

Groton Daily Independent

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“Every day brings a chance for you to draw in a breath, kick off your shoes, and dance.”

-Oprah Winfrey



Thursday, March 17

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

Spring Break - No School

Friday, March 18

State A Tournament in Rapid City

Spring Break - No School

Saturday, March 19

State A Tournament in Rapid City

Mitchell Show Choir Competition

Sunday, March 20

5 p.m.: Welcome Home Celebration in the Arena

Vender Fair

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

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

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

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South Dakota veteran denied benefits after exposure to toxic burn pits

Stu Whitney

South Dakota News Watch

When President Joe Biden mentioned the term “burn pits” while discussing health benefits for military veterans during his State of the Union address March 1, many Americans heard of the issue for the first time.

Congress is crafting legislation to assist post-9/11 combat veterans exposed to toxic smoke from burn pits that contractors used to dispose of human waste, chemicals, munitions and other hazardous materials in Iraq and Afghanistan.

For Jerry Somsen of Webster, S.D., who grew up dreaming of being a soldier, and who helped command a South Dakota Army National Guard battalion during Operation Iraqi Freedom, Biden’s words were merely a reminder that the wounds of war can linger, even when their origin is unclear.

The 54-year-old insurance executive started experiencing tremors in his hands a few years after returning from southern Iraq in 2005. The shaking soon spread to both sides of his body and down his legs. Last year, a doctor diagnosed Somsen with Parkinson’s disease, a progressive nervous system disorder, though Somsen has no family history with the disease.

Sitting at his dining room table on a recent evening with his wife Kari, a lawyer who works in Groton, Somsen’s hands shook noticeably as he recounted the neurological tests and other medical appointments that so far have not led to any disability coverage for his illness from the U.S. Department of Veteran Affairs, which only recognizes certain conditions as linked to burn pit exposure.

“I didn’t have this when I went over there, and I came out knowing something was wrong,” said Somsen, a Castlewood native and South Dakota State graduate who retired after 23 years of National Guard service in 2009. “I guess you could say we signed up for it, but we didn’t sign up to not be protected once we got back.”

Somsen is one of 16 South Dakotans on a confidential registry of veterans self-reporting symptoms of burn pit exposure, ranging in severity from nasal congestion to lung cancer. The registry is maintained by Burn Pits 360, a non-profit advocacy group that has pushed the VA to develop its own data gathering effort after Congress passed legislation in 2013.

Further action in Washington will be determined through negotiations between a Democrat-favored measure in the House of Representatives and a more modest bipartisan measure that passed unanimously in the Senate. Veterans and their families continue to seek clarity on what the government can provide in terms of treatment and financial support.

“Most veterans understand that this needs to be an evidence-based process,” said U.S. Rep. Dusty Johnson, R-South Dakota, said in an interview with News Watch.

Johnson voted against the House bill but supports the Senate effort. “They understand that it takes



[VIDEO: Click here to see Jerry Somsen talk about his medical condition and service in the National Guard in Iraq. Photo/video: Stu Whitney, South Dakota News Watch](https://youtu.be/tQlwj3SoiQ)

[https://youtu.be/ tQlwj3SoiQ](https://youtu.be/tQlwj3SoiQ)

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Jerry Somsen helped command a South Dakota Army National Guard battalion in Iraq from 2003-2005 and has experienced tremors and anxiety since his return. He and other soldiers believe they were exposed to toxic smoke from burn pits that contractors used to dispose of human waste, chemicals and munitions and other hazardous materials. Photo: Courtesy of Jerry Somsen

By the time he graduated in 1990 with a degree in mathematics, he headed to Field Artillery Officers Basic School at Fort Sill, Oklahoma, where his math background helped him excel.

By the time he earned his master's degree at SDSU in 1994, Somsen had three children and was going through a divorce while still a member of the National Guard but pondering his path. He took a job at Dakotah Incorporated in Webster in 1997 and met Kari through church, teasing her about her lines in an Easter pageant.

They were married in 2000 and added a daughter to a family that already included three girls. But any semblance of domestic bliss was staggered when Somsen showed up to work on Sept. 11, 2001 and saw the planes hit the World Trade Center.

He was in the South Dakota Army National Guard's 2nd Battalion, 147th Field Artillery. The 1st Battalion was called to action in 2003 as part of Operation Iraqi Freedom but never deployed overseas from Fort Sill. "They weren't needed," said Somsen. "The war got over too fast."

The 2nd Battalion deployed later that year with the mission of capturing and destroying enemy ammunition, with Somsen serving as executive officer, second in command. "We didn't know what our mission was until we got there," he said. "We pulled our stuff out of snowbanks in South Dakota and had it in Iraq within 36 days."

They started in Kuwait and then staged at Camp Cedar in southern Iraq, escorting convoys in 130-degree heat, with Wall Drug bumper stickers on their vehicles. It didn't take long to notice the thick layers of smoke that wafted through the compound from fire pits on the perimeter.

"From the first day we got there, there was smoke everywhere," said Somsen. "If the wind was right, you'd walk to lunch in it. We just thought they were burning the trash."

Soldiers slept in vacated Iraqi ammunition bunkers and were exposed to smoke when rockets and landmines were destroyed through demolition. Somsen spent much of his time at command base but traveled to visit these subordinate units.

