fear that street battles would deliver the kind of heavy casualties that its troops suffered in the city in the 1994-96 war.

In January this year, as the Kremlin's forces closed in on Ukraine's borders, British Prime Minister Boris Johnson warned the Russian people that invading would be "a painful, violent and bloody business," with heavy street fighting of the same kind, and that they risk seeing "a new Chechnya."

Russian airpower also helped President Bashar Assad during Syria's civil war. It was not gentle to civilians.

In 2016, after punishing aerial bombardments by Russian and Syrian planes and years of street fighting, the staggering extent of the damage to the city of Aleppo began to emerge. Tens of thousands of homes left uninhabitable, most factories looted or destroyed, and ancient landmarks reduced to rubble.

Experts said the cost of rebuilding would run into tens of billions of dollars and take years. The city had once been an industrial hub, home to factories producing textiles, plastics and pharmaceuticals. Its ancient center was a World Heritage site that drew hordes of tourists.

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Aleppo "resembles those cities that were stricken during World War II," Maamoun Abdul-Karim, head of the government's museums and archaeology department, said in late 2016. The scale of devastation evoked comparisons to Grozny, or the British World War II firebombing of the German city of Dresden.

The damage to Aleppo and Grozny was inflicted by Russian warplanes over years. It was relentless; a tactic to avoid being sucked into street fighting and to limit troop casualties. Russia's war on Ukraine has barely begun. The prospect of close-quarters street fighting, should it come to that, lies ahead.

"This may end up looking like something out of the Middle Ages in terms of cities being besieged and bombarded ... with extraordinary misery, very brutal tactics, indiscriminate shelling by the Russians," Douglas Lute, a former U.S. Ambassador to NATO, told the Associated Press.

Senate gives final approval to Ukraine aid, huge budget bill

By ALAN FRAM Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — A \$13.6 billion emergency package of military and humanitarian aid for besieged Ukraine and its European allies easily won final congressional approval, hitching a ride on a government-wide spending bill that's five months late but loaded with political prizes for both parties.

With Russian President Vladimir Putin's invasion killing thousands and forcing over 2 million others to flee, the Senate approved the \$1.5 trillion overall legislation by a 68-31 bipartisan margin late Thursday. Democrats and Republicans have battled this election year over rising inflation, energy policy and lingering pandemic restrictions, but they've rallied behind sending aid to Ukraine, whose stubborn resilience against brutal force has been inspirational for many voters.

"We promised the Ukrainian people they would not go at it alone in their fight against Putin," Senate Majority Leader Chuck Schumer, D-N.Y., said just before the vote. "And once we pass this funding in a short while, we will keep that promise."

The House passed the compromise bill easily Wednesday. President Joe Biden's signature was certain.

White House press secretary Jen Psaki said approval "proves once more that members of both parties can come together to deliver results for the American people" — a phenomenon in short supply in recent years.

She also prodded lawmakers to revive money "urgently needed to prevent severe disruptions to our COVID response." In an embarrassment to Biden and Democratic leaders who'd made it a top priority, the House on Wednesday dropped the measure's \$15.6 billion for continuing efforts to battle the pandemic after rank-and-file lawmakers balked at cuts in aid states had been promised.

Around half the \$13.6 billion measure for the war was for arming and equipping Ukraine and the Pentagon's costs for sending U.S. troops to other Eastern European nations skittish about the warfare next door. Much of the rest included humanitarian and economic assistance, strengthening regional allies' defenses and protecting their energy supplies and cybersecurity needs.

Republicans strongly backed that spending. But they criticized Biden for moving too timidly, such as in the unresolved dispute with Poland over how that nation could give MiG fighter jets to Ukraine that its pilots know how to fly.

"This administration's first instinct is to flinch, wait for international and public pressure to overwhelm them, and then take action only after the most opportune moment has passed us by," said Senate Minority Leader Mitch McConnell, R-Ky.

White House aides told Congress last month that Biden wanted \$6.4 billion to counter Russia's invasion. He ended up formally requesting \$10 billion, an amount that it took an eager Congress just a few days to boost to its final figure of \$13.6 billion.

The \$1.5 trillion bill carrying that aid gave Democrats a near 7% increase for domestic initiatives, which constituted a bit less than half the package. That translated to beefed-up spending for schools, housing, child care, renewable energy, biomedical research, law enforcement grants to communities and feeding programs.

The measure also directs money to minority communities and historically black colleges, renews efforts

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aimed at preventing domestic violence against women and requires infrastructure operators to report serious hacking incidents to federal authorities.

Republicans lay claim to an almost 6% boost for defense, including money for 85 advanced F-35 fighter planes, 13 new Navy ships, upgrades for 90 Abrams tanks and improvements for schools on military bases. There would be another \$300 million for Ukraine and \$300 million for other Eastern European allies on top of the measure's emergency funding.

The GOP also prevailed in retaining decades-old restrictions against using federal money to pay for nearly all abortions. And they forced Biden to abandon goals for his 2022 budget — politically implausible from the start — that envisioned 16% domestic program increases and defense growth of less than 2%.

Besides those policy victories, many lawmakers of both parties had one incentive to back the spending package that they have not enjoyed since 2010. Democratic leaders restored the old practice of earmarks, hometown projects for lawmakers that Congress dropped in 2011 because voters viewed it as a sleazy misspending of taxpayers' money.

The practice restored, the expansive bill was laced with thousands of the projects at a price tag of several billion dollars. Years ago, the numbers were often higher.

Affirming the practice's popularity, the Senate rejected an amendment by Sen. Mike Braun, R-Ind., to strip the earmarks. Braun said they encompassed 367 pages that weighed five pounds and showed "the swamp is rising again." The amendment's defeat by a bipartisan 64-35 margin spoke for itself.

Government agencies have operated under last year's lower spending levels since the new fiscal year began Oct. 1 because, as usual, Congress hadn't approved any bills by then updating those amounts.

Months of talks produced the compromise spending pact this week. With the latest temporary spending measure expiring Friday night, Biden's signature of the \$1.5 trillion bill would avert a weekend federal shutdown, which was never going to happen because neither party had reason to spark such a battle.

The Senate sent Biden a separate bill financing agencies through Tuesday in case it takes time to complete the required reprinting and proofreading of the lengthy measure.

A lot has happened since Oct. 1, much of it challenging for Democrats. Biden's polling numbers have sunk, high inflation has persisted and gasoline prices have jumped. Omicron's fade has left voters impatient to end pandemic restrictions, Biden's marquee social and environment bill has crashed and Russia has invaded Ukraine.

With that election-year backdrop, Democrats saw the \$1.5 trillion package as their chance to claim wins.

Currently controlling both the White House and Congress, Democrats could lose their narrow House and Senate majorities in November's midterm elections, meaning this could be the peak of their ability to win policy priorities for years. Before last year, the last time they controlled both branches was in 2010.

The largesse has been enabled, in part, by both parties' relaxed attitudes toward gargantuan federal deficits.

Last year's pandemic-fueled shortfall of \$2.8 trillion was the second worst ever. It was so high that Biden has suggested that this year's projected \$1.8 trillion gap would be an accomplishment because it would be \$1 trillion smaller, the biggest reduction ever.

Biden relief plan: Major victory gets mixed one-year reviews

By CHRIS MEGERIAN and ZEKE MILLER Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — It's not often that a president gets everything he asks for, but that's what happened.

President Joe Biden wanted \$1.9 trillion to help the country climb out of the coronavirus crisis last year, and Democrats in Congress delivered.

The American Rescue Plan was stuffed with rental assistance, tax rebates, direct payments and money to distribute vaccines that had just become available. Less than two months after Biden took office, it was a hopeful sign that he could fulfill his campaign promise to get Washington's often lumbering machinery working again.

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But the legislation's legacy is more complicated than it originally appeared. Depending on who's telling the story, it's either Biden's first success or a trap that he set for himself.

It may well prove to have been a bit of both.

Friday is the anniversary of Biden's signing of the American Rescue Plan, and the second anniversary of the World Health Organization's declaration that the coronavirus had become a global pandemic. Looking back, administration officials defend the relief package as a necessary step to insulate the economy and promote a national rebound, and they point to historically low unemployment now as proof of their success.

"Looking at how resilient and equitable the recovery has been in the face of delta, omicron and now military conflict in Europe, that strategy already looks wise," said Gene Sperling, a Biden adviser tapped to oversee the legislation's implementation.

A fraction of the bill's spending was devoted to directly combating the pandemic, including purchasing shots and treatments, supporting testing and vaccination sites, and treating those infected with the virus that has killed more than 959,000 in the U.S.

The rest was intended to backstop state and local governments, ease the pain of job losses and pump money into American pocketbooks.

Critics say the latter set of policies has driven up prices by fueling consumer demand at a time when supply chains couldn't keep up, sapping momentum from Democratic efforts to enact generational changes such as expanded education programs, subsidized child care and financial incentives for fighting climate change.

"The gamble was it would create a success that would make people want to do more," said Jason Furman, a Harvard professor and former top economic adviser to President Barack Obama. "But it contributed to inflation that made people want to do less."

"In some ways, that's the biggest consequence," he added. "It was a gamble, and they lost that gamble, and it hurt."

Inflation hit 7.9% over the last 12 months, the highest in four decades, and Furman estimated that the rescue plan was responsible for about 2.5 percentage points.

Michael Strain, director of economic policy studies at the conservative American Enterprise Institute, pegs the figure at 3 percentage points.

"We really didn't need another stimulus. The economy was already growing rapidly," Strain said, noting that President Donald Trump had signed two measures totaling \$3.1 trillion before Biden took office.

Administration officials reject those inflation estimates, pointing to a study from the San Francisco Federal Reserve Bank that said the rescue plan contributed to less than 1 percentage point of the increase.

"The stark reality is that there are higher prices and supply chain shocks in virtually every major economy in the world," Sperling said.

However, inflation was paramount when Sen. Joe Manchin, D-W.Va., killed Democratic dreams of using their unified control of Washington to greatly expand the social safety net. Biden's arguments that his agenda, known as "Build Back Better," would limit rather than increase prices did not stick.

"Inflation is real, it's not going away any time soon," Manchin told "Fox News Sunday" in December.

The failure of that legislation also sank efforts to extend the monthly child tax credit payments that began with the rescue plan. An estimated \$93 billion was sent to 40 million families with 65 million children last year.

Rep. Pramila Jayapal, D-Wash., said she had no regrets about any inflation that the legislation might have caused, describing it as a "consequence that we have to work through."

"There's no question that the American Rescue Plan put money in people's pockets, kept businesses open, got shots in arms and did the kind of things that our economy would need if it was going to recover," said Jayapal, who chairs the Congressional Progressive Caucus.

Biden is still trying to get his aspirations back on track. Emilie Simons, a spokeswoman for the White House, said the president "continues to work with Congress on his agenda to lower kitchen table costs for American families — by addressing prescription drug prices, child care, energy costs, and more."

One year after the American Rescue Plan was signed, the federal government has spent down nearly

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all of its direct COVID-19 assistance, which boosted supply of at-home tests, provided free virus treatment for the uninsured and paid for vaccine doses sent overseas to help prevent the emergence of more dangerous variants.

The hundreds of millions of dollars spent on television ads, promotions and incentives drove up vaccination rates on the margins, but proved to be no match for rampant misinformation and partisanship surrounding the life-saving shots. The U.S. vaccination rate for adults stands at 75% — well below other large advanced economies.

Now the White House is pushing Congress to urgently approve more money for antibody treatments, a preventative therapy for the immunocompromised and to fund community testing sites.

"We need this money," White House press secretary Jen Psaki said Thursday. "Without additional resources from Congress, the results are dire."

The funding proposal may become a casualty of negotiations over a broader budget measure that needs to pass by the end of the week to keep the federal government operating.

The omicron wave of coronavirus infections is rapidly receding, but more than 1,100 people in the U.S. are still dying each day from the virus. The vast majority are not vaccinated or boosted.

Although the pandemic has lasted much longer than Americans hoped, the U.S. is far closer to its pre-pandemic normal, as mask-mandates are on their way out across the country, nearly all schools are open for in-person learning and offices are beginning to fill up with workers once again.

As with the COVID funds, much of the rest of the money from the rescue plan has already flowed out the federal government's door, according to administration officials.

More than 170 million direct payments to individuals, known as Economic Impact Payments, worth at least \$400 billion, were distributed. The average amount was \$2,300.

Schools received \$122 billion in relief funding, with additional dollars being directed toward homeless students and children with disabilities. Nearly \$40 billion has been provided to colleges and universities.

Another \$39 billion was provided to support child care services. More than 150,000 providers who serve more than 5 million children have gotten money.

More than \$245 billion has been distributed to state, local, territory and tribal governments. Another \$105 billion is scheduled to be distributed in May.

This pool of dollars for state and local governments has become among the more controversial aspects of the rescue plan, with some critics arguing that it was unnecessary because state governments ultimately saw double-digit growth in tax revenue.

Philadelphia Mayor Jim Kenney said the money helped prevent cutting essential services like firefighters and paramedics.

"Imagine a grandfather in medical crisis waiting a few extra minutes for help to arrive," he said.

Without the money, Kenney added, "it would have meant hundreds of layoffs of frontline city workers."

Heidi Sheirholz, who leads the liberal Economic Policy Institute, said the legislation is "a core reason we're in such an incredibly strong recovery right now."

"I'm not saying it was perfect," she said. "But it made it so households did not need to go into austerity."

The rescue plan also provided nearly half of the funding for a \$46.5 billion emergency rental assistance program, which began slowly as state and local officials struggled to launch a new system from scratch.

However, the program picked up steam last summer, and more than \$25 billion has been distributed in 4.1 million payments. Treasury officials estimate that 80% of the money went to low-income tenants. The rest of the money is expected to be spent by the middle of this year.

Peter Hepburn, a research fellow with the Eviction Lab at Princeton University, said evictions in 2021 were about half of what they would have been in a normal year, suggesting that 1.36 million evictions were prevented. Even though the nationwide eviction moratorium expired last summer, evictions were down 33.1% in January and 27.7% in February.

He called it a "pretty stark accomplishment."

Sperling pointed to the rental assistance program as an example of how the rescue plan will pay dividends into the future because evictions are the kind of setbacks that can derail American families for years.

"Preventing deeper harms is going to pay serious benefits, not just in terms of the longer term economy but also basic human well-being and dignity," he said.

In an about-face, liberal US cities target homeless camps

By SARA CLINE Associated Press/Report for America

PORTLAND, Ore. (AP) — Makeshift shelters abut busy roadways, tent cities line sidewalks, tarps cover broken-down cars, and sleeping bags are tucked in storefront doorways. The reality of the homelessness crisis in Oregon's largest city can't be denied.

"I would be an idiot to sit here and tell you that things are better today than they were five years ago with regard to homelessness," Portland Mayor Ted Wheeler said recently. "People in this city aren't stupid. They can open their eyes."

As COVID-19 took root in the U.S., people on the street were largely left on their own — with many cities halting sweeps of homeless camps following guidance from federal health officials. The lack of remediation led to a situation that has spiraled out of control in many places, with frustrated residents calling for action as extreme forms of poverty play out on city streets.

Wheeler has now used emergency powers to ban camping along certain roadways and says homelessness is the "most important issue facing our community, bar none."

Increasingly in liberal cities across the country — where people living in tents in public spaces have long been tolerated — leaders are removing encampments and pushing other strict measures to address homelessness that would have been unheard of a few years ago.

In Seattle, new Mayor Bruce Harrell ran on a platform that called for action on encampments, focusing on highly visible tent cities in his first few months in office. Across from City Hall, two blocks worth of tents and belongings were removed Wednesday. The clearing marked the end of a two and a half week standoff between the mayor and activists who occupied the camp, working in shifts to keep homeless people from being moved.

In Washington, D.C., Mayor Muriel Bowser launched a pilot program over the summer to permanently clear several homeless camps. In December, the initiative faced a critical test as lawmakers voted on a bill that would ban clearings until April. It failed 5-7.

In California, home to more than 160,000 homeless people, cities are reshaping how they address the crisis. The Los Angeles City Council used new laws to ban camping in 54 locations. LA Mayoral candidate Joe Buscaino has introduced plans for a ballot measure that would prohibit people from sleeping outdoors in public spaces if they have turned down offers of shelter.

San Francisco Mayor London Breed declared a state of emergency in December in the crime-heavy Tenderloin neighborhood, which has been ground zero for drug dealing, overdose deaths and homelessness. She said it's time to get aggressive and "less tolerant of all the bull— that has destroyed our city."

In Sacramento voters may decide on multiple proposed homeless-related ballot measures in November — including prohibiting people from storing "hazardous waste," such as needles and feces, on public and private property, and requiring the city to create thousands of shelter beds. City officials in the area are feeling increasing pressure to break liberal conventions, including from an conservation group that is demanding that 750 people camping along a 23-mile (37-kilometer) natural corridor of the American River Parkway be removed from the area.

Advocates for the homeless have denounced aggressive measures, saying the problem is being treated as a blight or a chance for cheap political gains, instead of a humanitarian crisis.

Donald H. Whitehead Jr., executive director of the National Coalition for the Homeless, said at least 65 U.S. cities are criminalizing or sweeping encampments. "Everywhere that there is a high population of homeless people, we started to see this as their response."

Portland's homeless crisis has grown increasingly visible in recent years. During the area's 2019 point-in-time count — a yearly census of sorts — an estimated 4,015 people were experiencing homelessness, with half of them "unsheltered" or sleeping outside. Advocates say the numbers have likely significantly increased.

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Last month Wheeler used his emergency powers to ban camping on the sides of “high-crash” roadways — which encompass about 8% of the total area of the city. The decision followed a report showing 19 of 27 pedestrians killed by cars in Portland last year were homeless. People in at least 10 encampments were given 72 hours to leave.

“It’s been made very clear people are dying,” Wheeler said. “So I approach this from a sense of urgency.”

Wheeler’s top adviser — Sam Adams, a former Portland mayor — has also outlined a controversial plan that would force up to 3,000 homeless people into massive temporary shelters staffed by Oregon National Guard members. Advocates say the move, which marks a major shift in tone and policy, would ultimately criminalize homelessness.

“I understand my suggestions are big ideas,” Adams wrote. “Our work so far, mine included, has ... failed to produce the sought-after results.”

Oregon’s Democratic governor rejected the idea. But Adams says if liberal cities don’t take drastic action, ballot measures that crack down on homelessness may emerge instead.

That’s what happened in left-leaning Austin, Texas. Last year voters there reinstated a ban that penalizes those who camp downtown and near the University of Texas, in addition to making it a crime to ask for money in certain areas and times.

People who work with the homeless urge mayors to find long-term solutions — such as permanent housing and addressing root causes like addiction and affordability — instead of temporary ones they say will further traumatize and villainize a vulnerable population.

The pandemic has added complications, with homeless-related complaints skyrocketing in places like Portland, where the number of campsites removed each week plummeted from 50 to five after COVID-19 hit.

