

# Groton Daily Independent

Saturday, March 12, 2022 ~ Vol. 30 - No. 248 ~ 1 of 73

**Remember to turn clocks ahead  
1 hour before going to bed  
tonight!**

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## UpComing Events

### Saturday, March 12

Show Choir at Aberdeen Competition, 1 p.m., at Aberdeen Central Center Stage

### 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

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

**OPEN:** **Recycling Trailer in Groton**  
The recycling trailer is located west of the city shop. It takes cardboard, papers and aluminum cans.

Chicken Soup  
for the Soul

WE CANNOT CURE  
THE WORLD OF  
SORROWS, BUT WE  
CAN CHOOSE TO  
LIVE IN JOY.

JOSEPH CAMPBELL



## 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!

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## Groton City Council Meeting Agenda

March 15, 2022 – 7:00pm

City Hall – 120 N Main Street

(IF YOU WOULD LIKE TO CALL IN TO THIS MEETING, PLEASE MAKE PRIOR ARRANGEMENTS TO DO SO BY CALLING CITY HALL 605-397-8422)

1. Public Comments - pursuant to SDCL 1-25-1  
(Public Comments will offer the opportunity for anyone not listed on the agenda to speak to the council. Speaking time will be limited to 3 minutes. No action will be taken on questions or items not on the agenda.)

2. Minutes
3. Bills
4. February Finance Report
5. Spring Garbage Routes – Effective March 21, 2022
6. Discussion and award of Pool Resurfacing Contract
7. 608 N 2nd Street Curb & Gutter
8. Authorization to pay IMEG invoices
9. Authorization for Purchase of Electric Supplies/Materials – Todd Gay
10. Pool Pass donation for Lynso Keller Benefit Auction on Saturday, April 30th.
11. Appoint Election Board for April 12th Election and Establish Wage
12. Allied Health Insurance refund for lower-than-expected claim costs
13. Reschedule Equalization Meeting – March 21st at 6:00 PM
14. Community Center Surplus
15. Recipient of Aeronautics Fund for Airport Improvement in the amount of \$8,841.20
16. Recipient of Stephanie Miller-Davis Library Grant in the amount of \$1,000.00
17. Mayor to proclaim March 14th – 20th as Groton Tiger Week to honor the Groton Area Boy's Basketball Team earning an invitation to the State A Boy's Basketball Tournament
18. April 5-6, 2022 – SDMEA Conference and Technology Expo in Watertown, SD – Todd Gay & Landon Johnson
19. Reminder – SDML District 6 Annual Meeting 3/23/2022
20. Executive session personnel & legal 1-25-2 (1) & (3)
21. Hire Summer Employees
22. Allow Groton PD Officers to Exceed Vacation Time Cap
23. Authorization to Allow Raise Continuation for Deputy Finance Officer
24. Adjournment

## GROTON AREA SCHOOL DISTRICT #06-6

### School Board Meeting

March 14, 2022 – 7:00 PM – GHS Library Conference Room

#### AGENDA:

1. Call to Order with members present. Approve agenda as proposed or amended.

#### POTENTIAL CONFLICTS DISCLOSURE PURSUANT SDCL 23-3

#### CONSENT AGENDA:

1. Approval of minutes of February 14, 2022 school board meeting as drafted or amended.
2. Approval of February 2022 District bills for payment.
3. Approval of February 2022 Financial Report, Custodial Accounts, and Investments.
4. Approval of February 2022 School Lunch Report.
5. Approval of February 2022 School Transportation Report.

#### OLD/CONTINUING BUSINESS:

1. Open Forum for Public Participation...in accordance with Board Policy & Guidelines.
2. Administrative Reports: (a) Superintendent's Report; (b) Principal's Reports; (c) Business Manager Report

#### NEW BUSINESS:

1. Consider school bus bids.
2. Consider elementary roofing project bids.
3. Set 2022 Driver's Education Fee and issue Driver's Education Instructor Agreements.
4. Executive session pursuant SDCL 1-25-2(1) including Superintendent's evaluation and SDCL 1-25-2(4) for negotiations and SDCL 1-25-2(2) for student issue.
5. Act on open enrollment application #22-07.
6. Approve resignation of Austin Fordham at end of 2021-2022 school year.
7. Approve resignation of Kristen Gonsoir, Debate and Oral Interp Coach, for the 2022-2023 school year.
8. Approve contract for Heather Rowen, 3<sup>rd</sup> Grade Teacher, for 2022-2023 school year.

#### ADJOURN

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## SENIOR MEALS PROGRAM

APRIL 2022

month/year

SITE: GROTON / CONDE

MONDAY	TUESDAY	WEDNESDAY	THURSDAY	FRIDAY
				1 DRI-27 Lemon Baked Fish Rice Pilaf California Blend Veggies Fruit Crisp Whole Wheat Bread
4 DRI-40 Ranch Chicken Breast Boiled Potato Squash Fruit Whole Wheat Bread	5 Hamburger w/ Bun Oven Roasted Potatoes Mixed Vegetables Fruit Ice Cream Sundae	6 DRI-28 Scalloped Potato/Ham Peas Sunset Salad Cookie Whole Wheat Bread	7 DRI-48 Roast Beef Mashed Potatoes/Gravy Carrots Peach Cobbler Whole Wheat Bread	8 DRI-39 Tuna Noodle Casserole Broccoli Swedish Apple Pie Square Whole Wheat Bread
11 DRI-64 Lasagna Rotini Tossed Salad/Dressing Ambrosia Fruit Salad Cookie Whole Wheat Bread	12 DRI-24 Hot Turkey Sandwich Macaroni Salad Mandarin Orange Dessert Sherbet	13 DRI-29 Oven Fried Chicken Mashed Potatoes Mixed Vegetables Buttermilk Biscuits Banana Pudding w/Bananas	14 DRI-18 Sweet and Sour Pork Steamed Rice Carrot & Broccoli Medley Honey Fruit Salad Whole Wheat Bread	15  HOLIDAY  GOOD FRIDAY
18 DRI-51 Creamed Chicken Buttermilk Biscuit Peas Mandarin Oranges Cookie	19 DRI-49 Salisbury Steak Mashed Potatoes/Gravy Coleslaw Fruit Frosted Brownie Whole Wheat Bread	20 DRI-57 Baked Chicken Breast Noodles Romanoff Lemon Buttered Broccoli Pineapple Strawberry Ambrosia Whole Wheat Bread	21 DRI-8 Ham/Raisin Sauce Sweet Potatoes Mixed Vegetables Crazy Cake Dinner Roll	22 DRI-35 BBQ Beef Sandwich Potato Salad Carrots & Peas Fresh Fruit
25 DRI-44 Swiss Steak w/Mushroom Gravy/Mashed Potatoes Mixed Vegetables Pears Whole Wheat Bread	26 DRI-43 Lemon Chicken Breast Creamy Noodles Spinach Salad Baked Apple Slices Whole Wheat Bread	27 DRI-14 Tater Tot Hotdish Green Beans Grape Juice Sour Cream Apple Pie Square Whole Wheat Bread	28 DRI-3 Turkey & Dressing Mashed Potatoes/Gravy Broccoli Cranberry Sauce Pumpkin Bar Whole Wheat Bread	29 DRI-26 Salmon Loaf Creamed Peas Fruit Brownie Whole Wheat Bread

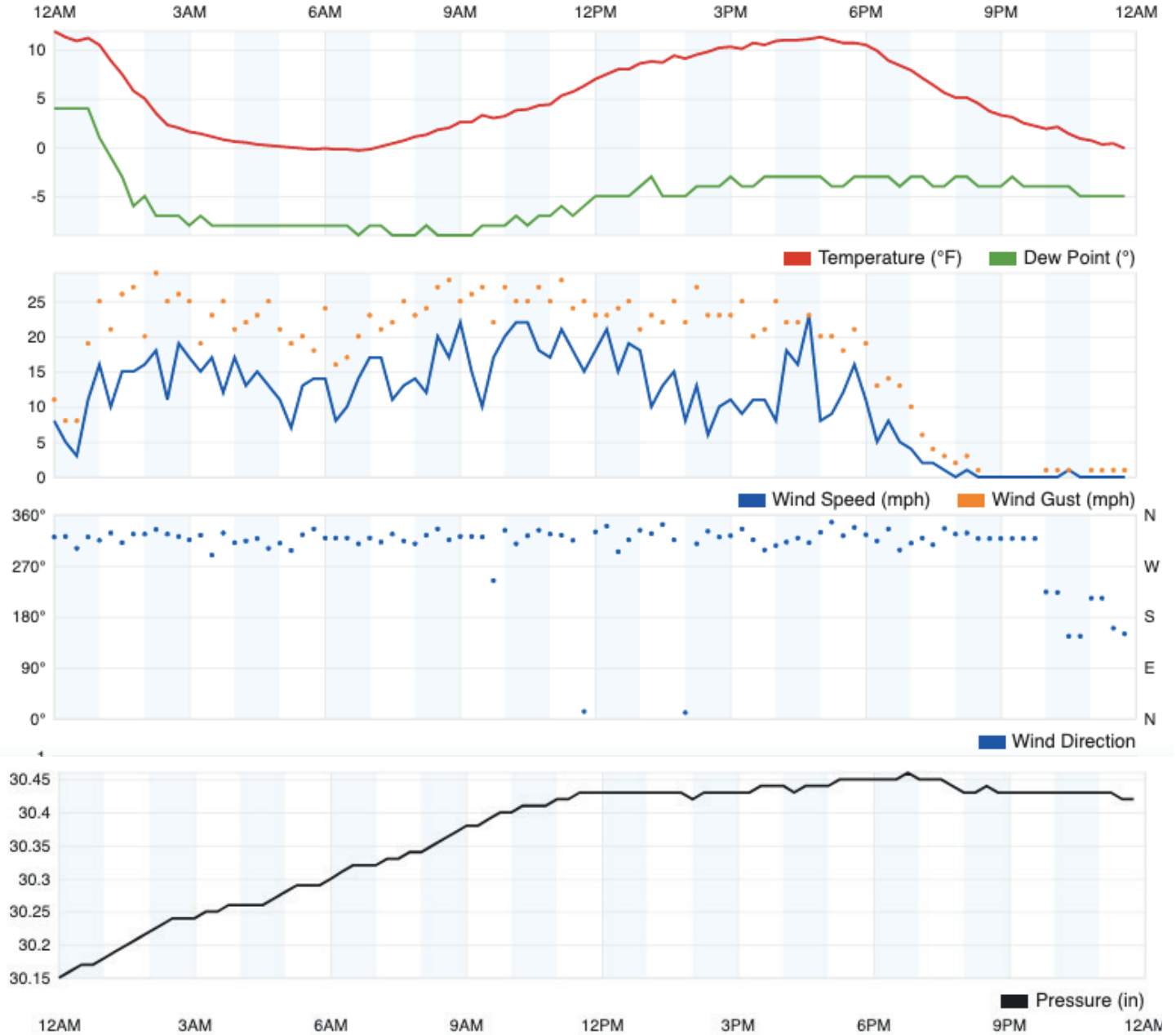
MEALS APPROVED BY: REGISTERED DIETITIAN

All meals include milk

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## Yesterday's Groton Weather Graphs



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Today	Tonight	Sunday	Sunday Night	Monday
Partly Sunny and Breezy	Partly Cloudy	Increasing Clouds	Chance Wintry Mix	Mostly Sunny
High: 44 °F	Low: 24 °F	High: 45 °F	Low: 23 °F	High: 37 °F

## Milder Temps Begin Today

Daylight Saving Time begins Sunday morning

Updated: 3/12/2022 5:36 AM CST  
 NATIONAL WEATHER SERVICE  
 OCEANIC AND ATMOSPHERIC ADMINISTRATION

### Today

**32 to 56°**  
 Coolest across and east of the Prairie Coteau

Breezy to windy. **Forecast wind gusts below.** High to very high fire danger this afternoon across parts of central SD.

### Sunday

**34 to 60°**  
 Coolest across and east of northern Prairie Coteau

Low pressure brings a chance for snow Sunday evening. **Probability of snow below.** Less than an inch most likely.

### Next Week

**Lots of Mid 40s to 60s**

A tad cooler Monday, then widespread above normal readings. Mostly dry. **Forecast high temperatures below.**

	6am	9am	12pm	3pm	6pm	9pm	12am
Aberdeen	22	32	33	30	25	28	28
Eagle Butte	23	28	39	40	33	29	22
Miller	20	28	31	31	23	28	26
Mobridge	22	28	36	41	26	21	20
Pierre	15	23	36	41	25	21	16
Sisseton	14	24	30	31	28	32	32
Watertown	14	26	36	36	31	32	31
Milbank	10	20	29	30	30	36	33

	Sun			Mon			
	3pm	6pm	9pm	12am	3am	6am	9am
Aberdeen	4	31	31	31	26	26	0
Eureka	7	32	32	32	15	15	0
Gettysburg	2	15	15	15	13	13	0
Mobridge	5	21	21	21	12	12	0
Pierre	0	6	6	8	8	8	0
Sisseton	5	36	36	45	45	45	2
Watertown	2	20	20	28	28	28	1
Wheaton	4	31	31	47	47	47	3

	Mon	Tue	Wed	Thu	Fri
Aberdeen	39	56	53	50	56
Eagle Butte	47	60	55	50	56
Miller	44	62	58	54	59
Mobridge	47	62	58	53	58
Pierre	49	65	60	56	61
Sisseton	32	48	46	43	49
Watertown	36	54	53	47	53
Wheaton	29	44	43	39	44

After a very cold morning, temperatures moderate quickly by this afternoon on breezy southwesterly winds. A Wind Advisory is in effect across portions of Central SD this afternoon. Generally light snow is possible for some Sunday night, otherwise the next several days look mostly dry. Mild temperatures continue into the new work-week.

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## Latest Sub-Zero Temps on Record

### Aberdeen *Average: Mar 3*

Year	Last	Value
2018	04-04 (2018)	-6
1975	04-03 (1975)	-2
1969	03-30 (1969)	-14
1923	03-30 (1923)	-2
1899	03-30 (1899)	-6

### Watertown *Average: Mar 2*

Year	Last	Value
1928	04-14 (1928)	-5
1926	04-05 (1926)	-10
2018	04-04 (2018)	-3
1975	04-01 (1975)	-2
1969	03-30 (1969)	-12

### Sisseton *Average: Mar 2*

Year	Last	Value
1936	04-07 (1936)	-3
1969	03-29 (1969)	-5
1964	03-29 (1964)	-2
1955	03-25 (1955)	-5
1974	03-24 (1974)	-12

### Pierre *Average: Feb 20*

Year	Last	Value
1965	03-29 (1965)	-7
1964	03-26 (1964)	-3
1955	03-25 (1955)	-1
2002	03-22 (2002)	-3
1951	03-21 (1951)	-2

### Mobridge *Average: Feb 26*

Year	Last	Value
1975	04-01 (1975)	-1
1965	03-29 (1965)	-3
1964	03-29 (1964)	-5
1913	03-28 (1913)	-4
1931	03-27 (1931)	-1

### Miller *Average: Feb 24*

Year	Last	Value
1964	03-29 (1964)	-1
1921	03-28 (1921)	-2
1913	03-27 (1913)	-14
1996	03-26 (1996)	-1
1915	03-26 (1915)	-4

 NATIONAL WEATHER SERVICE  
OCEANIC AND ATMOSPHERIC ADMINISTRATION

Averages based on 1991-2020 data

Created: 3/12/2022 5:58 AM CST

Did our last sub-zero temperatures of the season just take place? Considering the mild outlook for much of the rest of March, it's a real possibility. Besides, history would suggest the odds are in our favor, as we're already past our average last sub-zero date (well past for some). That said, history also suggests that sub-zero temperatures can occur in April...

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## Today in Weather History

March 12, 1995: Rapid snowmelt, due to warm temperatures, caused widespread flooding of streams, low areas, and farmland. Many roads were covered with water, and some were washed out. Some utility poles and lines were damaged. High water levels destroyed some schools, houses, and other buildings. Day County was especially stricken, with damage to roads alone estimated at \$75,000. Ice jams exacerbated the flooding on some culverts and streams.

1888 - A blizzard paralyzed southeastern New York State and western New England. The storm produced 58 inches of snow at Saratoga NY, and 50 inches at Middletown CT. The blizzard was followed by record cold temperatures, and the cold and snow claimed 400 lives. New York City received 20.9 inches of snow, Albany NY reported 46.7 inches. (David Ludlum) (The Weather Channel)

1928: The St. Frances dam near Santa Paula, California, burst before midnight, sending 138,000 acres of water rushing down the San Francisquito Canyon, killing 450 people. The dam was designed and built between 1924 and 1926 by the Los Angeles Department of Water and Power, then named the Bureau of Water Works and Supply.

1954 - A blizzard raged from eastern Wyoming into the Black Hills of western South Dakota, while a severe ice storm was in progress from northeastern Nebraska to central Iowa. The ice storm isolated 153 towns in Iowa. Dust from the Great Plains caused brown snow, and hail and muddy rain over parts of Wisconsin and Michigan. (11th-13th) (The Weather Channel)

1967 - A tremendous four day storm raged across California. Winds of 90 mph closed mountain passes, heavy rains flooded the lowlands, and in sixty hours Squaw Valley CA was buried under 96 inches (eight feet) of snow. (David Ludlum)

1976: A massive tornado outbreak spawned tornadoes in the Great Lakes and Midwest, including 9 in northern Indiana and extreme southern Michigan. A tornado missed President Ford's motorcade by a quarter-mile near O'Hare. The next morning, he got out of his vehicle to view the damage.

1987 - Unseasonably cold weather prevailed in the southeastern U.S., with gale force winds along the Middle Atlantic Coast. A storm in the Pacific Northwest produced rain and gale force winds. Crescent City CA received 2.27 inches of rain in 24 hours. (The National Weather Summary) (Storm Data)

1993: An incredible blizzard known as "The Superstorm" struck the eastern United States on this date through the 15th. The storm was described as the most costly non-tropical storm ever to hit the U.S., doing an estimated \$6 billion in damage. The storm was as strong as a hurricane regarding winds and low pressure. The pressure dropped to an incredible 28.35 inches of mercury or 960 millibars when then the storm was located over the Chesapeake Bay. Boston, Massachusetts, recorded a wind gust to 81 mph, the most substantial wind they had recorded since Hurricane Edna in 1954. Also, as the storm was intensifying over the Gulf of Mexico, a wind gust to 99 mph was recorded by an offshore oil rig. It dumped incredible amounts of snow from Alabama to New England. The snow amounts were significant everywhere, but for places like Birmingham, Alabama, the 17 inches recorded brought the city to a standstill for three days. Mount Leconte, North Carolina, recorded 60 inches of snow. Practically every weather station in West Virginia established a new 24-hour snowfall record during the event. Syracuse, New York was buried under 43 inches of snow. The storm killed 220 people, and another 48 lost at sea. The storm also brought a 12-foot storm surge and 15 tornadoes to Florida, where 51 people were killed. Air travel was brought to a halt as every major airport from Atlanta north was closed during the height of the storm. During the late evening into the early morning hours of the 13th, a vicious squall line swept through Florida and spawned 11 tornadoes resulting in five fatalities. Thunderstorm winds gusted to 110 mph at Alligator Point and 109 mph at Dry Tortugas. Exceptionally high tides occurred along the western Florida coast. A 13-foot storm surge occurred in Taylor County, Florida, resulting in 10 deaths with 57 residences destroyed. A 5 to 8-foot storm surge moved ashore in Dixie County. Over 500 homes were destroyed, with major damage to another 700 structures.



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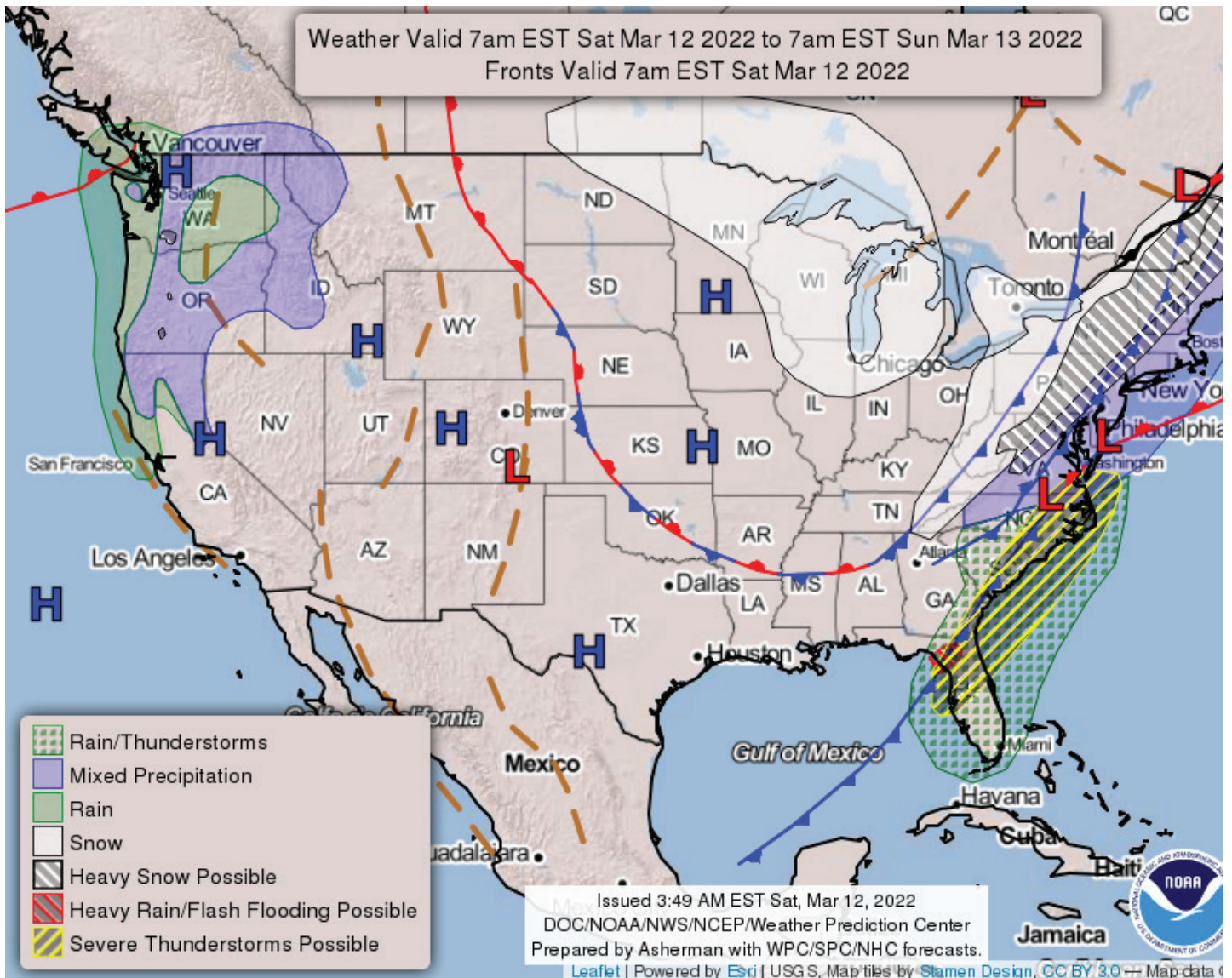
## Yesterday's Groton Weather

**High Temp: 12 °F at 12:00 AM**  
**Low Temp: 0 °F at 11:57 PM**  
**Wind: 30 mph at 1:21 AM**  
**Precip: 0.00**

Day length: 11 hours, 47 minutes

## Today's Info

Record High: 72 in 2016  
Record Low: -20 in 1897  
Average High: 39°F  
Average Low: 18°F  
Average Precip in Mar.: 0.29  
Precip to date in Mar.: 0.00  
Average Precip to date: 1.46  
Precip Year to Date: 0.97  
Sunset Tonight: 6:35:42 PM  
Sunrise Tomorrow: 7:46:31 AM



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## PROMISES! PROMISES!

Making a promise is easy. Keeping a promise may be difficult. Most of us make promises without giving much thought to the consequences of not keeping the promise either to ourselves or to the one we made the promise to. But making a promise means that we have given our word that we will or will not do something. It can be something that is significant or something that is insignificant. That part does not matter. What does matter is that we have given our word.