Asked if it crossed his mind that the fumes were dangerous, he said, "To this day, I wish it would have. The protection of your soldiers is foremost in your mind, so we were more focused on the enemy threat and IEDs (improvised explosive devices). Looking back on it, every soldier in our battalion probably spent

some time to get the science figured out, but what they don't like is when political fights or bureaucracy slows down the delivery of the science," he said.

Back in Webster, as Somsen and his wife look through photographs of his 14 months in Kuwait and Iraq, they lament the frustration of seeing a once-healthy husband and father in the grip of a debilitating disease, with little relief in sight.

"We trust these (veterans) with our lives and with national security," Kari Somsen said. "But when it comes to him saying, 'Look I have this issue and I believe it came from Iraq,' we need to make it so we trust these people a little bit more. They're not lying. They need help."

Called to serve in Iraq

Jerry Somsen grew up as one of seven children on a family farm outside Castlewood, about 40 miles north of Brookings. He joined five of his siblings in attending SDSU, but not before becoming fascinated with the pomp and precision of military service.

"My oldest brother, Lowell, was in the National Guard as an officer," Somsen recalled. "I went to one of his drills at the armory in Mitchell and decided that I wanted to be that guy."

Jerry entered the Reserve Officers' Training Corps at SDSU with basic training already completed, wanting to hit the ground running.

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time in those burn pits or in some kind of smoke that wasn't good for them."

'Can I live until I'm 80?'

Even before Somsen returned home from Iraq in February 2005, he felt like something was wrong. He had periods of nervousness or anxiety that didn't exist before, though he managed to calm himself down.

The tremors in his right hand and side started after his return and worsened, making it difficult to hold the microphone when he gave a Veterans Day speech in Webster in November 2007. When he showed up at his old high school in Castlewood for a Memorial Day event six months later, he had to hide his hands behind the podium and later made the decision that his public speaking days were over.

Somsen, who was awarded the Bronze Star for his post-9/11 service, was aware of the perils of war. He knew that other veterans were more severely impacted by their time in Iraq, and that some had lost their lives. He downplayed what was happening to him, even to his family, and focused on his job in the Webster office of DakotaCare, where he has worked since 2007.

"On the way back from Iraq, I found out I was going to be battalion commander, which is what I'd been working for basically my whole life," he said. "I still had a chance to make full colonel. If I mentioned anything (about the tremors), I was afraid that I'd be forced into a medical discharge."

After trying to keep his command while tremors progressed to both sides of his body and down his legs, Somsen made the decision to retire in 2009 with the rank of lieutenant colonel. His next battlefield occurred back home and took the form of hospital corridors and exam rooms after applying for disability, joining a legion of fellow soldiers seeking relief from the government.

According to VA press secretary Terrence Hayes, the department is tracking claims for about 2.5 million veterans who were deployed to the Gulf War region from September 2001 to the present and were potentially exposed to various airborne hazards. Of those, about 1.6 million have filed a claim for disability compensation.

Diagnostic procedures, including a spinal tap and brain testing, led a neurologist to conclude in 2021 that Somsen had Parkinson's disease. His assessment said the illness was "more likely than not related to his exposure during his time in Iraq, possibly bringing symptoms out much earlier than would have otherwise presented. He has no other family risk factors."

Contacted by South Dakota News Watch, Hayes said the VA's position is that "no link has been established to date between these exposures and Parkinson's Disease," citing research from the National Academy of Sciences, Engineering and Medicine.

Somsen, after years of trying to hide his ailment, is now in the uncomfortable position of having to prove it exists, with Kari as his main advocate. After seeing the most recent review of his disability claim rejected, they're considering taking their case to the Board of Veterans' Appeals in Washington D.C.

In the meantime, Somsen shows up at work each day, stays active in the Webster community and keeps



Jerry Somsen is shown with his wife, Kari, and four daughters around the time of his deployment to Iraq.

Photo: Courtesy of Jerry Somsen

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The U.S. military has often burned wastes and excess military equipment at foreign bases during wartime, including at this U.S. base in Afghanistan in 2006. Some veterans exposed to toxic fumes from burn pits are worried about their health. Photo: Shutterstock image

during the pandemic.

The momentum continued earlier this year, when the Senate unanimously passed the Health Care for Burn Pit Veterans Act, which would expand health care eligibility for post-9/11 combat veterans from five years after their discharge to 10 years while also providing a one-year application window for those who missed the initial deadline. The bill would also mandate education and training for VA personnel on toxic exposures and expand federal research in the field.

"This legislation is a small step in the right direction to help make certain that veterans who were exposed to burn pits and other toxic substances get the access to care they deserve," Rounds said in a statement. He described the \$1 billion measure as the first step in a three-part plan.

The House bill, a sweeping proposal to expand treatment and benefits to all veterans with illnesses from service-related toxic exposures and expedite the VA claims process, passed by a vote of 256-174 two days after Biden's State of the Union remarks.

The House bill, a sweeping proposal to expand treatment and benefits to all veterans with illnesses from service-related toxic exposures and expedite the VA claims process, passed by a vote of 256-174 two days after Biden's State of the Union remarks. Johnson joined most Republicans in voting against the bill, decrying a price tag of about \$300 billion over 10 years and accusing Democrats of political posturing with a bill that can't pass the Senate and thus won't become law.