The situation has affected businesses and events, with employers routinely asking officials to do more. Some are looking to move, while others already have — notably Oregon’s largest annual golf tournament, the PGA Tour’s Portland Classic, relocated from Portland last year due to safety concerns related to a nearby homeless encampment.

James Darwin “Dar” Crammond, director at the Oregon Water Science Center building downtown, told the City Council about his experience working in an area populated with encampments.

Crammond said four years ago the biggest security concerns were vandalism and occasional car break-ins. Now employees often are confronted by “unhinged” people and forced to sidestep discarded needles, he said.

Despite spending \$300,000 on security and implementing a buddy system for workers to safely be outdoors, the division of the U.S. Geological Survey is looking to move.

“I don’t blame the campers. There are a few other options for housing. There’s a plague of meth and opiates and a world that offers them no hope and little assistance,” Crammond said. “In my view, where the blame squarely lies is with the City of Portland.”

In New York City, where a homeless man is accused of pushing a woman to her death in front of a subway in January, Mayor Eric Adams announced a plan to start barring people from sleeping on trains or riding the same lines all night.

Adams has likened homelessness to a “cancerous sore,” lending to what advocates describe as a negative and inaccurate narrative that villainizes the population.

“Talk to someone on the street and literally just hear a little bit about their stories — I mean, honestly, homelessness can happen to any one of us,” said Laura Recko, associate director of external communications for Central City Concern in Portland.

And some question whether the tougher approach is legal — citing the 2018 federal court decision known as *Martin v. City of Boise, Idaho*, that said cities cannot make it illegal for people to sleep or rest outside without providing sufficient indoor alternatives.

Whitehead, of the National Coalition for the Homeless, thought the landmark ruling would force elected officials to start developing long-term fixes and creating enough shelter beds for emergency needs. Instead, some areas are ignoring the decision or finding ways around it, he said.

"If cities become as creative about solutions as they are about criminalization, then we could end homelessness tomorrow," he said.

Jussie Smollett sentenced to 150 days in jail in fake attack

By DON BABWIN and KATHLEEN FOODY Associated Press

CHICAGO (AP) — A judge sentenced Jussie Smollett to 150 days in jail, branding the Black and gay actor a narcissistic charlatan for staging a hate crime against himself to grab the limelight while the nation struggled with wrenching issues of racial injustice. Smollett responded by defiantly maintaining his innocence and suggesting he could be killed in jail.

The sentence and Smollett's post-hearing outburst capped an hourslong hearing Thursday and more than three years of legal drama following Smollett's claim that he had been the target of a racist and homophobic attack.

Smollett didn't make a statement when offered the opportunity before the judge announced the sentence, saying he was listening to his attorneys' advice. But after Cook County Judge James Linn issued his decision, Smollett removed the face mask he wore throughout the hearing to proclaim himself innocent.

"If I did this, then it means that I stuck my fist in the fears of Black Americans in this country for over 400 years and the fears of the LGBT community," Smollett said, standing up at the defense table as his lawyers and sheriff's deputies surrounded him. "Your Honor, I respect you and I respect the jury but I did not do this. And I am not suicidal. And if anything happens to me when I go in there, I did not do it to myself. And you must all know that."

As deputies led him from the courtroom, Smollett shouted out again.

"I am innocent," he yelled, raising his fist. "I could have said I am guilty a long time ago."

The judge sentenced Smollett to 30 months of felony probation, with 150 days served in Cook County Jail, and ordered that he pay \$120,106 in restitution to the city of Chicago and a \$25,000 fine.

Special prosecutor Dan Webb asked Linn to include "an appropriate amount of prison time" when sentencing the actor for his conviction on five counts of disorderly conduct.

"His conduct denigrated hate crimes," Webb said after the hearing. "His conduct will discourage others who are victims of hate crimes from coming forward and reporting those crimes to law enforcement."

Smollett's attorneys wanted the judge to limit the sentence to community service, arguing that he had already been punished by the criminal justice system and damage to his career.

Family members echoed those comments.

"I ask you, judge, not to send him to prison," his grandmother, 92-year-old Molly Smollett, told the court. She later added, "If you do, send me along with him, OK?"

Smollett's attorneys also read aloud letters from other supporters, including the president of the NAACP, the Rainbow PUSH Coalition and actors LaTanya and Samuel L. Jackson that asked Linn to consider the case's effect on Smollett's life and career.

Several supporters spoke about worries that Smollett would be at risk in prison, specifically mentioning his race, sexual orientation and his family's Jewish heritage.

Linn said he did consider those requests for mercy, along with Smollett's prior work for and financial support of social justice organizations. But Linn also excoriated Smollett as a narcissist and pronounced himself astounded by his actions given the actor's multiracial family background and ties to social justice work.

"The damage you've done to yourself is way beyond anything else than can happen to you from me," Linn said. "You are now a permanently convicted felon."

Smollett's attorney Nyenye Uche said he will ask the jail to keep Smollett in protective custody and plans to appeal both the verdict and the judge's sentence.

Uche said he didn't expect Linn to include jail time but Smollett did.

"He said: 'Because I'm a Black guy, no matter how successful I've gotten, I'm Black,'" Uche told reporters after the hearing.

A spokesman for the Cook County Sheriff's Office said Smollett will have a comprehensive medical,

mental health and security assessment, a routine process.

Before the sentencing portion of the hearing began, Linn rejected a motion from the defense to overturn the jury's verdict on legal grounds. Judges rarely grant such motions.

Smollett faced up to three years in prison for each of the five felony counts of disorderly conduct — the charge filed for lying to police — of which he was convicted. He was acquitted on a sixth count.

But because Smollett does not have an extensive criminal history and the conviction is for a low-level nonviolent crime, experts did not expect him to be sent to prison.

Thursday's sentencing, which is subject to appeal, is the latest chapter in a criminal case that made international headlines when Smollett reported to police that two men wearing ski masks beat him, and hurled racial and homophobic slurs at him on a dark Chicago street and ran off.

Cook County State's Attorney Kim Foxx had come under fire for her office's decision to drop its initial charges against Smollett. On Thursday, Foxx blasted a "relentless, organized and effective" push to pursue Smollett while other serious crimes went unsolved or unresolved.

"Just because we do not like the outcome should not mean we bully prosecutors and circumvent the judicial process to get it changed," Foxx wrote in a column published by the Chicago Sun-Times. "Smollett was indicted, tried and convicted by a kangaroo prosecution in a matter of months."

Judicially appointed special prosecutors led the second case and Smollett was convicted in December. Witnesses at his trial included two brothers who told jurors Smollett paid them to carry out the attack, gave them money for the ski masks and rope, instructed them to fashion the rope into a noose. Prosecutors said he 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.

Smollett, who knew the men from his work on the television show "Empire" that filmed in Chicago, testified that he did not recognize them and did not know they were the men attacking him.

Unlike the trial, Linn agreed to let photographers and a television camera inside court for the hearing — meaning the public got to see and hear Smollett speak in court for the first time.

Poll: Equality concerns rise, but few say voting is too hard

By NICHOLAS RICCARDI and HANNAH FINGERHUT Associated Press

DENVER (AP) — Majorities of Americans in both major parties think voting rules in their states are appropriate and support a voter identification law, but Democrats are increasingly worried about progress in voting rights for Black Americans.

A new poll from The Associated Press-NORC Center for Public Affairs Research showed voting was the only one of eight subjects — including education and treatment by police — in which fewer Americans now than four years ago said African Americans had achieved significant progress since the civil rights era. Concern about a lack of progress is much higher for Democrats, 86% of whom believe more must be done to secure racial equality in voting rights, compared with 40% of Republicans.

That's a reflection of the continuing partisan fight over election procedures that spawned more restrictive laws in 19 GOP-controlled states last year.

"I'm concerned that the more conservative elements are attempting to create a Jim Crow 2," said Richard Barnett, a retired attorney who volunteered as an election judge in his Chicago suburb, echoing the term President Joe Biden, a fellow Democrat, used to attack the new Republican laws. "They're making it hard for 'the other' people to vote to consolidate their power."

Still, even Democrats are fairly happy with the voting laws in their own states — red and blue. About 3 out of 4 Americans think the laws in their states are "about right," according to the poll.

Recoa Russell, a 67-year-old retired machine operator in Mobile, Alabama, who is Black, lives in a state with some of the most restrictive voting laws in the country. But he said the rules there "work well. Just show your ID and pull the lever."

Indeed, voter identification is the most popular of a series of voting reforms in the poll, with 70% favoring requiring photo identification before casting a ballot. Smaller majorities were in favor of automatic

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voter registration of eligible citizens and sending mail ballots to all registered voters, two top Democratic priorities. Republicans were more likely than Democrats to support the voter ID law, 87% to 55%.

The poll illustrates why Democrats have had such problems in their push for a federal overhaul of voting laws. An attempt to pass sweeping election changes stalled in the Senate earlier this year amid unanimous Republican opposition. For months, Democrats hesitated to even bring the bill to a vote because they couldn't get their entire 50-member Senate caucus to agree to it.

One of the bill's provisions would have banned partisan gerrymandering, or the contorted redrawing of legislative lines to make it easier for one party's representatives to win elections. The poll found that 69% of Americans believe that's a major problem, with Democrats more likely than Republicans to say so, 80% to 58%. The GOP had great success in the prior round of redistricting and has pushed to lessen legal oversight of the once-a-decade drawing of legislative lines.

Lisa Thomas worries about gerrymandering. The 48-year-old janitor in Lakeland, Florida, believes the Republicans who control her state government have been drawing lines to weaken the votes of African Americans like her. She links it to changes in the state's voting laws implemented by the GOP last year even though Republicans touted Florida's system as an example of a well-run election system.

Thomas, who says she leans Democratic but is an independent and hungers for more viable parties, dismissed arguments that voter identification laws hurt minorities because they have a harder time getting a government ID. "There are a lot of situations where you have to show who you are," she said.

Although she likes Florida's voting laws, she's worried that the changes — new procedures for mail ballots and limitations on drop boxes where they can be deposited — will ruin things. "It seems like in the past several years, it's been going the opposite direction, it's reversing," she said of progress on voting rights for African Americans.

Just 32% of Black Americans say there has been significant progress in racial equality in voting rights since the civil rights era, compared with 52% of white Americans. Majorities of Black and white Americans say more needs to be done, but Black Americans are much more likely to say a lot more is needed, 57% to 29% of whites who feel that way.

Thomas, like roughly three-quarters of all Americans regardless of party, also worries about the future of the country's democratic system. "We're still a two-party system, and they both fail us on a daily basis," she said.

Peggy Orr, 66, who lives in rural Nebraska, is also concerned, but for very different reasons. She's convinced there was widespread voter fraud in the 2020 presidential election, echoing former President Donald Trump's false claims that that is why he lost.

Repeated audits and investigations have shown no widespread fraud in the election, but Orr, who described her profession as "a farm wife," isn't satisfied. "There were too many unexplained things going on," she said.

Orr, who is white, was baffled at the concerns Thomas and others have about Black Americans' voting rights.

"I think African American voting rights — just like women's voting rights — are settled," Orr said. "We don't make a big issue about women having a hard time voting."

Two grueling years later, world takes cautious steps forward

By GILLIAN FLACCUS, CHRISTOPHER WEBER and TERRY TANG Associated Press

PORTLAND, Ore. (AP) — With COVID-19 case numbers plummeting, Emily Safrin did something she hadn't done since the pandemic began two years ago: She put her fears aside and went to a concert.

The fully vaccinated and boosted restaurant server planned to keep her mask on, but as the reggaeton star Bad Bunny took the stage and the energy in the crowd soared, she ripped it off. Soon after, she was strolling unmasked in a trendy Portland neighborhood with friends.

Two years after the World Health Organization declared COVID-19 a pandemic, changing the world overnight, relief and hope are creeping back in after a long, dark period of loss, fear and deep uncertainty

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about the future.

"Everyone was supposed to be vaccinated or have a negative test, and I said, 'What the heck, I'm just gonna live my life,'" Safrin said of her concert experience. "It was overwhelming, to be honest, but it also felt great to be able to just feel a little bit normal again."

The world is finally emerging from a brutal stretch of winter dominated by the highly contagious omicron variant, bringing a sense of relief on the two-year anniversary of the start of the pandemic.

It was March 11, 2020 when the WHO issued its declaration, driving home the severity of the threat faced by a virus that at that point had wreaked havoc primarily in Italy and China. The U.S. had 38 confirmed coronavirus deaths and 1,300 cases nationwide on that date, but reality was starting to sink in: stocks tanked, classrooms started closing and people began donning masks. In a matter of hours, the NBA was canceling games, Chicago's huge St. Patrick's Day parade was scuttled and late-night comedians began filming from empty studios — or even their homes.

Since then, more than 6 million people have died globally, nearly 1 million in the U.S. Millions have been thrown out of work, students have endured three school years of disruptions. The emergence of the vaccine in December 2021 saved countless lives but political divisions, hesitancy and inequality in health systems have kept millions of people around the world from getting inoculated, prolonging the pandemic.

The situation is improving, however.

Hospitalizations of people with COVID-19 have plummeted 80% in the last six weeks across the U.S. since a mid-January pandemic peak, dropping to the lowest levels since July 2021, according to data from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. Case counts have followed the same trend line to the lowest counts since last summer as well. Even the death tally, which typically lags behind cases and hospitalizations, has slowed significantly in the last month.

In its latest pandemic report, the WHO said infections and deaths are down across the globe, with only one region — the Western Pacific — seeing a rise in cases. The Middle East and Africa saw cases drop by 46% and 40%, respectively.

Another positive: The omicron wave and vaccinations have left enough people with protection against the coronavirus that future spikes will likely require much less disruption to society, experts say.

Nowhere is the shift in the pandemic more apparent than in the nation's hospitals, where critical care units were overflowing with desperately ill patients just months ago.

Julie Kim, chief nursing officer at Providence St. Jude Medical Center in Fullerton, California, gets emotional when she recalls the bleakest days of the pandemic when doctors and nurses worked around the clock and didn't go home because they were afraid of bringing the virus back with them.

At one point during the summer 2020 spike, there were 250 COVID-19 patients in the hospital licensed for 320 beds and the hospital had to use offices for overflow bed space.

The pandemic has eased to the point that as of Tuesday, there were just four COVID-19 patients at the hospital, Kim said, and medical staff feels more prepared to treat the disease with the knowledge gained in those darkest days. Still, many are traumatized by the raw memories of the past two years and will never be the same, she said.

"It's hard to use the word 'normal,' because I don't think we will ever get back to a pre-COVID state. We are adapting and we are moving forward," Kim said. "This has had a toll on many of us. Some people are moving forward and some people are still having a hard time dealing with it all."

Mask mandates, vaccine requirements and other COVID-19 measures are being eliminated everywhere. The last statewide mask mandate in the U.S., in Hawaii, will end in two weeks.

But health experts are also urging some caution.

Dr. Albert Ko, an infectious-disease physician and epidemiologist at the Yale School of Public Health, said it's certainly good news that the U.S. seems to be at the tail end of a peak. But he cautioned against any victory declarations, especially with the potential of another variant lurking around the corner.

"We have new variants emerge and those new variants fuel large waves, epidemic waves," Ko said. "The big question is, are they going to be as mild or less severe as omicron? Are they going to be potentially

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more severe? Unfortunately, I can't predict that."

In Portland, people are heading back to movie theaters, concerts and gyms after a long, dark winter and bars and restaurants are filling up once more. Safrin said many customers are telling her it's their first time dining inside in months.

Kalani Pa, who owns an Anytime Fitness franchise with his wife in the Portland suburbs, said the past two years almost drove him out of business — but with Oregon's mask mandate ending Friday, his small gym is suddenly coming to life again. The franchise signed three new members on one day alone this week and a coffee shop opened this week next to the gym in a space that sat vacant for months, driving up foot traffic.

"Sometimes things have got to get worse before they get better," Pa said before rushing off to give a tour to a new member.

Demand for testing is down, too.

Jaclyn Chavira remembers the fear on peoples' faces as they lined up by the thousands in Los Angeles to be tested during the late 2020 surge, which triggered an astonishing 250,000 infections and more than 3,000 deaths a day across the U.S. at the peak.

Infections raced out of control for weeks and some days the line of cars at the Dodger Stadium test site, one of the largest in the nation, stretched for nearly two miles.

At the height of the omicron surge, Chavira's nonprofit called CORE did 94,000 tests a week at 10 sites in Los Angeles County. Last week, they conducted about 3,400 and most of them were for work or travel requirements — not because the person was sick, she said.

"You can sense the relief," said Chavira.

Not everyone, however, is ready to dive back in. Many remember last year when mask rules eased and COVID-19 seemed to be loosening its grip only to come roaring back as the delta and omicron variants took hold.

Amber Pierce, who works in a Portland bar-restaurant, was out of work for almost a year due to COVID-related layoffs and narrowly dodged an infection herself when the virus swept through her workplace. A regular customer died during this winter's peak, she said.

She still wears a mask even when outdoors and was eating pizza outside on a recent day only because her brother was visiting for the first time in more than a year.

"I'm going to make sure that there's not a spike once those masks come off and everyone starts, you know, feeling comfortable," she said, as she applied hand sanitizer.

"It's still the anxiety of it," she said. "Either way, it's going to hit you whether you get really sick or not."

Russians keep pressure on Mariupol; massive convoy breaks up

By EVGENIY MALOLETKA Associated Press

MARIUPOL, Ukraine (AP) — Russian forces kept up their bombardment of the port city of Mariupol on Thursday, while satellite photos appeared to show that a massive convoy that had been mired outside the Ukrainian capital split up and fanned out into towns and forests near Kyiv, with artillery pieces moved into firing positions.

International condemnation escalated over an airstrike in Mariupol a day earlier that killed three people at a maternity hospital. Western and Ukrainian officials called the attack a war crime. Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy said the Russian refusal to permit evacuations from the port city amounted to "out-right terror."

As the West seeks new ways to punish Moscow, U.S. President Joe Biden planned to announce Friday that the United States, the European Union and the Group of Seven leading industrialized nations would move to revoke Russia's "most favored nation" trade status, according to a source familiar with the matter who spoke on the condition of anonymity to preview the announcement. The loss of the trade status would allow tariffs to be imposed on Russian imports and increase the isolation of the Russian economy.

Meanwhile, the highest-level talks held since the invasion began two weeks ago yielded no progress, the

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number of refugees fleeing the country topped 2.3 million, and Kyiv braced for an onslaught, its mayor boasting that the capital had become practically a fortress protected by armed civilians.

Satellite imagery from Maxar Technologies showed that 40-mile (64-kilometer) convoy of vehicles, tanks and artillery has broken up and been redeployed, the company said. Armored units were seen in towns near the Antonov Airport north of the city. Some of the vehicles have moved into forests, Maxar reported, with towed howitzers nearby in position to open fire.