Most of us have made and broken many promises. We may forget what we said we would do, or what is even worse; we may have had no intention to keep our word. When people give us their word or make a promise, we expect them to honor it. When they don't do as they said they would do, we feel disappointed and let down.

Whenever God made a promise, it went into effect at that very moment and will continue through eternity. So, when the Psalmist said, "Sustain me, my God, according to Your promise, and I will live; do not let my hope be dashed," he had no doubt that God would keep His Word.

Many of us have difficulty taking God at His word. Is it because those whom we once trusted gave us their word and then failed to honor it? Do we doubt everyone because of broken promises in the past? Do we doubt God today because others disappointed us yesterday? Perhaps.

We trust those who do what they say they will do. "I will live," said the Psalmist. God had always been faithful to him in the past. He had no reason ever to doubt God.

Prayer: Give us a faith, Father, that will never waver. Strengthen our faith so that we take You at Your Word and never doubt. In Jesus' Name, Amen.

Scripture For Today: Sustain me, my God, according to Your promise, and I will live; do not let my hope be dashed. Psalm 119:116

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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

- Black & White ..... \$41.54/year
- Colored ..... \$74.55/year
- Colored ..... \$42.60/6 months
- E-Weekly\* ..... \$21.30/year

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Groton, SD 57445-0034

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## Groton Daily Independent

[www.397news.com](http://www.397news.com)

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- 1 Month ..... \$15.98
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- 9 Months ..... \$31.95
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## News from the Associated Press

### Revered Lakota horses offer tranquility in treatment program

By RICHARD TWO BULLS South Dakota Public Broadcasting

VERMILLION, S.D. (AP) — The Healing with Horses program under the Great Plains Tribal Leaders Health Board Opioid Response Program offers equine-assisted healing events for Native American youth, adults and families in the Rapid City area.

Leadership of the Tribal Opioid Response Program were looking into evidence-based practices in healing from trauma. They started working with Red Horse Healing because the group already had a background in Lakota equine therapy.

Staci Eagle Elk is the Tribal Opioid Response Program manager. She said the first event proved to be very popular.

"We know that the history, and the Lakota, and the ties to the horses is, there's a strong tie there, right?" Eagle Elk said. "And so that's part of history, it's part of culture, and Lakota horse culture."

One of the first events is titled Horses and Connection, South Dakota Public Broadcasting reported.

"Two weeks ago we did healing our hearts," said Eagle Elk, "and the way it was explained to me is that whenever we're born, we have that natural rhythm, and it's calm. And then when trauma comes along or something happens, it'll really throw your rhythm off, right? And so to get back into your rhythm. And it's like balancing, balancing your heart, your mind, your internal being. Your spirit, balancing your spirit."

Mental health is a topic that has become stigmatized over the years especially during the pandemic. Eagle Elks says there is a strong connection that is formed between horses and people — a connection that can help navigate trauma.

"There was a parent here last weekend, she was talking about her granddaughter and her granddaughter had been exposed to some pretty severe trauma, and she quit talking," said Eagle Elk. "And they went, at Christmas we had an event, it was a Christmas, and it was more like a fun thing where they could go out. And the horses were dressed up as elves, or Santa, or whatever. And take pictures and drink hot cocoa and stuff.

"So it was kind of a fun event. But that little girl, when she went to that here, she started talking. So they wanted to get her back into that, get her every opportunity to be around the horses. And one person, if we help one person, one child to make that connection and to start healing themselves, then I think that that's what it's all about, right?"

The Great Plains Tribal Opioid Response Program's Healing with Horses is offering events until late September. Some of the categories include Horses and Healing, Horses and Culture, Horses Helping Humans and even Horses and Yoga. Registration is required.

### SD Lottery

By The Associated Press undefined

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

Mega Millions

24-28-39-44-66, Mega Ball: 25, Megaplier: 3

(twenty-four, twenty-eight, thirty-nine, forty-four, sixty-six; Mega Ball: twenty-five; Megaplier: three)

Estimated jackpot: \$20 million

Powerball

Estimated jackpot: \$112 million

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## Friday's Scores

The Associated Press

GIRLS PREP BASKETBALL=

SDHSAA State Tournament=

Consolation Semifinal=

Class A=

Dakota Valley 47, Sioux Falls Christian 42

Red Cloud 64, Lakota Tech 44

Class AA=

Harrisburg 55, Sioux Falls Lincoln 49

Sioux Falls Washington 46, Rapid City Central 33

Class B=

Aberdeen Christian 60, Wall 56

Aberdeen Roncalli 59, White River 44

Semifinal=

Class A=

Hamlin 52, West Central 38

St. Thomas More 48, Wagner 35

Class AA=

Rapid City Stevens 54, Sioux Falls Jefferson 43

Sioux Falls O'Gorman 50, Brandon Valley 37

Class B=

DeSmet 52, Faith 50

Viborg-Hurley 43, Corsica/Stickney 38

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

## Pierre Wrap-up: GOP Tension on federal funds, AG impeachment

By STEPHEN GROVES Associated Press

PIERRE, S.D. (AP) — South Dakota lawmakers finished the bulk of their legislative session this week, with Gov. Kristi Noem and House Republicans locked in a power struggle over the spending of federal funds as well as an impeachment investigation into the state's attorney general.

Republicans rule the Capitol but were clearly not on the same page this year. Several of their proposals became casualties of the fight, but lawmakers still got some done — including deciding how to spend a massive influx of federal funds, some tweaks to the state's new medical marijuana laws and weighing in on several high-profile social issues.

Here are the things to know about the session and what lawmakers are turning to next:

### FEDERAL FUNDING FIGHT

Lawmakers decided how to spend nearly \$1 billion in federal funds for pandemic recovery, as well as over \$200 million in state funds for university projects and infrastructure around housing developments. Top lawmakers said the money would unleash transformational projects that will impact the state for decades.

Senate Republican leader Gary Cammack pointed to the largest federal funding project — \$600 million for water infrastructure projects — and said it allowed the state to spur the development of projects that would have taken decades to fund. One of the largest is expected to be a pipeline to bring Missouri River water to the Black Hills.

"This is an opportunity to bring all of those systems back up to where they should be," Cammack said.

While the water access funding passed with little controversy, other spending packages turned into bitter fights, especially between House Republicans and the governor.

A conservative group of House Republicans resistant to government spending has grappled with Noem

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for control over state funds. In the waning days of the session, it won a concession from the Senate, despite the governor's public opposition. In a compromise that cleared the way for the budget to pass, both the House and Senate passed a bipartisan bill that requires a legislative budgeting committee to approve state government spending of federal funds if it requires a policy change.

The bill passed with over two-thirds support in both chambers, but Noem's office has not indicated whether she will veto it.

## MARIJUANA

The state's pot laws were the subject of hours of debate and dozens of bills. Most failed.

Republicans were divided in their approach to pot. Some argued they should look to legalize to honor the will of voters who passed laws on medical and recreational pot in 2020. Others argued legalization would open the door to social ills and that the state government should push back on the voter-passed law.

In the end few major changes were made to the existing law.

The most significant changes the Legislature passed were to allow physician assistants and advanced nurse practitioners to recommend medical marijuana to patients, as well as placing a four-cap limit on the number cannabis plants that patients can grow in their homes.

A bill to legalize recreational pot narrowly cleared the Senate, but failed in the House.

However, the bill's failure means that marijuana legalization advocates will focus on a campaign to pass a legalization law on the November ballot.

## SOCIAL ISSUES

Republican lawmakers and the governor brought a handful of bills striking on social issues ranging from abortion to COVID-19 vaccine mandates and how race is taught in classrooms. They met limited success.

The governor's proposal to ban transgender girls and college-age women from playing in sports leagues that match their gender identity drew strong condemnations from advocates for transgender people as state-sponsored bullying. But Noem cast it as "protecting fairness in women's sports" and made it one of the first bills she signed this year.

She had more difficulty convincing the Republican-controlled Legislature to back several other parts of her social agenda. Lawmakers rejected bills aimed at keeping so-called "critical race theory" from K-12 classrooms, requiring time for prayer in schools and banning nearly all abortions through a law that mimicked Texas' private enforcement.

However, Noem did find some agreement with Republicans on bills aimed at making it more difficult to obtain abortion pills and preventing public universities from holding trainings that compel students to feel "discomfort" on account of their race.

## WHAT'S NEXT

The session is nearly over for legislators, but the fight between Noem and some House Republicans is not going away soon.

Several bills appear to be on Noem's radar for a veto, and lawmakers could return to Pierre on March 28 for a chance to gain the two-thirds majority necessary for a veto override.

That day, the House committee investigating Attorney General Jason Ravnsborg for his conduct in a 2020 fatal car crash will also be releasing a report of its findings.

Noem wants the attorney general removed from office. But lawmakers are pushing back against Noem's influence in the impeachment process. The committee plans to issue a cease and desist letter to her, instructing her not to release any more information on Ravnsborg.

Noem has already struck back at those plans, charging on Twitter that Republican House Speaker Spencer Gosch is "protecting" Ravnsborg.

The House will meet on April 14 to consider impeaching Ravnsborg.

## Russia strikes near Ukraine's capital; mosque reported hit

By YURAS KARMANAU Associated Press

LVIV, Ukraine (AP) — Russian forces pounding the port city of Mariupol shelled a mosque sheltering more

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than 80 people, including children, the Ukrainian government said Saturday as fighting also raged on the outskirts of the capital, Kyiv.

There was no immediate word of casualties from the shelling of the mosque. Mariupol has seen some of the greatest misery from Russia's war in Ukraine as unceasing barrages have thwarted repeated attempts to bring in food and water and to evacuate trapped civilians.

The Ukrainian Embassy in Turkey said that a group of 86 Turkish nationals, including 34 children, were among the people who had sought safety in the mosque of Sultan Suleiman the Magnificent and his wife Roksolana.

Elsewhere, air raid sirens rang out across the capital region and artillery barrages sent residents scurrying for shelter. Fighting erupted in multiple areas around Kyiv.

Russia's slow, grinding apparent attempt to encircle the city and the bombardment of other population centers with artillery and air strikes mirror tactics that Russian forces have previously used in other campaigns, notably in Syria and Chechnya, to crush armed resistance.

Artillery pounded Kyiv's northwestern outskirts. To the city's southwest, two columns of smoke -- one black and one white -- rose in the town of Vaslkyiv after a strike on an ammunition depot. The strike on the depot caused hundreds of small explosions from detonating ammunition.

As of Friday, the death toll in Mariupol passed 1,500 during 12 days of attack, the mayor's office said. A strike on a maternity hospital in the city of 446,000 this week that killed three people sparked international outrage and war-crime allegations.

The ongoing bombardment forced crews to stop digging trenches for mass graves, so the "dead aren't even being buried," the mayor said. An Associated Press photographer captured the moment when a tank appeared to fire directly on an apartment building, enveloping one side in a billowing orange fireball.

Russian forces have hit at least two dozen hospitals and medical facilities since they invaded Ukraine on Feb. 24, according to the World Health Organization. Ukrainian officials reported Saturday that heavy artillery damaged a cancer hospital and several residential buildings in Mykolaiv, a city 489 kilometers (304 miles) west of Mariupol.

The hospital's head doctor, Maksim Beznosenko, said several hundred patients were in the facility during the attack but no one was killed.

The invading Russian forces have struggled far more than expected against determined Ukrainian fighters. But Russia's stronger military threatens to grind down the defending forces, despite an ongoing flow of weapons and other assistance from the West for Ukraine's westward-looking, democratically elected government.

The conflict has already sent 2.5 million people fleeing the country. Thousands of soldiers on both sides are believed to have been killed along with many Ukrainian civilians.

On the ground, the Kremlin's forces appeared to be trying to regroup and regain momentum after encountering tough resistance and amassing heavy losses over the past two weeks. Britain's Ministry of Defense said Russia is trying to reset and "re-posture" its troops, gearing up for operations against Kyiv.

"It's ugly already, but it's going to get worse," said Nick Reynolds, a warfare analyst at Royal United Services Institute, a British think tank.

Russian forces were blockading Kharkiv, Ukraine's second-largest city, even as efforts have been made to create new humanitarian corridors around it and other urban centers so aid can get in and residents can get out.

Ukraine's emergency services reported Saturday that the bodies of five people - two women, a man and two children - were pulled from an apartment building that was struck by shelling in Kharkiv,

The Russians' also stepped up attacks on Mykolaiv, located 470 kilometers (292 miles) south of Kyiv, in an attempt to encircle the city.

As part of a multi-front attack on the capital, the Russians' push from the northeast appeared to be advancing, a U.S. defense official said, speaking on condition of anonymity to give the U.S. assessment of the fight. Combat units were moved up from the rear as the forces advanced to within 30 kilometers



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(18.6 miles miles) of Kyiv.

New commercial satellite images appeared to capture artillery firing on residential areas that stood between the Russians and the capital. The images from Maxar Technologies showed muzzle flashes and smoke from big guns, as well as impact craters and burning homes in the town of Moschun, 33 kilometers (20.5 miles) from Kyiv, the company said.

Residents in a devastated village east of the capital climbed over toppled walls and flapping metal strips in the remnants of a pool hall, restaurant and theater freshly blown apart by Russian bombs.

With temperatures sinking below freezing, villagers quickly spread plastic wrap or nailed plywood over blown-out windows of their homes.

Russian President Vladimir Putin "created this mess, thinking he will be in charge here," 62-year-old Ivan Merzyk said. He added: "We are not going away."

On the economic and political front, the U.S. and its allies moved to further isolate and sanction the Kremlin. President Joe Biden announced that the U.S. will dramatically downgrade its trade status with Russia and ban imports of Russian seafood, alcohol and diamonds.

The move to revoke Russia's "most favored nation" status was taken in coordination with the European Union and Group of Seven countries.

"The free world is coming together to confront Putin," Biden said.

With the invasion in its 16th day, Putin said Friday that there had been "certain positive developments" in ongoing talks between Russian and Ukrainian negotiators. He gave no details.

Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy appeared on video to encourage his people to keep fighting.

"It's impossible to say how many days we will still need to free our land, but it is possible to say that we will do it," he said from Kyiv.

Zelenskyy said authorities were working on establishing 12 humanitarian corridors and trying to ensure food, medicine and other urgently needed basics get to people across the country.

He also accused Russia of kidnapping the mayor of one city, Melitopol, calling the abduction "a new stage of terror." The Biden administration had warned before the invasion of Russian plans to detain and kill targeted people in Ukraine. Zelenskyy himself is a likely top target.

American defense officials said Russian pilots are averaging 200 sorties a day, compared with five to 10 for Ukrainian forces, which are focusing more on surface-to-air missiles, rocket-propelled grenades and drones to take out Russian aircraft.

The U.S. also said Russia has launched nearly 810 missiles into Ukraine.

Until recently, Russia's troops had made their biggest advances on cities in the east and south while struggling in the north and around Kyiv. They also have started targeting areas in western Ukraine, where large numbers of refugees have fled.

Russia said Friday it used high-precision long-range weapons to put military airfields in the western cities of Lutsk and Ivano-Frankivsk "out of action." The attack on Lutsk killed four Ukrainian servicemen, the mayor said.

Russian airstrikes also targeted for the first time Dnipro, a major industrial hub in the east and Ukraine's fourth-largest city, with about 1 million people. One person was killed, Ukrainian officials said.

In images of the aftermath released by Ukraine's emergency agency, firefighters doused a flaming building, and ash fell on bloodied rubble. Smoke billowed over shattered concrete where buildings once stood.

The United Nations political chief said the international organization had received credible reports that Russian forces were using cluster bombs in populated areas. International law prohibits the use of the bombs, which scatter smaller explosives over a wide area, in cities and towns.

## Live updates: Italy seizes Russian billionaire's \$578M yacht

By The Associated Press undefined

The latest developments on the Russia-Ukraine war:

MILAN — Italian financial police has seized a Russian-owned superyacht valued at 530 million euros (\$578

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million) in the port of Trieste as part of seizures of oligarch wealth to pressure Russian President Vladimir Putin to halt the war on Ukraine.

The "Sy A" yacht was identified by Italian police as belonging to billionaire Andrey Igorevich Melnichenko, who made a fortune in fertilizer production and coal energy. It was seized Friday evening.

Video shows police in cars with flashing lights approaching the triple-mast yacht and officers boarding it.

Italian authorities last week seized some 143 million euros (\$156 million) in luxury yachts and villas belonging to Russian billionaires in such picturesque retreats as Sardinia, the Ligurian coast and Lake Como.

**LONDON** — Britain's Defense Ministry says fighting northwest of Kyiv has continued with the bulk of Russian ground forces now around 25 kilometers (15 miles) from the center of the city.

A daily intelligence update says elements of the large Russian military column north of Kyiv have dispersed. It says this is likely to support a Russian attempt to encircle the Ukrainian capital. According to the brief, it could also be an attempt by Russia to reduce its vulnerability to Ukrainian counterattacks, which have taken a significant toll on Russian forces.

The update says that beyond Kyiv, the cities of Kharkiv, Chernihiv, Sumy and Mariupol remain encircled and continue to suffer heavy Russian shelling.

**BERLIN** — Foreign Minister Annalena Baerbock says Germany is working with allies to airlift people who have fled Ukraine to countries farther away as neighboring nations struggle to cope with all new arrivals.

Baerbock said Saturday that Moldova, a nation of 2.5 million on the border with Ukraine, has taken in 100,000 people — almost as many as Germany, which has a population over 30 times bigger.

Speaking in Chisinau alongside her Moldovan counterpart, she said Germany had "only taken over a small share of the responsibility" so far and praised the poor Eastern European nation for its efforts to help refugees.

Baerbock said the European Union is setting up a "green corridor" to bring people by bus through Romania to other EU nations, but also working with partners to help fly their citizens who have fled Ukraine back home and "in particular also to fly Ukrainians for example across the Atlantic."

She urged allies to show solidarity toward those affected by the war and accused Russia of spreading "ever more crazy propaganda that now doesn't even shrink from threats to use weapons of mass destruction."

The International Maritime Organization, a U.N. oversight body for international seafaring and the law of the sea, is calling for a safe corridor in the Black and Azov seas to let commercial ships evacuate.

Many of the waters are mined, and Russian navy vessels are off the shores of Ukraine. Explosions have hit at least two cargo ships in the area and dozens of others have been stranded.

The IMO Council held an emergency session and said it deplored the attacks of the Russian Federation aimed at commercial vessels, their seizures, including search and rescue vessels, threatening the safety and welfare of seafarers and the marine environment.

Russia's space agency has sent NASA and other international partners a letter demanding an end to sanctions, saying they could threaten the International Space Station.

In a tweet Saturday, the head of Roscosmos, Dmitry Rogozin, said the letter appealed to the space agencies of the United States, Canada and Europe to keep the space station operational.

He illustrated the appeal with a map showing the flight path of the ISS — and a potential fall zone that straddles much of the world but barely touches upon Russia.

Four NASA astronauts, two Russian cosmonauts and one European astronaut are currently on the space station.

**ISTANBUL** — The Ukrainian Embassy in Turkey says a group of 86 Turkish nationals, including 34 children, are among those sheltering in a mosque in the besieged city of Mariupol.

An embassy spokeswoman, citing information from the city mayor, said they had taken shelter in the

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mosque along with others seeking refuge from the Russian attack on the encircled port on the Sea of Azov. She says, "There are really big communication problems in Mariupol and there's no opportunity to reach them."

Hundreds of thousands of civilians have been trapped in Mariupol for more than a week with no food, water, heat or power amid freezing temperatures. Efforts to establish a cease-fire to let them leave have repeatedly broken down.

Turkish officials did not respond to requests for comment. Foreign Minister Mevlut Cavusoglu said Friday that Turkey has evacuated nearly 14,000 of its citizens from Ukraine.

LVIV, Ukraine — Ukrainian officials accused Russia damaging a cancer hospital and several residential buildings in the southern city of Mykolaiv with shelling from heavy artillery.

The hospital's head doctor, Maksim Beznosenko, said several hundred patients were in the hospital during the attack but that no one was killed. The assault damaged the building and blew out windows.

Russian forces have stepped up their attacks on Mykolaiv, located 470 kilometers (292 miles) south of Kyiv, in an attempt to encircle the city.

Ukrainian and Western officials earlier accused Russia of shelling a maternity hospital in the southern city of Mariupol on Wednesday. Three people died in that attack.

LVIV, Ukraine — Ukraine's President Volodymyr Zelenskyy accused Russia on Friday of kidnapping the mayor of the city of Melitopol, equating it to the actions of "ISIS terrorists."

"They have transitioned into a new stage of terror, in which they try to physically liquidate representatives of Ukraine's lawful local authorities," Zelenskyy said in a video address Friday evening.

Kirill Timoshenko, the deputy head of Ukraine's presidential office, posted a video on the social media site Telegram which he said showed a group of armed men carrying the mayor, Ivan Fedorov, across a square.

Russian forces captured the southern port city of Melitopol, with a population of 150,000, on Feb. 26.

The prosecutor's office of the Luhansk People's Republic, a Moscow-backed rebel region in eastern Ukraine, said on its website that there was a criminal case against Fedorov. The prosecutor's office accused Fedorov of "terrorist activities" and of financing the nationalist militia Right Sector to "commit terrorist crimes against Donbass civilians."

The office said it was looking for Fedorov and called for anyone with information about his whereabouts to contact them.

SAVANNAH, Ga. — U.S. soldiers are continuing to deploy to Europe, joining thousands already sent overseas to support NATO allies amid Russia's invasion of Ukraine.

About 130 soldiers from the 87th Division Sustainment Support Battalion, 3rd Division Sustainment Brigade gathered Friday at Hunter Airfield in Savannah, Georgia and departed on a chartered flight.

The soldiers are in addition to the estimated 3,800 soldiers from the Army's 3rd Infantry Division who deployed recently from nearby Fort Stewart.

A division commander said that soldiers are being told to prepare for about six months overseas. The Pentagon has ordered roughly 12,000 total service members from various U.S. bases to Europe.

The soldiers' mission is to train alongside military units of NATO allies in a display of force aimed at deterring further aggression by Russia. The Pentagon has stressed U.S. forces are not being deployed to fight in Ukraine.

LVIV, Ukraine — Ukrainian authorities have warned of a humanitarian catastrophe in the port city of Mariupol, which has been encircled by Russian forces and cut off from deliveries of food and medicine.

Mariupol officials said Friday that 1,582 people had been killed in the 12 days since the siege began.

"There is a humanitarian catastrophe in the city and the dead aren't even being buried," Mariupol's mayor's office said in a statement Friday, calling for Russian forces to lift the siege.

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Ukrainian authorities have accused Russian forces of shelling evacuation routes and preventing civilians from escaping the city of 430,000 people.

BERLIN — Ukraine told the International Atomic Energy Agency on Friday that technicians have started repairing damaged power lines at the decommissioned Chernobyl power plant in an effort to restore power supplies, the U.N. nuclear agency said.

On Wednesday, Ukrainian authorities said that Chernobyl, the site of the 1986 nuclear disaster, was knocked off the power grid, with emergency generators supplying backup power.

The Ukrainian nuclear regulator said Friday that workers repaired one section of the lines, but there still appears to be damage in other places, the IAEA said. Repair efforts would continue despite “the difficult situation” outside the plant, which was taken by Russian forces early in the invasion, it said.

The Ukrainian regulator said additional fuel was delivered for generators, but it remains important to fix the power lines as soon as possible. The IAEA reiterated that the disconnection “will not have a critical impact on essential safety functions at the site.”

The Vienna-based U.N. nuclear watchdog said that it still isn’t receiving data from monitoring systems installed to monitor nuclear material and activities at Chernobyl, but transmission from the Zaporizhzhia plant — Ukraine’s biggest, which Russian forces seized last week — has been restored after being lost earlier this week.

PARIS — Interpol is restricting Russia’s ability to input information directly into the global police organization’s vast network, deciding that communications must first be checked by the general secretariat in Lyon, France.

The French Foreign Ministry said Friday that the beefed-up surveillance measures follow “multiple suspicions of attempted fraudulent use” of the Interpol system in recent days, but it did not elaborate.

Interpol stressed in a statement Thursday that it is maintaining its pledge of neutrality amid war between two of its members, triggered by Russia’s invasion of Ukraine. But it said that “heightened supervision and monitoring measures” of Moscow’s National Central Bureau were needed “to prevent any potential misuse of Interpol’s channels” like targeting individuals in or outside Ukraine.