"Sometimes political games get in the way of quick, important bipartisan victories," Johnson said. "We could have passed the Senate bill out of the House with 400 votes, and we'd already be in the process of delivering this relief. It's not a silver bullet, but it would move us in the right direction and veterans would be getting the help they need."

Biden compared the situation to the aftermath of the Vietnam War, when more than 2 million veterans were potentially exposed to Agent Orange, a blend of herbicides the U.S. military sprayed over jungles to remove dense tropical foliage that provided enemy cover. The president said it took far too long to reach

up with his daughters, the youngest of whom continued the family tradition by attending SDSU.

"It's frustrating because I don't know what the future holds," he said. "Can I live until I'm 80? What if it's not Parkinson's and it's something else? You realize that it could be more and more debilitating and you look around for answers, and they're not easy to find."

Congress explores funding options

In the summer of 2018, U.S. Sen. Mike Rounds, R-South Dakota, met with representatives of the Iraq and Afghanistan Veterans of America to discuss potential legislative efforts to deliver support for injuries from burn pits and other toxic exposure.

Rounds, familiar with the issue as a member of the Senate Veterans' Affairs Committee, pushed for more research into health effects from burn pits and co-sponsored a successful 2021 bill that improved the level of care veterans exposed to toxic substances received

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decisions on presumptive conditions for those affected, and is determined to now make the same mistake again.

With the president's urging and legislative efforts under way, the expectation is that compromise between Senate and House bills is likely, providing more clarity on the disability status of post-9/11 veterans.

Somsen doesn't expect Congress to forge the solution to his situation because of questions about his condition. He hopes further medical research can find a link between what's happening to his body and the toxic exposures that occurred while he served his country.

At the very least, he is thankful that more attention is being paid to burn pits and soldiers who were potentially affected so they are not left to suffer in silence.

"Hopefully this will help a lot of people like me, who went over there healthy and are feeling pretty ragged right now," he said.



Jerry Somsen helped command a South Dakota Army National Guard battalion in Iraq from 2003-05. Here he shows off the severe heat that troops had to deal with during their time in the desert.