The convoy had massed outside the city early last week, but its advance appeared to have stalled amid reports of food and fuel shortages. U.S. officials said Ukrainian troops also targeted the convoy with anti-tank missiles.

A U.S. defense official speaking on condition of anonymity said some vehicles were seen moving off the road into the tree line in recent days, but the official could not confirm whether the convoy had dispersed.

In Mariupol, a southern seaport of 430,000, the situation was increasingly dire as civilians trapped inside the city scrounged for food and fuel. More than 1,300 people have died in the 10-day siege of the frigid city, said Deputy Prime Minister Iryna Vereshchuk.

Residents have no heat or phone service, and many have no electricity. Nighttime temperatures are regularly below freezing, and daytime ones normally hover just above it. Bodies are being buried in mass graves. The streets are littered with burned-out cars, broken glass and splintered trees.

"They have a clear order to hold Mariupol hostage, to mock it, to constantly bomb and shell it," Zelenskyy said in his nightly video address to the nation. He said the Russians began a tank attack right where there was supposed to be a humanitarian corridor.

On Thursday, firefighters tried to free a boy trapped in the rubble. One grasped the boy's hand. His eyes blinked, but he was otherwise still. It was not clear if he survived. Nearby, at a mangled truck, a woman wrapped in a blue blanket shuddered at the sound of an explosion.

Grocery stores and pharmacies were emptied days ago by people breaking in to get supplies, according to a local official with the Red Cross, Sacha Volkov. A black market is operating for vegetables, meat is unavailable, and people are stealing gasoline from cars, Volkov said.

Places protected from bombings are hard to find, with basements reserved for women and children, he said. Residents, Volkov said, are turning on one another: "People started to attack each other for food."

An exhausted-looking Aleksander Ivanov pulled a cart loaded with bags down an empty street flanked by damaged buildings.

"I don't have a home anymore. That's why I'm moving," he said. "It doesn't exist anymore. It was hit, by a mortar."

Repeated attempts to send in food and medicine and evacuate civilians have been thwarted by Russian shelling, Ukrainian authorities said.

"They want to destroy the people of Mariupol. They want to make them starve," Vereshchuk said. "It's a war crime."

All told, some 100,000 people have been evacuated during the past two days from seven cities under Russian blockade in the north and center of the country, including the Kyiv suburbs, Zelenskyy said.

Zelenskyy told Russian leaders that the invasion will backfire on them as their economy is strangled. Western sanctions have already dealt a severe blow, causing the ruble to plunge, foreign businesses to flee and prices to rise sharply.

"You will definitely be prosecuted for complicity in war crimes," Zelenskyy said in a video address. "And then, it will definitely happen, you will be hated by Russian citizens — everyone whom you have been deceiving constantly, daily, for many years in a row, when they feel the consequences of your lies in their wallets, in their shrinking possibilities, in the stolen future of Russian children."

Russian President Vladimir Putin dismissed such talk, saying the country has endured sanctions before.

"We will overcome them," he said at a televised meeting of government officials. He did, however, acknowledge the sanctions create "certain challenges."

In addition to those who have fled the country, millions have been driven from their homes inside Ukraine.

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Kyiv Mayor Vitali Klitschko said about 2 million people, half the population of the metropolitan area, have left the capital.

"Every street, every house ... is being fortified," he said. "Even people who in their lives never intended to change their clothes, now they are in uniform with machine guns in their hands."

On Thursday, a 14-year-old girl named Katya was recovering at the Brovary Central District Hospital on the outskirts of Kyiv after her family was ambushed as they tried to flee the area. She was shot in the hand when their car was raked with gunfire from a roadside forest, said her mother, who identified herself only as Nina.

The girl's father, who drove frantically from the ambush on blown-out tires, underwent surgery. His wife said he had been shot in the head and had two fingers blown off.

Western officials said Russian forces have made little progress on the ground in recent days and are seeing heavier losses and stiffer Ukrainian resistance than Moscow apparently anticipated. But Putin's forces have used air power and artillery to pummel Ukraine's cities.

Early in the day, the Mariupol city council posted a video showing a convoy it said was bringing in food and medicine. But as night fell, it was unclear if those buses had reached the city.

A child was among those killed in the hospital airstrike Wednesday. Seventeen people were also wounded, including women waiting to give birth, doctors, and children buried in the rubble. Images of the attack, with pregnant women covered in dust and blood, dominated news reports in many countries.

French President Emmanuel Macron called the attack "a shameful and immoral act of war." Britain's Armed Forces minister, James Heappey, said that whether the hospital was hit by indiscriminate fire or deliberately targeted, "it is a war crime."

U.S. Vice President Kamala Harris, on a visit to Ukraine's neighbor Poland, backed calls for an international war-crimes investigation into the invasion, saying, "The eyes of the world are on this war and what Russia has done in terms of this aggression and these atrocities."

Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov dismissed concerns about civilian casualties as "pathetic shrieks" from Russia's enemies, and denied Ukraine had even been invaded.

Lavrov and his Ukrainian counterpart, Dmytro Kuleba, held talks in a Turkish resort in their first meeting since the invasion.

The two sides discussed a 24-hour cease-fire but made no progress, Kuleba said. He said Russia still wanted Ukraine to surrender but insisted that will not happen.

Lavrov said Russia is ready for more negotiations, but he showed no sign of softening Moscow's demands.

Senate gives final approval to Ukraine aid, huge budget bill

By ALAN FRAM Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — A \$13.6 billion emergency package of military and humanitarian aid for besieged Ukraine and its European allies easily won final congressional approval Thursday, hitching a ride on a government-wide spending bill that's five months late but loaded with political prizes for both parties.

With Russian President Vladimir Putin's invasion killing thousands and forcing over 2 million others to flee, the Senate approved the \$1.5 trillion overall legislation by a 68-31 bipartisan margin. Democrats and Republicans have battled this election year over rising inflation, energy policy and lingering pandemic restrictions, but they've rallied behind sending aid to Ukraine, whose stubborn resilience against brutal force has been inspirational for many voters.

"We promised the Ukrainian people they would not go at it alone in their fight against Putin," Senate Majority Leader Chuck Schumer, D-N.Y., said just before the vote. "And once we pass this funding in a short while, we will keep that promise."

The House passed the compromise bill easily Wednesday. President Joe Biden's signature was certain.

White House press secretary Jen Psaki said approval "proves once more that members of both parties can come together to deliver results for the American people" — a phenomenon in short supply in recent years.

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She also prodded lawmakers to revive money “urgently needed to prevent severe disruptions to our COVID response.” In an embarrassment to Biden and Democratic leaders who’d made it a top priority, the House on Wednesday dropped the measure’s \$15.6 billion for continuing efforts to battle the pandemic after rank-and-file lawmakers balked at cuts in aid states had been promised.

Around half the \$13.6 billion measure for the war was for arming and equipping Ukraine and the Pentagon’s costs for sending U.S. troops to other Eastern European nations skittish about the warfare next door. Much of the rest included humanitarian and economic assistance, strengthening regional allies’ defenses and protecting their energy supplies and cybersecurity needs.

Republicans strongly backed that spending. But they criticized Biden for moving too timidly, such as in the unresolved dispute with Poland over how that nation could give MiG fighter jets to Ukraine that its pilots know how to fly.

“This administration’s first instinct is to flinch, wait for international and public pressure to overwhelm them, and then take action only after the most opportune moment has passed us by,” said Senate Minority Leader Mitch McConnell, R-Ky.

White House aides told Congress last month that Biden wanted \$6.4 billion to counter Russia’s invasion. He ended up formally requesting \$10 billion, an amount that it took an eager Congress just a few days to boost to its final figure of \$13.6 billion.

The \$1.5 trillion bill carrying that aid gave Democrats a near 7% increase for domestic initiatives, which constituted a bit less than half the package. That translated to beefed-up spending for schools, housing, child care, renewable energy, biomedical research, law enforcement grants to communities and feeding programs.

The measure also directs money to minority communities and historically black colleges, renews efforts aimed at preventing domestic violence against women and requires infrastructure operators to report serious hacking incidents to federal authorities.

Republicans lay claim to an almost 6% boost for defense, including money for 85 advanced F-35 fighter planes, 13 new Navy ships, upgrades for 90 Abrams tanks and improvements for schools on military bases. There would be another \$300 million for Ukraine and \$300 million for other Eastern European allies on top of the measure’s emergency funding.

The GOP also prevailed in retaining decades-old restrictions against using federal money to pay for nearly all abortions. And they forced Biden to abandon goals for his 2022 budget — politically implausible from the start — that envisioned 16% domestic program increases and defense growth of less than 2%.

Besides those policy victories, many lawmakers of both parties had one incentive to back the spending package that they have not enjoyed since 2010. Democratic leaders restored the old practice of earmarks, hometown projects for lawmakers that Congress dropped in 2011 because voters viewed it as a sleazy misspending of taxpayers’ money.

The practice restored, the expansive bill was laced with thousands of the projects at a price tag of several billion dollars. Years ago, the numbers were often higher.

Affirming the practice’s popularity, the Senate rejected an amendment by Sen. Mike Braun, R-Ind., to strip the earmarks. Braun said they encompassed 367 pages that weighed five pounds and showed “the swamp is rising again.” The amendment’s defeat by a bipartisan 64-35 margin spoke for itself.

Government agencies have operated under last year’s lower spending levels since the new fiscal year began Oct. 1 because, as usual, Congress hadn’t approved any bills by then updating those amounts.

Months of talks produced the compromise spending pact this week. With the latest temporary spending measure expiring Friday night, Biden’s signature of the \$1.5 trillion bill would avert a weekend federal shutdown, which was never going to happen because neither party had reason to spark such a battle.

The Senate sent Biden a separate bill financing agencies through Tuesday in case it takes time to complete the required reprinting and proofreading of the lengthy measure.

A lot has happened since Oct. 1, much of it challenging for Democrats. Biden’s polling numbers have sunk, high inflation has persisted and gasoline prices have jumped. Omicron’s fade has left voters impatient to end pandemic restrictions, Biden’s marquee social and environment bill has crashed and Russia

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has invaded Ukraine.

With that election-year backdrop, Democrats saw the \$1.5 trillion package as their chance to claim wins. Currently controlling both the White House and Congress, Democrats could lose their narrow House and Senate majorities in November's midterm elections, meaning this could be the peak of their ability to win policy priorities for years. Before last year, the last time they controlled both branches was in 2010.

The largesse has been enabled, in part, by both parties' relaxed attitudes toward gargantuan federal deficits.

Last year's pandemic-fueled shortfall of \$2.8 trillion was the second worst ever. It was so high that Biden has suggested that this year's projected \$1.8 trillion gap would be an accomplishment because it would be \$1 trillion smaller, the biggest reduction ever.

Live updates: US plans to revoke Russia favored trade status

By The Associated Press undefined

The latest developments on the Russia-Ukraine war:

WASHINGTON — President Joe Biden will announce Friday that, along with the European Union and the Group of Seven countries, the U.S. will move to revoke "most favored nation" trade status for Russia over its invasion of Ukraine.

That's according to a source familiar with the matter who spoke on the condition of anonymity to preview the announcement.

Biden's move comes as bipartisan pressure has been building in Washington to revoke what is formally known as "permanent normal trade relations" with Russia.

The move would allow the U.S. and allies to impose tariffs on Russian imports.

Associated Press Writer Zeke Miller contributed to this report.

WASHINGTON — The U.S. Senate has given final congressional approval to a \$13.6 billion emergency package of military and humanitarian aid for besieged Ukraine and its European allies.

The measure passed with a 68-31 bipartisan margin.

The House easily passed the compromise bill on Wednesday. President Joe Biden is expected to sign it.

Around half the \$13.6 billion measure was for arming and equipping Ukraine and the Pentagon's costs for sending U.S. troops to other Eastern European nations skittish about the warfare next door. Much of the rest included humanitarian and economic assistance, strengthening regional allies' defenses and protecting their energy supplies and cybersecurity needs.

Democrats and Republicans have battled this election year over rising inflation, energy policy and lingering pandemic restrictions. But they've rallied behind sending aid to Ukraine, whose stubborn resilience against Russia has been inspirational for many voters.

BEIJING -- China's Premier Li Keqiang on Friday called the situation in Ukraine "grave" and offered Beijing's help in playing a "positive role" for peace while continuing to refuse to criticize Russia.

China has largely sided with Russia, refusing to refer to its actions in Ukraine as a war or invasion. Chinese officials and state media have parroted Russian claims while Beijing calls itself neutral and defending national sovereignty above all else.

"We support and encourage all efforts that are conducive to a peaceful settlement of the crisis," Li told reporters at an annual news conference.

"The pressing task now is to prevent tension from escalating or even getting out of control," Li said. "China calls for exercising utmost restraint and preventing a massive humanitarian crisis."

Li spoke following the close of the annual session of China's rubber-stamp legislature.

Russia's war in Ukraine was not openly discussed at the meeting, although it echoes in Beijing's approach to Taiwan — the self-governing island democracy China claims as its own territory, to be annexed

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by force if necessary.

TOKYO — Japan said it will spend \$100 million in previously announced humanitarian aid for Ukraine on shelter, medical care and clean water.

The money will go to Ukraine and neighboring countries Poland, Hungary, Moldova, Slovakia, and Romania through six international and Japanese groups, such as UNICEF, the World Food Program and refugee assistance programs, the Foreign Ministry said Friday.

Japan has joined the U.S. and European nations in slapping sanctions on Russia after its invasion of Ukraine. In the business sector, major companies, including Sony, Uniqlo and Nissan, have decided to suspend operations in or shipments to Russia.

Friday's aid carries out a pledge made by Prime Minister Fumio Kishida last month to stand with the people of Ukraine, the ministry said.

WASHINGTON — The White House is warning Russia against taking steps to seize the assets of U.S. and international companies that have announced plans to suspend operations in Russia or to withdraw from the Russian market in response to Vladimir Putin's decision to invade Ukraine.

Jen Psaki, the press secretary, was responding to reports in Russian and other news media about a proposal to nationalize the property of major foreign companies that are leaving Russia.

Psaki says Thursday on Twitter that such a step would be a throwback to 1917 and that Russia will have to live for decades with investor distrust. She says Russia also could face legal claims from companies whose property is seized.

Psaki says the White House stands with American companies that are making what she called "tough decisions" about the future of their Russian operations.

The Russian newspaper Izvestia reported Thursday that the government and the general prosecutor's office were considering a proposal to nationalize foreign companies that have announced they are pulling out of Russia because of the war in Ukraine. The newspaper said it had a list of nearly 60 companies, including IKEA, McDonald's, Apple, Microsoft, IBM and Porsche, among others.

The article said some were urging caution. One expert quoted warned against hasty actions, saying some of the businesses were acting under pressure from their governments and that it would be wrong to conclude that they have closed their doors on the Russian market forever.

LVIV, Ukraine — Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy said 100,000 people have been evacuated during the past two days from seven cities under Russian blockade in the north and center of the country, including the Kyiv suburbs.

But he said the Russian refusal to allow evacuations from Mariupol, a port city in the south, was "outright terror."

"They have a clear order to hold Mariupol hostage, to mock it, to constantly bomb and shell it," Zelenskyy said in his nightly video address to the nation. He said the Russians began a tank attack right where there was supposed to be a humanitarian corridor.

The city of 430,000 has been without food supplies, running water and electricity for 10 days. Ukrainian officials say about 1,300 people have died, including three in the bombing of a maternity and children's hospital on Wednesday.

KYIV — Satellite photos show that a massive Russian convoy that had been mired outside the Ukrainian capital since last week appeared to have dispersed.

Satellite imagery from Maxar Technologies showed the 40-mile (64-kilometer) line of vehicles, tanks and artillery has broken up and been redeployed, with armored units seen in towns near the Antonov Airport north of the city. Some of the vehicles have moved into forests, Maxar reported.

The convoy had massed outside the city early last week, but its advance appeared to have stalled amid reports of food and fuel shortages. U.S. officials said Ukrainian troops also targeted the convoy with anti-

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tank missiles.

LVIV, Ukraine — Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy denied Russia's accusation that Ukraine is preparing to attack with chemical or biological weapons, and he said the accusation itself was a bad sign. "That worries me very much because we have often been convinced that if you want to know Russia's plans, they are what Russia accuses others of," he said in his nightly address to the nation.

Russia said it uncovered plans to create secret laboratories in Ukraine to produce biological weapons. "I am a reasonable person. The president of a reasonable country and reasonable people. I am the father of two children," he said. "And no chemical or any other weapon of mass destruction has been developed on my land. The whole world knows this."

UNITED NATIONS — The U.N. Security Council will meet on Friday to discuss what Russia claims are "the military biological activities of the U.S. on the territory of Ukraine."

Council diplomats confirmed the meeting scheduled for 10 a.m. EST, speaking on condition of anonymity ahead of an official announcement.

Russia requested the meeting in a tweet Thursday afternoon from its first deputy U.N. ambassador, Dmitry Polyansky.

The request came after the Biden administration rejected the accusation, made without evidence by Russian Foreign Ministry spokeswoman Maria Zakharova, that Ukraine was running chemical and biological labs with U.S. support.

White House press secretary Jen Psaki called Russia's claim "preposterous." On Wednesday, warned that Russia might seek to use chemical or biological weapons against Ukraine, the neighbor it has invaded.

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

But Dmitry Chumakov, another Russian deputy U.N. ambassador, repeated the accusation Wednesday, urging Western media to cover "the news about secret biological laboratories in Ukraine."

Associated Press Writer Edith Lederer at the United Nations contributed to this report.

UNITED NATIONS — Russia has called for a U.N. Security Council meeting to discuss what it claims are "the military biological activities of the U.S. on the territory of Ukraine."

The Russian request, announced in a tweet Thursday afternoon from its deputy U.N. ambassador, Dmitry Polyansky, follows the Biden administration's rejection of Russian accusations that Ukraine is running chemical and biological labs with U.S. support.

In response to this week's accusations by Russian Foreign Ministry spokeswoman Maria Zakharova — without evidence — White House press secretary Jen Psaki issued a public warning Wednesday that Russia might seek to use chemical or biological weapons against Ukraine, the neighbor it has invaded.

Polyansky said Russia has asked for the Security Council to meet on Friday. It was not immediately clear when or whether a council meeting would take place.

Psaki called Russia's claim "preposterous" and tweeted: "This is all an obvious ploy by Russia to try to justify its further premeditated, unprovoked, and unjustified attack on Ukraine."

BETHESDA, Md. — Marriott will close its corporate offices in Moscow in response to Russia's invasion of Ukraine, the company announced Thursday.

The company said it is also pausing new hotel openings and all future hotel development and investment in Russia. Marriott's 28 hotels in Russia, which are owned and operated by franchisees, remain open, the company said.

LVIV, Ukraine — Russian forces shelled a nuclear research institute in Kharkiv, Ukraine's second-largest city on Thursday, setting buildings on fire, said Anton Gerashchenko, an adviser to Ukraine's Interior Ministry.