The ministry noted that Interpol’s decision has multiple impacts from communications, to putting out so-called “red notices” for criminals on the loose or even feeding data on lost or stolen documents — all of which must now get compliance checks from Interpol headquarters.

Interpol, which has 195 members, said it had received calls to suspend Russia from the network, along with calls by law enforcement leaders looking for continued cooperation to better fight crime.

“In addition to the tragic loss of life, conflicts invariably lead to an increase in crime,” as organized crime groups try to exploit desperation, Interpol said. Risks include human trafficking, weapons smuggling and trafficking in illicit goods and medicines.

## As companies leave Russia, their assets could be seized

By The Associated Press undefined

The “Evropeisky” mall in Moscow was once a symbol of a Russia integrated into the global consumer economy, with atriums named after cities like London, Paris and Rome.

But now large parts of the seven-story shopping center have gone quiet after Western brands from Apple to Victoria’s Secret closed their Russian operations in the two weeks since the country invaded Ukraine.

Hundreds of companies have similarly announced plans to curtail ties to Russia, with the pace accelerating over the past week as the deadly violence and humanitarian crisis in Ukraine worsens, and as Western governments ratchet up economic sanctions.

Russian President Vladimir Putin responded Thursday by saying that if foreign companies shut down production in Russia, he favored a plan to “bring in outside management and then transfer these companies to those who want to work.”

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A draft law could allow Russian courts to appoint external administrators for companies that cease operations and are at least 25% foreign-owned. If the owners refuse to resume operations or to sell, the company's shares could be auctioned off, the ruling United Russia party has said, calling it "the first step toward nationalization."

Chris Weafer of Macro-Advisory, a consultancy specializing in Russia, said the Russian government "is adopting a carrot-and-stick approach to foreign business," with talk of nationalization balanced out with government help for those who stay. A key reason, Weafer said, is the Kremlin's desire to avoid mass unemployment.

"When it comes to social pressures or potential public backlash, what they understand, I guess, is that people will not take to the streets because they cannot buy a Big Mac," Weafer said. "But they might take to the streets if they have no job and no income."

White House press secretary Jen Psaki criticized "any lawless decision by Russia to seize the assets of these companies," saying that it "will ultimately result in even more economic pain for Russia."

"It will compound the clear message to the global business community that Russia is not a safe place to invest and do business," she said in a tweet, adding that "Russia may also invite legal claims from companies whose property is seized."

Even before its invasion of Ukraine, Russia was already trying to domesticize its food supply following sanctions it had placed on the European Union in 2014. With little to no fresh food imported from those trading partners, Russia put greater focus on domestic food and importing from friendlier countries like Turkey.

Companies like French foods giant Danone, which is suspending capital investment in Russia but continuing production there, are "essentially Russian companies" with local staff and supply chains and can function more or less autonomously of the foreign owners, Weafer said.

But keeping businesses operating in Russia — even with government intervention — will not be easy. That's because the conditions that led foreign companies to leave Russia are still in place: international sanctions, disruption to the supply chain and pressure from customers in Europe and North America.

The auto industry has been particularly hard hit by its reliance on foreign-made electronics. Even companies that have stayed in Russia like French carmaker Renault, the majority owner of Russian producer Avtovaz, have had to suspend production temporarily.

Without imports, businesses like furniture maker Ikea or many fashion retailers can't function, and will likely have to leave the Russian market altogether, Weafer said.

Some foreign companies suspending their Russian operations, like McDonald's and cigarette producer Imperial Brands, have made a point of saying they will continue to pay staff even while their workplaces are closed. That can't last forever, and Weafer predicts companies will need to decide by the end of summer whether to resume operations or leave entirely.

One voice pushing back against confiscating foreign firms' assets is billionaire metals tycoon Vladimir Potanin, who compared it to the Russian Revolution of 1917, when Communists took power.

"It would set us back 100 years to 1917 and the consequences of a step like this one — global distrust in Russia by investors — would be felt by us for many decades," he said in a statement Thursday on the social media of his company, Nornickel.

## Concern grows over traffickers targeting Ukrainian refugees

By STEPHEN McGRATH Associated Press

SIRET, Romania (AP) — One man was detained in Poland suspected of raping a 19-year-old refugee he'd lured with offers of shelter after she fled war-torn Ukraine. Another was overheard promising work and a room to a 16-year-old girl before authorities intervened.

Another case inside a refugee camp at Poland's Medyka border, raised suspicions when a man was offering help only to women and children. When questioned by police, he changed his story.

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As millions of women and children flee across Ukraine's borders in the face of Russian aggression, concerns are growing over how to protect the most vulnerable refugees from being targeted by human traffickers or becoming victims of other forms of exploitation.

"Obviously all the refugees are women and children," said Joung-ah Ghedini-Williams, the UNHCR's head of global communications, who has visited borders in Romania, Poland and Moldova.

"You have to worry about any potential risks for trafficking — but also exploitation, and sexual exploitation and abuse. These are the kinds of situations that people like traffickers ... look to take advantage of," she said.

The U.N. refugee agency says more than 2.5 million people, including more than a million children, have already fled war-torn Ukraine in what has become an unprecedented humanitarian crisis in Europe and its fastest exodus since World War II.

In countries throughout Europe, including the border nations of Romania, Poland, Hungary, Moldova and Slovakia, private citizens and volunteers have been greeting and offering help to those whose lives have been shattered by war. From free shelter to free transport to work opportunities and other forms of assistance — help isn't far away.

But neither are the risks.

Police in Wrocław, Poland, said Thursday they detained a 49-year-old suspect on rape charges after he allegedly assaulted a 19-year-old Ukrainian refugee he lured with offers of help over the internet. The suspect could face up to 12 years in prison for the "brutal crime," authorities said.

"He met the girl by offering his help via an internet portal," police said in a statement. "She escaped from war-torn Ukraine, did not speak Polish. She trusted a man who promised to help and shelter her. Unfortunately, all this turned out to be deceitful manipulation."

Police in Berlin warned women and children in a post on social media in Ukrainian and Russian against accepting offers of overnight stays, and urged them to report anything suspicious.

Tamara Barnett, director of operations at the Human Trafficking Foundation, a U.K.-based charity which grew out of the All Party Parliamentary Group on Human Trafficking, said that such a rapid, mass displacement of people could be a "recipe for disaster."

"When you've suddenly got a huge cohort of really vulnerable people who need money and assistance immediately," she said, "it's sort of a breeding ground for exploitative situations and sexual exploitation. When I saw all these volunteers offering their houses ... that flagged a worry in my head."

The Migration Data Portal notes that humanitarian crises such as those associated with conflicts "can exacerbate pre-existing trafficking trends and give rise to new ones" and that traffickers can thrive on "the inability of families and communities to protect themselves and their children."

Security officials in Romania and Poland told The Associated Press that plain-clothed intelligence officers were on the lookout for criminal elements. In the Romanian border town of Siret, authorities said men offering free rides to women have been sent away.

Human trafficking is a grave human rights violation and can involve a wide range of exploitative roles. From sexual exploitation — such as prostitution — to forced labor, from domestic slavery to organ removal, and forced criminality, it is often inflicted by traffickers through coercion and abuse of power.

A 2020 human trafficking report by the European Commission, the EU's executive branch, estimates the annual global profit from the crime is 29.4 billion euros (\$32 billion). It says that sexual exploitation is the most common form of human trafficking in the 27-nation bloc and that nearly three-quarters of all victims are female, with almost every fourth victim a child.

Madalina Mocan, committee director at ProTECT, an organization that brings together 21 anti-trafficking groups, said there are "already worrying signs," with some refugees being offered shelter in exchange for services such as cleaning and babysitting, which could lead to exploitation.

"There will be attempts of traffickers trying to take victims from Ukraine across the border. Women and children are vulnerable, especially those that do not have connections — family, friends, other networks of support," she said, adding that continued conflict will mean "more and more vulnerable people" reaching the borders.

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At the train station in the Hungarian border town of Zahony, 25-year-old Dayrina Kneziva arrived from Kyiv with her childhood friend. Fleeing a war zone, Kneziva said, left them little time to consider other potential dangers.

"When you compare ... you just choose what will be less dangerous," said Kneziva, who hopes to make it to Slovakia's capital of Bratislava with her friend. "When you leave in a hurry, you just don't think about other things."

A large proportion of the refugees arriving in the border countries want to move on to friends or family elsewhere in Europe and many are relying on strangers to reach their destinations.

"The people who are leaving Ukraine are under emotional stress, trauma, fear, confusion," said Cristina Minculescu, a psychologist at Next Steps Romania who provides support to trafficking victims. "It's not just human trafficking, there is a risk of abduction, rape ... their vulnerabilities being exploited in different forms."

At Romania's Siret border after a five-day car journey from the bombed historical city of Chernihiv, 44-year-old Iryna Pypypenko waited inside a tent with her two children, sheltering from the cold. She said a friend in Berlin who is looking for accommodation for her has warned her to beware of possibly nefarious offers.

"She told me there are many, very dangerous propositions," said Pypypenko, whose husband and parents stayed behind in Ukraine. "She told me that I have to communicate only with official people and believe only the information they give me."

Ionut Epureanu, the chief police commissioner of Suceava county, told the AP at the Siret border that police are working closely with the country's national agency against human trafficking and other law enforcement to try to prevent crimes.

"We are trying to make a control for every vehicle leaving the area," he said. "A hundred people making transport have good intentions, but it's enough to be one that isn't ... and tragedy can come."

Vlad Gheorghe, a Romanian member of the European Parliament who launched a Facebook group called United for Ukraine that has more than 250,000 members and pools resources to help refugees, including accommodation, says he is working closely with the authorities to prevent any abuses.

"No offer for volunteering or stay or anything goes unchecked, we check every offer," he said. "We call back, we ask some questions, we have a minimal check before any offer for help is accepted."

At Poland's Medyka border, seven former members of the French Foreign Legion, an elite military force, are voluntarily providing their own security to refugees and are on the lookout for traffickers.

"This morning we found three men who were trying to get a bunch of women into a van," said one of the former legionnaires, a South African who gave only his first name, Mornay. "I can't 100% say they were trying to recruit them for sex trafficking, but when we started talking to them and approached them — they got nervous and just left immediately."

"We just want to try and get women and kids to safety," he added. "The risk is very high because there are so many people you just don't know who is doing what."

Back at her tent on the Siret border, Pypypenko said people were offering help — but she wasn't sure who she could trust.

"People just enter and tell us that they can take us for free to France," she said. "Today we are for three hours here ... and we had two or three propositions like that. I couldn't even imagine such a situation, that such a big tragedy could be the field of crime."

## As Cairo transforms, Egyptians fight to save their trees

By AMIR-HUSSEIN RADJY Associated Press

CAIRO (AP) — A few months ago, Choucri Asmar decided he wasn't ready to give up hope. So he led a group of residents in "a peaceful demonstration to protect the trees" of his Cairo neighborhood.

Egyptian authorities were planning to clear out a large avenue of ficus, acacia and palm trees — part of sweeping urban redevelopment projects that are transforming much of historic Cairo.

"It was like a war on green," Asmar said.

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Asmar and other residents of Heliopolis — an old neighborhood that boasts some of the city's most important early 20th-century buildings — numbered the trees lining Nehru Street, labeling each of them after famous Egyptian figures. Five days later, police took the signs down and Asmar got a warning from security officials. The trees have survived, for now, while many others nearby have not, their wood sawed into pieces and towed away in trucks.

Part of the adjoining park was razed to erect a stone monument commemorating Cairo's road and highways development, while a nearby public garden dating from the early 20th century was demolished to make way for a new street and state-owned gas station.

Asmar said that between August 2019 and January 2020, Heliopolis lost an estimated 396,000 square meters (about 100 acres) of green space.

"And then we stopped counting, but lost much more," he said. He described feeling disoriented on once-familiar streets.

That's roughly 73 football fields worth of greenery in just one neighborhood of the sprawling metropolis that stretches from the Pyramids at Giza in the west, across the Nile River, to new modern developments in the east. Heliopolis accounts for no more than one fifth of the capital in area. Cairo's population of roughly 20 million is spread over some 648 square kilometers (250 square miles), making it one of the densest cities in the world.

Egypt's environmental record is under scrutiny as it hosts the U.N. climate conference COP27 in the Red Sea resort town of Sharm el-Sheikh in November.

An official at Egypt's Ministry of Environment did not respond to a request for comment on the loss of urban green spaces. Other officials have said that better roads will ease traffic, and promised that the new developments will include large parks and incorporate as much vegetation as possible. One plan, announced in government media, is for a park in the historic center, incorporating a large archeological zone.

Much of Cairo's redesign and new highways aim to service a new capital under construction on the city's outskirts. It's the flagship mega-project of President Abdel Fattah El-Sissi, who says he is rebuilding the economy after years of political turmoil.

In recent years, grassroots groups have sprung up in different areas of Cairo to try to protect the city's urban identity. Asmar is a member of the Heliopolis Heritage Initiative, founded in 2011.

Sarah Rifaat lives a five-minute walk from Mesaha Square, a rare leafy spot in Giza, a neighborhood of high-rises. A few months ago, she was jolted into action by a video of a forklift leveling the square's garden. She joined a WhatsApp group where residents expressed concern over the loss of green space. Residents organized a petition, but paving over of the garden continued.

"There's a sense of collective connection to trees that I haven't seen before," she said.

Activists have scored some wins, including halting the commercial redevelopment of the Fish Garden, a park in the city's central Zamalek area. Rifaat has seen some urban improvements initiated by city officials as well, but says there is no accountability among decision-makers.

Cairenes are struggling to come to terms with a rapidly changing city, where many public spaces have been taken away or commercialized, she said. Rifaat believes that protecting neighborhoods has become a final form of protest, as the space for civil society in Egypt keeps shrinking.

Backed up by residential groups across the city, environmental lawyer Ahmed Elseidi is leading a case before Egypt's highest administrative court that he hopes will oblige the government to replant trees and protect Cairo's few remaining green spaces.

The government is required by law to carry out public consultations and environmental impact reports on highway construction that has torn through many old neighborhoods, he said. The law protects green spaces, designating trees as public property, he added.

Elseidi said he has submitted documents showing that no environmental studies were conducted ahead of any road projects, including in Heliopolis.

Rim Hamdy, a botany professor at Cairo University, said some types of trees could vanish from city streets. Thirty-five varieties of Australian eucalyptus once grew along Giza streets but dozens have been



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felled. Even the nearby Agricultural Ministry's plant nursery has been bulldozed, she said.

Many tree species and public gardens are a legacy of Egypt's 19th-century rulers, who planted thousands of trees as they rebuilt Cairo. They imported specimens — including flowering purple jacaranda and red poinciana — that became signatures of Cairo's streets.

Hamdy plans to petition authorities to allow her to trim and protect a century-old sycamore fig outside her university.

In Maadi, an area known for its leafy squares and villas, the Tree Lovers Association is one of the city's oldest neighborhood groups.

Association member Samia Zeitoun said the authorities have responded to some of the public complaints about development.

"Cairo was choking, so it's a big challenge for the government to open up arteries," she said, raising the issue of overcrowding in the city that grows by the thousands every day.

As Egypt prepares to host COP27, activists say green spaces help reduce Cairo's heavy pollution and lower scorching summer temperatures in urban areas.

In fighting to preserve green spaces, the more well-to-do areas score more successes, with residents typically enjoying better access to officials than those living in poorer areas.

Asmar said he's disappointed he hasn't been able to do more to protect Al Maza, a working-class area next to the more affluent Heliopolis. Authorities are removing its main tree-lined road and planning to evict residents along it, he said.

## Oil, sanctions, jets: How Congress pushes Biden on Ukraine

By LISA MASCARO AP Congressional Correspondent

WASHINGTON (AP) — At first, the White House resisted calls from Congress to ban Russian oil imports to the U.S. And then, it did just that.

The administration hit the brakes on legislation that would have revoked Russia's normal trade status, until President Joe Biden announced the move Friday. The administration persuaded senators to hold off on imposing Russian sanctions, then slapped stiff sanctions itself. It rejected efforts in Congress to stop the Nord Stream 2 energy pipeline, then led allies in halting it.

"What do all those things have in common?" Sen. Rob Portman, R-Ohio, asked after reciting a similar list.

"In each of those cases, the administration said no," until lawmakers from both political parties put pressure on the White House to change course. "And in each case, the administration did a 180."

It's an emerging pattern that has not gone unnoticed during the escalating war in Ukraine: A remarkably unified Congress is out front on foreign policy, pressuring Biden to go further and faster with a U.S. response to a devastating conflict that has no clear endgame in sight.

Rather than running for political cover as the Ukraine war worsens, lawmakers of both parties are pushing the president to act more swiftly and forcefully to stop Russian President Vladimir Putin's invasion. The result has been a rare, mostly unified resolve from the legislative branch, which is leaving an imprint on executive branch decision-making.

"We've seen that with this president time and time and time again, where he says, 'We can't do this,'" said Sen. Joni Ernst, R-Iowa, a combat veteran. "Then he reverses course."

Now, Ernst and other members of Congress are pushing the Biden administration to reconsider sending Polish warplanes that Ukrainian pilots could fly in their fight against the Russian attacks.

More than 40 Republican senators signed onto a letter imploring Biden to reverse course after the Pentagon rejected an offer from Poland to transfer the Soviet-era MiGs to Ukraine. Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy pleaded with Congress last weekend that if the U.S. was unwilling to impose a no-fly zone, it should at least send the planes and other air support.

"Send these MiGs," said Sen. Mitt Romney, R-Utah.

The administration initially had indicated it supported NATO ally Poland sending its planes to Ukraine, but then slammed the door on Poland's surprise offer to instead send the planes to a U.S. base in Germany for

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transfer to Ukraine. Military leaders deemed it too risky. They worried such a move would unduly provoke Putin, and argued that other weaponry may be more effective than the jets.

"There is bipartisan support to provide these planes," said Sen. Jeanne Shaheen, D-N.H., during a Foreign Relations Committee hearing Thursday with administration officials. "It is disappointing to see the reluctance on the part of the administration, and it's coming across as indecision and bickering."

The steady drumbeat from Congress in recent weeks can be viewed as both a criticism of the White House response, but also an approving nod signaling to the Biden administration how far lawmakers are willing to go to support Ukraine.

Instead of a war-weary Congress, as might have been expected after the disastrous withdrawal from Afghanistan, lawmakers appear determined to do as much as possible for Ukraine -- short of involving U.S. troops on the ground or in the skies overhead.

Biden has made it clear there will be no direct U.S. confrontation with Russia. But the president acknowledged Friday that he has asked the Congress to hold off at times, particularly on the new trade status for Russia, "until I could line up all of our key allies to keep us in complete unison."

Biden has been wary of having the U.S. front a response to Russia alone, and instead has assembled an impressive Western alliance, bolstering NATO and drawing in Asian countries with a common purpose unseen in a generation.

"Unity among our allies is critically important, as you all know, from my perspective, at least," Biden said Friday.

Later, he told House Democrats at their annual retreat that he knows he has frustrated them at times over the response to Ukraine. But more important than moving quickly, he said, was keeping the allies together. He spoke in particular about the work he did on the Russian energy ban with the Europeans, who are more dependent on Russian oil. "It took a long time," he explained.

He thanked House Speaker Nancy Pelosi for holding off on the trade bill, and quipped, "I drove her crazy."

Still, lawmakers from both parties are signaling they have the president's back as the war in Ukraine intensifies.

Congress easily approved a \$13.6 billion aid package for Ukraine this week that includes military and humanitarian support.

Pelosi indicated more funding would be necessary to rebuild the country after her own call this week with Zelenskyy.

For many lawmakers, the support for Ukraine goes beyond the blue-and-yellow colors of the Ukrainian flag they are wearing in their clothing choices or lapel pins.

Many felt they gave Zelenskyy their word last weekend when he issued a "desperate plea" for support, and they promised to do everything they can to help the young democracy in its fight for survival against Putin's assault.

Sen. Susan Collins, R-Maine, said it's hard to imagine seeing reports of the attacks on Ukraine, including the devastating strike on a maternity hospital, and not ensure the U.S. is doing all it can.

"I think there actually is much more agreement on the need to let the MiGs go forward and provide lethal drones than may appear," she said.

## Crossing Trump: 2 S.C. Republicans take different approaches

By MEG KINNARD Associated Press

FLORENCE, S.C. (AP) — Under pressure recently to prove her loyalty to Donald Trump, Rep. Nancy Mace traveled to New York to film a social media video outside Trump Tower reminding her South Carolina constituents that she was one of the former president's "earliest supporters."

Facing similar scrutiny, Rep. Tom Rice has taken a different approach, quietly winding through rural stretches of his congressional district to remind voters of his work securing federal relief for frequent — often disastrous — flooding, and of his advocacy for agricultural improvements.

Lifelong Republicans representing neighboring congressional districts in one of the most reliably GOP

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states in the U.S., Mace and Rice are unlikely players in the fierce debate over the future of their party. But they're both facing spirited primary challenges this summer from Trump-backed rivals that could signal the former president's grip on the party as he weighs another White House bid. The primary is June 14.

The focus on Mace and Rice could intensify Saturday when Trump holds a rally in Florence, South Carolina, with their primary rivals. He's almost certain to revive his criticism of the incumbents as insufficiently loyal.

For Rice, the sin was his support for Trump's second impeachment in the aftermath of the violent Jan. 6 insurrection ignited by the then-president. Mace, meanwhile, drew the ire of Trump and his backers by voting to certify President Joe Biden's win in the 2020 election, as well as her support for holding Steve Bannon in contempt of Congress, and her frequent television appearances blaming Trump for the insurrection.

Ahead of Trump's visit, both said their focus was on reminding voters of what they've accomplished.

"I've delivered hundreds of millions of dollars to this district, for disaster relief, tax credits, PPP loans, beachfront renourishment, roads," Rice said in an interview. "I think if I remind people of that ... then I will rest on their verdict. Whatever verdict they give is what we'll do."

Mace, meanwhile, has touted her support for Trump's economic and foreign policies.

"I'm the only candidate in this race that has a record that is reflective of the policies that he supports," Mace said in an interview.

Together, the pair represent South Carolina's nearly 200-mile coastline. But the contours of their districts offer different political challenges.

Mace, for instance, represents a red-leaning district anchored in Charleston and its booming suburbs, home to a mixture of moderate Republicans, Democrats and Trump loyalists. She's used that to her advantage by warning that a Democrat could carry the district if Republicans nominate someone too far to the right.

She has history on her side. In 2018, Katie Arrington, her Trump-endorsed rival, successfully knocked off incumbent GOP Rep. Mark Sanford, who was sometimes an antagonist to the then-president. But Arrington went on to lose the general election to Democrat Joe Cunningham, a stinging loss for the GOP.

Mace took back the district in 2020, and Cunningham is now waging an uphill campaign for governor.

In the video outside Trump Tower, Mace called out Arrington's 2018 loss and said she's "more than qualified" to lose the seat again to a Democrat.

Arrington called Mace "a sellout" who "is more interested in being a mainstream media celebrity than fighting for the people she is supposed to represent."

Rice, meanwhile, is running in a more reliably Republican district that stretches from the golf courses of Myrtle Beach to inland farms and communities like Florence. He's facing off against several rivals, including Russell Fry, a Republican state representative backed by Trump who has said Rice broke constituents' trust when he supported impeachment.

To Rice, seeking his sixth term means a lot of travel through the district to remind constituents of what he sees as his legislative achievements. But he knows that some voters will only think of his impeachment vote, for which he was censured by the state party.

"I'm going to do my best to explain (the vote) to them, and I don't have to be confrontational to do that," he said. "That's how politics is supposed to be."

Rice has said his best defense is the same kind of campaigning that's won him five terms in the district that Trump carried by nearly 20 points in 2020.

"I've had some people come to me and say, 'I was disappointed in your vote,'" Rice said, noting that he feels a lot of voter animosity has waned over the past year. "But 10 times as many have said, 'Thank you.'"

## Agenda languishing, Democrats press Biden to go it alone

By FARNOUSH AMIRI Associated Press

PHILADELPHIA (AP) — Top Democrats are pleading for President Joe Biden to act alone on some of the party's core legislative priorities, viewing executive action as their best hope of delivering on their promises

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and energizing liberal voters they worry are going to sit out the elections in November.