Photo: Courtesy of Jerry Somsen

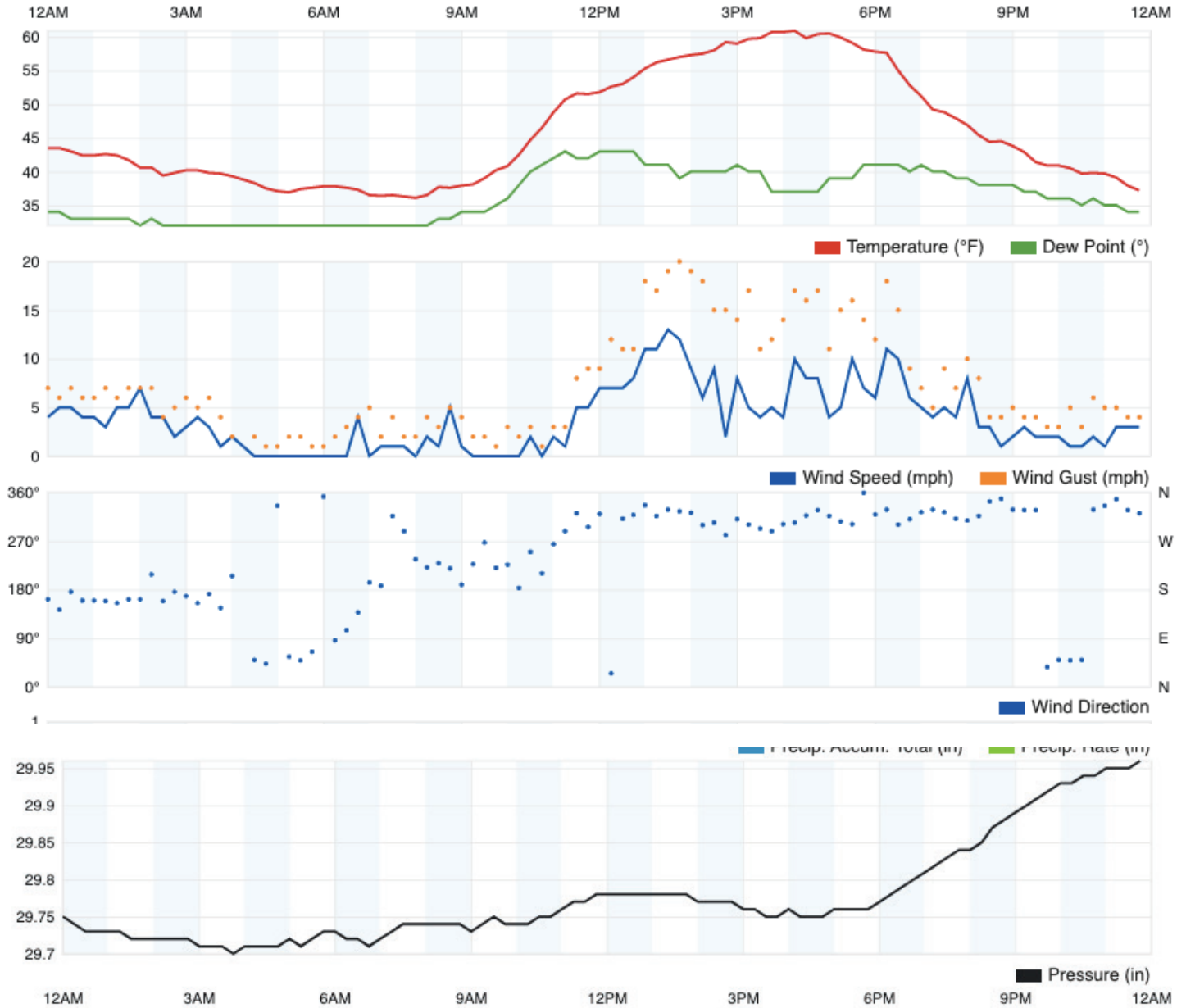
ABOUT STU WHITNEY

Stu Whitney is an investigative reporter for South Dakota News Watch. A resident of Sioux Falls, Whitney is an award-winning reporter, editor and novelist with more than 30 years of experience in journalism.

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Yesterday's Groton Weather Graphs



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Today



Sunny

High: 52 °F

Tonight



Partly Cloudy

Low: 26 °F

Friday



Decreasing
Clouds

High: 55 °F

Friday
Night



Partly Cloudy

Low: 30 °F

Saturday



Sunny

High: 60 °F

7-Day Temperatures And Precipitation Chances

Forecast High Temperatures

	3/17	3/18	3/19	3/20	3/21	3/22	3/23
	Thu	Fri	Sat	Sun	Mon	Tue	Wed
Aberdeen	54	56	58	65	55	47	45
Britton	45	45	47	56	50	41	39
Eagle Butte	53	57	58	63	48	46	46
Eureka	50	57	57	62	49	45	43
Gettysburg	53	56	57	63	50	45	44
Kennebec	57	60	62	70	56	49	49
McIntosh	52	57	56	60	46	45	45
Milbank	50	47	54	61	56	41	41
Miller	58	59	61	68	57	49	48
Mobridge	56	60	60	64	52	50	48
Murdo	57	60	61	68	52	49	49
Pierre	59	60	62	70	56	51	51
Redfield	57	58	60	68	58	49	46
Sisseton	47	45	50	56	52	41	41
Watertown	51	51	55	63	58	42	40
Wheaton	43	40	44	50	50	39	38

*Table values in °F

**Created: 4 am CDT Thu 3/17/2022

***Values are maximums over the period beginning at the time shown.

Probability of Precipitation

	3/17	3/18	3/19	3/20	3/21	3/22	3/23
	Thu	Fri	Sat	Sun	Mon	Tue	Wed
Aberdeen				1	33	36	16
Britton					35	39	18
Eagle Butte				2	24	23	11
Eureka	1	1	0	1	27	27	12
Gettysburg				1	29	29	14
Kennebec	1	0	0	1	36	38	17
McIntosh	1	0	0	3	26	18	10
Milbank					34	48	26
Miller				1	35	38	18
Mobridge	1	0	0	1	25	24	12
Murdo	1	0	0	1	33	33	16
Pierre				1	30	31	16
Redfield					35	39	18
Sisseton					36	44	22
Watertown		1	0	1	38	48	25
Wheaton					33	44	24

*Table values in %

**Created: 4 am CDT Thu 3/17/2022

***Values are maximums over the period beginning at the time shown.



NWS Aberdeen, SD
Updated: 3/17/2022 4:42 AM CST

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Today in Weather History

March 17, 1997: High winds of 30 to 50 mph, gusting to over 60 mph, occurred over much of northeast South Dakota through the morning and into the early afternoon hours. Several homes and businesses sustained some roof damage. In Aberdeen, the high winds tore a large piece of the roof off the bowling alley and also ripped a part of a roof off an appliance store. The winds damaged some power lines and connections in Aberdeen, including some traffic lights. In Aberdeen, the power was out for 2500 customers for a few hours in the morning. The wind also damaged two old farm buildings west of Aberdeen. One barn lost 75 percent of its roof. The second barn was pushed six inches off of its foundation, suffering minor structural damage. The Edmunds County Highway Department Shop, under construction east of Ipswich, suffered much damage as many rafters came down, and the sidewall frame shifted. Finally, much small to medium-sized branches were brought down by the high winds. Some peak wind gusts across the area included 58 mph in Aberdeen and 63 mph in Watertown.

1892: A winter storm in southwestern and central Tennessee produced 26.3 inches of snow at Riddleton and 18.5 inches at Memphis. It was the deepest snow on record for those areas.

1906: The temperature at Snake River Wyoming dipped to 50 degrees below zero, a record for the U.S. for March.

1906: A magnitude 7.1 earthquake caused significant damage in Taiwan. According to the Central Weather Bureau in China, this earthquake caused 1,258 deaths, 2,385 injuries, and destroyed over 6,000 homes.

1952: The ban on using the word "tornado" issued in 1886 ended on this date. In the 1880s, John P. Finley of the U.S. Army Signal Corps, then handling weather forecasting for the U.S., developed generalized forecasts on days tornadoes were most likely. But in 1886, the Army ended Finley's program and banned the word "tornado" from forecasts because the harm done by a tornado prediction would eventually be greater than that which results from the tornado itself. The thinking was that people would be trampled in the panic if they heard a tornado was possible. The ban stayed in place after the Weather Bureau; now, the National Weather Service took over forecasting from the Army. A tornado that wrecked 52 large aircraft at Tinker Air Force Base, OK, on 3/20/1948, spurred Air Force meteorologists to begin working on ways to forecast tornadoes. The Weather Bureau also began looking for ways to improve tornado forecasting and established the Severe Local Storm Warning Center, which is now the Storm Prediction Center in Norman, OK. The ban on the word "tornado" fell on this date when the new center issued its first Tornado Watch.