A shell hit a building where there is equipment that could release radiation if it were damaged, Gerash-

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chenko said. According to the president's office, there has been no change in the background radiation.

The shelling caused a fire, but firefighters were able to put it out.

Russian forces have already taken over two nuclear power plants in Ukraine, raising concerns about the security of the nuclear facilities.

LVIV, Ukraine — The Ukrainian military said it has successfully held back Russian troops, preventing them from making any new gains.

The Ukrainian military's General Staff said that Russian forces were trying to encircle Kyiv moving from the north and west, but their advance has slowed down or even stopped.

It said that Ukrainian forces on Thursday drove Russians out of the village of Baklanova Muraviika near Chernihiv, which sits on a road leading to Kyiv.

WASHINGTON — The costs of economic recovery and reconstruction for war-torn Ukraine are "already massive" and will require swift aid as Russia's invasion of Ukraine continues, the head of the International Monetary Fund said Thursday.

IMF Managing Director Kristalina Georgieva spoke a day after the 190-country organization approved \$1.4 billion in emergency lending for Ukraine to meet urgent needs and help blunt the economic impact of the invasion.

The emergency IMF aid comes atop \$700 million disbursed to Ukraine in December and \$2.7 billion in emergency reserves Ukraine received in August as part of its normal IMF allocation. The organization provides loans and other financial support to countries in crisis to help restore economic and financial stability.

Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy's top economic adviser on Thursday put the cost of recovery and reconstruction at \$100 billion at least. Georgieva said it's too early to accurately assess costs, but acknowledged they could be close to that.

For Russia, Georgieva said the unprecedented economic and financial sanctions leveled by the U.S. and European allies have brought severe economic disruption, staggering inflation and damage to the Russian people's standard of living. A deep recession is certain, she said.

UNITED NATIONS — In addition to the more than 2.3 million people who have fled the war in Ukraine, an estimated 1.9 million people are displaced within the country, according to U.N. officials.

U.N. spokesman Stephane Dujarric said Thursday that most of the internally displaced people are moving away from the front lines and heading west toward Lviv. The humanitarian situation "continues to deteriorate at an alarming pace," he said.

"Humanitarian organizations are deploying additional staff across the country and are working to move supplies to warehouses in different hubs within Ukraine and outside," Dujarric said. "So far, we — along with our partners — have reached more than 500,000 people with some form of humanitarian assistance in Ukraine, including life-saving food, shelter, blankets, and medical supplies."

By Wednesday, he said, the U.N. refugee agency UNHCR had delivered 85 metric tonnes of humanitarian assistance to reception and transit centers in Vinnytsia in central Ukraine, which is hosting people who have fled hostilities further east.

The U.N. World Food Program plans to assist up to 3.1 million people, giving priority to pre-positioning bulk food, bread, and other rations in cities and areas where fighting is expected to flare, Dujarric said.

The U.N. Food and Agriculture Organization is warning that between February and May, farmers need to start preparing land for planting wheat, barley, maize and sunflowers and they need to prepare land for sowing vegetables in the middle of March, he said. FAO is also stressing that all efforts should be made to protect harvests and livestock, he said.

NEW YORK — The Walt Disney Co. said Thursday that in addition to pausing film releases in Russia, as previously announced, it is also "taking steps to pause all other businesses" there. That includes its

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cruise ships, National Geographic magazine issues and tours, local productions, product licensing and its TV networks.

Some activities can be paused immediately; others, like the TV networks and some licensing arrangements, "take time given contractual complexities," the company said in a statement.

UNITED NATIONS — The United Nations has received official notification from Ukraine that it intends to withdraw all 308 military and police personnel serving in six U.N. peacekeeping missions, along with eight Russian-built Mi-8 helicopters currently in Congo.

U.N. spokesman Stephane Dujarric made the announcement Thursday, saying this includes about 250 troops from Congo whose withdrawal was announced Wednesday as well as 36 staff officers and experts, and 22 police officers.

In addition to Congo, the Ukrainians are serving in five other peacekeeping operations in Mali, Cyprus, Abyei and South Sudan and Kosovo.

The Ukrainian request appears to be aimed at beefing up its military and helicopters in the war against Russia.

Dujarric again stressed that every country has a right to withdraw military forces contributed to peacekeeping operations and thanked Ukrainian personnel "for their longstanding contribution to peace operations."

He said the U.N. is in the process of taking action on the Ukrainian request and will be contacting other countries to replace the troops, police and equipment.

NEW YORK — JPMorgan Chase said Thursday that it is "unwinding" its Russian banking business and plans not to take any additional work, making it the latest bank to pull out of Russia.

Like Goldman Sachs, JPMorgan said it has a "limited" presence in Russia, a spokeswoman said, and will only be using the coming weeks to close out pre-existing business relationships. The bank will also donate \$5 million to humanitarian relief efforts.

Banks have been the latest industry to come under pressure to cut ties from Russia entirely due to the war. Goldman Sachs announced Thursday it would close its Russian offices and Citigroup has said it would try to sell its retail banking business and close its investment banking operations.

Unlike companies who make goods that ship to Russia, banks have loans, deposits and existing customer relationships that take time to wind down or sell off.

BERLIN — While the situation regarding Ukraine's nuclear facilities is "complex and difficult," the head of the U.N. nuclear agency said Thursday that he is in contact with all sides to ascertain how to help ensure the safety of the country's nuclear facilities.

Rafael Grossi, the director-general of the International Atomic Energy Agency, told reporters Thursday evening in Vienna that the nuclear watchdog has "scheduled physical inspections" of nuclear facilities in Ukraine. He would not give any details on when or how those inspections would take place citing the sensitivity of the situation.

Grossi added that the IAEA also has "a number of remote monitoring devices" in operation.

When it comes to nuclear facilities based in conflict zones, the director-general said "we are trying to make sure that we will not have again added suffering because of any radioactive release or anything having to do with nuclear facilities."

Grossi said he does not expect any side to intentionally target nuclear reactors, but there was the risk of unintentional shelling. He also stressed that at facilities taken by the Russian military, but operated by Ukrainian staff, it was paramount that employees get enough rest to be focused while working.

Grossi told reporters that there was not immediate danger of power cuts at the decommissioned Chernobyl plant, which Russian forces seized last week, and that even in the case of power cuts there would be "ample time" to restore it before anything dangerous could happen.

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BRASILIA, Brazil — A Brazilian Air Force plane from Warsaw landed in Brazil's capital on Thursday with 68 passengers who left Ukraine amid the country's conflict with Russia.

President Jair Bolsonaro welcomed 42 of his countrymen, 20 Ukrainians, five Argentines and one Colombian, according to the Brazilian Foreign Ministry. Eight dogs and two cats were also aboard.

The same plane took more than 11 tons of humanitarian aid to the European nation.

Bolsonaro has had an ambivalent position about the conflict, siding with the U.S. and the European Union at the United Nations without condemning Russian President Vladimir Putin for the invasion.

MILAN — The world's fourth-largest car manufacturer, Stellantis, announced Thursday that it was suspending all imports and exports of cars to Russia.

The company did not provide further details but noted that it has employees in Russia "and we consider we should not mix 'regime' and people." Stellantis operates a plant in Kaluga, Russia.

"Our CEO has made clear public statements against any more of violence," the statement said.

It added: "At Stellantis we condemn violence and aggression and, in this time of unprecedented pain, our priority is the health and safety of our Ukrainian employees and families."

The company said it has dedicated a task force to helping the 71 Ukrainian colleagues in Ukraine and their families, including an exceptional supplement and support in moving out of the country.

The Russian Defense Ministry denied responsibility Thursday for striking a maternity hospital in the Ukrainian city of Mariupol and claimed that the explosions that hit the building were staged to smear Russia.

Ukrainian officials said that Wednesday's Russian air strike on the hospital killed three people, including a child, and wounded 17 others. The attack has caused global outrage.

Russia's Defense Ministry spokesman Maj. Gen. Igor Konashenkov denied that the Russian military struck the hospital. He claimed that the two explosions that ravaged the building were caused by explosive devices planted nearby in what he described as a "staged provocation to incite anti-Russian agitation in the West."

KYIV, Ukraine — Constant shelling has thwarted attempts to evacuate civilians from the besieged Ukrainian city of Mariupol, a senior Ukrainian official said Thursday.

Deputy Prime Minister Iryna Vereshchuk said 1,300 civilians have been killed in Mariupol, a strategic port on the Azov Sea during the nine days of siege. The city has been left without power, food and water.

Vereshchuk said in televised remarks that the Russian forces start shelling the city each time a humanitarian convoy makes an attempt to depart for Mariupol to evacuate its residents.

"They want to destroy the people of Mariupol, they want to make them starve," she said. "It's a war crime."

LONDON — British Prime Minister Boris Johnson joined other Western officials Thursday in warning that Russia could use chemical weapons in Ukraine, and accused the Kremlin of a "cynical, barbaric" attempt to justify such a move.

Johnson said the Kremlin is preparing a "fake story" that chemical weapons are being stored by their opponents or by the Americans as a pretext for deploying the weapons themselves.

"The stuff which you are hearing about chemical weapons is straight out of their playbook," he told Sky News on Thursday. "You have seen it in Syria, you saw it even in the U.K. I just note that that is what they are already doing. It is a cynical, barbaric government I'm afraid."

GENEVA — Shops and pharmacies scoured out of desperation. Hospitals functioning only partially. People fighting for food or swiping fuel from idle cars. A black market breaking out for vegetables, and no meat available at all.

A top official with the International Committee for the Red Cross in the besieged Ukrainian city of Mariupol has described the harrowing conditions faced by civilians trapped inside.

"All the shops and pharmacies were looted four to five days ago. Some people still have food, but (I) am

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not sure how long it will last," said Sacha Volkov, the ICRC's deputy head of sub-delegation in Mariupol, in an audio file provided Thursday by the ICRC. The comments were recorded Wednesday by satellite phone from a city with which communications with the outside world have been patchy at best.

People are getting sick because of the cold and humidity, Volkov said. Many people have no drinking water. Basements — offering greater safety — are reserved for mothers with small children.

"People started to attack each other for food," he said. "People started to ruin someone's car to take the gasoline out."

The Geneva-based ICRC has been trying to arrange evacuations for days for an estimated 200,000 people in Mariupol after Russian forces have all but surrounded the Ukrainian port city.

PARIS — French President Emmanuel Macron condemned "a shameful and amoral act of war" after a Russian airstrike on a Mariupol maternity hospital.

Macron said Thursday he was deeply upset by images showing "lethal weapons have been used in an indiscriminate manner in the city center." He spoke ahead of a summit of EU heads of state and government at the Versailles Palace, west of Paris.

Macron said "nothing justifies" what happened in Mariupol.

"I am very worried and pessimistic," about the war in Ukraine, Macron said. "I don't see a ceasefire (being) realistic in the coming hours."

ISTANBUL — Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan stressed the importance of Turkey's role in ending the war in Ukraine in a phone call with U.S. President Joe Biden on Thursday, state-run Anadolu Agency said.

In a 45-minute call, Erdogan said it was important for Turkey to be a "facilitator in the search for a solution in case the crisis deepens," Anadolu reported. He described a meeting between Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov and Ukraine's Foreign Minister Dmytro Kuleba held earlier near the Turkish city of Antalya as "a victory for diplomacy."

The meeting was chaired by the Turkish foreign minister after Turkey lobbied to act as a mediator between the warring countries. It failed to produce any concrete results.

Erdogan also asked Biden to lift "unfair" sanctions on Turkey, Anadolu said. Sanctions on leading defense industry figures were imposed after Ankara acquired a Russian-made air defense system in 2019. Turkey was also kicked off the F-35 fighter program.

TEL AVIV, Israel — Israel's Holocaust memorial museum has suspended its "strategic partnership" with Russian-Israeli billionaire Roman Abramovich, the museum announced Thursday.

The decision came shortly after the British government sanctioned Abramovich over his close relationship with Russian President Vladimir Putin. Yad Vashem said its own decision came "in light of recent developments" but gave no further details.

It's a reversal from a Feb. 6 Yad Vashem letter to U.S. ambassador Tom Nides urging the U.S. not to sanction Abramovich because of "potentially negative consequences." Just days before Russia's invasion of Ukraine, the memorial announced a multi-million dollar donation that would have made Abramovich the museum's second-largest private donor. That donation is now on hold, a spokesman said.

Yad Vashem has condemned the invasion and Putin's comparison of Ukraine's government to Nazi Germany, calling it a "trivialization and distortion of the historical facts of the Holocaust."

Western governments have shunned Putin. Israel has stopped short of condemning it and Prime Minister Naftali Bennett has kept up talks with both the Russian leader and Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy.

WARSAW, Poland — Polish police arrested a man accused of raping a 19-year-old Ukrainian woman he had offered refuge, officials announced Thursday.

The crime comes amid Europe's worst humanitarian crisis in decades, with Russia's brutal invasion of Ukraine causing more than 2.3 million people to flee the country so far. Poland is the country that is tak-

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ing the most, with Poles exhibiting a huge outpouring of compassion and help, and some even taking strangers into their own homes.

Police said the perpetrator offered to help the 19-year-old Ukrainian citizen "and turned out to be a ruthless criminal." If he is convicted, he could face up to 12 years in prison.

The incident comes as the International Organization for Migration warns that the refugees, who are largely women, children and the elderly, are particularly particularly vulnerable to gender-based violence, sexual exploitation and to trafficking.

LONDON — The exiled opposition leader of Belarus urged western democracies Thursday to slap tougher sanctions on Belarusian President Alexander Lukashenko over his backing of Russia's invasion of Ukraine.

"Lukashenko has full responsibility for this attack on Ukraine," Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya said at an event at London's Chatham House thinktank. "I believe that it's time for democracy to show its teeth, and it's crucial to put diplomatic, economic and political pressure on the Belarus regime."

Tsikhanouskaya has said that Belarus' military is effectively under Russian control. She called for Lukashenko to be suspended from all international organizations, Belarus state banks to be cut from the international SWIFT payment network and for imports from state enterprises to be banned.

Many countries have already announced sanctions on the Belarus government, but Tsikhanouskaya said this is not enough.

"Half measures don't work. They only make things worse," she said.

DOHA, Qatar — Sheikh Tamim bin Hamad Al-Thani met Thursday with Bektum Rostam, special envoy of the Ukrainian president.

Qatar's ruler and Rostam discussed the developments in Ukraine and diplomatic ways to solve the conflict, as well as regional and international matters, The Emir's Diwan said in a statement.

The tiny nation of Qatar, which lies on the eastern side of the Arabian Peninsula and has only one land border to Saudi Arabia, is among the world's largest suppliers of liquefied natural gas, and is among countries that the U.S. is hoping could aid Europe. Despite its small size, it also plays a strategic role as a back channel, mediator and facilitator of negotiations among countries and groups.

PARIS — Beyond any eventual EU decision to embargo Russia's oil and gas, former Polish Prime Minister Donald Tusk said Thursday that Europe must end its dependence on Russian energy supplies.

"It is a matter of our security," Tusk said at a news conference attended by some EU leaders ahead of a summit in Versailles. He noted that some European leaders are hesitant about an embargo "for practical reasons," a reference to some countries' dependence on Russian energy. But, Tusk said, in the long-term, "this is a must for Europe."

Tusk heads the European People's Party, a center-right group in the European Parliament, which met in Paris ahead of the summit hosted by President Emmanuel Macron. Russia's war in Ukraine and the wider repercussions were to dominate summit talks.

Latvian Prime Minister Krisjanis Karins argued ahead of the summit for targeting Russia's energy sector, "the Kremlin's main source of income," as the best way to force Russian President Vladimir Putin to end his war in Ukraine.

The United States this week ordered a ban on Russian oil imports.

NEW YORK — Goldman Sachs says it is closing its operations in Russia entirely, making it the first major Wall Street bank to do so since Russia invaded Ukraine.

Goldman's announcement comes after Citigroup said it would start winding down its Russia operations. But that process will likely take longer because Citi operates a consumer banking and business banking division in the country.

Like other Wall Street banks, Goldman operated a small investment banking business in the country for the past few years. The bank said in a statement Thursday it has roughly \$650 million in exposure to

Russian debt.

Banking is the latest industry to come under pressure to cut its Russian ties due to the war. But unlike companies who make goods that ship to Russia, banks have loans, deposits and existing customer relationships that take time to wind down or sell off.

Play ball! MLB players reach deal, salvage 162-game season

By RONALD BLUM AP Baseball Writer

NEW YORK (AP) — Major League Baseball's players and owners ended their most bitter money fight in a quarter-century Thursday when the players' association accepted management's offer to salvage a 162-game season that will start April 7.

The work stoppage ended at 7 p.m. sharp, closing an acrimonious 99-day lockout that delayed spring training and threatened to cancel regular-season games for the first time since 1995.

Training camps in Florida and Arizona will open Friday, with players mandated to report by Sunday. Opening day was pushed back just over a week from its March 31 date, but all that might be forgotten when the Yankees' Aaron Judge digs in against the rival Red Sox, or Shohei Ohtani eschews the new universal designated hitter and plays both ways for the Angels.

"I do want to start by apologizing to our fans," Commissioner Rob Manfred said, his voice quavering at times, later adding: "I hope that the players will see the effort we made to address their concerns in this agreement as an olive branch in terms of building a better relationship."

A frenzy of free-agency action was expected. A freeze on roster transactions was dissolved Thursday night, spurring a wave of speculation about new homes for Carlos Correa, Freddie Freeman and more than 100 other free agents who had been kept in lockout limbo.

The deal brings major changes that include expansion of the DH to the National League, increasing the postseason from 10 teams to 12, advertisements on uniforms, a balanced schedule that reduces intradivision play starting in 2023 and measures aimed to incentivize competition and decrease rebuilding, such as an amateur draft lottery. Most of the labor fight, of course, centered on the game's core economics.

The players' executive board approved the five-year contract at about 3 p.m. in a 26-12 vote. Owners ratified the deal 30-0 just three hours later, and just like that, baseball's ninth work stoppage ended.

Not that all is resolved. Union head Tony Clark did not appear alongside Manfred and scheduled a separate news conference for Friday, a visible sign of the sport's factions.

"Our union endured the second-longest work stoppage in its history to achieve significant progress in key areas that will improve not just current players' rights and benefits, but those of generations to come," Clark said in a statement.

Manfred pledged "maybe to more regularly get to the bottom of player concerns so that they don't build up."

"I spoke to Tony after their ratification vote. I told him that I thought we had a great opportunity for the game in front of us," Manfred said. "One of the things that I'm supposed to do is promote a good relationship with our players. I've tried to do that. I think that I have not been successful in that. I think that it begins with small steps."

Players' pictures that had been scrubbed from the league's website were restored. Teams tweeted videos and statements celebrating the lockout's end and sharing info about tickets for the new opening day.