In areas like voting rights, police reform and immigration where Democratic bills have been thwarted by GOP opposition in the Senate, the leaders of the influential Black and Asian American caucuses made their requests directly to Biden during a recent meeting at the White House, urging him to issue executive orders that could push their proposals forward without votes in the House and Senate.

The pleas come at a particularly desperate moment for House Democrats, who are heading into a difficult midterm election season where the loss of only a handful of seats will end their majority. Biden's flagging poll numbers are adding to the steep headwinds Democrats are facing in a midterm election year that historically has been unfavorable to the party in power.

"I don't want anyone to think that we believe that executive action is better than legislation," said Rep. Pramila Jayapal, chair of the Progressive Caucus, during the House Democratic issues conference in Philadelphia.

"But certainly, there are a lot of areas where if we don't get legislation, the administration can take action to help move us more quickly towards the goals that we're working on."

During the recent meeting with Biden, the caucuses' leaders seemed to acknowledge the damage done in recent months, when intraparty squabbling led them to many legislative dead ends.

The way to turn things around, argued Black Caucus Chair Joyce Beatty, Hispanic Caucus Chair Raul Ruiz and Asian American Caucus Chair Judy Chu — recalling the case they each made or will make to Biden — is for the president to put pen to pad.

"The Congressional Black Caucus has not been silenced for this," Beatty said of the caucus' efforts to move forward with voting rights. "We know the value and importance of preclearance for us," referring to the Voting Rights Act requirement that mandates states or localities with a history of racial voting discrimination get federal approval for election policy changes.

Jayapal and Ruiz told reporters that the Progressive and Hispanic caucuses will be releasing a list next week of their own priorities for executive action.

Reliance on executive action is a strategy that Biden knows well, having seen it in action when he was President Barack Obama's vice president. Facing a GOP-controlled Congress in 2014, Obama declared that he had a "pen and a phone" and began taking executive actions on matters like guns and immigration. Biden has acted unilaterally as well, most recently on a series of orders punishing Russia for the invasion of Ukraine.

But there are considerable limits to what a president can accomplish through executive action, which is why it is often the option of last resort.

The hunger among Democrats for Biden to go it alone is widely shared. House leadership and rank-and-file members echoed Jayapal's sentiments on the path forward as Democrats gathered for their annual issues conference in Philadelphia — an event that almost didn't happen, fittingly enough, due to party infighting over new emergency funding for COVID-19 relief.

The one-and-a-half-day retreat was expected to be a reset for a caucus desperately in need of one as a record number of members are retiring and those facing reelection are being challenged by strong, money-backed and, in some cases, Donald Trump-approved candidates.

After Biden gave the Democrats a pep talk Friday, many of the Democrats agreed that he might be their only chance in the next 10 months to make good on the promises made to Democratic voters who handed them the House, Senate and the White House just a year and a half ago.

Even House Speaker Nancy Pelosi, the party's master legislator, seemed to give a nod toward the White House.

"It's very important for the executive to act if we cannot get legislative action immediately," Pelosi told reporters Friday.

The failure in January on one of the major legislative priorities, voting rights legislation, was still fresh for many members, including House Majority Whip Jim Clyburn.

The voting rights package collapsed on the Senate floor in January after Democratic centrist Sens. Joe

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Manchin of West Virginia and Krysten Sinema of Arizona refused to change the procedural rules necessary to allow the bill to push past a Republican-led filibuster on a majority vote. Democrats say action is still needed to combat a new wave of voter suppression that is sweeping the country.

Clyburn, who was at the meeting with Biden at the White House last Monday, said he reminded the president of the power executive orders have had in history, including the freeing of slaves in 1863 — two years before the 13th Amendment was passed by Congress.

"When we review our history as a country — a great country — often, more often than not, we see great leadership in our executive, showing the Congress where to go," Clyburn said. "Before Congress could act on the institution of slavery, Abraham Lincoln used executive order."

He added, "I think you'll find that through history sometimes, the Congress, the people need to be nudged by the person being chosen to lead."

## Live updates: Ukraine says shelling damaged cancer hospital

By The Associated Press undefined

The latest developments on the Russia-Ukraine war:

**LVIV, Ukraine** — Ukrainian officials accused Russia damaging a cancer hospital and several residential buildings in the southern city of Mykolaiv with shelling from heavy artillery.

The hospital's head doctor, Maksim Beznosenko, said several hundred patients were in the hospital during the attack but that no one was killed. The assault damaged the building and blew out windows.

Russian forces have stepped up their attacks on Mykolaiv, located 470 kilometers (292 miles) south of Kyiv, in an attempt to encircle the city.

Ukrainian and Western officials earlier accused Russia of shelling a maternity hospital in the southern city of Mariupol on Wednesday. Three people died in that attack.

**LVIV, Ukraine** — Ukraine's President Volodymyr Zelenskyy accused Russia on Friday of kidnapping the mayor of the city of Melitopol, equating it to the actions of "ISIS terrorists."

"They have transitioned into a new stage of terror, in which they try to physically liquidate representatives of Ukraine's lawful local authorities," Zelenskyy said in a video address Friday evening.

Kirill Timoshenko, the deputy head of Ukraine's presidential office, posted a video on the social media site Telegram which he said showed a group of armed men carrying the mayor, Ivan Fedorov, across a square.

Russian forces captured the southern port city of Melitopol, with a population of 150,000, on Feb. 26.

The prosecutor's office of the Luhansk People's Republic, a Moscow-backed rebel region in eastern Ukraine, said on its website that there was a criminal case against Fedorov. The prosecutor's office accused Fedorov of "terrorist activities" and of financing the nationalist militia Right Sector to "commit terrorist crimes against Donbass civilians."

The office said it was looking for Fedorov and called for anyone with information about his whereabouts to contact them.

**SAVANNAH, Ga.** — U.S. soldiers are continuing to deploy to Europe, joining thousands already sent overseas to support NATO allies amid Russia's invasion of Ukraine.

About 130 soldiers from the 87th Division Sustainment Support Battalion, 3rd Division Sustainment Brigade gathered Friday at Hunter Airfield in Savannah, Georgia and departed on a chartered flight.

The soldiers are in addition to the estimated 3,800 soldiers from the Army's 3rd Infantry Division who deployed recently from nearby Fort Stewart.

A division commander said that soldiers are being told to prepare for about six months overseas. The Pentagon has ordered roughly 12,000 total service members from various U.S. bases to Europe.

The soldiers' mission is to train alongside military units of NATO allies in a display of force aimed at deterring further aggression by Russia. The Pentagon has stressed U.S. forces are not being deployed to fight in Ukraine.

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**L**VIV, Ukraine — Ukrainian authorities have warned of a humanitarian catastrophe in the port city of Mariupol, which has been encircled by Russian forces and cut off from deliveries of food and medicine.

Mariupol officials said Friday that 1,582 people had been killed in the 12 days since the siege began.

"There is a humanitarian catastrophe in the city and the dead aren't even being buried," Mariupol's mayor's office said in a statement Friday, calling for Russian forces to lift the siege.

Ukrainian authorities have accused Russian forces of shelling evacuation routes and preventing civilians from escaping the city of 430,000 people.

**B**ERLIN — Ukraine told the International Atomic Energy Agency on Friday that technicians have started repairing damaged power lines at the decommissioned Chernobyl power plant in an effort to restore power supplies, the U.N. nuclear agency said.

On Wednesday, Ukrainian authorities said that Chernobyl, the site of the 1986 nuclear disaster, was knocked off the power grid, with emergency generators supplying backup power.

The Ukrainian nuclear regulator said Friday that workers repaired one section of the lines, but there still appears to be damage in other places, the IAEA said. Repair efforts would continue despite "the difficult situation" outside the plant, which was taken by Russian forces early in the invasion, it said.

The Ukrainian regulator said additional fuel was delivered for generators, but it remains important to fix the power lines as soon as possible. The IAEA reiterated that the disconnection "will not have a critical impact on essential safety functions at the site."

The Vienna-based U.N. nuclear watchdog said that it still isn't receiving data from monitoring systems installed to monitor nuclear material and activities at Chernobyl, but transmission from the Zaporizhzhia plant — Ukraine's biggest, which Russian forces seized last week — has been restored after being lost earlier this week.

**P**ARIS — Interpol is restricting Russia's ability to input information directly into the global police organization's vast network, deciding that communications must first be checked by the general secretariat in Lyon, France.

The French Foreign Ministry said Friday that the beefed-up surveillance measures follow "multiple suspicions of attempted fraudulent use" of the Interpol system in recent days, but it did not elaborate.

Interpol stressed in a statement Thursday that it is maintaining its pledge of neutrality amid war between two of its members, triggered by Russia's invasion of Ukraine. But it said that "heightened supervision and monitoring measures" of Moscow's National Central Bureau were needed "to prevent any potential misuse of Interpol's channels" like targeting individuals in or outside Ukraine.

The ministry noted that Interpol's decision has multiple impacts from communications, to putting out so-called "red notices" for criminals on the loose or even feeding data on lost or stolen documents — all of which must now get compliance checks from Interpol headquarters.

Interpol, which has 195 members, said it had received calls to suspend Russia from the network, along with calls by law enforcement leaders looking for continued cooperation to better fight crime.

"In addition to the tragic loss of life, conflicts invariably lead to an increase in crime," as organized crime groups try to exploit desperation, Interpol said. Risks include human trafficking, weapons smuggling and trafficking in illicit goods and medicines.

**B**OSTON — YouTube announced Friday that it has begun blocking access globally to channels associated with Russian state-funded media. It had previously blocked them — specifically RT and Sputnik — across Europe.

YouTube, which is owned by Google, announced the move in a Twitter post and said that while the change is effective immediately, "we expect our systems to take time to ramp up."

YouTube also said it was now removing content about Russia's invasion of Ukraine that violates its policy that "minimizes or trivializes well-documented violent events." The Kremlin refers to the invasion as a

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“special military operation” and not a war.

YouTube previously paused YouTube ads in Russia. Now, it is extending that to all the ways it makes money on the platform in Russia.

Ukraine’s digital transformation minister, Mykhailo Fedorov, predicted in his Telegram channel that the Kremlin would soon move to block YouTube in Russia. “It’s a question of time.”

**ANTALYA, Turkey**— With the Ukrainian refugee crisis, European countries that had previously been reluctant to share the burden for refugees have found themselves seeking solidarity and burden-sharing, United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees Filippo Grandi said Friday.

Grandi spoke at a diplomacy forum near the Turkish Mediterranean city of Antalya as the number of refugees fleeing Ukraine passed 2.5 million.

“European countries, including countries that have been rather hesitant in the past to any notion that you should share that responsibility, now find themselves ... in the situation to hold hundreds of thousands,” Grandi said. “And what do they do? They ask for that international solidarity and sharing, which means financial assistance.”

Grandi said: “I think that we need to capitalize on what is happening now to restate this notion, that if refugees move, everybody should share responsibility.”

**WARSAW, Poland** – Ukraine’s president and NATO chief remotely joined Poland’s leaders and lawmakers Friday for a session marking Poland’s 23 years in the defensive military alliance at a time when neighboring Ukraine is fighting Russian invasion.

In a video link to the gathering in Poland’s parliament, Ukraine President Volodymyr Zelenskyy thanked Poland for supporting his nation’s struggle against the aggressor and also for opening its borders to refugees fleeing the war. Over 2.3 million people have fled Ukraine since the Feb. 24 invasion. Over 1.5 million of them have made their way to Poland.

In a veiled way Zelenskyy said he hopes Ukraine will eventually receive Soviet-designed MiG-29 fighter jets from Poland. The delivery implications of the jets recently led to an apparent misunderstanding between Warsaw and the U.S. administration.

“I am grateful for the efforts you are taking to allow us to protect Ukraine’s skies,” Zelenskyy said. “I trust that we will be able to arrive at a result that is very important to us.”

NATO Secretary-General Jens Stoltenberg said Poland is safer for being a member of the alliance, and stressed the task is now to make sure the armed conflict does not spread but comes to an end.

Poland’s President Andrzej Duda condemned Russia’s bombings of Ukraine’s cities and housing areas as “war crimes.”

**UNITED NATIONS** — The United Nations human rights office has received “credible reports” that Russian forces are using cluster munitions in Ukraine, including in populated areas which is prohibited under international humanitarian law, the U.N. political chief said Friday.

Undersecretary-General Rosemary DiCarlo told a U.N. Security Council meeting that residential areas and civilian infrastructure are being shelled in Mariupol, Kharkiv, Sumy and Chernihiv and “the utter devastation being visited on these cities is horrific.”

Most of the civilian casualties recorded by the U.N. human rights office — 564 killed and 982 injured as of Thursday — “have been caused by explosive weapons with a wide impact area, including heavy artillery and multi-launch rocket systems, and missile and air strikes,” she said.

“Indiscriminate attacks, including those using cluster munitions, which are of a nature to strike military objectives and civilians or civilian objects without distinction, are prohibited under international humanitarian law,” DiCarlo said. “Directing attacks against civilian and civilian objects, as well as so-called area bombardment in towns and villages, are also prohibited under international law and may amount to war crimes.”

As of Thursday the U.N. World Health Organization has verified 26 attacks on health facilities, health

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workers and ambulances, including the bombing of the Mariupol maternity hospital, which caused 12 deaths and 34 injuries, DiCarlo said.

All alleged violations of international humanitarian law must be investigated and those found responsible must be held accountable, she said.

DiCarlo stressed that "the need for negotiations to stop the war in Ukraine could not be more urgent."

Footage recorded on the outskirts of Kyiv by Radio Free Europe on Wednesday shows Ukrainian soldiers with rifles and rocket-propelled grenade launchers slung over their shoulders traversing snow-dusted fields and woods and expressing disdain toward the Russians.

One unidentified soldier called their adversaries "orcs," a reference to the monstrous and malevolent foot soldiers in the "Lord of the Rings" series.

Another soldier said they planned to kill all their enemies over the bombing of Mariupol.

"We'll multiply them by zero," the unidentified soldier said.

Gunfire and explosions erupt during the 3-minute, 30-second clip. At one point in the woods, shots split the air near the group, and soldiers drop to their stomachs in an instant and return fire. The assailants are not visible in the clip, but the crack-crack-crack from the gunfire exchange carries on for 15 seconds in one part of the clip.

The chief prosecutor of the International Criminal Court has opened an online portal to gather evidence of war crimes in Ukraine, as he renewed his call to combatants to abide by the laws of war.

Prosecutor Karim Khan said in a written statement Friday that he is "closely following the deeply troubling developments in hostilities." There have been reports in recent days of Russian strikes on civilian infrastructure in Ukrainian towns and cities, including the deadly strike on a maternity hospital in Mariupol earlier this week.

Khan notes in a written statement that "if attacks are intentionally directed against the civilian population: that is a crime. If attacks are intentionally directed against civilian objects: that is a crime. I strongly urge parties to the conflict to avoid the use of heavy explosive weapons in populated areas." He says there is no legal justification or excuse "for attacks which are indiscriminate, or which are disproportionate in their effects on the civilian population."

Khan also said that two more of the global court's member states, Japan and North Macedonia, have formally requested him to investigate in Ukraine, bringing the number of so-called state party referrals to 41.

The information will bolster evidence gathered by an investigative team Khan sent to the region last week to begin gathering evidence.

Neither Russia nor Ukraine is an ICC member state, but Kyiv has recognized the court's jurisdiction, allowing Khan to investigate war crimes, crimes against humanity and genocide.

**BELGRADE, Serbia** — A flight from Belgrade to Moscow was reverted and evacuated following a bomb alert, Serbian police said Friday.

The Belgrade airport received an email saying that an explosive device has been planted on the Air Serbia flight to Moscow, police said in an email.

The plane was then turned back shortly after take-off, and is being checked by police, the statement said. No other details were immediately available.

Serbian media said there were more than 200 passengers and crew on the plane.

Air Serbia carrier is the only one in Europe that still flies to and from Russia as Serbia has refused to join Western sanctions against its traditional ally over Ukraine.

Air Serbia has increased the number of flights to Russia amid high demand.

**ATHENS, Greece** — The leader of Greece's Orthodox Church has contacted the Orthodox Church of Ukraine to offer support in housing refugees fleeing the war-torn country.



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Archbishop Ieronymos, who heads the Greek church, said in a statement on Friday that he had telephoned Metropolitan Bishop Epiphanius of Kyiv, the Ukrainian Orthodox Church leader, and promised "full support" for Ukraine, adding that parishes across Greece had been sent a request to provide assistance.

Only several thousand refugees from Ukraine have traveled to Greece so far — out of the 2.5 million that have fled the country — but Greek authorities expect that number to increase in the coming weeks.

The Greek church has recognized the independence of the Orthodox Church of Ukraine despite strong opposition from the Russian Orthodox Church.

**ISTANBUL** — Turkey on Friday evacuated its embassy in Kyiv, a Foreign Ministry spokesman said.

Tanju Bilgic said staff at the mission would move to Chernivtsi near the Romanian border for security reasons, state-run Anadolu news agency reported.

The order to leave Kyiv came as Russian forces fanned out around the city and appeared likely to step up artillery and rocket attacks. Many countries ordered diplomatic staff to leave Kyiv before Russia launched its invasion on Feb. 24.

Turkey has close ties to both Ukraine and Russia and has been seeking to mediate between its warring Black Sea neighbors.

**VERSAILLES**, France — German Chancellor Olaf Scholz is underlining the importance of keeping in contact with Russian President Vladimir Putin, but is stressing that "we will not make decisions for the Ukrainians."

Scholz and French President Emmanuel Macron, who has spoken frequently with the Russian leader, together spoke to Putin on Thursday. After a European Union summit on Friday, Scholz said "it is absolutely necessary that we do not let the thread of talks break."

The Elysee said Friday that Macron and Scholz would speak again with Putin on Saturday.

Scholz stressed that he and Macron are consulting closely among themselves and with the Ukrainian leadership — and that a cease-fire is the top priority. Scholz said it's good that there are talks, but they shouldn't just drag on while "weapons every day destroy people's lives, buildings, infrastructure and dreams."

The chancellor said that there is "one very clear principle: we will not make decisions for the Ukrainians. They must know themselves what from their point of view is the right thing for their country in this threatening situation."

**BELGRADE**, Serbia — Germany's foreign minister has urged Serbia, which has not imposed sanctions on traditional ally Russia over the war in Ukraine, to align policies with the European Union if it wants to join the bloc.

Annalena Baerbock said Friday in Serbia's capital Belgrade that "we all must have a clear position" over the Russian invasion of Ukraine.

Russian President Vladimir Putin, Baerbock said, launched a "shameless campaign of destruction" that is targeting "maternity wards, schools, (people's) homes."

While Serbia has criticized the attack on Ukraine and voted in the United Nations for the condemnation of the attack, Belgrade has refrained from joining Western sanctions against Moscow.

Historically considered a friendly nation, Russia remains popular among the Serbs, particularly because of Moscow's support for Serbia's opposition to the Western-backed independence of the breakaway former Kosovo province.

Baerbock praised Serbia's U.N. vote and the offer to host Ukrainian refugees. But she added that "joining the European Union means readiness to align with the positions of the union."

Serbia's President Aleksandar Vucic said that "Serbia has a very determined and clear position" and has done "nothing that would hurt Ukraine."

**MOSCOW** — Russia's communications and media regulator says it's restricting national access to Instagram because the platform is spreading "calls to commit violent acts against Russian citizens, including military personnel."

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The regulator, called Roskomnadzor, took the step Friday as Russia presses ahead with its invasion of Ukraine.

Earlier on Friday, Meta, the company that owns Facebook, Instagram and WhatsApp, said in a statement tweeted by its spokesman Andy Stone that it had "made allowances for forms of political expression that would normally violate our rules on violent speech, such as 'death to the Russian invaders'."

The statement stressed that the company "still won't allow credible calls for violence against Russian civilians."

**PRAGUE** — Prague City Hall has started readying temporary accommodation for a surge in refugees from Ukraine after the Czech capital ran out of housing options for them.

The government estimates that up to 200,000 refugees — 55% of them children — have arrived in the Czech Republic, a European Union and NATO member that doesn't border Ukraine. About 25% of the refugees entering the country have gone to Prague.

Prague Mayor Zdenek Hrib has asked the heads of 22 city districts to prepare at least 100 beds each in school gyms and also provide food for the refugees there.

Hrib compared the current situation in Prague to Germany facing the waves of refugees during a European migrant crisis in 2015-16.

"The difference is that Germany had months to react, we have just days," Hrib said. "The demand for accommodation in Prague is enormous and by far surpasses what we can offer."

**ANTALYA**, Turkey — Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan has suggested that the war in Ukraine could have been avoided had the world spoken out against Russia's 2014 annexation of Crimea.

"Would we have faced such a picture if the West, the whole world, had raised their voices?" Erdogan asked. "Those who remained silent in the face of Crimea's invasion are now saying some things."

Erdogan spoke Friday at a diplomacy forum near the Turkish Mediterranean city of Antalya, where the Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov and Ukraine's Foreign Minister Dmytro Kuleba met a day earlier for talks facilitated by Turkey's foreign minister.

Erdogan said Turkey would continue its efforts for peace.

**COPENHAGEN**, Denmark — Finnish President Sauli Niinistö spoke in a phone call Friday with Russian President Vladimir Putin about the war in Ukraine.

Niinistö's office said in a statement that he informed Putin that he, earlier in the day, had a phone call with Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy, and that Zelenskyy was prepared to talk directly with Putin.

The statement said Niinistö called for an immediate ceasefire and the safe evacuation of civilians, but also spoke to Putin about the security of nuclear energy facilities in Ukraine.

Niinistö is one of the few Western leaders who has kept a regular dialogue with Putin ever since the Finnish leader took office in 2012.

**BUDAPEST**, Hungary — Hungary's prime minister said Friday that sanctions imposed against Russia by the European Union would not involve a ban on imports of Russian oil and gas.

In a video on his social media channels following a meeting of EU leaders in Versailles, France, Viktor Orban said it was possible that the war in Ukraine "would drag on," but that "the most important issue was settled in a way that was favorable to us."

"There will be no sanctions covering oil and gas, which means that Hungary's energy supply is guaranteed for the next period," Orban said.

Orban, widely considered to be the Kremlin's closest ally in the EU, has supported the bloc's sanctions against Russia over its invasion of Ukraine, Hungary's neighbor.

But he has remained firm in insisting that the energy sector be left out of sanctions, arguing that such a move would damage EU countries more than Russia.

Last year, Hungary extended by 15 years a natural gas contract with Russian state-owned energy com-

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pany Gazprom, and has entered into a 12 billion-euro (\$13.6 billion) Russian build-and-finance agreement to add two nuclear reactors to Hungary's only nuclear power plant.

KYIV, Ukraine — Ukraine's president says his country's military forces have reached "a strategic turning point," while Russia's president says there are "certain positive developments" in talks between the warring countries.

Neither leader explained clearly what they meant, however.

Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy said Friday: "It's impossible to say how many days we will still need to free our land, but it is possible to say that we will do it because ... we have reached a strategic turning point." He didn't elaborate.

He said authorities are working on 12 humanitarian corridors and trying to ensure needy people receive food, medicine and basic goods.

He spoke on a video showing him outside the presidential administration in Kyiv, speaking in both Ukrainian and Russian about the 16th day of war.

Meanwhile, in Moscow Russian President Vladimir Putin said there have been positive developments in talks between the warring countries, but he didn't offer any details about what those developments were.

Putin hosted Belarus President Alexander Lukashenko for talks on Friday and told him that negotiations with Ukraine "are now being held almost on a daily basis."

## Russian warplanes, artillery widen attack, hit industry hub

By YURAS KARMAU Associated Press

LVIV, Ukraine (AP) — Russia's airplanes and artillery widened their assault on Ukraine on Friday, striking airfields in the west and a major industrial hub in the east, as Moscow's forces tried to regroup from recent losses and their onslaught fast reduced crowded cities to rubble.

American defense officials offered an assessment of the Russian air campaign, estimating that invading pilots are averaging 200 sorties a day, compared with five to 10 for Ukrainian forces, which are focusing more on surface-to-air missiles, rocket-propelled grenades and drones to take out Russian aircraft.