1987 - A powerful spring storm produced severe thunderstorms over the Central Gulf Coast States, and heavy snow in the High Plains Region. A tornado caused three million dollars damage at Natchez MS, and six inches of rain in five hours caused five million dollars damage at Vicksburg MS. Cactus TX received 10 inches of snow. Western Kansas reported blizzard conditions. (The National Weather Summary) (Storm Data)

1988 - A winter storm produced heavy snow from the northeast Texas panhandle to the Ozark area of Missouri and Arkansas. Up to fifteen inches of snow was reported in Oklahoma and Texas. Snowfall totals in the Ozark area ranged up to 14 inches, with unofficial reports as high as 22 inches around Harrison AR. (The National Weather Summary) (Storm Data)

1989 - Strong northerly winds ushered snow and arctic cold into the north central U.S. Winds gusted to 58 mph at Sydney NE and Scottsbluff NE, Cadillac MI received 12 inches of snow, and International Falls MN reported a record low of 22 degrees below zero. (The National Weather Summary) (Storm Data)

1990: Showers and thunderstorms associated with a slow-moving cold front produced torrential rains across parts of the southeastern U.S. over two days. Flooding claimed the lives of at least 22 persons, including thirteen in Alabama. Up to 16 inches of rain deluged southern Alabama with 10.63 inches reported at Mobile AL in 24 hours. The town of Elba, AL, was flooded with 6 to 12 feet of water causing more than 25 million dollars damage, and total flood damage across Alabama exceeded 100 million dollars. Twenty-six counties in the state were declared disaster areas.

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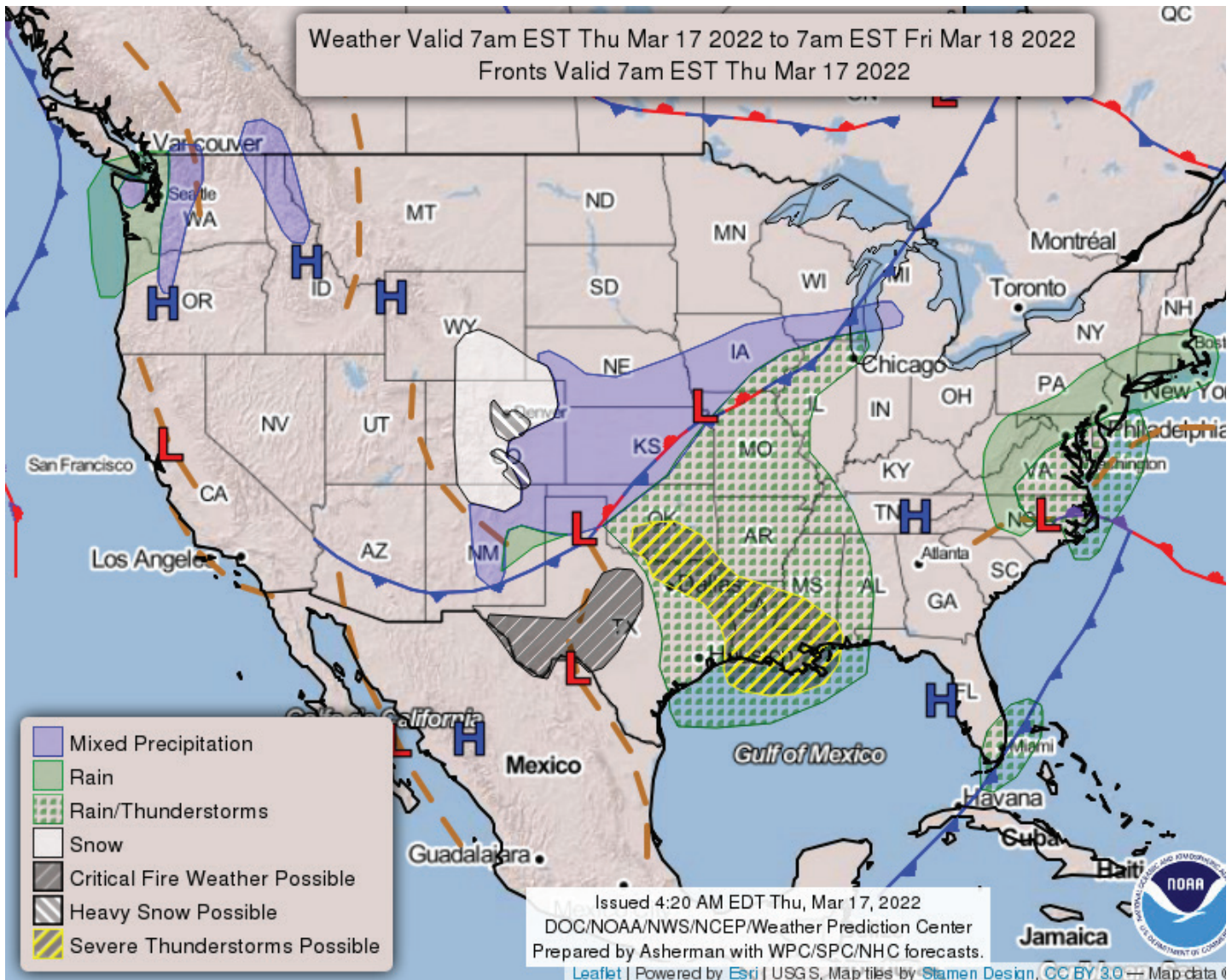
Yesterday's Groton Weather