The 184 games canceled by Manfred were instead postponed, and the regular season was extended by three days to Oct. 5. Approximately three games per team will be made up as part of doubleheaders.

With pitchers Max Scherzer and Andrew Miller taking prominent roles as union spokesmen, players let three management deadlines pass — Manfred called them "the art of collective bargaining" — before accepting an agreement before the fourth.

While the union's executive subcommittee voted 8-0 against the deal — all earned \$3.5 million or more last year — player representatives were in favor by 26-4.

"Time and economic leverage. No agreement comes together before those two things play out," Manfred

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said. "I think we made an agreement when it was possible to make an agreement."

After narrowing the economic gap this week, MLB made another offer Thursday afternoon, saying this was the absolute, final, last moment to preserve full salary and service time.

"The deal pushes the game forward," Yankees pitcher Gerrit Cole, a member of the union's executive subcommittee, said in a telephone interview with the AP. "It addresses a lot of the things that the players in the game should be focused on: the competitive integrity aspect of it."

The union especially wanted to boost pay of young players and encourage teams not to delay their debuts in order to push back free agency.

Under the new postseason format, two division winners from each league receive first-round byes and the remaining four teams play in a best-of-three wild card round.

The deal allows teams to have advertising on uniforms and helmets for the first time and established a fast-track MLB-dominated rules committee that could recommend a pitch clock and limits on defensive shifts starting in 2023. Tiebreaker games for playoff berths have been eliminated, replaced by mathematical formulas.

The luxury tax threshold rises from \$210 million last year to \$230 million this season, the largest yearly increase since that restraint began in 2003. The threshold rises to \$244 million by 2026, a loosening for the biggest spenders such as the Yankees, Mets, Dodgers and Red Sox. The 3% annual growth is well over the 2.1% during the expired contract and the 1.2% in the 2011 deal.

Tax rates remain unchanged at the initial threshold, second and third thresholds. A new fourth threshold, aimed at billionaire New York Mets owner Steve Cohen, starts \$80 million above the first and has rates of 80% for the first offender, 90%, for the second and 110% for the third.

The minimum salary rises from \$570,500 to \$700,000 this year, a 22.7% rise that is the highest since 2003, with \$20,000 annual increases each season.

A new \$50 million bonus pool was established for players not yet eligible for arbitration, a way to boost salaries for young stars.

While the sides preserved a full regular season, the cost was rancor that cast both owners and players as money obsessed. Spring training was disrupted for the third straight year following two exhibition seasons altered by the coronavirus pandemic.

"People can go to the ballpark. That will help," Cole said. "Maybe some people will go to the ballpark to tell us how they feel negatively. That's their right to do as well. I will say that nobody wants it to go this way. And some of the hurdles we've had to jump through over the last few weeks have not necessarily been ill will but just due process.

"It's just a very democratic process and some of these sorts of things take some time. But I think everybody is tremendously excited to get back and tremendous excited to get back in front of the fans."

Some minority groups missed at higher rate in 2020 US census

By MIKE SCHNEIDER Associated Press

Black, Hispanic and American Indian residents were missed at higher rates than a decade ago during the 2020 census, according to a report released Thursday that evaluated how well the once-a-decade head count tallied every U.S. resident.

Even though the 2020 census missed an unexpectedly small percentage of the total U.S. population given the unprecedented challenges it faced, the increase in undercounts among some minority groups prompted an outcry from civil rights leaders who blamed political interference by the Trump administration, which tried unsuccessfully to add a citizenship question to the census form and cut field operations short.

"These numbers are devastating. Once again, we see an overcount of white Americans and an undercount of Black and Hispanic Americans," National Urban League CEO Marc Morial said on a call with reporters. "I want to express in the strongest possible terms our outrage."

The results of U.S. Census Bureau's Post-Enumeration Survey showed that most racial and ethnic minorities were overlooked at statistically significant higher rates than a decade ago, with the Asian population being

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an exception. The survey measures whether certain populations were undercounted or overrepresented in the census. Overcounts take place, for example, if someone owns a vacation home and is counted there as well as at a permanent home address.

The Black population in the 2020 census had a net undercount of 3.3%, while it was almost 5% for Hispanics and 5.6% for American Indians and Native Alaskans living on reservations. Those identifying as some other race had a net undercount of 4.3%. The non-Hispanic white population had a net overcount of 1.6%, and Asians had a net overcount of 2.6%, according to the results.

In the 2010 census, by comparison, the Black population had a net undercount of more than 2%, while it was 1.5% for the Hispanic population. There was almost a 4.9% undercount for American Indian and Alaskan Natives living on reservations, and it was 1.6% for people identifying as some other race and 0.08% for Asians. The non-Hispanic white population had a net overcount of 0.8%.

The 2020 census missed 0.24% of the entire U.S. population, a rate that wasn't statistically significant, while it missed 0.01% in the 2010 census.

The census figures help determine the distribution of \$1.5 trillion in federal spending each year as well as how many congressional seats each state gets. Any undercounts in various populations can shortchange the amount of funding and political representation they get over the next decade.

In the years leading up to the 2020 census, advocates worried that a failed attempt by the Trump administration to add a citizenship question to the census questionnaire would scare off Hispanics and immigrants from participating, whether they were in the country legally or not. The Trump administration also unsuccessfully tried to get the Census Bureau to exclude people in the country illegally from numbers used for divvying up congressional seats among the states and cut short the schedule for field operations that had been extended because of the pandemic.

During a conference call Thursday, Census Bureau Director Robert Santos said many Latino communities throughout the U.S. suffered during the pandemic from joblessness and housing insecurity, and that played a role in the undercount. But he added that the Trump administration's actions also may have had an impact.

"I'm personally not surprised to see the results we see today," said Santos, who was sworn into the position at the beginning of the year.

The severe undercount of the Hispanic population helps explain why three states with large Latino populations underperformed in the 2020 census, with Arizona failing to gain an extra seat, Florida gaining only a single seat and Texas getting only two seats, said Arturo Vargas, CEO of NALEO Educational Fund.

"It was startling to me, the level of undercount," Vargas said. "We knew there was going to be an undercount, but the extent of it took me by surprise."

About 70% of Native Americans live on reservations. James Tucker, the chairman of a Census Bureau advisory committee, estimated the undercount translates to at least 100,000 Native Americans on reservations not counted and more than a \$300 million loss in federal funding for Indian Country annually.

"This undercount is not new — it is a continuous cycle of erasure of Native people from society," said Lycia Maddocks, a citizen of the Fort Yuma Quechan Indian Tribe in Arizona who is political director of NDN Collective, a South Dakota-based advocacy group. "In a practical sense, an undercount means that Native people are not looked at as a significant voting block when in reality, our population has proven itself to be the margin of victory in key states such as Arizona."

The pandemic disrupted census operations and schedules, and it made residents wary of opening their doors to answer questions from census takers. Wildfires in the West and hurricanes in the Gulf Coast during the door-knocking phase of the head count sent residents fleeing from their homes.

The Post-Enumeration showed that 18.8 million people weren't counted correctly in the 2020 census. Although some of them may have been missed, others were counted using a statistical technique that fills in missing data.

After the results of the Post-Enumeration Survey were released, dozens of members of the Congressional Black Caucus sent a letter to the Census Bureau asking how it planned to investigate the undercount.

"A Census that does not accurately represent Black communities robs them of their equal share of federal

resources in education, health care, housing, nutrition assistance, and many other areas — perpetuating systemic racism,” the letter said.

Facing Purdue owners brings pain, closure for opioid victims

By JENNIFER PELTZ and GEOFF MULVIHILL Associated Press

NEW YORK (AP) — Kara Trainor composed herself, looked into a camera and began to speak to the drugmakers she holds responsible for two decades of suffering that has extended from her to a son born dependent on opioids.

Three members of the family that owns OxyContin maker Purdue Pharma watched silently or listened to the virtual court hearing as Trainor described giving birth to a baby who rapidly plunged into withdrawal — “the screaming will haunt you for the rest of your life” — and what it’s been like to raise him. At 11, he still uses a sippy cup and diapers.

Trainor and others who have suffered from or lost relatives to opioid addiction had waited years for this moment: a direct, if virtual, confrontation with members of the Sackler family in court over the consequences of the painkiller that made them a fortune while helping fuel a deadly drug epidemic. The opportunity finally came for about two dozen victims or their relatives at an extraordinary bankruptcy court hearing Thursday.

Some emerged exhausted, others angry, others relieved, and all unsure whether the Sacklers, who weren’t allowed to respond during the session, had been moved. Still, several people who gave statements said they valued being able to speak for their lost loved ones and show solidarity, and that they had gotten a grain of resolution.

“I can feel, as a mother, that my son was seen and heard by the family,” said Trainor, of Kalamazoo, Michigan, who got an OxyContin prescription at 21 and soon became addicted. She’s now 40, in recovery and working with others who struggle with drug abuse.

“It’s going to be part of my healing and part of a closure of 20 years,” she said, “finally being able to be heard.”

The hearing, highly unusual for U.S. Bankruptcy Court, was suggested by a mediator who helped broker a potential settlement of thousands of lawsuits against Purdue. If it wins final approval, the deal will generate \$10 billion or more to fight addiction and overdoses, with the Sacklers chipping in as much as \$6 billion in exchange for protection from civil lawsuits. Up to 149,000 people who have struggled with addiction or who lost loved ones to it are due to split \$750 million under the settlement.

One after another, victims logged in from Hawaii to New Hampshire on Thursday with accounts of surgeries and illnesses that led to OxyContin prescriptions, followed by dependency, despair, rounds of drug-abuse treatment, personal and financial ruin and, all too often, death by overdose or suicide.

Vitaly Pinkusov described waking up to find his 32-year-old wife’s body cold in their bed. Kristy Nelson played a recording of her frantic 911 call reporting that her son was unresponsive. Stephanie Lubinski recounted how her husband went into their basement and shot himself in the chest.

Former Purdue president and board chairman Richard Sackler listened by phone, a sore point for some victims who found it disrespectful that he didn’t face them. His son, David Sackler, and another family member, Theresa Sackler, appeared on camera, appearing attentive but showing little reaction.

“They just sat there, alone but stone-faced, and never changed their expression, never,” a frustrated Lubinski of Blaine, Minnesota, said afterward.

The Sacklers have never unequivocally apologized. They released a statement last week saying they had acted lawfully but “regret” that OxyContin “unexpectedly became part of an opioid crisis that has brought grief and loss to far too many families and communities.”

OxyContin, a pioneering extended-release prescription painkiller, hit the market in 1996, while Purdue and other drug companies funded efforts to suggest that prescribers consider opioids for a wider range of pain conditions than previously thought appropriate. Purdue asserted that far fewer than 1% of people prescribed opioids developed addictions, though there weren’t rigorous studies to support the claim.

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Waves of fatal opioid overdoses followed, from prescription drugs, heroin, and most recently fentanyl and similar drugs. Purdue documents made public in lawsuits appear to show family members at times downplaying the crisis.

Tiffinee Scott asked the Sacklers whether they had ever revived one of their children from an overdose, as she did for her daughter before finally losing her to an overdose at age 28. Tierra Renee Brown-Lewis had been prescribed OxyContin for sickle cell disease pain, the mother said.

"Shame on you," she told the Sacklers, though she said later that she hadn't expected a reaction from people she sees as heartless. To her, the point of the session was the impact of the families' unity and their joint message.

"For once, we felt to have a sense of power over privilege, as it pertains to the Sacklers," she said.

After her 21-year-old son, Chris Yoder, died from an overdose, Dede Yoder used to swear at the Sacklers as she drove by Purdue's headquarters in Stamford, Connecticut, near her Norwalk home. She's felt vindicated by the bankruptcy case and public scrutiny of the Sacklers.

"Being part of this court record is very important, and my son's story being part of the record," she said after making her statement during the hearing.

Ryan Hampton of Las Vegas found "a level of catharsis" in testifying Thursday about the years of addiction, overdoses and periods of homelessness he endured after a knee injury. But it bothered him that victims and their relatives were delivering a message that, in his view, should come from authorities.

Like several of those who testified, he wants the Sacklers to be criminally charged. There's no sign that will happen, although seven U.S. senators last month asked the Department of Justice to consider it. Purdue Pharma, meanwhile, has twice pleaded guilty to criminal charges.

Cheryl Juare, meanwhile, is looking ahead to the potential for money to flow to addiction treatment programs and "start to heal this country." Juare, of Marlborough, Massachusetts, lost two adult sons, Corey Merrill and Sean Merrill, who died just last June.

Jill Cichowicz, who lost her twin brother, Scott Zebrowski, hopes that Thursday's uncommonly personal hearing "sets the tone for future companies, and they understand the ramifications of their actions."

For a long time, she had thought about what she might say to the Sacklers if she ever got the chance.

"And then, when you're actually in the room facing them, eye-to-eye, you're not as angry. You're hurt," said Cichowicz, of Richmond, Virginia. "It was a sense of closure, but in the same sense, I'm still suffering, being hurt by their actions."

'Scum of the earth': Drug victims face Purdue Pharma owners

By GEOFF MULVIHILL and JENNIFER PELTZ Associated Press

NEW YORK (AP) — Angry, defiant and sometimes tearful, more than two dozen Americans whose lives were upended by the opioid crisis finally had their long-awaited chance Thursday to confront in court some members of the family they blame for fueling it.

They were unsparing as they unleashed decades of frustration and sorrow on members of the Sackler family who own OxyContin maker Purdue Pharma over the course of a three-hour virtual hearing.

One woman played a recording from when she called 911 to get help for her overdosing son, then called one of the Sacklers the "scum of the earth." Several displayed pictures of loved ones who died too soon because of their addictions. Many spoke about forgiveness, with some trying to find it — and others definitely not.

"I hope that every single victim's face haunts your every waking moment and your sleeping ones, too," said Ryan Hampton, of Las Vegas, who has been in recovery for seven years after an addiction that began with an OxyContin prescription to treat knee pain led to overdoses and periods of homelessness.

"You poisoned our lives and had the audacity to blame us for dying," he said. "I hope you hear our names in your dreams. I hope you hear the screams of the families who find their loved ones dead on the bathroom floor. I hope you hear the sirens. I hope you hear the heart monitor as it beats along with a failing pulse."

The unusual hearing was conducted virtually in U.S. Bankruptcy Court at the suggestion of a mediator

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who helped broker a deal that could settle thousands of lawsuits against Purdue over the toll of opioids, generating billions for the fight against the addiction and overdose crisis and giving Sackler family members protection from lawsuits.

Appearing via audio was Richard Sackler, the former Purdue president and board chair who has said the company and family bear no responsibility for the opioid crisis; he is a son of Raymond Sackler, one of the three brothers who in the 1950s bought the company that became Purdue Pharma. Attending on video were Theresa Sackler, a British dame and wife of the late Mortimer D. Sackler, another of the brothers; and David Sackler, Richard Sackler's son.

Theresa's and David's expressions remained largely neutral as people spoke on video 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.

Under court rules, the Sacklers were not allowed to respond to the victims, who were selected by lawyers for creditors in the case. Some victims spoke from a law office in New York; others were at their homes or offices around the country.

Jannette Adams told of her late husband, Dr. Thomas Adams, who was a physician and church deacon in Mississippi and a missionary in Africa and Haiti. He became addicted to opioids after pharmaceutical representatives pitched them, she said. After a terrible decline, he died in 2015.

"I'm angry, I'm pissed, but I move on," Adams said. "Because our society lost a person who could have made so many more contributions. ... You took so much from us, but we plan to, through our faith in God, move forward."

Kristy Nelson played for the Sacklers a tense recording of a 911 call in which she summoned police to her home the day her son Bryan died of an opioid overdose. The dispatcher asked whether his skin had gone blue; she said it was white. She said she replays the call in her mind daily.

Thursday was Richard Sackler's 77th birthday, according to public records. Later this month, Nelson said, she and her husband will visit the cemetery on what would have been Bryan's 34th birthday.

"I understand today's your birthday, Richard, how will you be celebrating?" she said. "I guarantee it won't be in the cemetery. ... You have truly benefitted from the death of children. You are scum of the earth."

Her words echoed a 2001 email from Richard Sackler, made public during lawsuits over OxyContin, in which he referred to people with addiction as "scum of the earth."

Jenny Scully, a nurse in New York, gave birth in 2014 while on OxyContin and other opioids prescribed years earlier when she was dealing with both breast cancer and injuries from an accident. She was told her baby would be healthy, Scully said, but the little girl has had a lifetime of physical, developmental and emotional difficulties.

"You have destroyed so many lives," she said, pulling her daughter into view. "Take a good look at this beautiful little girl you robbed of the person she could have been."

The forum was unconventional 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.

Other drugmakers and wholesalers and even a consulting company have also been settling lawsuits over the opioid crisis, which has been linked to more than 500,000 deaths in the U.S. over the past two decades. But Purdue's case stands out because it was an early player with OxyContin and is privately owned.

The settlement is estimated to be worth at least \$10 billion over time. It calls for the Sacklers 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 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 opioid withdrawal.

The plan also calls for family members to give up ownership of the company so it can become a new entity, Knoa Pharma, with its profits dedicated to stemming the epidemic. In exchange, Sackler family

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members would get protection from 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.

Purdue Pharma starting selling OxyContin, a pioneering extended-release prescription painkiller, in 1996. At the same time, Purdue and other drug companies funded efforts to get doctors and other prescribers to think differently about opioids — suggesting they be used for some pain conditions for 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 Sacklers have been charged with crimes. There are no indications any such charges are forthcoming, although seven U.S. senators last month asked the Department of Justice to consider charges.

The Sacklers have never unequivocally apologized. 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."

Following the hearing, a spokesperson for Mortimer Sackler's descendants said the family would not make a statement; a representative of Raymond Sackler's side of the family did not immediately respond to a request for comment. The family of the other brother, Arthur, sold its share of Stamford, Connecticut-based Purdue before OxyContin was developed.

Several speakers noted the lack of an apology, and some called for prosecutors to pursue criminal investigations.

"When you created OxyContin, you created so much loss for so many people," said Kay Scarpone, who lost her son Joseph, a former Marine, to addiction a month before his 26th birthday. "I'm outraged that you haven't owned up to the crisis that you've created."

US extends mask rule for travel while weighing new approach

By DAVID KOENIG and ZEKE MILLER Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — Federal officials are extending the requirement for masks on planes and public transportation for one more month — through mid-April — while taking steps that could lead to lifting the rule.

The mask mandate was scheduled to expire March 18, but the Transportation Security Administration said Thursday that it will extend the requirement through April 18.

TSA said the extra month will give the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention time to develop new, more targeted policies that will consider the number of cases of COVID-19 nationally and in local communities, and the risk of new variants.

The TSA enforces the rule, which extends to planes, buses, trains and transit hubs.

As of Thursday, more than 98% of the U.S. population is living in areas with low or medium COVID-19 case levels, meaning that the CDC no longer recommends face masks in public indoor settings.