New commercial satellite images appeared to capture artillery firing on residential areas between Russian forces and the capital. The images from Maxar Technologies showed muzzle flashes and smoke from the big guns, as well as impact craters and burning homes in the town of Moschun, outside Kyiv, the company said.

In a devastated village east of the capital, villagers climbed over toppled walls and flapping metal strips in the remnants of a pool hall, restaurant and theater freshly blown apart by Russian bombs.

Russian President Vladimir Putin "created this mess, thinking he will be in charge here," 62-year-old Ivan Merzyk said. In temperatures sinking below freezing, villagers quickly spread plastic wrap or nailed plywood over blown out windows of their homes.

"We are not going away from here," Merzyk said.

On the economic and political front, the U.S. and its allies moved to further isolate and sanction the Kremlin. President Joe Biden announced that the U.S. will dramatically downgrade its trade status with Russia and also ban imports of Russian seafood, alcohol and diamonds.

The move to revoke Russia's "most favored nation" status was taken in coordination with the European Union and Group of Seven countries.

"The free world is coming together to confront Putin," Biden said.

On the ground, Russia's forces appeared to be trying to regroup and regain momentum after encountering heavier losses and stiffer resistance than anticipated over the past two weeks. Britain's Ministry of Defense said Russia is trying to "re-set and re-posture" its troops, gearing up for operations against Kyiv.

"It's ugly already, but it's going to get worse," said Nick Reynolds, a warfare analyst at Royal United Services Institute, a British think tank.

With the invasion in its 16th day, Putin said there had been "certain positive developments" in Russia-

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Ukraine talks, but gave no details.

Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy claimed Ukrainian forces had "reached a strategic turning point," though he did not elaborate.

"It's impossible to say how many days we will still need to free our land, but it is possible to say that we will do it," he said via video from Kyiv.

Zelenskyy said authorities were working on establishing 12 humanitarian corridors and trying to ensure food, medicine and other basics get to people across the country. Thousands of soldiers on both sides are believed to have been killed in the invasion, along with Ukrainian civilians.

He accused Russia of kidnapping the mayor of one city, Melitopol, calling the abduction "a new stage of terror." The Biden administration, citing American intelligence but no evidence, warned before the invasion of Russian plans to detain and kill targeted people in Ukraine. Zelenskyy himself would be a likely top target.

So far, the Russians have made the biggest advances on cities in the east and south while struggling in the north and around Kyiv.

Russia said it used high-precision long-range weapons to put military airfields in Lutsk and Ivano-Frankivsk in the west "out of action." The attack on Lutsk killed four Ukrainian servicemen, the mayor said.

Russian airstrikes also targeted for the first time Dnipro, a major industrial hub in the east and Ukraine's fourth-largest city, with about 1 million people. One person was killed, Ukrainian officials said.

In images of the aftermath released by Ukraine's emergency agency, firefighters doused a flaming building, and ash fell on bloodied rubble. Smoke billowed over shattered concrete where buildings once stood.

The bombardment continued in Mariupol, where a deadly strike on a maternity hospital this week sparked international outrage and war-crime allegations.

Unrelenting attacks have thwarted repeated attempts to send in food and medicine and evacuate civilians from Mariupol, a city of 430,000. In a statement, the Mariupol mayor's office said Friday that the toll of people killed during the now 12-day siege had risen to 1,582.

In the face of the unrelenting bombing, "the dead aren't even being buried," the mayor's office said.

Elsewhere, temperatures were forecast to hit -13 degrees Celsius (8 Fahrenheit) in the eastern city of Kharkiv, which has come under heavy bombardment.

About 400 apartment buildings in Kharkiv lost heat, and Mayor Ihor Terekhov appealed to remaining residents to descend into the subway or other underground shelters where blankets and hot food were being distributed.

The latest assaults came a day after satellite photos appeared to show that the huge armored column that was stalled for over a week outside Kyiv had spread out near the capital.

Military analysts were divided over whether the maneuvering by the Russian convoy signaled the imminent start of a siege of Kyiv or was just an effort to disperse some vehicles to more protected positions. The photos showed howitzers newly set up in firing position, and armored units staged near the Antonov Airport north of the city, according to Maxar.

Americans point instead to other forces that are moving toward Kyiv from the northeast and are now about 20 to 30 kilometers (about 10 to 20 miles) east of the city center.

Hundreds of miles to the south of Kyiv, at Mykolaiv, shelling damaged a cancer hospital, according to the head doctor, Maksim Beznosenko. No one was killed.

The United Nations says it has verified 26 attacks on medical centers, medical workers or ambulances since the invasion began, with 12 people killed.

The U.N. political chief said Friday that the international organization had received credible reports that Russian forces were using cluster bombs in populated areas. The bombs scatter smaller explosives over a wide area and are prohibited in cities and towns under international law.

Russians and Ukrainians have held multiple rounds of talks near the Belarus border, and the two countries' foreign ministers met again Thursday with no apparent progress. Various third countries have also made attempts to broker a stop to the fighting.

Some 2.5 million people have fled Ukraine since the invasion began, according to the United Nations.

## Texas judge blocks investigations of trans youth parents

By ANDREW DeMILLO Associated Press

A Texas judge on Friday blocked the state from investigating as child abuse gender confirming care for transgender youth.

District Judge Amy Clark Meachum issued a temporary injunction preventing the state from enforcing Republican Gov. Greg Abbott's directive to compel the Department of Family and Protective Services to investigate reports of youth receiving such care.

The injunction broadens Meachum's earlier order blocking the state's investigation of the parents of one transgender teenager. The American Civil Liberties Union and Lambda Legal sued on behalf of the parents of the 16-year-old girl over the investigation and Abbott's directive. Meachum scheduled a trial for July 11 on the challenge to Abbott's directive.

Meachum ruled that by issuing the directive without a new law or rule, the governor and officials' actions "violate separation of powers by impermissibly encroaching into the legislative domain."

The lawsuit marked the first report of parents being investigated following Abbott's directive and an earlier nonbinding legal opinion by Republican Attorney General Ken Paxton labeling certain gender-confirming treatments as "child abuse." DFPS said it had opened nine investigations following the directive and opinion.

"The court's decisive ruling today brings some needed relief to trans youth in Texas but we cannot stop fighting," Brian Klosterboer, ACLU of Texas attorney, said in a statement after the ruling.

The groups also represent a clinical psychologist who has said the governor's directive forces her to choose between reporting clients to the state or losing her license and other penalties.

"(Abbott's directive) singles out these families for targeted scrutiny, it stigmatizes them, invades their privacy and it interferes with the fundamental right of parents to make the decision of what's best for their child," Paul Castillo, senior counsel for Lambda Legal, said toward the end of the daylong hearing before Meachum.

Paxton said he planned to appeal the judge's ruling.

"I'll win this fight to protect our Texas children," Paxton tweeted.

The governor's directive and Paxton's opinion go against the nation's largest medical groups, including the American Medical Association, which have opposed Republican-backed restrictions on transgender people filed in statehouses nationwide.

Arkansas last year became the first state to pass a law prohibiting gender confirming treatments for minors, and Tennessee has approved a similar measure. A judge blocked Arkansas' law, and the state has appealed that ruling.

Meachum's ruling came the same day that dozens of major companies — including Apple, Google, Johnson & Johnson, Meta and Microsoft — criticized the Texas directive in a full-page ad in the Dallas Morning News.

"The recent attempt to criminalize a parent for helping their transgender child access medically necessary, age-appropriate healthcare in the state of Texas goes against the values of our companies," read the ad, which used the headline "DISCRIMINATION IS BAD FOR BUSINESS."

Meachum issued her ruling after several hours of testimony in the parents' lawsuit challenging Abbott's directive.

A child protective services supervisor testified Friday that she resigned from the department because of concerns about the directive, and said cases involving gender confirming care were being treated differently than others.

Megan Mooney, a clinical psychologist also represented by the groups in the lawsuit, said the governor's directive has caused "outright panic" among mental health professionals and families of transgender youth.

"Parents are terrified that (child protective services) is going to come and question their children, or take them away," Mooney testified. "Mental health professionals are scared that we're either violating our standards and professional codes of conduct, or in violation of the law."

The family that challenged Texas' directive was not identified by name in the lawsuit. The suit said the mother works for DFPS on the review of reports of abuse and neglect. The day of Abbott's order, she asked her supervisor how it would affect the agency's policy, according to the lawsuit.

The mother was placed on leave because she has a transgender daughter and the following day was informed her family would be investigated in accordance with the governor's directive, the suit said. The teen has received puberty-delaying medication and hormone therapy.

Advocates have said the directive has had a chilling effect on providers of gender confirming care in the state. Texas Children's Hospital announced last week it will stop providing hormone therapies for transgender youth because of the governor's order.

Paxton earlier this week filed a challenge in federal court to guidelines President Joe Biden's administration issued in response to Texas' investigations. The guidance from the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services said that despite Abbott's order, health care providers are not required to disclose private patient information regarding gender-confirming care.

## Texas clinics' lawsuit over abortion ban 'effectively over'

By PAUL J. WEBER and JAMIE STENGLE Associated Press

AUSTIN, Texas (AP) — The Texas Supreme Court on Friday dealt essentially a final blow to abortion clinics' best hopes of stopping a restrictive law that has sharply curtailed the number of abortions in the state since September and will now fully stay in place for the foreseeable future.

The ruling by the all-Republican court was not unexpected, but it slammed the door on what little path forward the U.S. Supreme Court had allowed Texas clinics after having twice declined to stop a ban on abortions after roughly six weeks of pregnancy.

It spells the coming end to a federal lawsuit that abortion clinics filed even before the restrictions took effect in September — and were then rejected at nearly every turn, and in nearly every court, for six months.

"There is nothing left, this case is effectively over with respect to our challenge to the abortion ban," said Marc Hearn, attorney for the Center for Reproductive Rights, which led the challenge against the Texas law known as Senate Bill 8.

Although Texas abortion clinics are not dropping the lawsuit, they now expect it will be dismissed in the coming weeks or months.

It is likely to further embolden other Republican-controlled states that are now pressing forward with similar laws, including neighboring Oklahoma, where many Texas women have crossed state lines to get an abortion for the past six months. The Republican-controlled Oklahoma Senate on Thursday approved a half-dozen anti-abortion measures, including a Texas-style ban.

Texas' law leaves enforcement up to private citizens, who are entitled to collect what critics call a "bounty" of \$10,000 if they bring a successful lawsuit against a provider or anyone who helps a patient obtain an abortion.

The Texas law bans abortion after roughly six weeks of pregnancy and makes no exceptions in cases of rape or incest. Abortions in Texas have plummeted by about 50% since the law took effect, while the number of Texans going to clinics out of state and requesting abortion pills online has gone up.

In December, the U.S. Supreme Court decided to keep the law in place and allowed only a narrow challenge against the restrictions to proceed. The decision by the Texas Supreme Court turned on whether medical licensing officials had an enforcement role under the law, and therefore, could be sued by clinics that are reaching for any possible way to halt the restrictions.

But writing for the court, Justice Jeffrey Boyd said those state officials have no enforcement authority, "either directly or indirectly."

Republican Texas Attorney General Ken Paxton celebrated the decision that he said renders the lawsuit "essentially finished." Anti-abortion groups, who pushed GOP lawmakers to approve the law, also called it a significant victory.

"This is a win for thousands of unborn Texans and I'm proud to defend those who do not yet have a voice," Paxton said. "I will fight relentlessly to stop gruesome abortion practices from taking more innocent lives."

Texas abortion providers had already acknowledged they were running out of options and that the law

would stay in place for the foreseeable future.

"Because of the U.S. Supreme Court's repeated refusal to intervene for more than half a year, Texans are living in a state of sustained chaos, crisis, and confusion – and there is no end in sight," Alexis McGill Johnson, president and CEO of Planned Parenthood Federation of America, said Friday. "Tragically, this attack on reproductive freedom now continues uninterrupted in Texas and across the country."

Even though the Texas law is more restrictive than any in the country, the future of abortion rights in the U.S. is likely to come down to a Supreme Court decision later this year over a separate case out of Mississippi. That one amounts to a direct challenge of *Roe v. Wade*, the landmark 1973 case that affirmed the constitutional right to an abortion.

In December, the court's conservative majority signaled a willingness to roll back abortion rights across the country, which clinics fear could allow Texas and other GOP-controlled states to ban abortion outright.

The number of abortions in September and October in Texas fell by about 50% compared to the same months a year earlier, from 4,511 in September 2020 to 2,197 in September 2021, and from 4,650 in October 2020 to 2,251 in October 2021, according to state health figures.

But that data only tells part of the story. Researchers say the number of Texas women going to clinics in neighboring states and going online to get abortion pills by mail has risen sharply since the law took effect.

A study released this month showed that from September to December, nearly 1,400 Texans a month were going to neighboring states for abortions. The study from the University of Texas at Austin's Texas Policy Evaluation Project collected data from 34 of 44 open clinics in Arkansas, Colorado, Kansas, Louisiana, Mississippi, New Mexico and Oklahoma.

It found that about 5,600 Texans went to the clinics in nearby states over those months compared to just over 500 for the same period in 2019.

Another study led by a University of Texas researcher found an increase in the number of Texans requesting abortion pills from the overseas nonprofit Aid Access. The study, published in the medical journal *JAMA Network Open*, found that during the first week of September, requests per day jumped to about 138 compared to a previous average of 11. Over the subsequent weeks in September, requests averaged 37 a day. Then, through December, the average was 30 per day. Researchers noted they didn't know if all requests resulted in abortions.

## **No indictment for Texans QB Watson over sex assault claims**

By JUAN A. LOZANO Associated Press

HOUSTON (AP) — A grand jury on Friday declined to indict Houston Texans quarterback Deshaun Watson following a police investigation sparked by lawsuits filed by 22 women who have accused him of sexual assault and harassment.

The grand jury's decision came about a year after the women first filed their suits, accusing Watson of exposing himself, touching them with his penis or kissing them against their will during massage appointments. One woman alleged Watson forced her to perform oral sex.

Houston police began investigating Watson in April 2021 after a criminal complaint was filed. The FBI also was reviewing the allegations.

Prosecutors presented evidence and testimony to the grand jury for over six hours on Friday related to nine criminal complaints against Watson, Johna Stallings, chief of the adult sex crimes and trafficking division with the Harris County District Attorney's Office, said. She declined to say what possible charges were presented to the grand jury for consideration.

"We respect the grand jury's decision," Stallings said.

Stallings said that decision ended criminal proceedings related to Watson in Harris County, where Houston is located.

Watson's lawyers have said "some sexual activity" happened during some of the massage appointments but that he never coerced anyone.

At a news conference outside his lawyer's office building, Watson said he was grateful for the grand

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jury's decision.

"It's definitely a very emotional moment for me. We're far from being done handling what we need to handle on the legal side but today is definitely a big day and I thank my lord and savior Jesus Christ for letting the truth be heard ... I'm going to continue to just keep pushing forward and build my name back to where it was if not better," Watson said.

Rusty Hardin, Watson's lead attorney, said that the NFL star "has not done a single thing wrong and this is the first step for that."

Tony Buzbee, the attorney representing the 22 women, said the criminal case is separate from the civil cases and he will continue the process of questioning Watson as the lawsuits move toward trial. Earlier Friday, Buzbee questioned Watson during a deposition, the first the NFL star has given as part of the lawsuits.

"The civil cases will continue to gather steam. We take Mr. Watson's deposition again Tuesday. Respect the process," Buzbee said.

Eight of the women who sued Watson filed criminal complaints against him with Houston police and had been set to appear before the grand jury. Two other women who didn't sue Watson also filed police complaints.

Watson's lawyers have sought to balance their defense of the NFL star while simultaneously condemning sexual violence against women. They have called the lawsuits a "money grab" and claimed that all 22 women who sued are lying — a strategy some experts and advocates say relies on long-used tropes designed to minimize such accusations. Buzbee has said some of his clients have faced criticism and even death threats.

Hardin said Friday that he always urged the women to file criminal complaints so they could be heard and police could investigate.

"We were vindicated in the sense that ...if law enforcement thoroughly looked at these matters, that we'd have the result we had today," Hardin said.

Even before the lawsuits were filed in March 2021, Watson had asked to be traded. The trade request and the lawsuits kept Watson out all last season. The Texans were expected to try and trade Watson this offseason.

NFL spokesman Brian McCarthy said the league is "closely monitoring all developments" and that matter "remains under review of the personal conduct policy."

No trial date has been set for the lawsuits.

The deposition of Watson for the civil cases took place in the offices of Hardin's law firm, located about half a mile (0.8 km) away from the Harris County criminal courthouse in downtown Houston, where the grand jury met.

Watson invoked his Fifth Amendment right against self-incrimination during the deposition, Hardin said.

"No lawyer in America would let their client testify in a court case with the same matters being considered by a grand jury," Hardin said.

With the criminal investigation over, "we are happy to move forward with the civil case depositions" Hardin said.

Buzbee said that Watson's refusal to answer his questions Friday only bolstered the women's allegations.

"If he did nothing wrong, why not just say that?" Buzbee said.

Hardin said Buzbee's only goal on Friday was to ask Watson "salacious questions" and release transcripts to the media to make him look bad.

Hardin and Buzbee are two of the best-known lawyers in Texas. Hardin is a civil and criminal defense attorney who represented ex-pitcher Roger Clemens when he was acquitted in 2012 of charges that he lied to Congress by denying he used performance-enhancing drugs. Buzbee represented former Texas Gov. Rick Perry in an abuse-of-power case and settled lawsuits for 10 teenagers who had accused Texas millionaire Stanley Marsh 3 of paying them for sexual acts.



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## AP Was There: The surreal first day of the pandemic

By The Associated Press undefined

On the day the World Health Organization declared the coronavirus a pandemic, Koloud "Kay" Tarapolsi reflected the views of many people when she told an Associated Press reporter: "If we avoid each other and listen to the scientists, maybe in a few weeks it will be better."

If only she knew.

News coverage of the first day of the pandemic, March 11, 2020, is a fascinating look-back in time at a world experiencing combination of denial and panic about a virus that was still a mystery to many.

People were stunned at the idea that schools and sporting events were being shuttered, developments that became the norm over the next two years. Stock markets plummeted, President Donald Trump addressed a jittery nation to announce travel restrictions. Tom Hanks was infected with the virus,

But many people, like Tarapolsi, thought it would be over soon.

"I was like 'Omigod, that poor girl,'" Tarapolsi said through laughter after re-reading the AP story from that day. "I'm sad for the optimist that I was, you know, just thinking life would get back together and I was just so optimistic about that."

It didn't take long for the virus to hit home for the Redmond, Washington, woman, however.

A few days later, she learned a nursing home not far from her was the epicenter of a coronavirus outbreak. Later that month, she drove through downtown Seattle and was shocked to see it more of a "ghost town."

"I just thought we were led to believe it was just a little tiny thing. And it really just kind of stopped the world on its head," she said.

Her job as a library storyteller and teacher of her Arabic culture were suddenly impossible to do. So was a three-month artist residency in Morocco during the last half of 2020. Her kids' school was upended, but like many in the pandemic, she had time to pursue a new passion and wrote a children's book.

"I just wish we would have taken it more seriously," she said of the early days of the pandemic.

Below are two AP stories from March 11, 2020 that chronicle the start of the pandemic, giving a glimpse into a world coming to grips with a new public health emergency:

Americans snap to attention on virus as big events canceled

A basketball tournament, with no fans. A St. Patrick's Day, with no parades. College campuses, with no students. Corporate headquarters, with barren cubicles.

The nation snapped to attention on Wednesday as the new coronavirus was declared a pandemic, stocks slid into bear market territory and the American public finally began to come to grips with the outbreak. President Donald Trump held a rare prime-time address from the Oval Office to calm the public.

Health and government officials have been sounding the alarm about the virus for nearly two months as it infected and killed thousands of people, pinballing from China to Iran to Italy and beyond before striking Seattle in the first deadly outbreak in the U.S.

But Wednesday was the moment that the larger American public came to the dawning realization that the toll of the virus would be unavoidable for months to come, perhaps longer.

In the matter of hours Wednesday afternoon, the signs were everywhere. The NCAA announced that the rite of spring for so many Americans — its college basketball tournament — would be played before largely empty arenas. Around the same time, the White House scheduled a nationally televised address. News feeds lit up with cancellations of St. Patrick's Day parades, major university systems in California, New York and elsewhere ending classes for the term and late night comedians making plans to film without live studio audiences.

CBS Evening News anchor Norah O'Donnell solemnly declared during Wednesday evening's broadcast that two employees of the network had tested positive and those who worked closely with them had been asked to self-quarantine.

Later in the day, Hollywood icon Tom Hanks announced that he and his wife had tested positive for the virus. Just as the Hanks news was bouncing around the internet and on people's phones, the NBA said it was suspending its season until further notice.

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In his prime-time address, Trump declared that he is sharply restricting passenger travel from 26 European nations to the U.S. beginning late Friday, at midnight. Trump said the month-long restrictions won't apply to the United Kingdom, and there would be exemptions for "Americans who have undergone appropriate screenings." He said the U.S. would monitor the situation to determine if travel could be reopened earlier.

"We are all in this together," Trump said.

The Oval Office address was an abrupt shift in tone from a president who has repeatedly sought to downplay the severity of the threat, telling people: "It will go away, just stay calm."

Many Americans shared a similar mindset in recent weeks, but the events of Wednesday changed the mood.

Koloud "Kay" Tarapolsi of the Seattle suburb of Redmond learned that two of her children will have to be kept home from school because their district closed for two weeks starting Thursday. Their Girl Scout activities including cookie-selling have already been curtailed.

"We're adjusting," she said. "If we avoid each other and listen to the scientists, maybe in a few weeks it will be better."

Officials in some American cities, including the hot spots of Seattle and the San Francisco Bay Area, banned large gatherings of people, while celebrations including Chicago's St. Patrick's Day parade were canceled.

The World Health Organization called the crisis a pandemic, a step it had previously resisted. Stocks plunged, with the S&P 500 on the cusp of falling into bear territory at nearly 20% lower than the record set just last month.

In Washington state, after Gov. Jay Inslee announced a ban on events of more than 250 people in the greater Seattle area, the Seattle Public School system said it would close for at least two weeks for its 53,000 students. COVID-19 has killed more than two dozen in the Seattle area.

Seattle Public Schools Superintendent Denise Juneau called it "an unprecedented situation."

As of Wednesday evening, 38 people had died in the U.S., while more than 1,300 people had tested positive for the new coronavirus.

That's far less than the toll in other parts of the globe: In Italy, where more than 12,000 people had tested positive and 800 people have died, the situation was so dire that all stores except pharmacies and food markets were ordered closed.

For most people, the new coronavirus causes only mild or moderate symptoms, such as fever and cough. For some, especially older adults and people with existing health problems, it can cause more severe illness, including pneumonia.

The vast majority of people recover from the new virus. According to the World Health Organization, people with mild illness recover in about two weeks, while those with more severe illness may take three to six weeks to recover. In mainland China, where the virus first exploded, more than 80,000 people have been diagnosed and more than 60,000 have so far recovered.

Meanwhile, from UCLA to the University of Vermont, the number of colleges and universities canceling in-person classes and moving the rest of the semester online mounted.

In New York City, there have only been a few dozen people diagnosed with COVID-19, but the virus is still all that anyone was talking about.

Subway trains, usually jam-packed at rush hour, were unusually uncrowded Wednesday. City transportation officials reported that the number of people cycling to work in Manhattan over the East River bridges has soared 55% over the past few days as people have heeded the mayor's suggestion to avoid public transportation during peak hours.

Some grocery stores across the city, which ran out of hand sanitizer days ago, have seen shelves empty of other items, like bottled water. Public places have seemed a little less teeming, though tourist hubs like Times Square are still attracting plenty of people.

Late night comedians made plans to start filming without live audiences. NBC's "Late Night With Seth Myers" tweeted it was following guidance by New York City officials.

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"We hope to do our part to help to decrease the rate of transmission in our communities," it wrote.

Even email boxes were papered with references to the new virus, as employers wrote to workers outlining new work-from-home procedures, and businesses sent emails to customers with subject lines like "Coronavirus update."

Holly Wagner, 20, a sophomore at New York University, said she had been planning on visiting Washington, D.C., over spring break, but now is worried the campus will shut entirely while she's gone, leaving her unable to retrieve belongings.