High Temp: 61 °F at 4:10 PM
Low Temp: 36 °F at 7:58 AM
Wind: 21 mph at 1:20 PM
Precip: 0.00

Day length: 12 hours, 03 minutes

Today's Info

Record High: 77 in 2012
Record Low: -10 in 1906
Average High: 42°F
Average Low: 20°F
Average Precip in Mar.: 0.43
Precip to date in Mar.: 0.00
Average Precip to date: 1.60
Precip Year to Date: 0.97
Sunset Tonight: 7:42:20 PM
Sunrise Tomorrow: 7:37:05 AM



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FIRST, CRY FOR HELP

As Christians, we are a people with many privileges - perhaps many more than we realize. But there is no doubt that the highest privilege is the privilege of prayer. We would, perhaps, all agree that the greatest tragedy of our lives would be that we neglect to pray.

Someone once compared prayer to a fireman going to put out a fire with no water for his hose or a person who is poverty-stricken not knowing what to do with a blank check or a piece of gold.

Jesus prayed. He felt the need to pray and spent much time in prayer. Prayer was so very important to Him that He made it a great part of His life. Imagine - the Creator of the universe praying! Prayer to Him was like breathing: He did it constantly and continually. He knew that He would not survive unless He was in constant contact with His Father.

Unfortunately, prayer for many of us is something we do after "things" are set in motion, start to go wrong or "explode." The day begins and before we know it "things" are going astray. So, we stop and ask God to "get here quickly before things are beyond my control."

Wisely the Psalmist wrote, "I rise before dawn and cry for help; I have put my hope in Your Word." Before he did anything, he began his day in prayer and placed his hope in God and not man. What a powerful thought. What a great idea. What a way to live. What great advice!

"Lord, the sun is waiting to rise, and I have all these things to do today. I know it's a long list and many things can go wrong. So, I look to You first for hope and help."

Prayer: So often we wait until we sense danger to pray. Help us realize, Father, how different our lives would be if we began each day with You - seeking Your help! In Jesus' Name, Amen.

Scripture For Today: I rise before dawn and cry for help; I have put my hope in Your Word. Psalm 119:147

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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
01/29/2023 Carnival of Silver Skates 2pm & 6:30pm (Last Sunday of January)

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The Groton Independent Printed & Mailed Weekly Edition

Subscription Form

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News from the Associated Press

Williams ready to help Murray State deliver in March again

By STEVE MEGARGEE AP Sports Writer

KJ Williams was playing a supporting role for Murray State a few years ago when Ja Morant posted a triple-double while leading the Racers to an NCAA Tournament victory.

As the Racers return to March Madness this week, Williams has matured into one of the team's star attractions.

Murray State (30-2) carries a 20-game winning streak into its first-round game against San Francisco (24-9) on Thursday at Indianapolis. The Racers owe much of their success to Williams, the Ohio Valley Conference player of the year.

"With me coming in my freshman year, I think I averaged 7 and 6 (his actual averages were 7.6 points and 4.7 rebounds per game)," Williams said. "I just took that to another level and just got my game better throughout the years. I just wanted to show that I can score at all levels, that I can do what I can do."

Williams improved his scoring averages to 12.7 points in 2019-20, 15.6 in 2020-21 and 18.2 this season. The 6-foot-10 junior also has produced 8.6 rebounds per game.

Now he gets to make his long-awaited return to the tournament.

As a freshman playing alongside Morant, Williams shot 8 of 10 and scored 16 points as Murray State trounced Marquette 83-64 in a first-round game. Williams was held scoreless in the next round as Murray State lost 90-62 to Florida State.

The Racers are counting on the tournament experience of Williams and Tevin Brown to help guide them this week. Brown scored 19 points in that 2019 victory over Marquette.

"We have two players in KJ Williams and Tevin Brown who've won a lot of games, won a lot of championships, won a game in the NCAA Tournament, have performed at a really high level in the NCAA Tournament," Murray State coach Matt McMahan said. "Those two guys scored 35 points in our first-round win back in 2019. I expect them to show great leadership toward our other players who may or may not have played in that tournament."

Morant, now an All-Star guard with the Memphis Grizzlies, will be keeping tabs on them. Williams said a congratulatory text recently arrived from his former teammate.

"He texts us telling us, 'Good job, way to get the job done,' and telling us to look forward to March Madness," Williams said.

Williams is one of several notable players from one-bid conferences who could make an impact on this NCAA Tournament. Here are six others:

TEDDY ALLEN, NEW MEXICO STATE

First-round game: Thursday vs. UConn in Buffalo, New York.

Allen's college career has taken him to West Virginia, Wichita State, Western Nebraska Community College and Nebraska. The 6-6 guard finally found a home at New Mexico State, where he was named the Western Athletic Conference player of the year. He averages 19.3 points, 6.9 rebounds and 2.7 assists.