A decision to eventually scrap the mask requirement — one of the last vestiges of nationwide pandemic rules — has grown more likely in recent weeks as more states, even those led by Democratic governors, relaxed their own mandates for wearing masks indoors, and the CDC eased its recommendations.

That led critics to question why the CDC would allow maskless people to gather in movie theaters and sports arenas but not on planes.

White House press secretary Jen Psaki said Thursday that deciding on the right policy for travel was more complicated than setting recommendations for local communities.

"If you're moving from one zone to another and picking people up ... it's a little bit different, and that requires some consultation, which is what (CDC officials) are going to endeavor to do between now and

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April 18," Psaki said.

CDC Director Dr. Rochelle Walensky said last week that her agency must study the science around virus transmission "but also the epidemiology and the frequency that we may encounter a variant of concern or a variant of interest in our travel corridors."

Sen. Roger Wicker of Mississippi, the top Republican on the Senate Commerce, Science & Transportation Committee, said he was disappointed in the one-month extension.

"The science does not support this decision," he said. Earlier, Wicker and 30 other Republican senators asked Biden to end the mask rule and a requirement that travelers test free of COVID-19 within a day before flying to the U.S.

Airlines for America, a trade group that represents the largest U.S. airlines, said in a statement that it urged the administration to end both rules.

Dr. Graham Snyder, medical director of infection prevention at the University of Pittsburgh Medical Center, said it makes sense to be more cautious on planes, subway trains and buses because "they are designed to efficiently put a lot of people in one place," raising the risk of virus transmission.

Stephen Morse, an infectious-diseases expert at Columbia University, said a short-term extension of the rule is appropriate, but he warned that once it is dropped it will be hard to revive if COVID-19 cases surge again. He said there have been so many surprises with the pandemic that "a month may not be long enough."

The federal mask mandate was imposed in January 2021, days after President Joe Biden took office, and has been extended several times. The Trump administration had declined to require masks on public transportation, but airlines began requiring them in mid-2020 to reassure passengers worried about contracting the virus.

Last September, the Transportation Security Administration doubled the fines for people who refused to wear a mask on public transportation to up to \$1,000 for first-time offenders and up to \$3,000 for repeat violations.

The requirement became a lightning rod for confrontation between some passengers and airline crews. Since the start of 2021, airlines have reported more than 6,000 incidents of unruly passengers, most of them involving disputes over mask wearing. That history could make it unlikely for airlines to require masks once the federal rule lapses.

"I don't think the airlines have any desire to impose their own requirements at this point against a public that is weary of these restrictions," said Henry Harteveltdt, a travel-industry analyst with Atmosphere Research Group.

On four flights he took this week, Harteveltdt said, "I noticed there were passengers who did not wear their masks even when they were not eating or drinking, and the flight attendants did not ask them to put them on."

Flight attendants were once mostly in favor of masks, which they viewed as protecting their health. They largely supported the federal rule, which carried more weight than an airline policy.

But cabin crews are now divided over keeping the federal rule, according to their largest union, the Association of Flight Attendants, which declined to take a position on extending the mandate beyond March 18.

The continuation of the rule seemed to underscore the position of airlines and aircraft manufacturers, who have argued since the start of the pandemic that high-quality filters and strong air flow made virus transmission unlikely in plane cabins. In December, as omicron was spreading rapidly, the CEO of Southwest Airlines told Congress that masks "don't add much, if anything" to safety on planes — a claim that experts quickly disputed.

David Neeleman, who founded JetBlue and now leads another start-up carrier, Breeze Airways, said passengers "who feel uncomfortable should wear a good mask, an N95 mask," but face coverings shouldn't be mandatory.

"I would love to see it expire on (March) 18th," Neeleman told The Associated Press. "It puts a lot of stress on our flight crews, and it puts stress on our passengers."

Shannon Schreyer of Ogden, Utah, wants the mandate killed.

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"I haven't seen that it has provided any measure of effectiveness," he said, his mask hanging just below his mouth while picking up luggage at Detroit Metro Airport. "I think that the masks have been a pretty big facade from the very beginning. We're pretty much over the whole COVID thing."

Some travelers are just perplexed by all the fuss over wearing masks.

"I don't really mind, honestly — on bus, on train, on plane," said Natalie Johnston, a University of Michigan student from Philadelphia, who was waiting for a bus in Ann Arbor, Michigan. "I don't really think it's that big of a deal."

News of the extension and policy review was first reported by Reuters.

Chelsea feels effects of sanctions imposed on Abramovich

By ROB HARRIS AP Global Soccer Writer

LONDON (AP) — Chelsea fans received an unwelcome present on the Premier English League team's 117th birthday Thursday: British government sanctions against Russian owner Roman Abramovich that only served to intensify the team's growing pariah status in the soccer world.

The aluminum magnate is among seven wealthy Russians who had their assets frozen under British sanctions on Thursday in response to Russia's invasion of Ukraine.

Under the unprecedented government action, Chelsea will operate through the end of the season May 31 with a special "Russia Regulations" license that among other restrictions prohibits the team from selling new tickets or merchandise, or signing new players.

The club's future was already in doubt: Abramovich, whose \$2 billion investment in Chelsea over 19 years transformed the team into a force in European football, had put the squad up for sale last week amid growing calls that sanctions be imposed on a man the government has labeled a "pro-Kremlin oligarch" linked to "destabilizing ... undermining and threatening" Ukraine.

The British government also has alleged that Abramovich has obtained financial benefits from Putin's administration, including contracts in the buildup to Russia hosting the 2018 World Cup.

"We are now turning the screw on influential oligarchs enabling his regime," Culture Secretary Nadine Dorries said of Putin. "The important measures announced today will clearly have a direct impact on Chelsea FC and its fans but we are working hard to make sure the club and the national game are not unnecessarily harmed."

Club sponsors are responding in their own way: The telecommunications firm Three announced Thursday that it would suspend its sponsorship of the team and remove its logo from Chelsea's jerseys.

"We recognize that this decision will impact the many Chelsea fans who follow their team passionately," Three said. "However, we feel that given the circumstances, and the government sanction that is in place, it is the right thing to do."

But the logos still appeared when, in the only uplifting moments of the day for Chelsea, the men's team won 3-1 at Norwich in the Premier League and there was a 4-1 Women's Super League success at West Ham.

Soccer fans immediately felt the effects of the British government's sanctions: Anyone with tickets until the end of the season will be able to attend matches, but those without will stay without while away fans will be unable to purchase tickets for upcoming games held at Stamford Bridge stadium.

The new rules also limit the club to spending a maximum of 500,000 pounds (\$657,000) on 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.

Staff, including players, will 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 also has been effectively placed under a transfer ban since it cannot spend money to register new players.

"We are very disappointed right now because of this," said Tanjim Islam, a frustrated Chelsea fan from Vancouver, Canada, who stood outside the team's hastily closed merchandise shop at the stadium on Thursday. "We traveled from the west coast (of Canada) to be here."

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Even worse for fans, though, is uncertainty about the club's fate.

"We had a great legacy over the past 20 years," Islam said. "We are doing great and (now) we don't know where our club will be in the future."

Lifelong Chelsea fan Freddie Frampton called the sanctions "hypocrisy at its highest level," citing the European Union, of which Britain is no longer a part.

"The EU is paying Putin 1 billion (euros) a day for Russian energy. On the other side, they're funding Ukraine with weapons. The madness has to end. Sanctioning Abramovich changes nothing. It's not Abramovich who is funding this war, it's Europe. Why take away our fun?"

Chelsea completed the set of major trophies under Abramovich by winning the Club World Cup last month, joining two Champions League titles and five Premier Leagues under his ownership.

The invasion of Ukraine is not the first event to affect Abramovich's relationship with Britain. He had already been banned from the country since 2018, when he withdrew an application to renew his visa amid a clampdown on rich Russians after a former Russian spy and his daughter were poisoned in the English city of Salisbury. Britain blamed Russia for the pair's exposure to a nerve agent, an allegation Moscow denied.

Abramovich made his fortune in oil and aluminum during the chaotic years that followed the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991. British government officials estimate his worth at more than 9 billion pounds (\$12 billion).

The oligarch has said proceeds of the club's sale, which is subject to government approval, will go to a foundation he started for victims of the war in Ukraine. In two statements he has issued since the war began, however, Abramovich has refrained from condemning Russia's invasion of Ukraine. The sale is on hold under the sanctions.

Not all Western companies sever ties to Russia over Ukraine

By TALI ARBEL AP Business Writer

A shrinking number of well-known companies are still doing business in Russia, even as hundreds have announced plans to curtail ties.

Burger King restaurants are open, Eli Lilly is supplying drugs, and PepsiCo is selling milk and baby food, but no more soda.

The pace of businesses exiting Russia accelerated over the past week as the deadly violence and humanitarian crisis in Ukraine worsened, and as Western governments ratcheted up economic sanctions to punish Russia for its two-week-old invasion. Major oil companies BP and Shell walked away from multibillion-dollar investments. McDonald's and Starbucks stopped serving customers.

The companies that still have a presence in Russia say they have franchise owners or employees to consider; they don't want to punish Russians by taking away food or medicine; or they provide software or financial services for Western businesses that aren't easy to replace.

"It's a business calculation. On the stay side: How much revenue do they earn in Russia? Do they provide an essential service?" said Mary Lovely, a senior fellow at the Peterson Institute for International Economics in Washington. "Each day that passes, though, calculations change. Sanctions against Russia are likely to last a long time, along with rising revulsion."

Some companies in lower-profile industries like agriculture have been able to fly under the radar and avoid the type of social media pressure that had been directed at brands such as McDonald's, Uniqlo and Starbucks, before they decided to cut ties this week, if only temporarily.

But in this era of hyper-awareness that some customers and even employees have about the positions companies take on social and moral issues, those still doing business with — or in — Russia are putting their reputations on the line.

Take Japanese clothing chain Uniqlo, which drew negative attention after the CEO of its parent company told the Nikkei newspaper in a story published Tuesday that the reason to keep nearly 50 Russian stores open was that: "clothing is a necessity of life." By Thursday, Uniqlo said it would close the stores.

"There's potentially a big downside of companies to be on the wrong side of this," Lovely said.

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Many large multinationals didn't flee Russia at the start of the war. But that changed as the invasion led to increasing violence — and more than 2 million refugees fleeing Ukraine.

There are now more than 300 companies that have curtailed operations in Russia, according to a list maintained by a team at Yale. Apple stopped shipments. Google paused ad sales. Automakers halted production. Hollywood studios ceased releasing films, and Netflix stopped streaming.

Some of these decisions were driven by the need to comply with the sanctions Western governments leveled at Russia; others came because of supply chain issues or the fear of a hit to their reputations. Sanctions have already taken a toll on Russia's economy and global trade.

Some companies that plan to sever ties with Russia say it isn't so simple.

Citigroup said Wednesday that selling its 11 Russian bank branches will be difficult because the country's economy has been cut off from the global financial system. Until then, Citi said it is "operating the business on a more limited basis" and is helping its U.S. and other corporate clients suspend their businesses in Russia.

Likewise, Amazon says its biggest cloud-computing customers in Russia are headquartered elsewhere. The company said Tuesday it has stopped accepting new cloud-computing customers in Russia and that it plans to suspend e-commerce shipments to Russia.

Fast-food companies often have franchising agreements that complicate an exit, because they don't own those locations.

That helps explain why Restaurant Brands International, owner of Burger King, is keeping its 800 restaurants open in Russia. And why Yum Brands, parent company of KFC and Pizza Hut, announced the closure of 70 company-owned KFCs across Russia, but not the nearly 1,000 franchisee-owned KFCs, or its 50 Pizza Hut locations.

This sometimes applies to hotels as well: Marriott says its Russian hotels are owned by third parties, and it's evaluating their ability to remain open.

"I think a lot of these companies are expecting a backlash if they're staying," said Susanne Wengle, a political science professor and Russia expert at Notre Dame.

McDonald's action in Russia was easier: it owns most of the 850 restaurants in Russia it will temporarily close.

But there are companies that remain in Russia — whether in whole or in part — and say that it's because they view their products as essential.

Pharmaceutical company Eli Lilly is one of them. "We continue to distribute medicines in Russia as patients with cancer, diabetes and auto-immune diseases everywhere count on us to support them," said spokesperson Tarsis Lopez, noting that EU and U.S. sanctions do not apply to medicine.

PepsiCo said it will stop selling soda, but that it will continue to supply milk, baby formula and baby food in Russia. And Unilever said it will keep selling "everyday essential" Russian-made food and hygiene products to Russians, but that it will stop exporting and advertising these products.

Tech companies have their own balancing act. Providers of internet-based services like Google, Twitter and Facebook have been mostly reluctant to take actions that could deprive Russian citizens access to information other than what they get from state media. (Russia blocked Facebook and Twitter, however, and then TikTok largely suspended its service in the country.)

The response from industrial food producers has been complicated by Russia's role as a major exporter of wheat and other commodities.

Bunge, which has assets of \$121 million in Russia, said Thursday that its Russian oilseed plant will operate and serve the domestic market, but that it has suspended "any new export business." Farm equipment maker John Deere said it has stopped machine shipments to Russia; it is monitoring a Russian plant that makes seeding equipment and its dealer network in the country "day-by-day." Cargill and ADM, other agriculture companies, have not responded to questions.

These companies don't want the Russian government to seize their assets should they close up shop, said Vincent Smith, an economics professor at Montana State University.

Other companies point to their employees' livelihoods in rationalizing decisions to stay, or not completely sever ties.

Starbucks initially expressed concern for its 2,000 Russian employees before reversing course Tuesday. The Kuwaiti company that franchises its 130 Russian stores is closing them, but continuing to pay employees.

British American Tobacco on Wednesday said it would keep making and selling cigarettes in Russia, where it has 2,500 employees, citing a "duty of care" for employees.

IRS plans to hire 10,000 workers to relieve massive backlog

By FATIMA HUSSEIN Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — The IRS said Thursday it plans to hire 10,000 new workers to help reduce a massive backlog that the government says will make this tax season the most challenging in history.

The agency released a plan to work down the tens of millions of filings that includes speeding up the traditionally slow hiring process, relying more on automated processes and bringing on more contract workers to help with mailroom and paper processing.

Getting it done will be the big challenge, tax experts say.

The agency faces a backlog of around 20 million pieces of correspondence, which is more than 15 times as large as in a normal filing season, according to the agency. And the IRS workforce is the same size it was in 1970, though the U.S. population has grown exponentially and the U.S. tax code has become increasingly complicated.

Additionally, the need to administer pandemic-related programs has imposed an entirely new workload on the agency.

White House officials have said the agency is not equipped to serve taxpayers even in non-pandemic years. A senior administration official, speaking on condition of anonymity Thursday to preview the new IRS plan, said processing returns will continue to be a massive challenge so long as the agency operates on 1960s infrastructure.

The IRS' latest plan to combat the current backlog includes creating a 700-person surge team to process new returns, adding 2,000 contractors to respond to taxpayer questions about stimulus and child tax credit payments and developing new automated voice and chat bots to answer taxpayer questions.

The plan also calls for several upcoming hiring fairs in Austin, Texas; Kansas City, Missouri; and Ogden, Utah, where the IRS will be able to use "direct-hire authority" to allow new hires to begin work within 30 to 45 days of their job offer.

There is no plan to extend the current April 18 filing deadline, the senior official said. Lawmakers have asked IRS Commissioner Chuck Rettig for that deadline to be extended, citing taxpayers' economic challenges due to the pandemic.

The new IRS plan comes as lawmakers have made persistent calls for additional federal funding for the agency.

Congress' mammoth \$1.5 trillion omnibus package, released early Wednesday, would provide \$14.3 billion to the Treasury Department, including \$12.6 billion devoted to the IRS. That would be the largest funding increase for the tax agency since 2001.

However, Republicans have questioned the need for additional funding. Florida Sen. Rick Scott's "11 Point Plan to Rescue America," unveiled in February, proposes a 50% cut in funding and workforce at the IRS.

The White House and Senate Minority Leader Mitch McConnell have roundly rejected Scott's idea.

Caroline Bruckner, a tax professor at the American University Kogod School of Business, said the agency is "at a competitive disadvantage" for finding new staff based on its reputation for employees being wholly overworked. She said she based this on her own survey of tax students she teaches.

Bruckner said, "It's absurd we have put so much work on the IRS" without giving it the necessary resources to help Americans in the way that is expected.

Bruckner says along with increased funding, the IRS also "really has to change its narrative and the way it talks about its mission to one of service and being one of the most important anti-poverty systems that

we have in the U.S.”

During the 2020 budget year, the IRS processed more than 240 million tax returns and issued roughly \$736 billion in refunds, including \$268 billion in stimulus payments, according to the latest IRS data. In that same time frame, 59.5 million people called or visited an IRS office.

Another barrier to hiring is the pay structure of many IRS positions.

In February, National Taxpayer Advocate Erin Collins, who serves as an IRS ombudsman, told a Senate Finance subcommittee that the current base pay for some IRS employees is \$24,749.

“In this economy, it is not surprising that the IRS is having difficulty finding enough suitable job applicants,” Collins said.

Lisa Perkins, director of the Tax Clinic at the University of Connecticut School of Law, says the agency should bring in as many workers as possible to reduce the backlog, as it hurts low-income individuals who need their tax refunds quickly.

“This rush to hire 10,000 workers, it’s really not going to be effective until the next filing season,” she said, “but it is necessary.”

Scathing reports find military failures in 2020 Kenya attack

By LOLITA C. BALDOR Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — Military investigations have found poor leadership, inadequate training and a “culture of complacency” among U.S. forces undermined efforts to fend off a 2020 attack by militants in Kenya that killed three Americans, U.S. officials familiar with the probes told The Associated Press ahead of the release of the findings, expected Thursday.

Two military reviews of the attack by al-Shabab militants are scathing in their conclusions that there were failures across the board at the Manda Bay air base, where senior military leaders said there was a “deeply rooted culture of a false sense of security.” The attack also wounded three people and destroyed six aircraft, and killed at least six insurgents.

Army Gen. Stephen Townsend, head of U.S. Africa Command, which did the first review, told the AP that while the actions of no one person caused the attack or the casualties, the reviews concluded that security, intelligence, training and command failures contributed to the losses.

And Air Force Maj. Gen. Tom Wilcox, who was part of the team that did the second review, said that “none of the negligence that we found contributed to the primary cause of the loss of life or damage. However, we did find that they potentially contributed to the outcome, to vulnerabilities on the airfield.”

Defense officials said that a number of Air Force personnel were reviewed for possible disciplinary action and, as a result, eight have received some form of administrative punishment, including written reprimands and loss of certification. The eight range from junior enlisted airmen to officers below the general ranks. A written reprimand can be career-ending for an officer. The officials spoke on the condition of anonymity to describe personnel discipline.