"I'm worried the situation is going to escalate and they're going to say, 'don't come back to the dorms,'" she said.

Rhode Island Gov. Gina Raimondo asked residents not to organize or attend gatherings of more than 250 people, but stopped short of an outright ban. Still, at an afternoon news conference, she pleaded for people sick even with just aches and pains to stay home.

"We understand that people have to live their lives and and business has to continue," she said. "However, we only have one chance to contain this."

WHO declares coronavirus a pandemic, urges aggressive action

GENEVA (AP) — The World Health Organization declared the coronavirus a pandemic and urged aggressive action from all countries to fight it, as U.S. stocks plunged into bear market territory and several American cities joined global counterparts in banning large gatherings.

By using the charged word "pandemic" after shying away from calling it so earlier, the U.N. health agency sought to shock lethargic countries into pulling out all the stops.

"We have called every day for countries to take urgent and aggressive action. We have rung the alarm bell loud and clear," WHO's chief Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus said Wednesday.

"All countries can still change the course of this pandemic. If countries detect, test, treat, isolate, trace and mobilize their people in the response," he said. "We are deeply concerned by the alarming levels of spread and severity and by the alarming levels of inaction."

After downplaying the threat of the virus for days, President Donald Trump announced in an Oval Office address he is sharply restricting European passenger travel to the U.S. and moving to ease the pandemic's economic costs.

The NBA became the first major American sports league to suspend play, which raised questions about college basketball's championships, which for now will be played without fans attending. In Italy, soccer club Juventus said defender Daniele Rugani tested positive.

Iran and Italy are the new front lines of the fight against the virus that started in China, the WHO said.

"They're suffering but I guarantee you other countries will be in that situation soon," said Dr. Mike Ryan, the WHO's emergencies chief.

For the global economy, virus repercussions were profound, with increasing concerns of wealth- and job-wrecking recessions. U.S. stocks wiped out more than all the gains from a huge rally a day earlier as Wall Street continued to reel.

The Dow Jones Industrial Average dropped 1,464 points, bringing it 20% below its record set last month and putting it in what Wall Street calls a "bear market." The broader S&P 500 is just 1 percentage point away from falling into bear territory and bringing to an end one of the greatest runs in Wall Street's history.

WHO officials said they thought long and hard about labeling the crisis a pandemic — defined as sustained outbreaks in multiple regions of the world.

The risk of employing the term, Ryan said, is "if people use it as an excuse to give up." But the benefit is "potentially of galvanizing the world to fight."

Underscoring the mounting challenge: soaring numbers in the U.S. and Europe's status as the new epicenter of the pandemic. While Italy exceeds 12,000 cases and the United States has topped 1,300, China reported a record low of just 15 new cases Thursday and three-fourths of its infected patients have recovered.

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China's totals of 80,793 cases and 3,169 deaths are a shrinking portion of the world's more than 126,000 infections and 4,600 deaths.

"If you want to be blunt, Europe is the new China," said Robert Redfield, the head of the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

With 12,462 cases and 827 deaths, Italy said all shops and businesses except pharmacies and grocery stores would be closed beginning Thursday and designated billions in financial relief to cushion economic shocks in its latest efforts to adjust to the fast-evolving crisis that silenced the usually bustling heart of the Catholic faith, St. Peter's Square.

In Iran, by far the hardest-hit country in the Middle East, the senior vice president and two other Cabinet ministers were reported to have been diagnosed with COVID-19, the illness caused by the virus. Iran reported another jump in deaths, by 62 to 354 — behind only China and Italy.

Italian Premier Giuseppe Conte said it was necessary to "go another step" in toughening the already unprecedented travel and social restrictions that took effect Tuesday by shuttering pubs, restaurants, hair salons, cafeterias and other businesses that can't operate with a meter (yard) of space between workers and customers.

"In this moment, all the world is looking at us for the number of infections, but also ... see great resistance," Conte said on Facebook Live.

These measures are on top of travel and social restrictions that imposed an eerie hush on cities and towns across the country.

Still, the effectiveness of travel restrictions and quarantines will likely drop substantially as COVID-19 spreads globally, making it impossible for countries to keep out the virus. Health officials will also need to be more flexible in their coordinated response efforts, as the epicenters are likely to shift quickly and dramatically.

For most, the coronavirus causes only mild or moderate symptoms, such as fever and cough. But for a few, especially older adults and people with existing health problems, it can cause more severe illnesses, including pneumonia. But the vast majority recover: People with mild illness recover in about two weeks, while more severe illness may take three to six weeks, WHO says.

In the Mideast, most of the nearly 10,000 cases are in Iran or involve people who traveled there. Iran's semiofficial Fars news agency said they include Vice President Eshaq Jahangiri. Iran's ministers for cultural heritage, handcrafts and tourism, and for industry, mines and business were also infected, the agency said.

The United States snapped to attention with its spreading caseload and the impact of canceled events. The NCAA said it would play March Madness with no fans, and the NBA said it would suspend its season until further notice. Cities canceled St. Patrick's Day parades, and several colleges shut down. Actor Tom Hanks and his wife Rita Wilson said they had the virus. He had been working in Australia when they felt ill with slight fevers, his statement said.

Officials in Seattle announced that public schools would close for about 53,000 students and large gatherings were banned in San Francisco and in Washington state, the hardest-hit U.S. state, with 29 deaths.

The virus upended the U.S. presidential campaign, with U.S. Vice President Joe Biden and Sen. Bernie Sanders canceling rallies and leaving open the possibility that future campaign events could be impacted. Trump's campaign insisted it would proceed as normal, although Vice President Mike Pence conceded future rallies would be evaluated "on a day to day basis."

And at a Congressional hearing in Washington Dr. Anthony Fauci, director of the National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Disease, sounded an alarm: "Bottom line, it's going to get worse."

## Ohio officer cleared in shooting of teenager Ma'Khia Bryant

By ANDREW WELSH-HUGGINS Associated Press

COLUMBUS, Ohio (AP) — The Columbus police officer who shot and killed 16-year-old Ma'Khia Bryant last year has been cleared of any criminal wrongdoing, Ohio prosecutors announced Friday.

Bryant was killed in April by Columbus police officer Nicholas Reardon as she swung a knife at a young

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woman, just seconds after pushing another woman to the ground. Bryant was Black and Reardon is white. Police were responding to a 911 call made from Bryant's foster home about a group of girls threatening to stab members of the household.

The killing led to a Justice Department review of the police department in Ohio's capital city.

Bryant was shot four times and died from her injuries. The coroner listed the cause of death as a homicide — a medical determination used in cases where someone has died at someone else's hand, but not a legal finding. It doesn't imply criminal intent.

Bryant's killing further heightened tensions in Ohio's capital city over fatal police shootings of Black people, and also cast a light on the state's foster care system.

In announcing the grand jury decision, special prosecutors Tim Merkle and Gary Shroyer noted, "Under Ohio law the use of deadly force by a police officer is justified when there exists an immediate or imminent threat of death or serious bodily injury to the officer or another." They said the decision followed a full review of the shooting.

The woman Bryant was attacking, Shai-onta Craig, had formerly lived at the home but had returned and argued with her that day, according to Craig's statement to police released Friday.

Reardon told investigators he didn't think using mace or a "hands-on" approach would have worked because of the knife in Bryant's hand, because he thought he was the only officer on scene and because Bryant appeared much bigger than him.

"At the time I fired my weapon, I was in fear for the life of the female in pink," Reardon said, referring to Craig.

The city will now conduct an internal review to determine whether Reardon's actions followed department policy, the Columbus Public Safety Department tweeted.

Bryant's family expressed disappointment that Reardon wasn't charged and said in a statement: "There should have been other non-deadly options available to deal with this situation." Her family also called for "full-scale changes" to Ohio's foster-care system to prevent similar tragedies.

"Ohio's foster care system is failing our children and we cannot stand by and allow this to continue," the statement said. "As the one-year anniversary of Ma'Khia's death approaches, her family is resolute in their fight for justice on her behalf."

Foster parent Angela Moore told investigators that neither Bryant nor her sister, who was also in the home, had ever displayed violence, but all the girls in the home periodically argued.

A week after Bryant's death, Columbus Mayor Andrew Ginther invited the Justice Department to review the police department for possible "deficiencies and racial disparities."

The U.S. Justice Department accepted, and last fall agreed to review practices of the police department, saying its Office of Community Oriented Policing Services would conduct a review of what the department called technical assistance in such areas as training, recruitment including a focus on diversity and creating an early intervention system for officers.

Columbus — the country's 14th largest city — has recorded several contested police shootings, including the 2021 killing of 27-year-old Miles Jackson in an emergency room; and the 2020 shooting death of 47-year-old Andre Hill. The white police officer who fatally shot Hill has pleaded not guilty to a number of charges brought against him by the state attorney general's office.

## Liberal US cities change course, now clearing 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."

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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.

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.”

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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 LPGA 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.

## Amid Mariupol horror, a newborn rests in her mother's arms

By MSTYSLAV CHERNOV Associated Press

MARIUPOL, Ukraine (AP) — Newborn Veronika curled against her mother's side on Friday, as if to hide from the horror around them — the war that tore apart the Mariupol maternity hospital where she was meant to greet the world.

On the eve of giving birth, her mother, Mariana Vishegirska, had to flee the hospital when a Russian airstrike hit.

Her brow and cheek bloodied, she clutched her belongings in a plastic bag as she navigated down the

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hospital's debris-strewn stairs in her polka dot pajamas on Wednesday.

Images of the desperate mothers and medical workers from the Children's and Women's Health hospital shocked the world, as the bombing took Russia's war against Ukraine to a sickening new level.

Taken to another hospital, Vishegirskaaya and another woman who escaped the bombing have since given birth, their babies delivered to the sound of shellfire. A strike hit the new site where they were taken, too.

Facing worldwide condemnation, Russian officials made several false claims — that the hospital had been taken over by far-right Ukrainian forces to use as a base and emptied of patients and nurses.

The Twitter account for the Russian Embassy in London claimed she was not a victim, but a beauty blogger and model who was posing as two different pregnant women.

While Vishegirskaaya is a Ukrainian blogger in Mariupol who posts about skin care, makeup and cosmetics, there is no evidence that she was anything but a patient at the hospital. She has posted multiple photos and videos on Instagram documenting her pregnancy in the past few months, and in one, she can be seen wearing the same polka-dot pajamas as on Wednesday.

The embassy posted side-by-side images of two Associated Press photos, one depicting Vishegirskaaya and another of a woman being carried away on a stretcher, placing the word "FAKE" over them in red text. The caption claimed: "The maternity house was long non-operational" at the time of the strike.

The embassy followed with a second tweet in which it shared a photo of Vishegirskaaya wrapped in a blanket outside the hospital alongside an image from her Instagram account to suggest she was playing a role.

AP reporters in Mariupol who documented the attack in video and photos saw the victims and damage first-hand — and nothing to indicate the hospital was used as anything other than a hospital.

Twitter has since removed the Russian Embassy's tweets, and existing links are directed to a notice that says the posts violated Twitter's rules.

The AP was unable to determine the identity of the woman on the stretcher.

The case drew attention at the U.N. Security Council, where Russian Ambassador Vasily Nebenza held up copies of the AP photos during a meeting on Friday while repeating falsehoods about Vishegirskaaya's identity and the attack.

But U.S. Ambassador Linda Thomas-Greenfield praised the media for "documenting the truth on the ground," and adding: "Russia cannot cover up the work of AP news photographers."

After the bombing, Vishegirskaaya was taken to another hospital on the outskirts of the city, facing the front line, and gave birth via cesarean section in a city that's been cut off from food supplies, water, electricity and heat for more than a week.

On Friday, her husband, Yuri, lovingly held up his daughter, then she was tucked back next to her mother. Vishegirskaaya, in same the polka-dot clothing, rested her arm on the bundled-up Veronika.

## **EXPLAINER: Russia is not a 'most favored nation.' What now?**

By MARCY GORDON AP Business Writer

WASHINGTON (AP) — In escalating the U.S. drive to squeeze Russia's economy, President Joe Biden moved Friday, with European and other key allies, to revoke Moscow's "most favored nation" trade status. His administration also banned imports of Russian seafood, alcohol and diamonds.

And the U.S. is cutting the flow the other way, too: It's barring the export of expensive watches, cars, clothing and other luxury American products to Russia.

Congress is expected to act swiftly to pass legislation to formalize the downgrade of Moscow's trade status. The U.S. revocation of Russia's long-standing most favored trade status is only the latest in a series of economic and financial sanctions that have been leveled against Russia in response to its brutal war against Ukraine.

By itself, the downgrade of its trade status won't have an immediate far-reaching effect on the Russian economy. But combined with the other sanctions the United States and its allies have imposed, the idea is to intensify the pressure on President Vladimir Putin and force a pullback of his Russian forces.



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Here is a deeper look:

## WHAT IS 'MOST FAVORED NATION' STATUS?

The idea behind MFN status is to equalize the trade treatment in tariffs and other terms of all of a country's trading partners. Say, for example, that the United States levies a 13% tariff on imported leather gloves. MFN status means that gloves imported from France, China, Brazil and Russia would all be taxed at that same rate.

MFN status has been a baseline for global trade, ensuring that countries within the World Trade Organization are treated on a similar footing, with some exceptions that allow, for example, preferential treatment for developing countries.

Over the years, the U.S. has revoked the MFN status of more than two dozen countries — generally for political reasons, with the Cold War bringing the sanction against the then-Soviet Union and other communist countries, for example.

With the exception of Cuba and North Korea, the preferred status of those nations was eventually restored. This was done, for example, after the thaw of the Cold War in Eastern Europe and the opening of U.S.-China relations after the visit of President Richard Nixon. With this latest move, Russia will join the ranks of those two communist countries in lacking MFN status with the U.S.

## WHAT ABOUT REAL IMPACT VS SYMBOLISM?

For the U.S. at least, removing most favored nation status is a mostly symbolic gesture. The U.S. ban that was announced this week on imports of Russian oil, gas and coal already eliminated about 60% of all U.S. imports from Russia. The new import bans announced Friday add up to only about \$1 billion in revenue, according to White House figures.

Russia provided less than 1% of all U.S. vodka imports in December, according to the Distilled Spirits Council of the United States, and less than 2% of U.S. seafood imports by volume, according to federal statistics.

But symbolism can be important in war.

"Putin is an aggressor," Biden said from the Roosevelt Room of the White House. "And Putin must pay the price. He cannot pursue a war that threatens the very foundations ... of international peace and stability."

Russia widened its offensive in Ukraine on Friday, two weeks after the invasion began, striking airfields in the west and a major industrial city in the east. A huge armored column that had been stalled for over a week outside Kyiv was on the move again, spreading out near the capital.

## DIAMONDS, VODKA, KING CRAB. WHAT ELSE DOES THE U.S. IMPORT FROM RUSSIA?

The U.S. buys mostly natural resources from Russia for which existing tariffs are mostly low or zero — oil and metals such as palladium, rhodium, uranium and silver bullion. Imports also include chemical products and semi-finished steel products, plywood and, paradoxically, bullets and cartridge shells.

Because the imports from Russia are mostly natural resources, they generally will face little to no increase in tariffs as a result of the lost MFN status, Ed Gresser, director for trade and global markets at the left-leaning Progressive Policy Institute, noted in an online posting.

To replace the current tariff rates, U.S. buyers of Russian goods would pay import taxes established under a 1930 U.S. law that disrupted trade during the Great Depression. It would still be zero for the metals. But the rates would soar — to levels considered punitive — for unwrought aluminum, plywood and semi-finished steel, among other products.

## Russia's bioweapon conspiracy theory finds support in US

By DAVID KLEPPER and ANGELO FICHERA Associated Press

Russia's baseless claims about secret American biological warfare labs in Ukraine are taking root in the U.S. too, uniting COVID-19 conspiracy theorists, QAnon adherents and some supporters of ex-President Donald Trump.

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Despite rebuttals from independent scientists, Ukrainian leaders and officials at the White House and Pentagon, the online popularity of the claims suggests some Americans are willing to trust Kremlin propaganda over the U.S. media and government.

Like any effective conspiracy theory, the Russian claim relies on some truths: Ukraine does maintain a network of biological labs dedicated to research into pathogens, and those labs have received funding and research support from the U.S.

But the labs are owned and operated by Ukraine, and the work is not secret. It's part of an initiative called the Biological Threat Reduction Program that aims to reduce the likelihood of deadly outbreaks, whether natural or manmade. The U.S. efforts date back to work in the 1990s to dismantle the former Soviet Union's program for weapons of mass destruction.

"The labs are not secret," said Filippa Lentzos, a senior lecturer in science and international security at King's College London, in an email to the Associated Press. "They are not being used in relation to bio-weapons. This is all disinformation."

That hasn't stopped the claim from being embraced by some on the far-right, by Fox News hosts, and by groups that push debunked claims that COVID-19 is a bioweapon created by the U.S.

The day of Russia's invasion of Ukraine, an early version appeared on Twitter -- in a thread espousing the idea that Russia's offensive was targeting "US biolabs in Ukraine" -- and was soon amplified by the conspiracy theory website Infowars. It has spread across mainstream and lower-profile social platforms, including Telegram and Gab, that are popular with far-right Americans, COVID-19 conspiracy theorists and adherents of QAnon, the baseless hoax that Satan-worshipping pedophiles secretly shape world events.

Many of the accounts posting the claim are citing Russian propaganda outlets as sources. When Kremlin officials repeated the conspiracy theory on Thursday, saying the U.S. was developing bioweapons that target specific ethnicities, it took a few minutes for their quotes to show up on American social media.

Several Telegram users who cited the comments said they trusted Russian propaganda over independent American journalists, or their own democratically elected officials.

"Can't believe anything our government says!" one poster wrote.

Others cited the claim while parroting Russia's talking points about the invasion.

"It's not a "war," it's a much needed cleansing," wrote a member of a Telegram group called "Patriot Voices" that is popular with supporters of Trump. "Ukraine has a ton of US govt funded BioWeapons Labs that created deathly pathogens and viruses."

Television pundits and high-profile political figures have helped spread the claim even further. Fox News host Tucker Carlson devoted segments on his shows on Wednesday and Thursday to promoting the conspiracy theory. On Wednesday, Donald Trump Jr. said conspiracy theories around the labs were proven to be a "fact" in a tweet to his 7.3 million followers.

Both Carlson and Trump misrepresented congressional testimony from a State Department official saying the U.S. was working with Ukraine to secure material in the biological labs, suggesting that indicated the labs were being used for illegitimate purposes.

It's not surprising that a biological research center would contain potentially hazardous material, however. The World Health Organization said Thursday that it has asked Ukraine to destroy any samples that could pose a threat if released, either intentionally or accidentally.

While the disinformation poses a threat on its own, the White House warned this week that the Kremlin's latest conspiracy theory could be a prelude to a chemical or biological attack that Russia would blame on the U.S. or Ukraine.

"Frankly, this influence campaign is completely consistent with longstanding Russian efforts to accuse the United States of sponsoring bioweapons work in the former Soviet Union," U.S. Director of National Intelligence Avril Haines said Thursday during testimony before the Senate Intelligence Committee. "So this is a classic move by the Russians."

The conspiracy theory has also been picked up by Chinese state media, and was further amplified this week by China's Foreign Ministry, which repeated Russia's claim and called for an investigation.

Milton Leitenberg, an arms control expert and senior research associate at the Center for International & Security Studies at the University of Maryland, noted that Russia has a long history of such disinformation. In the 1980s, Russian intelligence spread the conspiracy theory that the U.S. created HIV in a lab.

Leitenberg said numerous Russian scientists had visited a similar public health lab in the republic of Georgia, but that Russia continued to spread false claims about that facility.

"There's nothing they don't know about what's taking place there, and they know that nothing of what they claim is true," Leitenberg said. "The important thing is that they know that, unquestionably."

While gaining traction in the U.S., the claims about bioweapons are likely intended for a domestic Russian audience, as a way to increase support for the invasion, according to Andy Carvin, senior fellow and managing editor at the Atlantic Council's Digital Forensic Research Lab, which is tracking Russian disinformation.

Carvin noted the Kremlin has also spread hoaxes about Ukrainian efforts to obtain nuclear weaponry. "It's a rinse-and-repeat cycle to hammer home these narratives, particularly to domestic audiences," Carvin said.

## 'We're owning it': La. state police undergo outside review

By JIM MUSTIAN Associated Press

BATON ROUGE, La. (AP) — The Louisiana State Police have hired an outside consultant to conduct a top-to-bottom review of the scandal-plagued agency, a potentially years-long process intended to help restore public trust following a string of high-profile beatings of Black motorists.

Col. Lamar Davis, the state police superintendent, said Friday the "overall assessment" will include an in-depth review of troopers' body-worn camera video as well as the agency's culture and policies on use of force, hiring and training.

"I don't like how we got here, but we're here," Davis told an oversight committee at the state Capitol. "We're owning it. We're fixing it."

The \$1.5 million outside review comes amid federal grand jury investigations into the beatings, including the deadly 2019 arrest of Ronald Greene, 49.

Troopers initially blamed Greene's death on a car crash after a high-speed chase in northeast Louisiana. But The Associated Press last year published long-withheld body-camera video showing white troopers jolting Greene with stun guns, punching him in the face and dragging him by his ankle shackles as he wailed, "I'm your brother! I'm scared! I'm scared!"

Greene's death was among at least a dozen cases over the past decade in which the AP found state troopers or their bosses ignored or concealed evidence of beatings, deflected blame and impeded efforts to root out misconduct.

Federal prosecutors are also examining whether state police brass obstructed justice to protect the troopers who arrested Greene, including one who later admitted bashing the motorist in the head with a flashlight.

Meanwhile, a newly convened legislative committee is investigating allegations of an attempted cover-up surrounding Greene's death and what Democratic Gov. John Bel Edwards knew about the case and when. That panel will begin hearing testimony next week.

The outside consultant, the Bowman Group, is contracted through the end of May 2023 "to drive organizational change and improved public safety services," state police said in a statement.

Davis described the contract as an "emergency request" that allowed the agency to forego issuing a request for proposal. He pledged to make the group's findings public.

The outside review will proceed whether or not the U.S. Justice Department conducts a "pattern and practice" investigation of potential racial profiling by the overwhelmingly white male force, Davis said.

"This is a need of our agency," Davis told AP. "What I can't do is wait — and continue to wait — knowing that I have deficiencies."

## US rolls out more sanctions after North Korea missile tests

By HYUNG-JIN KIM Associated Press

SEOUL, South Korea (AP) — The U.S. Treasury Department announced new sanctions Friday after North Korea had tested parts of its biggest intercontinental ballistic missile in two recent launches, a sign it is likely to fire that weapon soon to put a spy satellite into orbit in what would be its most significant provocation in years.

The Treasury Department noted a March 4 ballistic missile launch in unveiling restrictions against three Russian-based entities that aided ongoing development of North Korea's military capabilities. The companies are Apollon, Zeel—M and RK Briz; two individuals tied to those companies will also be sanctioned.

The sanctions block access to any U.S. assets held by these companies, as well as Apollon director Aleksandr Andreyevich Gayevoy and Zeel—M director Aleksandr Aleksandrovich Chasovnikov, who also controls RK Briz.

Separately, South Korea's Defense Ministry said it detected signs that North Korea was possibly restoring some of the tunnels at its nuclear testing ground that were detonated in May 2018, weeks ahead of leader Kim Jong Un's first summit with then-President Donald Trump. The ministry didn't say whether it believes the North was restoring the site to resume tests of nuclear explosives.

North Korea's neighbors detected two ballistic launches last week. North Korea later said it was testing cameras and other systems to be installed on a spy satellite but didn't disclose what missiles or rockets it used.

After analyzing the launches, the U.S. and South Korean militaries concluded they involved an ICBM system under development that North Korea first unveiled during a military parade in October 2020.

"The purpose of these tests, which did not demonstrate ICBM range, was likely to evaluate this new system before conducting a test at full range in the future, potentially disguised as a space launch," Pentagon press secretary John Kirby said in a statement Thursday.

South Korea released a similar assessment and said North Korea must immediately stop any act that raises tensions and regional security concerns.