E.J. ANOSIKE, CAL STATE FULLERTON

First-round game: Friday vs. Duke at Greenville, South Carolina.

Anosike is making the most of his opportunity at Cal State Fullerton after previously playing at Sacred Heart and Tennessee. The 6-7 senior forward averages 16.5 points and 8.3 rebounds to lead the Titans in both categories. He averaged 18 points and 13.7 rebounds in three Big West Tournament games. He's the younger brother of Nicky Anosike, who played on Tennessee's 2007 and 2008 women's basketball national championship teams.

RYAN DAVIS, VERMONT

First-round game: Thursday vs. Arkansas in Buffalo, New York.

Davis is a two-time America East Conference player of the year who is averaging 17.2 points and 5.7 re-

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bounds. The 6-foot-8 senior forward is making 59% of his shots. He scored 20 points as Vermont trounced Maryland-Baltimore County 82-43 in the America East final.

BAYLOR SCHEIERMAN, SOUTH DAKOTA STATE

First-round game: Thursday vs. Providence in Buffalo, New York.

Scheierman has helped South Dakota State win 21 straight games, the longest active streak of any Division I team. The 6-6 sophomore is the Summit League player of the year. He leads the Summit League in assists (4.6) and is ranked second in rebounds (7.8) and fifth in scoring (16.2).

MALACHI SMITH, CHATTANOOGA

First-round game: Friday vs. Illinois in Pittsburgh.

Smith is Chattanooga's first Southern Conference player of the year since 1997, when Johnny Taylor led the Mocs to a Sweet 16 berth. He averages 20.1 points to rank 18th among all Division I players. The Wright State transfer also gets 6.7 rebounds and 3.1 assists per game. He averaged 16.8 points, 8.8 rebounds and 3.3 assists for Chattanooga last season.

JORDAN WALKER, UAB

First-round game: Friday vs. Houston at Pittsburgh.

Walker, the Conference USA player of the year, leads the league and ranks 14th nationally in scoring (20.2). He ranks third in Conference USA in assists (4.9). He scored 27 points to help UAB beat Louisiana Tech 82-73 in the Conference USA Tournament championship game. The 5-11 junior guard previously played at Seton Hall and Tulane.

SD Lottery

By The Associated Press undefined

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

Dakota Cash

11-13-15-17-25

(eleven, thirteen, fifteen, seventeen, twenty-five)

Estimated jackpot: \$46,000

Lotto America

02-16-34-40-41, Star Ball: 7, ASB: 4

(two, sixteen, thirty-four, forty, forty-one; Star Ball: seven; ASB: four)

Estimated jackpot: \$9.05 million

Mega Millions

Estimated jackpot: \$29 million

Powerball

03-28-34-35-58, Powerball: 17, Power Play: 2

(three, twenty-eight, thirty-four, thirty-five, fifty-eight; Powerball: seventeen; Power Play: two)

Estimated jackpot: \$133 million

Midwest Preview: Sharp-shooting Jackrabbits streak into NCAA

By RALPH D. RUSSO AP College Sports Writer

BUFFALO, N.Y. (AP) — Beware of Jackrabbits.

South Dakota State is bounding into the NCAA Tournament with the nation's longest winning streak at 21 games and the most-accurate 3-point shooting team in major college basketball in almost three decades.

In just 13 seasons in Division I, South Dakota State has become an NCAA Tournament regular out of the Summit League and one of the best mid-major programs in the country with former stars Nate Wolters and Mike Daum setting the standard.

The 13th-seeded Jackrabbits (30-4) will be making their sixth tournament appearance Thursday, when they face fourth-seeded Providence (25-5) in the first round of the Midwest Region in Buffalo.

At a time when mid-major programs are often turned into farm clubs for the schools from the so-called

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power conferences — such as the Big East, where Providence plays — South Dakota State has been a place where players tend to find a home.

“Quite frankly, our group has been together the last three years for the most part, and they’re a very, very connected group,” third-year coach Eric Henderson said Wednesday.

The Jackrabbits have had only one top player transfer out and up to a bigger program in recent years. David Jenkins followed former coach T.J. Otzelberger to UNLV in 2019.

Because of that, Henderson has only dabbled in the transfer market. The Jackrabbits have two players who transferred in from other four-year colleges, and only one is among the nine players who average at least 15 minutes per game.

“When you are part of a program that has a history like South Dakota State, playing in the NCAA Tournament and having winning teams, that’s what kids want to be part of.” Henderson said.

A unique nickname also hasn’t hurt South Dakota State develop its brand.

“It’s a cool logo,” Henderson said.

Douglas Wilson, a senior from Des Moines, Iowa, played two seasons at junior college before landing at South Dakota State. After two years in Brookings, Wilson decided to take advantage of the extra year of eligibility the NCAA granted to athletes who played through the pandemic in 2020-21 to return this season.

The 6-foot-7 forward leads the team in scoring at 16.5 points per game and is shooting 57.4 percent from the floor.

“So, I’m a big loyalty guy. So there was always people talking about (transferring), but my loyalty was with South Dakota State, and I didn’t want to be with nobody else,” Wilson said.

Wilson is the inside player on a team loaded with long-range shooters. South Dakota State enters the tournament shooting 44.7% from 3-point range. The last team to shoot better than that for a full season in Division I was Indiana, which made 45.4% percent on 3s in 1993-94.