The Manda Bay base, in the Kenyan seaside resort, was overrun by 30 to 40 of the al-Qaida-linked insurgents on Jan. 5, 2020, marking al-Shabab’s first attack against U.S. forces in the East African country. The pre-dawn assault triggered a lengthy firefight and daylong struggle for U.S. and Kenyan forces to search and secure the base.

The initial investigation into the attack was completed a year ago by U.S. Africa Command, but last April Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin ordered a new, independent review led by Gen. Paul Funk, commander of Army Training and Doctrine Command.

The new report largely mirrors the findings in the initial probe but expands its scope. Both are sharply critical of the inadequate security, training and oversight at the base. Austin has accepted the reports and their findings.

The base at Manda Bay has been used for years by the U.S. military, but it only became a full-time airfield in 2016, with increased personnel, aircraft and operations. According to the reviews, the military there never adjusted security to account for the expanded use and was lulled by the fact the base hadn’t

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been attacked in 16 years.

The complacency, said the Africom review, permeated every echelon and existed for several years.

The reviews criticized leadership at all levels, from the Air Force wing and security forces to special operations commanders and U.S. Africa Command. They found there was an inadequate understanding of and focus on the threats in the region.

Townsend said a vague intelligence report prior to the deadly attack referred to al-Shabab planning to attack United Nations aircraft. But that report didn't get to the right people due to staff shortages, And, he said, those who saw it "didn't connect the dots" — that it could be referring to the unmarked contract aircraft the U.S. has at Manda Bay.

He also noted, "We get these every day — al-Shabab is going to attack. Most of them never happen."

The reviews also said that the various command and service units at the base didn't communicate or coordinate well with each other or with the local Kenyan forces.

As a result, at 5:20 a.m., 20 to 30 al-Shabab militants were able to slip through a forest and fired rocket-propelled grenades onto the Magagoni Air Field at the base. In the first two minutes, the RPGs killed Army Spc. Henry Mayfield in a truck and killed two contractors, Dustin Harrison and Bruce Triplett, in an aircraft. Another soldier and a civilian contractor were wounded.

About a mile down the road, another smaller group of the militants fired on Camp Simba, a section of the adjacent Kenyan Navy base where U.S. forces are housed.

The reviews say security troops at the airfield were unprepared to respond to the attack and several never really engaged the insurgents. Instead, Marines at Camp Simba about a mile away responded first.

"Someone starts shooting, and Marines are going to go to the sound of the guns. And so they did. They mounted up, and they led the counterattack," said Townsend, who visited Manda Bay three weeks ago.

It took about 20 minutes for the Marine special operations team to get to the airfield and begin to fight back against the militants, who had made it onto the flightline and into buildings.

As Kenyan and additional U.S. security forces responded, al-Shabab attacked again. It took until midnight for the military to search the airfield and adjacent buildings and declare the area secure. During the counterattack one Marine and one Kenyan service member were wounded.

In interviews, Townsend and Wilcox said that substantial changes and improvements have been made — some in the first hours after the attack and others that have continued and grown over the past year.

Almost immediately, Army infantry soldiers were brought in for added security, and now the protection force is more than double the size it was during the attack. Fencing and other barriers now ring the entire base, including Camp Simba. And there have been overhauls of intelligence sharing and Air Force security training.

The Air Force now trains all deploying security forces together before they depart for the country, and it requires that personnel be more experienced in force protection to get senior jobs at the bases.

In addition, the reviews recommended that one senior commander at each base be in charge of force protection for the entire facility and that the commander be able to order training for all troops there. That would include units that may report to other commands -- such as special operations forces or Space Force teams that may be housed at the base.

Russian TV boosts Kremlin line on invasion after slow start

NEW YORK (AP) — Viewers of Russian state TV are told that Russian troops are in Ukraine to save people there from "neo-Nazis" and to disarm a country that was preparing to wage war on its own population.

The TV reports also say that people across Russia are supporting what the Kremlin calls the "special military operation" in Ukraine by forming convoys in which cars display the tricolor Russian flags. Or they gather in courtyards and form a large letter "Z," which has become a symbol of the Russian military. Or they rally in parking lots while chanting, "We don't abandon our own."

A news anchor at state TV channel Russia 24 rattled off the names of cities holding the demonstrations.

"Petropavlovsk-Kamchatsky, Chelyabinsk, Yekaterinburg, Stavropol, Tula — mass rallies in support of the

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special operation took place in these and many other cities all across the country,"

Another report was not much different.

"Drivers stick the letters 'Z' and 'V,' depicted on Russian military vehicles, onto their cars in a spontaneous flash mob, which was supported in absolutely all cities of our country as a sign of solidarity, support and pride in the courage of Russian soldiers," a narrator said. Those letters were painted or taped on tanks, trucks and other vehicles in Ukraine to designate their groups of origin.

It took several days after the start of the Feb. 24 invasion for Russia to gear up the campaign depicting what it said was widespread public support of the assault, which has killed thousands of soldiers and civilians in Ukraine and forced more than 2 million to flee the country.

The narrative of Russians standing behind their troops sought to counter spreading antiwar sentiment on the home front, with thousands protesting in the streets of Moscow, St. Petersburg and elsewhere, and over 1 million signing a petition to stop the attack.

Political analysts say Russians are indeed rallying around the flag, but the big question is how long such support will last in the face of the crippling Western sanctions and worsening living conditions, or whether it will eventually translate into increased support for President Vladimir Putin.

"A significant number of Russians perceive the situation as Russia finding itself in a serious challenge, and in these conditions, one shouldn't turn against the authorities," Tatyana Stanovaya, founder of the R.Politikl think-tank, told The Associated Press.

Unlike the grassroots efforts to speak out against the war, with dozens of open letters coming from different professional groups and spontaneous protests sparking in different Russian cities, public support of the invasion first appeared mostly through state-run media.

In seeking to control the narrative, the Kremlin has blocked most of Russia's independent media outlets and forced the rest to halt coverage altogether with threats of prosecution and prison for reporting that deviates from the official line, which includes calling the action a "war" or "invasion."

Regional authorities publicized pro-government car convoys in their areas. Patriotic videos, with crowds of young people looking into the camera and praising the Russian military by saying, "Keep working, brothers!" came from the youth branch of the Kremlin's United Russia party.

The state-funded TV network RT announced on its social media channels that it was selling T-shirts and hoodies with the letter "Z" on them to support Russian troops. Sergei Tsivilev, head of the Kemerovo region, announced a decision to rename the region by spelling it as "KuZbass," with the Latin "Z" in the middle, in official documents.

As time went on, signs of genuine public support started to emerge. The letter "Z," sometimes crudely made from paint or tape, appeared on buses, cars and office windows. Russian gymnast Ivan Kuliak put a small "Z" on his leotard and wore it at a World Cup event while standing next to a Ukrainian athlete.

Officials and state TV insist the Russian military is targeting only military facilities in Ukraine, blaming any attacks on civilians on what they call "neo-Nazis" in Kyiv's government, despite the fact that in 2019, Ukraine became the only country outside of Israel with both a president, Volodymyr Zelenskyy, and a prime minister who were Jewish. Zelenskyy's grandfather fought in the Soviet Army against the Nazis, while other relatives died in the Holocaust.

The Kremlin also has revived the scenario of being under siege that it used after the annexation of Crimea in 2014 drew sanctions, decrying the penalties imposed on Russia as an "unprecedented economic war" waged by the West in an effort to soften the blow to the population.

With independent sources of information largely cut off, it is easier for Russians to believe what the government tells them, says Nikolai Petrov, a senior research fellow in Chatham House's Russia and Eurasia Program.

"It is psychological comfort for people. They don't want to think that their leader is a criminal and is committing war crimes. They're more comfortable thinking that their army will rescue someone from Nazism," he said.

The Kremlin has long used the Soviet Union's victory over Nazi Germany in World War II as a way to

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bolster patriotic sentiment and has tried to tap into it by using the idea of the "neo-Nazism" as a threat from Ukraine.

Still, the level of support for the invasion can hardly be compared to the public elation that followed Russia's annexation of Crimea, said Andrei Kolesnikov, an analyst at the Carnegie Moscow Center.

"Blood, sweat, destruction. ... Russians support Putin, but because of the gravity of the situation, there is no such incredible mobilization as there was in 2014," Kolesnikov said.

And whatever support exists might wane as the economy suffers under the unprecedented sanctions and living conditions rapidly deteriorate, Petrov noted.

The sanctions tanked the ruble, disrupted supply chains and saw dozens of foreign companies and brands either pull out or suspend operations in Russia over the past two weeks. That included McDonalds, whose opening in Moscow in 1990 was a symbol of a new era of democracy and freedom.

Economists predicted shortages of goods, a spike in prices and a possible credit default.

"It is clear and inevitable that the mood will change," Petrov said. "In that sense, I think Putin has quite a limited period of time to declare a victory and bring the army back."

Russia-Ukraine war: Some pastors wonder about "end of days"

By DAVID CRARY AP National Writer

Russia's invasion of Ukraine has prompted some of America's most prominent evangelical leaders to raise a provocative question — asking if the world is now in the biblically prophesied "end of days" that might culminate with the apocalypse and the second coming of Christ.

There's no consensus on the answer, nor on any possible timetable.

Megachurch pastor Robert Jeffress, addressing his congregation at First Baptist Dallas, said many Christians are wondering, in the face of carnage in Ukraine, "Why does God permit evil like this to continue? ... Are we near Armageddon and the end of the world?"

"We are living in the last days," Jeffress said, "We've been living in the last days for the last 2000 years. We don't know, is this the end? Is this the beginning of the end, or the end of the beginning?"

The curators of raptureready.com -- which shares commentary about "end of days" prophecies -- suggest things could move quickly. Their "Rapture Index," -- on which any reading above 160 means "Fasten your seatbelts" -- was raised this week to 187, close to its record high of 189 in 2016.

One of the most detailed alerts came from televangelist Pat Robertson, who came out of retirement on Feb. 28 to assert on "The 700 Club" that Russian President Vladimir Putin was "compelled by God" to invade Ukraine as a prelude to an eventual climactic battle in Israel. Robertson said verses of the Old Testament Book of Ezekiel support this scenario.

"You can say, well, Putin's out of his mind. Yes, maybe so," Robertson said. "But at the same time, he's being compelled by God. He went into the Ukraine, but that wasn't his goal. His goal was to move against Israel, ultimately."

"It's all there," added Robertson, referring to Ezekiel. "And God is getting ready to do something amazing and that will be fulfilled."

Also evoking Ezekiel -- and a possible attack on Israel -- was Greg Laurie, senior pastor at a California megachurch whose books and radio programs have a wide following.

"I believe we're living in the last days. I believe Christ could come back at any moment," Laurie said in a video posted on YouTube.

Citing the war in Ukraine and the COVID-19 pandemic, he said biblical prophecies "are being fulfilled in our lifetime."

"We are seeing more things happen in real time, closer together, as the scriptures said they would be," Laurie said. "So what should we do? We should look up. We should remember that God is in control."

Predictions of an imminent "end of days" have surfaced with regularity over the centuries. Pat Robertson, for example, has inaccurately predicted apocalyptic events on previous occasions.

"One of the characteristics of apocalyptic thinking is that the most recent crisis is surely the worst — this

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is the one that is going to trip the end times calendar," said Dartmouth College history professor Randall Balmer.

"Now, admittedly, there may be some evidence for that, especially with Putin mumbling about nuclear weapons," Balmer added via email. "But I also remember the urgency of the Six Day War and George H. W. Bush's Persian Gulf War and, of course, 9/11."

The suggestion that God is somehow using the Russia-Ukraine war to fulfill biblical prophecies troubles some Christian scholars, such as the Rev. Rodney Kennedy, a Baptist pastor in Schenectady, New York, and author of numerous books.

"This evangelical insistence of involving the sovereignty of God in the evil of Putin borders on the absurd," Kennedy wrote recently in Baptist News.

"Rapture believers fail to understand that if they assist in bringing about world war, there will be no Superman Jesus appearing to 'snatch' all true believers into the safety of the clouds," Kennedy wrote. "The rapture is an illusion; the rupture caused by Putin is a deadly reality."

Russell Moore, public theologian at the evangelical magazine Christianity Today, said it's wrong to try to connect world events to end-times prophecy, noting that Jesus himself said his second coming would be unexpected and unconnected with "wars and rumors of wars."

"It's not consistent with the Bible and it's harmful to the witness of the church," said Moore, noting that the world has outlived many episodes of end-times speculation.

Moore said most Christians he's talked with are more concerned about Ukraine's well-being.

"I'm surprised at how little I am finding the idea that these events are direct biblical prophecy," he said. "I'm just not seeing that in the pews."

That's a change from the recent past, he noted, when many evangelicals tried to interpret world events as a road map to the apocalypse – driving sales for hugely successful authors Tim LaHaye ("Left Behind") and Hal Lindsey ("The Late Great Planet Earth").

"It's very rare for me to find someone under the age of 50" preoccupied with such views today, Moore said.

Jeffress said members of his congregation in Dallas are "very troubled by the atrocities being committed against the Ukrainian people and think we should push back forcefully against Putin's aggression."

"However, they are not headed toward their bunkers and preparing for Armageddon — yet," Jeffress said via email. "Most of our members understand that while the Bible prophesies the end of the world and return of Christ one day, no one has a clue when that day will be."

Laurie, in a written reply to questions from The Associated Press, said his congregation at Harvest Christian Fellowship "isn't fixated on the 'end times.'"

"My message for Christians during this time and really all people in general is don't panic, but pray," Laurie advised. "Live every day like it may be your last."

The war in Ukraine has heightened anxieties for some members of Mercy Hill Chapel, said Oleh Zhakunets, lead pastor of the small Southern Baptist church that holds services in Ukrainian and English in Parma, Ohio, a Cleveland suburb.

Several members have close relatives in Ukraine – some in more dangerous zones in eastern Ukraine and others who are welcoming refugees in the west, he said.

"It's a bag of mixed feelings," said Zhakunets, citing their worries for loved ones and their hope that God is in control.

Congregation members believe in biblical passages detailing signs of Jesus' return, he said, but they don't see Russia's invasion as fulfilling a specific prophecy.

"A lot of that is just guesswork," Zhakunets said. "We have hope that he's coming, but in terms of specifics, we're not going to give that kind of what we see as a false hope."

US VP Harris embraces call for war crimes probe of Russia

By AAMER MADHANI and ZEKE MILLER Associated Press

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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, citing the “atrocities” of bombing civilians, including a maternity hospital.

Speaking alongside Polish President Andrzej Duda at a press conference 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, as well as other attacks on civilians. She stopped short of directly accusing Russia of having committed war crimes.

“Absolutely there should be an investigation, and we should all be watching,” said Harris, noting that the United Nations has already started a process to review allegations. “I have no question the eyes of the world are on this war and what Russia has done in terms of this aggression and these atrocities.”

Harris’ visit to Poland came amid a kerfuffle between Warsaw and Washington over a Polish proposal to send its Soviet-made fighter jets to a U.S. and NATO base in Germany so they could then go to Ukraine. Poland, in turn, would receive American F-16s.

Poland had publicly floated the proposal without first consulting the U.S. Just as Harris arrived in Warsaw late Wednesday, the Pentagon definitively rejected the idea, saying it would run the risk of escalating the Russia-Ukraine war.

At Thursday’s news conference, both Harris and Duda sought to brush aside differences on the fighter jets issue.

“I want to be very clear, the United States and Poland are united in what we have done and are prepared to do to help Ukraine and the people of Ukraine, full stop,” she said.

Duda for his part sidestepped questions about why Poland announced its proposal without first consulting the United States. He stressed his government’s intention was driven by a desire for “NATO as a whole to make a common decision” on the matter.

“In a nutshell we have to be a responsible member of the North Atlantic Alliance,” Duda said.

Harris’ embrace for an investigation of war crimes came after the Biden administration on Wednesday warned that Russia might seek to use chemical or biological weapons in Ukraine as the White House rejected Russian claims of illegal chemical weapons development in the country it has invaded.

The White House raised the notion after Russian Foreign Ministry spokeswoman Maria Zakharova — without evidence — accused Ukraine of running chemical and biological weapons labs with U.S. support.

The International Criminal Court prosecutor announced last week he was launching an investigation that could target senior officials believed responsible for war crimes, crimes against humanity or genocide amid a rising civilian death toll and widespread destruction of property during Russia’s invasion of Ukraine.

But investigations at the ICC take many years, and relatively few convictions have ever been won. The ICC was set up in 2002 to prosecute war crimes, crimes against humanity and genocide. The crime of aggression, which can’t be investigated in Ukraine because neither Russia nor Ukraine is a member of the court, was added later.

White House press secretary Jen Psaki called the hospital bombing “horrific” and said the U.S. is going through a “legal review process” to determine whether to label the bombing a war crime.

Duda said “it is obvious to us that in Ukraine Russians are committing war crimes.” He added that in his view the invasion was “bearing the features of a genocide — it aims at eliminating and destroying a nation.”

Harris praised the Polish people for their generosity for taking in nearly 1.5 million refugees since Russia invaded Ukraine last month.

“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 earlier during a meeting 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.

Harris also met Thursday with seven refugees who have fled from Ukraine to Poland since the Russian invasion began. She praised the refugees for their “courage” and said the conversation would help inform

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U.S. assistance efforts. The group included a Ukrainian advocate for people with disabilities, a Moroccan university student, a professional film producer from Odessa, a Senegalese community leader and teacher, a LGBTQIA+ rights activist from Kyiv, and a Ukrainian energy expert and her young adult daughter.

"We are here to support you, and you are not alone," Harris told the group. "And I know there's so much about the experience that you've had that has made you feel alone. You are not alone. We around the world are watching."

The vice president also met with Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau while in Warsaw. The Canadian leader has been in Europe in recent days meeting with allies about Ukraine. Trudeau credited the Biden administration for rallying Europe's largely unified response.

"Vladimir Putin totally underestimated the strength and resolve of the Ukrainian people," Trudeau said. "But he also underestimated the strength and resolve of democracies to stand up in support of Ukraine, (and) in support of those values, and principles that underlie everything we do."

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.

Duda warned of a "refugee disaster" if Poland doesn't receive more assistance to help house and feed Ukrainians fleeing the conflict. He said he asked Harris for the U.S. to "speed up" the process for those Ukrainian refugees who would want to go to the U.S. and might have family there.

"The United States is absolutely prepared to do what we can and what we must to support Poland, in terms of the burden that they have taken on," Harris said.

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

US inflation soared 7.9% in past year, a fresh 40-year high

By CHRISTOPHER RUGABER AP Economics Writer

WASHINGTON (AP) — Propelled by surging costs for gas, food and housing, consumer inflation jumped 7.9% over the past year, the sharpest spike since 1982 and likely only a harbinger of even higher prices to come.