The ICBM in focus is the Hwasong-17, North Korea's biggest missile, which could potentially fly up to 15,000 kilometers (9,320 miles), far enough to strike anywhere in the U.S. and beyond. The 25-meter (82-foot) missile, which was shown again at a defense exhibition in North Korea's capital, Pyongyang, last year, has yet to be test-launched.

North Korea has already demonstrated the potential to reach the U.S. mainland with flight tests of other ICBMs, the Hwasong-14 and Hwasong-15, in 2017. Some analysts say developing a larger missile could mean the country is trying to arm its long-range weapons with multiple warheads to overcome missile defense systems.

In 2018, North Korea unilaterally suspended long-range and nuclear tests before it entered now-dormant denuclearization talks with the United States. The talks collapsed in 2019 due to disputes over U.S.-led sanctions on the North. Top North Korean officials recently hinted at lifting the 2018 weapons test moratorium.

Seoul's statement about North Korea's nuclear testing ground came after recent commercial satellite images showed a possible resumption of construction activity at the site in the northeastern town of Punggye-ri. It was used for the North's sixth and last nuclear test in 2017.

After declaring the site's closure, Kim invited foreign journalists to observe the destruction of tunnels in May 2018. But North Korea didn't invite outside experts to certify what had been destroyed. Analysts who studied the satellite images say it's unclear how long it would take for the North to restore the site for nuclear detonations.

North Korea's two missile launches were the latest in a string of tests in recent months, an apparent attempt to modernize its arsenal and pressure the Biden administration as nuclear disarmament talks remain stalled.

Observers expect North Korea to launch the Hwasong-17 missile for two main military purposes — testing key weapons parts and putting its first functioning spy satellite in space. They say North Korea may

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claim that it is firing a rocket, not a missile, for a satellite launch, but the U.N. and others have viewed past satellite launches as disguised tests of its long-range missile technology.

Kwon Yong Soo, a former professor at Korea National Defense University in South Korea, said the estimated thrust of the Hwasong-17 suggests it is powerful enough to place multiple reconnaissance satellites into orbit in a single launch. He said North Korea would also want to test the missile's engine parts.

Kwon said the liquid-fueled Hwasong-17 may be too big and lack mobility given North Korea's poor road conditions. He said the launch could be a show of force, but that a spy satellite could sharply increase the North's capability to monitor the movements of U.S. aircraft carriers and other strategic assets.

"If you want to use long-range strikes on moving targets like aircraft carriers, you need to receive data on their movement from satellites," Kwon said. "If North Korea puts a spy satellite (in space), that will be an epoch-making development."

Jung Chang Wook, head of the Korea Defense Study Forum think tank in Seoul, said North Korea would want to test technologies that ensure multiple warheads of a missile could survive the extreme heat and pressure of reentry from space.

Jung and Kwon both believe North Korea has acquired the reentry vehicle technology for a single warhead missile, an assessment that some analysts dispute.

A spy satellite and a missile with multiple warheads were among an array of sophisticated weapons that North Korean leader Kim Jong Un has vowed to develop to counter what he calls American hostility such as economic sanctions.

"If North Korea succeeds in its test of a reentry vehicle for multiple warheads, that will tremendously boost its leverage in its negotiations with the United States," Jung said. "It could be a game changer."

On Friday, North Korean state media said Kim visited the country's satellite launch facility and ordered officials to modernize and expand it to fire a variety of rockets. Earlier this week, he said that North Korea needs reconnaissance satellites to monitor "the aggression troops of the U.S. imperialism and its vassal forces."

North Korea conducted two successful satellite launches from the Sohae Satellite Launching Ground in the northwest in 2012 and 2016. It said they were observation satellites under its peaceful space development program, but outside experts said they were designed to spy on rivals, though there is no evidence that the satellites ever transmitted images.

Experts say North Korea could launch a spy satellite ahead of a major political anniversary in April — the 110th birthday of state founder Kim Il Sung, the late grandfather of Kim Jong Un.

Jung, the analyst, said he thinks the launch will likely come in early May, just before a new South Korean president takes office later that month.

Kirby said the U.S. military ordered "enhanced readiness" among its ballistic missile defense forces in the region and intensified surveillance activities off the Korean Peninsula's west coast.

The launch, if carried out, would be North Korea's most serious provocative act since its three ICBM tests in 2017.

## Chelsea financially perilous after Abramovich is sanctioned

By ROB HARRIS AP Global Soccer Writer

LONDON (AP) — Lavish spending, sustained only by Roman Abramovich's investment, funded Chelsea's 21 trophies during his 19 years as owner. Now there are fears the Premier League club could run out of money after the British government sanctioned the Russian oligarch and froze his assets.

A team that won the Champions League last year and was crowned world champions by FIFA a month ago has now had some banking facilities frozen with officials unable to use corporate credit cards while Barclaycard assesses what is permitted under government rules.

Chelsea is only allowed to continue operating and playing games under conditions set out by the government through a special license, with caps on spending and a prohibition on selling tickets that will impair the cash flow for a club with a last published wage bill of almost 28 million pounds (\$36 million) a month.

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Chelsea officials spent Friday in talks with the government to discuss how the club can continue to pay staff, operate Stamford Bridge on matchdays and ensure the club can be sold.

Abramovich had already announced plans to sell his trophy asset last week before he was sanctioned on Thursday over links to Russian President Vladimir Putin following the invasion of Ukraine.

The Raine Group, an investment bank, is working on the sale process on behalf of Abramovich, who remains owner of Chelsea. He originally hoped to divert the proceeds into a new foundation for the victims of the war in Ukraine, which he is yet to condemn Putin for launching. But the government will only sanction a sale that does not see Abramovich benefit as the government tightens the screw on influential individuals it views as enabling Putin's regime.

There are potential buyers waiting in the wings, including British property investor Nick Candy and Todd Boehly, a part owner of the MLB's Los Angeles Dodgers.

"I would describe Chelsea as a distressed asset," said Rob Wilson, a football finance expert from Sheffield Hallam University, "and the association that they've got with the owner is what's distressing them."

The only bright spots for Chelsea on its second day as a sanctioned entity were that no more sponsors suspended deals after the jersey backer, communications firm Three, asked for its logo to be removed. Jersey maker Nike was yet to halt its sponsorship. Another sponsor, hotel search website Trivago, said it would remain sponsor of the training kits.

"We are looking forward to a transition of ownership as soon as possible and want to support the club in this process," Trivago said. "We will provide any update to our business relationship if and when appropriate."

The statement condemned the "unprovoked and catastrophic invasion of Ukraine" without naming Russia. Hotels on its website could still be booked in Russia on Friday night.

Booking travel is a looming challenge for Chelsea. The trip to France to play Lille in the Champions League next week has already been bought. But the spending on travel to future games has been capped at 20,000 pounds by the government.

Chelsea can also only spend 500,000 pounds on matchdays — starting Sunday at home to Newcastle in the Premier League that the club has won five times under Abramovich. The league title had been won only once in the 98 years before Abramovich bought the club in 2003.

Only five times during his ownership has Chelsea made a profit, according to the respected Swiss Rumble account on Twitter that analyzes club accounts. There have been cumulative losses of around 900 million pounds in almost two decades of Abramovich's ownership, while annual revenue has grown from 110 million pounds in 2003 to 435 million pounds in the last financial year.

The way Abramovich propped up the Blues with his cash to turn them into a force, in part for personal status, is similar to how other oligarchs paid WNBA players like Brittney Griner \$1 million to come play for their company-sponsored teams in Russia.

Chelsea has been reliant on the 1.5 billion pounds of loans that Abramovich has pumped into the club which he has said he will not ask to be repaid.

The latest reported cash reserves for Chelsea's parent company were only 17.7 million pounds.

The club can no longer even sell merchandise with the club shop closing within hours of the sanctioning announcement on Thursday. There is also a prohibition from the government on selling new tickets to generate revenue. Only season ticket holders can go to Premier League matches. There is the prospect of the stadium being empty for a potential Champions League quarterfinal as tickets for those games would not be included for fans who bought season passes. Chelsea is also unable to sell tickets for next week's FA Cup match at Middlesbrough, hitting the second division club as well.

The impact could be felt hardest by temporary staff no longer being required to work at Chelsea matches.

"We would like the club to have the ability to trade as close to maximum capacity as possible," said Dan Silver of the Chelsea Supporters' Trust. "All these people rely on that (money) to put food on the plate. It's harsh on them, and the punishment falling all the way downhill is harsh."

"We don't want to have any jobs lost as a result of this, because the bigger picture is to keep everybody in the club protected and looked after."

The priority will be avoiding having to go into administration — bankruptcy protection. History, though,

could be repeating itself. Chelsea was sold for 1 pound in 1982 to Ken Bates due to financial trouble and then Abramovich stepped in with his 2003 takeover when there were further cash problems.

## 2 years into pandemic, 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 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

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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 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."

## Wisconsin crime lab destroys Kyle Rittenhouse rifle

MADISON, Wis. (AP) — Wisconsin officials have destroyed the rifle Kyle Rittenhouse used to shoot three people during street protests in Kenosha in 2020.

WISN-TV reported Friday that the state crime lab destroyed the rifle on Feb. 25. The station posted



video showing technicians unboxing the gun and feeding into a shredder.

Rittenhouse's attorneys and prosecutors agreed in January that the gun would be destroyed, Rittenhouse's lead attorney, Mark Richards, said Rittenhouse didn't want someone to buy it and turn it into a trophy. The agreement called for the process to be recorded.

Rittenhouse shot and killed Joseph Rosenbaum and Anthony Huber and wounded Gaige Grosskreutz during the protests in August 2020. The demonstrations began after a white police officer shot Jacob Blake, a Black man, during a domestic disturbance. The shooting left Blake paralyzed from the waist down.

Prosecutors filed multiple charges against Rittenhouse. A jury acquitted him on all counts in November after he argued all three men attacked him and he was forced to fire in self-defense.

Rittenhouse was 17 at the time of the protests, too young to buy a firearm in Wisconsin. His friend, Dominick Black, bought the gun for him earlier that year. Black pleaded no contest in January to contributing to the delinquency of a minor.

## US immigration arrests drop amid focus on most dangerous

By BEN FOX Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — Immigration enforcement arrests within the U.S. fell sharply over the past year as the Biden administration shifted its enforcement priorities to focus on people in the country without legal status who have committed serious crimes, officials said Friday.

As it released its annual report, reflecting eight months under President Joe Biden, U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement said immigration arrests dropped nearly 40% from the previous year while the number of people apprehended who had committed "aggravated felonies" nearly doubled.

Total deportations fell to the lowest in the agency's history, down nearly 70% to 59,011, a number that, in part, reflects use of a public health order implemented during the pandemic to expel people without formal deportation proceedings.

Officials portray this strategy as an efficient use of limited law enforcement resources, but it puts the administration in a bind between critics, primarily on the right, who want to see more apprehensions and progressive Democrats who have called for dramatically scaling back the mission of ICE or even eliminating it altogether.

At a minimum, it also reflects a departure from the strategy pursued under former President Donald Trump, who early on directed ICE to apprehend anyone who was in the country illegally regardless of other circumstances.

"As the annual report's data reflects, ICE's officers and special agents focused on cases that delivered the greatest law enforcement impact in communities across the country while upholding our values as a nation," acting Director Tae Johnson said in a statement announcing the results.

Critics say the Biden administration's enforcement policy encourages the irregular migration that a succession of U.S. presidents have struggled to control.

"The Biden administration has turned the United States into a sanctuary country, plain and simple," said Mark Morgan, who was acting commissioner of Customs and Border Protection under Trump and is now with the Heritage Foundation. "This president has sent a message to the world that if you illegally cross our sovereign border, you will likely be released into the interior of the United States, and once you're here, immigration officials are not allowed to remove you even if you skip your court date or commit a crime."

But in what officials call a "rebalanced" approach, ICE said its Office of Enforcement and Removal Operations arrested 74,082 noncitizens, a combination of people referred to the agency by Customs and Border Protection and people detained at large in the country.

That figure is down from 103,603 in the 2019 budget year, which was down 28% from the prior 12 months because of policies implemented at the start of the COVID-19 pandemic, including use of the public health order to quickly turn back people stopped at the border without giving them the opportunity to seek asylum.

ICE said nearly half the arrests and deportations since Biden took office consisted of "serious criminals," which the administration defines as people convicted of both felonies or "aggravated felonies," without

providing a more detailed breakdown.

In addition to who it targets, ICE has also changed where it operates. The administration last year directed the agency to limit enforcement actions at schools, hospitals and a range of other sensitive locations.

The agency argues in its statement that the "public safety impact has been dramatic," with the number of monthly arrests of aggravated felons up 53% from the final year under President Barack Obama and 51% average during the Trump administration.

Apprehensions included some conducted under an initiative targeting sex offenders, resulting in the arrests of 495 people, compared 194 under the previous year, ICE said.

Trump, whose administration took hundreds of measures to restrict both legal and illegal immigration, directed ICE to apprehend anyone who was in the country illegally. In June 2019, he tweeted that "next week ICE will begin the process of removing the millions of illegal aliens who have illicitly found their way into the United States."

It didn't happen, though. Total deportations were higher under the first term of Obama than under Trump in part because many cities and states, opposed to his administration's approach to immigration, refused to cooperate with ICE on removals.

## Judge: Trump delays on rape accuser's claims in 'bad faith'

By LARRY NEUMEISTER Associated Press

NEW YORK (AP) — Former President Donald Trump's legal moves aimed at delaying a rape accuser's defamation claims from reaching trial are in bad faith and, so far, succeeding, a judge said in a decision released Friday as he rejected an attempt by Trump to countersue.

E. Jean Carroll's single claim of defamation "could have been tried and decided — one way or the other — long ago," U.S. District Judge Lewis A. Kaplan said.

In a written ruling dated Thursday but publicly filed Friday, Kaplan cited delays caused by Trump's legal tactics as he rejected the former president's attempt to countersue Carroll under a law sometimes used to challenge defamation lawsuits that unfairly make claims.

A countersuit could have been filed 14 months ago, Kaplan wrote.

"The record convinces this Court that the defendant's litigation tactics, whatever their intent, have delayed the case to an extent that readily could have been far less," the judge wrote.

Trump's attorney, Alina Habba, responded to a message seeking comment with an email saying, "While we are disappointed with the Court's decision today, we eagerly look forward to litigating this action and proving at trial that the plaintiff's claims have absolutely no basis in law or in fact."

Roberta Kaplan, a lawyer for Carroll, said of the judge's decision: "My client E. Jean Carroll and I could not agree more."

Carroll, a longtime advice columnist for Elle magazine, wrote in a June 2019 book that Trump raped her in the mid-1990s in an upscale Manhattan department store. Trump denied it and questioned Carroll's credibility and motivations.

Judge Kaplan wrote of litigation delays, saying Trump "attempted to evade" delivery of a copy of the lawsuit to his Manhattan residence or at the White House after it was originally filed in New York state court in November 2019. It was later moved to federal court.

Trump then used "frivolous" legal challenges to delay progress of the lawsuit, the judge wrote, including claiming that the state court lacked jurisdiction over him and that the lawsuit could not proceed until an appeal in another woman's lawsuit alleging sexual misconduct by Trump was resolved.

The lawsuit can't go to trial until the appeals court clarifies whether the defendant is Trump or the U.S. government.

In August 2020, Trump reportedly instructed then-U.S. Attorney General William Barr to cause the United States to intervene and substitute itself as the defendant, the judge said. That challenge, continued by President Joe Biden's Justice Department, still awaits an appeals ruling.

"Taken together, these actions demonstrate that defendant's litigation tactics have had a dilatory effect

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and, indeed, strongly suggest that he is acting out of a strong desire to delay any opportunity plaintiff may have to present her case against him," the judge said.

The Associated Press does not typically identify people who allege sexual assault unless they come forward publicly, as Carroll has done.

The judge noted that Carroll is 78 years old and the only direct witness to the alleged rape besides Trump, saying "the relevance of these facts is obvious."

"In the Court's view, characterization of defendant's previous and threatened future actions as dilatory, in bad faith or unduly prejudicial would be a bootless exercise. They are, in varying degrees, all three," he said.

## US slashes Russia trade status, bans its alcohol and seafood

By JOSH BOAK, CHRIS MEGERIAN and ZEKE MILLER Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — President Joe Biden announced Friday the U.S. will dramatically downgrade its trade status with Russia as punishment for its invasion of Ukraine and also ban imports of Russian seafood, alcohol and diamonds.

The broad trade shift, which revokes the "most favored nation" status for Russia, is being taken in coordination with the European Union and Group of Seven countries.

"The free world is coming together to confront Putin," Biden said from the Roosevelt Room of the White House. He also said countries were adding new names to a list of Russian oligarchs who are facing sanctions, and the U.S. is cutting the flow of high-end American products such as expensive watches, cars and clothing.

"We're banning the export of luxury goods to Russia," he said.

Biden said there would be further retaliation if Ukraine is targeted with chemical weapons, a possibility that administration officials have warned about in recent days.

"Russia would pay a severe price if they used chemical weapons," he 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.

Biden's changes on Russia's trade status come 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.

House Speaker Nancy Pelosi, D-Calif., said lawmakers would pass legislation to formalize the trade downgrade.

"Putin's premeditated, unprovoked war is an attack on the Ukrainian people and an attack on democracy — and the House remains steadfast in our commitment to partnering with President Biden and our allies to level swift, severe punishment and stand with the Ukrainian people," she said.

This week's moves are the latest in a series of sanctions aimed at crippling the Russian economy and a sign that the U.S. and its allies will continue to use their financial heft to retaliate against Russian President Vladimir Putin. The other measures include the freezing of central bank assets, limits on exports and sanctions against Russian oligarchs and their families. These financial tools have led to the Russian ruble losing about half of its value against the U.S. dollar over the past month, which has caused destructive inflation that could erode Putin's ability to wage a prolonged war in Ukraine.

Most favored nation status has been a baseline for global trade, ensuring that countries within the World Trade Organization are treated similarly. Some countries in the WTO have special privileges due to their status as developing economies. Russia would join the ranks of Cuba and North Korea by not having MFN status from the U.S.

The revocation carries mostly symbolic weight. The earlier sanctions on imports of Russian oil, gas and coal already cut off about 60% of U.S. imports from the country, and the new import bans announced Friday add up to only about \$1 billion in revenue, according to White House figures.

Russia provided less than 1% of U.S. vodka imports in December, according to the Distilled Spirits Council

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of the United States, and less than 2% of U.S. seafood imports by volume, according to federal statistics. Because Russian imports into the U.S. are primarily natural resources, they would generally face little to no increase in their tariffs because of the lost status, Ed Gresser of the Progressive Policy Institute in Washington, said in an online post.

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. This would still be zero for uranium, rhodium, palladium, silver bullion and king crabs. But the import tax would shoot up for unwrought aluminum, plywood, semi-finished steel and diamonds, among other products.

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.

## **EXPLAINER: Will Russia bring Syrian fighters to Ukraine?**

By ZEINA KARAM Associated Press

BEIRUT (AP) — With Russia's war on Ukraine now in its third week, Russian President Vladimir Putin on Friday approved bringing in volunteer fighters from the Middle East, particularly Syria.

Syria clearly has a rich pool of fighters to draw from. Russia's military is deeply entrenched in the Mideast country, where its intervention — starting in 2015 — helped Syrian President Bashar Assad gain the upper hand in the ongoing, 11-year civil war.

But less clear is how significant, large or effective a Syrian deployment would be.

On Friday, Russian Defense Minister Sergei Shoigu spoke of "more than 16,000 applications" already from the Middle East, though he didn't specify which country. Syrian opposition activists say Russia recently began recruitment efforts in Syria for the Ukraine war, but put the scale of those efforts so far at far lower numbers.

The announcement came after the Ukrainian government said about 20,000 foreigners from various nations have already joined the so-called International Legion for the Territorial Defense of Ukraine, most of them from Western countries.

So who are these potential pro-Russia volunteers?

**NO SHORTAGE OF FIGHTERS**

Syria's long, grueling war has given rise to a multitude of armed factions, militias and mercenaries on all sides of the conflict.

The ranks of pro-government paramilitary groups in Syria include tens of thousands of so-called National Defense Forces, Christian militia fighters and army defectors skilled in urban and guerilla warfare. They also include other Russian-supported auxiliary units and militias that fought alongside the Syrian military.

"If need be, Russia could quickly recruit members of these groups to fight in Ukraine," according to Danny Makki, a Syria analyst.

Joined by Iran-backed fighters from nearby Iraq, Lebanon and elsewhere in the region, these forces not only battled Syrian rebels, they also helped fight the Islamic State group after it overran large parts of Iraq and Syria in 2014.

Thousands of mercenaries from the Russian private contractor Wagner Group have also deployed in Syria.

"Given the misery of the Syrian economy, there would be no shortage of combat-hardened men of military age willing to put their lives on the line for a modicum of material gain," Makki wrote in an analysis for the Middle East Institute, where he is a non-resident scholar.

It wouldn't be the first time Syrian fighters are recruited for conflicts abroad. Turkey, another major actor in Syria, recruited Syrian mercenaries to boost its fighters in other wars. These include conflicts in Azerbaijan and Libya, where the presence of thousands of foreign fighters, including those from Syria,

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Sudan and Turkey, remains a major obstacle to peace.

## CURRENT RECRUITMENT EFFORTS

Evidence is only just beginning to emerge of recruitment among Syrian fighters, particularly in government-controlled territories.

Omar Abu Layla, a Europe-based activist who runs the DeirEzzor 24 Syria war monitoring group, said recruitment run by the Wagner Group has gone on for days in the eastern province Deir el-Zour near the border with Iraq.

Abu Layla said that so far, dozens of men have signed up in the province. He claimed Russia was offering volunteers from the country between \$200 and \$300 to operate as security guards in Ukraine for six months at a time.

Some Syrian observers and activists suggest any recruitment going on is so far largely symbolic and remains in the very early stages.

On Friday, an ad for a "combat role" in Ukraine was posted on a closed Facebook group for soldiers of the Fourth Armored Division, one of the largest in the Syrian army. It offered a payment of \$3,000 depending on an applicant's expertise and said registration was limited.

Russia's Defense Ministry-run TV channel aired footage purportedly from Syria showing armed men in uniform it described as would-be volunteers. The men waved Russian and Syrian flags and held up a sign bearing the letter "Z" — used on Russian armored vehicles in Ukraine and now a symbol of support for Russian troops.

Ahmad al-Ahmad, an opposition activist in northwestern Syria, said that in the government-controlled northern town of Ethraya, the Russians have asked senior officers with the Fifth Corps, a Russian-backed Syrian army force, to recruit young men with experience in urban fighting who are ready to go to Ukraine.

As many as 3,000 people have registered in southern Syria, he said. It was not immediately possible for The Associated Press to confirm those reports.

Syrians for Truth and Justice, an independent civil society organization, said in a report this week that it had interviewed at least two Syrians based in Damascus' countryside who registered with Syrian government security services. They confirmed that lists with potential recruits' names are to be presented to Russian forces in Syria for approval to deploy to Ukraine.

## WHAT DO MIDEAST RECRUITS OFFER?

Battle-hardened fighters with experience in urban warfare in Syria have in some cases little to lose. Still, despite their decade at war, Syrian fighters, for example, are not known for being particularly competent combatants.

Back in 2015, It took the Russian air force, Lebanon's Hezbollah militants and Iranian forces to shore up Assad's fledgling military against the opposition. Foreign fighters have usually had the upper hand in battlefields throughout the conflict, including in the war on IS.

Syria experts have also questioned the usefulness of recruits from the Middle East in Ukraine, where they don't speak the language and are not familiar with the terrain or the harsh weather conditions.

However, if the war stretches on and Russian forces get bogged down, foreign fighters will become a more attractive option.

Makki, the analyst, said reports of Syrians fighting with Russia are premature.

"However, given Moscow's increasing losses, Syrians make for attractive, low-cost mercenaries in Russia's eyes," he said.

## UN: War in Ukraine to hurt poor nations importing grain

By FRANCES D'EMILIO Associated Press

ROME (AP) — Poorer countries in northern Africa, Asia and the Middle East that depend heavily on wheat imports risk suffering significant food insecurity because of Russia's war in Ukraine, and the conflict is poised to drive up already soaring food prices in much of the world, the U.N. food agency warned Friday.