The increase reported Thursday by the Labor Department reflected the 12 months ending in February and didn't include the oil and gas price surges that followed Russia's invasion of Ukraine on Feb. 24. Since then, average gas prices nationally have jumped about 62 cents a gallon to \$4.32, according to AAA.

Even before the war further accelerated price increases, robust consumer spending, solid pay raises and persistent supply shortages had sent U.S. inflation to its highest level in four decades. What's more, housing costs, which make up about a third of the government's consumer price index, have risen sharply, a trend that's unlikely to reverse anytime soon.

"The numbers are eye-watering, and there is more to come," said Eric Winograd, senior economist at asset management firm AllianceBernstein. "The peak in inflation will be much higher than previously thought and will arrive later than previously expected."

The government's report Thursday showed that from January to February, inflation rose 0.8%, up from a 0.6% increase from December to January. Excluding the volatile food and energy categories, so-called core prices rose a sharp 0.5% month to month and 6.4% from a year earlier. Economists tend to monitor core prices because they more closely reflect longer-running inflation trends.

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 President Joe Biden and congressional Democrats as the midterm elections draw closer. Small business people 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 quarter-point hike next week. The Fed faces a delicate challenge, though: If it tight-

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ens credit too aggressively this year, it risks undercutting the economy and possibly triggering a recession.

From January to February, nearly every category of goods and services got pricier. Grocery costs jumped 1.4%, the sharpest one-month increase since 1990, other than during a pandemic-induced price surge two years ago. The collective price of fruits and vegetables rose 2.3%, the largest monthly increase since 2010. Gas prices spiked 6.6%, clothing 0.7%.

For the 12 months ending in February, grocery prices leapt 8.6%, the biggest year-over-year increase since 1981, the government said. Gas prices are up a whopping 38%. And housing costs have risen 4.7%, the largest yearly jump since 1991.

Lydia Boussour, an economist at Oxford Economics, estimates that if oil remains at \$120 a barrel for the rest of this year — which it topped Tuesday before slipping — it would cost U.S. households \$1,500, on average. It would also weaken economic growth by about 0.8 percentage point this year, she said. Many economists have cut their growth estimates for 2022 by roughly a half-point to about 2.5%.

Across the country, individual Americans as well as companies are struggling with the inflation spike and trying to minimize its impact.

"Gas prices are above the roof, especially with spring vacation coming up for the kids," Vikas Grover said while filling up his car Monday in Herndon, Virginia. "It definitely takes our overall budget much, much higher."

In San Jose, California, Maurice Brewster, the founder of Mosaic Global Transportation, a limousine and transportation company with nearly 100 vehicles, has been hammered by gas prices. A couple of months ago, Brewster had been paying \$4 a gallon. On Monday, the price was \$6.39.

"Inflation has been a killer," he said. "I feel it every day."

A major part of Brewster's business is shuttling workers from San Francisco to Silicon Valley companies like Google, Meta (formerly known as Facebook) and Merck. Gas costs are built into those contracts, and Brewster is now passing on the higher prices.

Brewster also rents limos to consumers for weddings, wine tours and other functions, and that business has boomed as pandemic restrictions have eased. He plans to add a 10% fuel surcharge for consumer rentals and is praying that his customers will pay it.

"I'm anticipating that it will not stop them from still wanting to get out and having a good time," he said. "I hope I'm not wrong."

Energy prices, which soared after Russia's invasion of Ukraine, jumped again this week after Biden said the United States would bar oil imports from Russia. Oil prices did retreat Wednesday on reports that the United Arab Emirates will urge fellow OPEC members to boost production. But they rose again Thursday.

The Biden White House has attributed much of the inflation surge to the ability of a few corporate giants to dominate industries and squeeze out competition that would otherwise lower prices. The administration argues that meat prices, for example, are higher because four meat-packing firms control the industry.

In his State of the Union address last week, Biden asserted that the U.S. should manufacture more goods at home, rather than overseas, to avoid the supply chain backups that are bedeviling many companies. Yet producing more competition or more home-grown products would take time and wouldn't reduce inflation anytime soon.

Republicans in Congress and many economists say the Biden administration's \$1.9 trillion financial rescue package, which distributed stimulus checks and enhanced unemployment benefits to tens of millions of households after the pandemic struck, contributed to high inflation by accelerating consumer spending.

The economic consequences of Russia's war 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 show declines. That won't likely happen. Should gas prices remain near their current levels, Winograd estimates that inflation could reach as high as 9% in March or April.

Laura Rosner-Warburton, senior economist at MacroPolicy Perspectives, suggested that a key question in coming months will be whether higher gas costs seep into the broader economy by escalating costs for

items like shipping and airline tickets. Such core price increases usually take longer to fade than volatile energy costs do.

Slower growth poses a particularly difficult challenge for the Fed, because it comes at a time that higher gas prices are also lifting inflation. That pattern is akin 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.

'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 potential 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 and, in all, about 35,000 people got out. People left Sumy, in the northeast near the Russian border; the suburbs of Kyiv; and Enerhodar, the southern town where Russian forces took over a large nuclear plant.

"Yes, I saw corpses of civilians," said Ilya Ivanov, who reached Poland after fleeing a village outside Sumy where Russian forces rolled through. "They shoot at civilians with machine guns."

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

In a staggering measure of displacement, Kyiv Mayor Vitali Klitschko on Thursday said about 2 million people, or "every second person" among the capital's residents, have left the metro area.

In addition to the growing number of refugees, at least 1 million people have been displaced within Ukraine, 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.

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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.

U.S. Vice President Kamala Harris on Thursday embraced calls for an international war crimes investigation of Russia, expressing outrage over the bombing of the children's hospital in Mariupol. "Absolutely there should be an investigation, and we should all be watching," she said.

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 apply 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."

How will COVID end? Experts look to past epidemics for clues

By MIKE STOBBE AP Medical Writer

NEW YORK (AP) — Two years into the COVID-19 pandemic, most of the world has seen a dramatic improvement in infections, hospitalizations and death rates in recent weeks, signaling the crisis appears to be winding down. But how will it end? Past epidemics may provide clues.

The ends of epidemics are not as thoroughly researched as their beginnings. But there are recurring themes that could offer lessons for the months ahead, said Erica Charters of the University of Oxford, who studies the issue.

"One thing we have learned is it's a long, drawn-out process" that includes different types of endings that may not all occur at the same time, she said. That includes a "medical end," when disease recedes, the "political end," when government prevention measures cease, and the "social end," when people move on.

The COVID-19 global pandemic has waxed and waned differently in different parts of the world. But in the United States, at least, there is reason to believe the end is near.

About 65% of Americans are fully vaccinated, and about 29% are both vaccinated and boosted. Cases have been falling for nearly two months, with the U.S. daily average dropping about 40% in the last week alone. Hospitalizations also have plummeted, down nearly 30%. Mask mandates are vanishing — even federal health officials have stopped wearing them — and President Joe Biden has said it's time for people to return to offices and many aspects of pre-pandemic life.

But this pandemic has been full of surprises, lasting more than two years and causing nearly 1 million deaths in the U.S. and more than 6 million around the world. Its severity has been surprising, in part because many people drew the wrong lesson from a 2009-2010 flu pandemic that turned out to be nowhere as deadly as initially feared.

"We got all worried but then nothing happened (in 2009), and I think that was what the expectation was" when COVID-19 first emerged, said Kristin Heitman, a Maryland-based researcher who collaborated with Charters.

That said, some experts offered takeaways from past epidemics that may inform how the end of the COVID-19 pandemic may play out.

FLU

Before COVID-19, influenza was considered the most deadly pandemic agent. A 1918-1919 flu pandemic killed 50 million people around the world, including 675,000 in the U.S., historians estimate. Another flu pandemic in 1957-1958 killed an estimated 116,000 Americans, and another in 1968 killed 100,000 more.

A new flu in 2009 caused another pandemic, but one that turned out not to be particularly dangerous to the elderly — the group that tends to die the most from flu and its complications. Ultimately, fewer than 13,000 U.S. deaths were attributed to that pandemic.

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The World Health Organization in August 2010 declared the flu had moved into a post-pandemic period, with cases and outbreaks moving into customary seasonal patterns.

In each case, the pandemics waned as time passed and the general population built immunity. They became the seasonal flu of subsequent years. That kind of pattern is probably what will happen with the coronavirus, too, experts say.

"It becomes normal," said Matthew Ferrari, director of Penn State's Center for Infectious Disease Dynamics. "There's a regular, undulating pattern when there's a time of year when there's more cases, a time of year when there's less cases. Something that's going to look a lot like seasonal flu or the common cold."

HIV

In 1981, U.S. health officials reported a cluster of cases of cancerous lesions and pneumonia in previously healthy gay men in California and New York. More and more cases began to appear, and by the next year officials were calling the disease AIDS, for acquired immune deficiency syndrome.

Researchers later determined it was caused by HIV — human immunodeficiency virus — which weakens a person's immune system by destroying cells that fight disease and infection. For years, AIDS was considered a terrifying death sentence, and in 1994 it became the leading cause of death for Americans ages 25 to 44.

But treatments that became available in the 1990s turned it into a manageable chronic condition for most Americans. Attention shifted to Africa and other parts of the world, where it was not controlled and is still considered an ongoing emergency.

Pandemics don't end with a disease ebbing uniformly across the globe, Charters said. "How a pandemic ends is generally by becoming multiple (regional) epidemics," she said.

ZIKA

In 2015, Brazil suffered an outbreak of infections from Zika virus, spread by mosquitoes that tended to cause only mild illness in most adults and children. But it became a terror as it emerged that infection during pregnancy could cause a birth defect that affected brain development, causing babies to be born with unusually small heads.

By late that year, mosquitoes were spreading it in other Latin American countries, too. In 2016, the WHO declared it an international public health emergency, and a U.S. impact became clear. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention received reports of 224 cases of Zika transmission by mosquitoes in the continental United States and more than 36,000 in U.S. territories — the vast majority in Puerto Rico.

But the counts fell dramatically in 2017 and virtually disappeared shortly after, at least in the U.S. Experts believe the epidemic died as people developed immunity. "It just sort of burned out" and the pressure for making a Zika vaccine available in the U.S. ebbed, said Dr. Denise Jamieson, a former CDC official who was a key leader in the agency's responses to Zika.

It's possible Zika will be a dormant problem for years but outbreaks could occur again if the virus mutates or if larger numbers of young people come along without immunity. With most epidemics, "there's never a hard end," said Jamieson, who is now chair of gynecology and obstetrics at Emory University's medical school.

COVID-19

The Geneva-based WHO declared COVID-19 a pandemic on March 11, 2020, and it will decide when enough countries have seen a sufficient decline in cases — or, at least, in hospitalizations and deaths — to say the international health emergency is over.

The WHO has not yet announced target thresholds. But officials this week responded to questions about the possible end of the pandemic by noting how much more needs to be accomplished before the world can turn the page.

COVID-19 cases are waning in the U.S., and dropped globally in the last week by 5%. But cases are rising in some places, including the United Kingdom, New Zealand and Hong Kong.

People in many countries need vaccines and medications, said Dr. Carissa Etienne, director of the Pan American Health Organization, which is part of the WHO.

In Latin America and the Caribbean alone, more than 248 million people have not yet had their first dose

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of COVID-19 vaccine, Etienne said during a press briefing with reporters. Countries with low vaccination rates likely will see future increases in illnesses, hospitalizations and deaths, she said.

"We are not yet out of this pandemic," said Dr. Ciro Ugarte, PAHO's director of health emergencies. "We still need to approach this pandemic with a lot of caution."

Amid heavy shelling, Ukraine's Mariupol city uses mass grave

By EVGENIY MALOLETKA Associated Press

MARIUPOL, Ukraine (AP) — With bodies piling up in Russia's nine-day siege of Mariupol, the port city of 430,000 in southeastern Ukraine, local authorities are hurrying to bury the dead in a mass grave.

City workers made quick signs of the cross gestures as they pushed bodies wrapped in carpets or bags into a deep trench some 25 meters (80 feet) long on the outskirts of the city.

More than 70 bodies have been interred in the common grave since it was opened Tuesday.

About half of those buried were killed in the intense shelling of the city, estimated an AP journalist who visited the burial ground. Others died at home from natural causes, but authorities were unable to arrange for the collection of the bodies or their burial.

Mariupol has suffered at least 8 major airstrikes in the past 48 hours, with a children's hospital and the central fire department among those hit.

City residents are staying in shelters as much as possible as temperatures dip to minus 9 degrees Celsius (15 degrees Fahrenheit).

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 may aggravate the highest inflation in four decades.

Venezuelan oil might help ease inflation pressures, at least psychologically and in the medium term, even if it would take time for significant supplies to reach the U.S.

But while Venezuela is eager to win relaxation of the economically devastating sanctions, there were signs Thursday it's not ready to immediately abandon ties to key ally Russia.

Only days after the U.S. talks, Venezuelan Vice President Delcy Rodríguez met in Turkey with Russia's Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov on the sideline of his talks with Ukraine, according to a photo tweet from Russia's embassy in Caracas, though no details of their discussions were released.

Still, the approach has changed in Washington.

"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

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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.

But some American lawmakers are hopeful that direct talks with Maduro can produce meaningful changes. Rep. Gregory Meeks, chairman of the House Foreign Affairs Committee, applauded Biden’s efforts and said he should next suspend oil sanctions to provide support for negotiations without letting up pressure on human rights abusers and corrupt officials.

“The Trump-era oil sanctions currently in place have only deepened the suffering of the Venezuelan people and failed to weaken Maduro’s control of the country,” Meeks said in a statement Wednesday.

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 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 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. Congress, have started to chastise Biden for abandoning a multilateral policy of isolating Maduro.

Wherever the outreach ends up, 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.

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"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."

Today in History

By The Associated Press undefined

Today in History

Today is Friday, March 11, the 70th day of 2022. There are 295 days left in the year.

Today's Highlight in History:

On March 11, 1941, President Franklin D. Roosevelt signed the Lend-Lease Bill, providing war supplies to countries fighting the Axis.

On this date:

In 1862, during the Civil War, President Abraham Lincoln removed Gen. George B. McClellan as general-in-chief of the Union armies, leaving him in command of the Army of the Potomac, a post McClellan also ended up losing.

In 1918, what were believed to be the first confirmed U.S. cases of a deadly global flu pandemic were reported among U.S. Army soldiers stationed at Fort Riley, Kansas; 46 soldiers would die. (The worldwide outbreak of influenza claimed an estimated 20 to 40 million lives.)

In 1942, as Japanese forces continued to advance in the Pacific during World War II, U.S. Army Gen. Douglas MacArthur left the Philippines for Australia, where he vowed on March 20, "I shall return" — a promise he kept more than 2 1/2 years later.

In 1954, the U.S. Army charged that Sen. Joseph R. McCarthy, R-Wis., and his subcommittee's chief counsel, Roy Cohn, had exerted pressure to obtain favored treatment for Pvt. G. David Schine, a former consultant to the subcommittee. (The confrontation culminated in the famous Senate Army-McCarthy hearings.)

In 1985, Mikhail S. Gorbachev was chosen to succeed the late Konstantin U. Chernenko as general secretary of the Soviet Communist Party.

In 1997, rock star Paul McCartney was knighted by Queen Elizabeth II.

In 2002, two columns of light soared skyward from Ground Zero in New York as a temporary memorial to the victims of the Sept. 11 attacks six months earlier.

In 2004, ten bombs exploded in quick succession across the commuter rail network in Madrid, Spain, killing 191 people in an attack linked to al-Qaida-inspired militants.

In 2006, former Serb leader Slobodan Milosevic (sloh-BOH'-dahn mee-LOH'-shuh-vich) was found dead of a heart attack in his prison cell in the Netherlands, abruptly ending his four-year U.N. war crimes trial; he was 64.

In 2010, a federal appeals court in San Francisco upheld the use of the words "under God" in the Pledge of Allegiance and "In God We Trust" on U.S. currency.

In 2011, a magnitude-9.0 earthquake and resulting tsunami struck Japan's northeastern coast, killing nearly 20,000 people and severely damaging the Fukushima Dai-ichi nuclear power station.

In 2020, the World Health Organization declared the coronavirus outbreak a pandemic. Former Hollywood producer Harvey Weinstein was sentenced in New York to 23 years in prison for rape and sexual abuse.

Ten years ago: Sixteen Afghan villagers — mostly women and children — were shot dead as they slept by U.S. Army Staff Sgt. Robert Bales, who later pleaded guilty and was sentenced to life in prison without parole.

Five years ago: Preet Bharara, an outspoken Manhattan federal prosecutor known for crusading against public corruption, announced on his personal Twitter account that he was fired after refusing a request to resign from Attorney General Jeff Sessions, who had asked that leftover appointees of former President

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Barack Obama leave.

One year ago: In his first prime-time address, President Joe Biden pledged to make all adults eligible for coronavirus vaccines by May. Biden signed into law a \$1.9 trillion COVID relief package that he said would help defeat the virus and nurse the economy back to health; Americans would receive up to \$1,400 in direct payments, along with extended unemployment benefits. In a poll by The Associated Press and the NORC Center for Public Affairs Research, about 1 in 5 Americans said they had lost a relative or close friend to the coronavirus. Uber and Lyft said they had teamed up to create a database of drivers ousted from their ride-hailing services for complaints about sexual assault and other crimes.

Today's Birthdays: Media mogul Rupert Murdoch is 91. Former ABC News correspondent Sam Donaldson is 88. Musician Flaco Jimenez (FLAH'-koh hee-MEH'-nez) is 83. Actor Tricia O'Neil is 77. Actor Mark Metcalf is 76. Rock singer-musician Mark Stein (Vanilla Fudge) is 75. Singer Bobby McFerrin is 72. Movie director Jerry Zucker is 72. Singer Cheryl Lynn is 71. Actor Susan Richardson is 70. Recording executive Jimmy Iovine (eye-VEEN') is 69. Singer Nina Hagen is 67. Country singer Jimmy Fortune (The Statler Brothers) is 67. Actor Elias Koteas (ee-LY'-uhs koh-TAY'-uhs) is 61. Actor-director Peter Berg is 60. Singer Mary Gauthier (GOH'-shay) is 60. Actor Jeffrey Nordling is 60. Actor Alex Kingston is 59. Actor Wallace Langham is 57. Former U.S. Rep. Jesse Jackson Jr., D-Ill., is 57. Actor John Barrowman is 55. Singer Lisa Loeb is 54. Neo-soul musician Al Gamble (St. Paul & the Broken Bones) is 53. Singer Pete Drogé is 53. Actor Terrence Howard is 53. Rock musician Rami Jaffee is 53. Actor Johnny Knoxville is 51. Rock singer-musicians Benji and Joel Madden (Good Charlotte; The Madden Brothers) are 43. Actor David Anders is 41. Singer LeToya Luckett is 41. Actor Thora Birch is 40. TV personality Melissa Rycroft is 39. Actor Rob Brown is 38. Actor Jodie Comer is 29.