Ukraine and Russia, which is under heavy economic sanctions for invading its neighbor two weeks ago,

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account for one-third of global grain exports.

With the conflict's intensity and duration uncertain, "the likely disruptions to agricultural activities of these two major exporters of staple commodities could seriously escalate food insecurity globally, when international food and input prices are already high and vulnerable," said Qu Dongyu, director-general of the Rome-based Food and Agriculture Organization.

The U.N. agency, known as FAO, also noted that Russia is the lead producer of fertilizer, and a key fertilizer component — urea — has jumped more than threefold in price in the last 12 months.

There's also the uncertainty over whether Ukraine's wheat ready in June can be harvested as "massive population displacement has reduced the number of agricultural laborers and workers. Accessing agricultural fields would be difficult," Qu noted.

Ukraine's ports on the Black Sea are shuttered, and its government this week banned the export of wheat, oats, millet, buckwheat and some other food products to prevent a crisis in its own country.

The ban does not apply to its major global exports of corn and sunflower oil. It and Russia together supply 52% of the world's sunflower oil exports. They also account for 19% of the world's barley supply, 14% of wheat and 4% of corn.

"It is still unclear whether (other) exporters would be able to fill this gap," Qu said, warning that wheat inventories are already running low in Canada.

The United States, Argentina and other wheat-producing nations are likely to limit exports as governments seek to ensure domestic supply, he said.

Adding to the pressure, countries that depend on Russian and Ukrainian wheat are likely to increase imports. Egypt, Turkey, Bangladesh and Iran buy 60% of their wheat from Russia and Ukraine. Also heavily reliant are Lebanon, Tunisia, Yemen, Libya and Pakistan.

In Libya, where civil war has ground on for years, the latest price increases for food staples have people worried.

Salah Alabar, a 37-year-old father of two, said bread and flour have increased by roughly 40% in his Benghazi neighborhood. Sunflower oil is 25% higher.

"This poses a challenge to families with minimum wages and even the middle-class families as expenses increase across the board," he said.

The U.N. agency said its simulations suggest that "the global number of undernourished people could increase by 8 to 13 million" in 2022-2023, particularly in Asia, sub-Saharan Africa, the Middle East and North Africa.

Potential for unrest could rise with the prices.

Mohammed Jassim, who owns a small bakery in Baghdad, said there was real concern in Iraq, where dozens of people held demonstrations in the past week over skyrocketing food prices.

"I am a consumer who buys staples for my business, and I have seen an increase of about 20% in the price of sugar and wheat," he said. "If this keeps up, then I will be forced to raise my prices, and ultimately, the average citizen will be the one to pay for it."

With shortfalls in grain and sunflower seed exports by Ukraine and Russia, "worryingly, the resulting global supply gap could push up international food and feed prices by 8 to 22% above their already elevated levels," the FAO's report warned.

Its figures show food prices reached an all-time high in February.

The COVID-19 pandemic already had a major impact on global food security. Last year, global prices of wheat and barley rose 31%, and rapeseed and sunflower oil prices jumped by more than 60%. Wheat prices have surged more than 50% since a week before the invasion.

In Italy, supermarkets in Tuscany and Sardinia are limiting sales of sunflower seed oil to two containers per customer, Italian state TV said. Spanish supermarkets also are rationing it.

Italian importers of the seed for processing into oil say their supply has already dried up.

**Test for MLB players will be how deal looks to them in '26**

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By RONALD BLUM AP Baseball Writer

NEW YORK (AP) — Now comes the test: Will baseball players be happy with their new collective bargaining agreement in 2026?

They clearly were unhappy with the just-expired five-year contract, which saw payrolls drop to their lowest level since 2015.

The agreement reached Thursday raises the competitive-balance tax threshold by \$34 million over five years, up from a \$21 million hike over the 2017-21 deal and an \$11 million rise from 2011-16.

"I think that the MLBPA historically has wanted a market-based system. Over multiple negotiations that has been a primary objective of theirs," baseball Commissioner Rob Manfred said after Thursday's deal ended a 99-day lockout.

"Markets produce market results. And I think that the changes that were made in this agreement moved dramatically in their direction on topics like the CBT threshold, and I think you'll probably see a little different market results as a result of the changes."

Players and management have had tense relations in recent years. Manfred said he hopes to improve that.

"I expect there to be disagreements, particularly when the interests and passions that the players have for protecting the game and the integrity of it is as strong as it is," union head Tony Clark said at a news conference Friday.

Young star players were the biggest beneficiary of the deal.

Shohei Ohtani earned \$545,000 in 2018, when he was voted AL Rookie of the Year. Had the new agreement been in place then, he would have earned an additional \$750,000.

Cody Bellinger was at \$605,000 in 2019, when he won NL MVP. Under the new deal, he would have gotten an extra \$2.5 million.

The minimum salary goes up from \$570,500 to \$700,000, a 22.7% rise that is the largest in a single season since 2003.

The union also hopes the deal boosts the middle: The median salary was \$1.15 million at the start of last season, according to calculations by The Associated Press, down 30% from the \$1.65 million record high at the start of 2015.

"The deal pushes the game forward," Yankees pitcher Gerrit Cole, a member of the union's executive subcommittee, said in an 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."

Veteran players in leadership hoped to get more. The union's executive subcommittee voted 8-0 against the deal: Zack Britton, Jason Castro, Cole, Francisco Lindor, Andrew Miller, James Paxton, Max Scherzer and Marcus Semien. Five of the eight are represented by agent Scott Boras, and Castro, at \$3.5 million, is the only one of the eight who earned under \$12 million last year.

Team player representatives voted 26-4 in favor, leaving the overall player executive committee vote 26-12 to approve.

"You call it a division, I call it a healthy dialogue and conversation," Clark said. "From our standpoint, the process worked. Each group and each team, each player, have had an opportunity to engage their team and and voice their particular vote against the backdrop of the other 25 members or 39 members, I guess I should say, of their club."

"The individual subcommittee members who were invested from start to finish, who were pushing to make the gains that we all wanted to make, they offered their vote against the backdrop of that democratic system," he said.

Clark and Manfred notably did not have a joint news conference. Clark chose to wait a day for his.

"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."

The union pushed for and gained an amateur draft lottery in an effort to spur competition and provisions

to discourage service time manipulation.

"The metrics that we used in analyzing the system leading up to this negotiation suggested to us the changes that needed to be made and the issues that needed to be addressed. And we looked to address them and did address them at the table," Clark said. "As a result, we'll determine here how the system responds to what we believe the fixes needed to be and address them accordingly at the end of the five-year term."

Clark said Manfred called him on Thursday to congratulate him on the union's ratification vote.

"There's a lot of work to do moving forward with respect to where our game is at and where it needs to head," Clark said.

## Harris: US dedication to collective NATO defense 'ironclad'

By AAMER MADHANI and CHRIS MEGERIAN Associated Press

BUCHAREST, Romania (AP) — U.S. Vice President Kamala Harris said Friday that Washington's dedication to the collective defense of NATO is "ironclad" as she visited allied Romania, which has experienced a flood of refugees from neighboring Ukraine amid Russia's invasion there.

"We take seriously, and are prepared to act on, the words we speak when we say, 'An attack on one is an attack against all,'" Harris said during a news conference with Romanian President Klaus Iohannis.

Harris also thanked Romania, a Balkan country of 19 million residents, for welcoming tens of thousands of displaced people from Ukraine as of earlier this week. The Ukrainian refugee crisis is expected to only become more challenging in the days and weeks ahead, and Harris said the Romanian people have been "extraordinary in the generosity and the courage you have shown in this moment."

She warned that Russian President Vladimir Putin has shown "no signs of engaging in serious diplomacy" to end the war in Ukraine. And she reiterated that Americans should be prepared to endure higher gas prices as the U.S. and its allies punish Russia, a major global oil supplier, with economic sanctions for the invasion.

"There is a price to pay for democracy. Gotta stand with your friends," Harris said, adding that "sometimes it's difficult, often it ain't easy."

Iohannis said he would increase his country's defense spending from 2% to 2.5% of its gross domestic product, or GDP, the latest example of European nations investing more in national security amid Russian aggression. He also said that NATO needs to "fundamentally rethink" its approach to its eastern flank, and he spoke with Harris about enhancing the alliance's presence there.

"NATO will act without hesitation to defend each and every allied state, including, obviously, Romania," Iohannis said. "It is a scenario that all of us want to avoid."

Harris' talks in Bucharest with Iohannis came after she spent Thursday in Poland, which has already welcomed some 1.5 million Ukrainians since the invasion began last month. 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.

Harris told Iohannis soon after arriving in Bucharest that she sought to "reaffirm our commitment to this partnership and also to the NATO alliance as a whole."

The southeastern European country of Romania 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 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



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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.

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

## It's time to 'spring forward' this weekend in most of the US

WASHINGTON (AP) — Even though winter doesn't slip away until next weekend, time has its marching orders. In the United States, it's time to "spring" forward.

Daylight saving time announces its entrance at 2 a.m. local time Sunday for most of the country. Standard time hibernates until Nov. 6. It will stay lighter for longer into the evening but the sun will rise later in the morning than it has during the months of standard time.

Remember to set clocks an hour ahead, usually before bed Saturday night.

No time change is observed in Hawaii, most of Arizona, Puerto Rico, the U.S. Virgin Islands, American Samoa, Guam and the Northern Marianas.

A poll conducted last October shows that most Americans want to avoid switching between daylight saving and standard time, though there is no consensus behind which should be used all year.

The poll from The Associated Press-NORC Center for Public Affairs Research found only 25% of Americans said they preferred to switch back and forth between standard and daylight saving time.

Forty-three percent of Americans said they would like to see standard time used during the entire year. Thirty-two percent say they would prefer that daylight saving time be used all year.

## Warsaw overwhelmed as it becomes key refugee destination

By VANESSA GERA Associated Press

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 its 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."

The welcome Warsaw has given Ukrainians as the neighboring nation struggles to resist Russia's invasion is wholehearted. Across the city, people have mobilized to help. They are taking Ukrainians into their homes, gathering donations and volunteering at reception centers. City monuments and buses fly Ukraine's blue-and-yellow flag in solidarity.

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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 child psychologists, in one example, had been volunteering to help refugees but soon will need to return to their jobs.

Housing is also a growing problem. When the war began, 95% of Ukrainians arriving in Warsaw were people who already had friends or family here and were taken in by them. Today that group is 70% of the new arrivals meaning that 30% of them "need a roof over their heads" and other support, the mayor said Friday.

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, or who are more vulnerable.

Late Thursday 15 disabled Ukrainian children arrived at the Medyka border crossing in Poland, and were put on a special makeshift medical train taking them to various hospitals in the country.

Dr. Dominik Daszuta, an anesthesiologist at Central Medical hospital MSWIA in Warsaw, described how the medical train was outfitted with intensive care capabilities. He spoke as medical staff lifted children in their strollers onto the train bound for Gdynia.

"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."

Lena Nagirnyak, a 35-year-old from Kyiv, found shelter at Torwar with her children after initially hoping to stay in Ukraine. They finally fled on foot from Bucha to Irpin after hearing a bomber flying low overhead.

"The next day, the street we were walking on was bombed. If we had left a day later, we might have died," she said.

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 the country's Border Guard agency.

Trzaskowski said over 320,000 people have traveled through Warsaw since the start of the war and 230,000 people were staying in the city of more than 1.7 million.

Other parts of the region are also under strain. Even the Czech Republic, which does not border Ukraine directly, has an estimated 200,000 refugees, many in Prague. As the capital runs out of housing options, city hall has begun preparing temporary accommodation.

"The demand for accommodation in Prague is enormous and by far surpasses what we can offer," Prague Mayor Zdenek Hrib said.

Meanwhile, the national government appealed to Czech citizens to house refugees in their own homes, promising that it would find a way to compensate them.

Poland has already taken a similar step, with the parliament approving a law offering people 40 zlotys (\$9.20) per day for each refugee they give shelter to. It's part of a new legislative package that also offers some financial help and health insurance to the Ukrainians.

In Poland's western neighbor, Germany, the influx so far has been concentrated on on the capital, Berlin, which is about an hour from the Polish border and the main destination for trains and buses from Poland.

Authorities there have been seeing over 10,000 people per day arrive. Officials are trying to spread new arrivals around the country, noting that they have better chances of getting somewhere to live and quick access to medical care elsewhere in Germany.

On Friday, Germany's Interior Ministry tweeted in several languages that "rumors that arrival and registration is only possible in Berlin" are not true and that they can register and receive help in any city in Germany.

## Russians pounding Ukraine, but Mariupol's no Aleppo — 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 buildings 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.

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. Hundreds of them were killed in the city of Aleppo.

In 2016, after punishing aerial bombardments by Russian and Syrian planes and years of street fighting, the staggering extent of the damage 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.

Russia is not the only country to use disproportionate force when its military aims are frustrated, with the U.S. facing heavy criticism for indiscriminate attacks in Vietnam, Iraq and Afghanistan.

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 inflicted on Aleppo and Grozny by Russian warplanes 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.

## 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 at 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.

## Red Cross official asks world not to 'shift' away from Yemen

By JON GAMBRELL Associated Press

DUBAI, United Arab Emirates (AP) — The world must not lose sight of the plight of those living through the yearslong war in Yemen, a Red Cross official said Friday, urging continued aid for the Middle East's poorest nation as the war in Ukraine grabs the world's attention.

Katharina Ritz, the International Committee of the Red Cross' head of delegation in Yemen, also said discussions continue over possible future prisoner swaps between the Houthi rebels and a Saudi-led coalition fighting on behalf of the country's exile government.

However, a major swap hasn't happened in several years as the war intensified around several front lines, including the energy-rich city of Marib.

"I think our duty is to respond equally to the needs and do our best," Ritz told The Associated Press. "I think it's not about is it Ukraine or not? Now it's Ukraine and Yemen and Syria and Iraq and Congo and so on. ... We have to add Ukraine on all the crises, but we shouldn't shift."

The Iranian-backed Houthis seized Yemen's capital, Sanaa, in September 2014. A Saudi-led coalition entered the war in March 2015 to back the country's expelled government.

In the time since, Yemen has become one of the world's worst humanitarian crisis. More than 150,000 people have been killed in the warfare, according to the Armed Conflict Location and Event Data Project. Those include both fighters and civilians; the most recent figure for the civilian death toll in Yemen's conflict stands at 14,500.

Also, Saudi airstrikes have killed hundreds of civilians and targeted the country's infrastructure. The Houthis have used child soldiers and indiscriminately laid landmines across the country.

Meanwhile, the splintered nation has faced the coronavirus pandemic and still sees African migrants

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hoping to cross Yemen and reach neighboring oil-rich Saudi Arabia.

The country also has been on the brink of famine for years, a crisis that may be exacerbated by Russia's war on Ukraine. Yemen imports some 40% of its wheat from Russia and Ukraine.

"Now obviously, we have the wheat supply, which will have an impact on the the food supply for Yemen," Ritz said. "The coping mechanism in the country is very limited, and I think that is going to be a major struggle."

Meanwhile, the Red Cross continues to have access to prisoners held by militias, the Houthi-controlled government in Sanaa and that of the Yemeni government in Aden, Ritz said. In 2020, the warring sides engineered a mass prisoner exchange, but there hasn't been one of a similar size since. A 2018 agreement in Stockholm saw the sides agree to swap over 15,000 prisoners.

"The dialogue between the parties is ongoing. The negotiation has never stopped," Ritz said. "I think it is an important part also to keep the parties on the table engaged."

The Houthis meanwhile have seized nearly a dozen former Yemeni employees of the U.S. Embassy in Sanaa. Asked about their case, Ritz said prisoners' families would need to come forward to the Red Cross for its assistance. She declined to say whether the families had.

The Red Cross also saw its name invoked by Saudi Arabia after a coalition airstrike in January struck a Houthi prison in the city of Saada, killing at least 87 people. Saudi Brig. Gen. Turki al-Malki alleged at the time that the Houthis hadn't reported the site as needing protection from airstrikes to the United Nations and the International Committee of the Red Cross.

"The responsibility remains with the parties of the conflict, Ritz said. "No matter what ICRC says or does not say or does or does not do, the responsibility remains."

However, Ritz said the Red Cross worked with the Saudi-led coalition, the Houthis and other militias in the war to stress the importance of protecting civilians and civilian infrastructure in the country.

## 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.

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

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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.

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."

## Rattlesnake roundups take 2 paths, drawing praise and scorn

By JEFF MARTIN Associated Press

WOODSTOCK, Ga. (AP) — An annual rattlesnake roundup in south Georgia recently changed the format of this month's event to celebrate living snakes without skinning and butchering them, earning plaudits from animal rights activists.

But no such changes are occurring at a huge rattlesnake roundup beginning this weekend in Texas, a festival that the activists say is barbaric. The two events are a marked contrast in how rattlesnakes are handled. They also show the huge divide in how they are seen by some, with the Georgia festival heralded by animal advocates and the Texas roundup shamed.

"A few rattlesnake roundups still persist," the Arizona-based Center for Biological Diversity said in a statement full of scorn for the Texas festival, which is "notorious for openly killing and skinning western diamondback rattlesnakes by the hundreds in front of crowds."

Plans for the "World's Largest Rattlesnake Roundup" this weekend in the Texas town of Sweetwater are full-scale ahead, with snakes set to be skinned and others "milked" of their venom. There's even a pageant for local young women, Miss Snake Charmer. The town of 11,000 is expected to swell to around 30,000 during the festival that runs Friday through Sunday, said Dennis Cumbie, one of the organizers.

"It's the biggest event in this town every year," Cumbie said. "It's very much part of our culture."

The same is true in the south Alabama town of Opp, where an annual rattlesnake festival that has drawn thousands for nearly six decades opens March 25. While organizers say the snake hunters who bring in big rattlers get rid of nuisance reptiles, opponents say Eastern diamondback snakes are declining in population.

Sweetwater has held its rattlesnake roundup for more than six decades, "and what we have figured out over 64 years is that we're not damaging the population of the snakes whatsoever," Cumbie said. Rather, organizers liken snake hunting to how other hunters keep deer numbers in check.

In Georgia, organizers say the more humane format they launched for the first time last weekend was a success. Exact attendance figures are unknown because many people such as children are admitted free, but "I've heard anywhere from 7,000 to 15,000," said longtime volunteer Jeffrey Cox, who has been helping to organize the Whigham Rattlesnake Roundup for the past four decades.

"Everybody was nervous about it and didn't know how it would go," Cox said.

Then came perfect weather for the one-day Georgia show, "and there were no complaints whatsoever," he said. "We probably had more actual snakes there this year, even though it was a different format than

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what we've had."

In Texas, the Sweetwater roundup is intertwined with the town's culture and draws visitors from all over the world. It began 64 years ago to keep snakes from overtaking the town and attacking livestock, pets and people, organizers say.

Karen Hunt grew up in Sweetwater, and recalls fellow Texans asking her about her hometown. "Yes, we're the rattlesnake town," they would say. Now, as director of the Sweetwater and Nolan County Chamber of Commerce, Hunt fields calls from people in England, Germany and other parts of the world inquiring about the festival and making plans to visit.

"This does put us on the map," she said. "What it does for our community is give us a sense of place."

Hunters gather the snakes — there's a contest for those capturing the largest ones — and they're brought to the Nolan County Coliseum, where multiple parts of the snakes are harvested, Cumbie said. He's the chairman of the milking pit, where venom is extracted and then used to develop various drugs for a range of illnesses. The snakes' skins will eventually show up on cowboy boots, belts and other western wear. Rattles are used for souvenirs, as are the heads, Cumbie said.

"There's literally no waste," he said. "We also butcher about 1,000 pounds of them each year that we actually cook on the spot."

## Today in History

By The Associated Press undefined

Today in History

Today is Saturday, March 12, the 71st day of 2022. There are 294 days left in the year.

Today's Highlights in History:

On March 12, 2009, disgraced financier Bernard Madoff pleaded guilty in New York to pulling off perhaps the biggest swindle in Wall Street history; he would be sentenced to 150 years behind bars. (Madoff died in prison in April 2021.)

On this date:

In 1864, Lt. Gen. Ulysses S. Grant assumed command as General-in-Chief of the Union armies in the Civil War.

In 1912, the Girl Scouts of the USA had its beginnings as Juliette Gordon Low of Savannah, Georgia, founded the first American troop of the Girl Guides.

In 1925, Chinese revolutionary leader Sun Yat-sen died in Beijing.

In 1947, President Harry S. Truman announced what became known as the "Truman Doctrine" to help Greece and Turkey resist Communism.

In 1955, legendary jazz musician Charlie "Bird" Parker died in New York at age 34.

In 1971, Hafez Assad was confirmed as president of Syria in a referendum.

In 1980, a Chicago jury found John Wayne Gacy Jr. guilty of the murders of 33 men and boys. (The next day, Gacy was sentenced to death; he was executed in May 1994.)

In 1987, the musical play "Les Miserables" opened on Broadway.

In 1994, the Church of England ordained its first women priests.

In 2003, Elizabeth Smart, the 15-year-old girl who vanished from her bedroom nine months earlier, was found alive in a Salt Lake City suburb with two drifters, Brian David Mitchell and Wanda Barzee. (Mitchell is serving a life sentence; Barzee was released from prison in September 2018.)

In 2011, fifteen passengers were killed when a tour bus returning from a Connecticut casino scraped along a guard rail on the outskirts of New York City, tipped on its side and slammed into a pole that sheared it nearly end to end. (Driver Ophadell Williams was later acquitted of manslaughter and negligent homicide.)

In 2020, the stock market had its biggest drop since the Black Monday crash of 1987 as fears of economic fallout from the coronavirus crisis deepened; the Dow industrials plunged more than 2,300 points, or 10%. The NCAA canceled its basketball tournaments because of the coronavirus, after earlier planning to play in empty arenas. The NHL joined the NBA in suspending play. Major League Baseball delayed the



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start of its season by at least two weeks. (An abbreviated 60-game season would begin in July.)

Ten years ago: A day after the massacre of 16 Afghan civilians by a U.S. soldier, President Barack Obama called the episode "absolutely tragic and heartbreaking," while Secretary of State Hillary Rodham Clinton called it "inexplicable." Greece implemented the biggest debt write-down in history, swapping the bulk of its privately held bonds with new ones worth less than half their original value.

Five years ago: A bus plowed into people taking part in an early morning street festival in Haiti, killing at least 34 of them. Authorities in Mexico recovered New England quarterback Tom Brady's Super Bowl jersey more than a month after it had gone missing from the Patriots' locker room following the game.

One year ago: The city of Minneapolis agreed to pay \$27 million to settle a civil lawsuit from George Floyd's family over the Black man's death in police custody, as jury selection continued in a former officer's murder trial. Senate Majority Leader Chuck Schumer and U.S. Sen. Kirsten Gillibrand called on New York Gov. Andrew Cuomo to resign, adding the most powerful Democratic voices yet to calls for the governor to leave office in the wake of allegations of sexual harassment and groping. (Cuomo would resign five months later.)

Today's Birthdays: Politician, diplomat and civil rights activist Andrew Young is 90. Actor Barbara Feldon is 89. Actor-singer Liza Minnelli is 76. Sen. Mitt Romney, R-Utah, is 75. Singer-songwriter James Taylor is 74. Former Sen. Kent Conrad, D-N.D., is 74. Rock singer-musician Bill Payne (Little Feat) is 73. Actor Jon Provost (TV: "Lassie") is 72. Author Carl Hiaasen (HY'-ah-sihn) is 69. Rock musician Steve Harris (Iron Maiden) is 66. Actor Lesley Manville is 66. Actor Jerry Levine is 65. Singer Marlon Jackson (The Jackson Five) is 65. Actor Jason Beghe is 62. Actor Courtney B. Vance is 62. Actor Titus Welliver is 60. Former MLB All-Star Darryl Strawberry is 60. Actor Julia Campbell is 59. Actor Jake Weber is 59. Sen. Tammy Duckworth, D-Ill., is 54. Actor Aaron Eckhart is 54. CNN reporter Jake Tapper is 53. Rock musician Graham Coxon is 53. Country musician Tommy Bales (Flynnville Train) is 49. Actor Rhys Coiro is 43. Country singer Holly Williams is 41. Actor Samm (cq) Levine is 40. Actor Jaimie Alexander is 38. Actor Tyler Patrick Jones is 28.