Baylor Scheierman is shooting 47.6% from deep for the Jackrabbits, and that’s third-best on the team behind Charlie Easley and Alex Ariens. Both are above 50%.

“I think coach has done an incredible job with keeping them simple,” Providence coach Ed Cooley said. “They know who they are. I don’t think they take bad shots. You can see they have a lot of offensive synergy and continuity.”

Cooley orchestrated one of the biggest turnarounds in the country after the Friars went 13-13 last season. But there are still skeptics. The Friars have heard they have been dubbed the luckiest team in America after winning 15 games by a single-digit margin, including three in overtime.

The Big East regular-season champions are only a two-point favorite against South Dakota State, according to FanDuel Sportsbook. The Jackrabbits, who have not lost since Dec. 15, are a popular upset pick in the bracket.

“I don’t think there is a person in America that has given us a chance in this game we’re about to play, not one person,” Cooley said.

At least the luckiest team in the country starts its NCAA Tournament on St. Patrick’s Day?

“Hell, I may be the leprechaun tomorrow,” Cooley said.

ALL-AMERICANS

The Midwest Region features two All-Americans and player of the year contenders in Kansas’ Ochai Agbaji and Iowa’s Keegan Murray.

Agbaji entered the NBA draft after his junior season, but decided to come back to Kansas this season and has blossomed. The senior improved his shooting percentage overall, from 3-point range and from the free-throw line.

Kansas coach Bill Self said that while Agbaji has become a star he doesn’t necessarily have to carry the team in the postseason.

“You know what I think he can do to really help us and himself is just be who he is and not try to be more than what that is,” Self said. “What that is is plenty. And he doesn’t need to be a superhero. We’ve got good players around him.”

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Agbaji heads into the top-seeded Jayhawks' first-round game against 16th-seeded Texas Southern (19-12) in Fort Worth, Texas, averaging 19.7 points per game.

Murray and the fifth-seeded Hawkeyes (26-9) are in Buffalo to face 12th-seeded Richmond (23-12), which made a surprising run to an Atlantic 10 Tournament championship to reach the NCAAs.

Murray made a leap this season, leading the Big Ten in scoring at 23.6 points per game after being a role player as a freshman.

"I think last year, you saw flashes of that," Iowa guard Jordan Bohannon said. "Obviously, it was really hard to see. We had so many talented guys last year from Joe Wieskamp to CJ (Fredrick) to Luka Garza."

Bohannon called Murray a "generational player."

"That step just doesn't happen by accident," Bohannon said. "That step happens by day in and day out of continuing to work hard and helping this team win, and that's exactly what he did in this offseason."

BATTLE OF THE DPOYS

The 8-9 game in Fort Worth will match two conference defensive players of the year.

Nathan Mensah of eighth-seeded San Diego State was the DPOY in the Mountain West, averaging two blocked shots per game for the team that led the conference in fewest points allowed (57.75) and field goal percentage against (38.2%).

Ryan Kalkbrenner of ninth-seeded Creighton was the Big East's defensive player of the year. He averaged 2.7 blocks per game and the Bluejays were the toughest team in their conference to make a basket against, allowing opponents to shoot 38.6% from the field.

"Both teams are really close to each other as far as profile," San Diego State coach Brian Dutcher said. "You can make mistakes on the perimeter, but anything around the rim is protected, hard to score at the basket. So that's going to be a great challenge for both teams."

Ex-South Dakota prison official: Firing was retaliation

SIOUX FALLS, S.D. (AP) — A former supervisor in South Dakota's prison system alleges in a lawsuit that she was fired last year in retaliation for reporting sexual harassment from the warden of the prison.

Stefany Bawek, the former director of a work program at the State Penitentiary in Sioux Falls, filed the lawsuit in federal court Monday, charging that the Department of Corrections violated her civil rights, including punishing her for reporting workplace misconduct and discriminating against her based on her sex.

Bawek was fired last year along with several other top Corrections Department officials after Gov. Kristi Noem launched an investigation into sexual harassment and low staff morale at the prison. But Bawek alleges that she was forced from her job just weeks after reporting a sexual harassment incident involving the prison warden and a subordinate staff member.

The former prison warden, Darin Young, denied the allegations in a statement to the Sioux Falls Argus Leader. He was also fired last year.

Bawek alleges in her lawsuit that the Corrections Department gave inaccurate information about her termination "as a means of chilling the willingness of other staff members to report discriminatory behavior," as well as making it more difficult for her to obtain unemployment insurance and find a new job.

She also alleged that the department had "different standards of performance" for female staff members. She is seeking unspecified payment from the state to cover losses to her income, emotional distress and other damages.

Governor's spokesman Ian Fury said the administration does not comment on "personnel matters or ongoing litigation."

Noem has pushed for widespread changes to the state's prison system after launching the investigation last year. She also named a new corrections secretary, Kellie Wasko, who started this month.

Noem signs bill banning election donations like Zuckerberg's

By STEPHEN GROVES Associated Press

PIERRE, S.D. (AP) — South Dakota Gov. Kristi Noem on Wednesday signed a bill to bar state election

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officials from accepting donations for election operating costs, taking aim at Mark Zuckerberg's donations that in 2020 helped officials hold elections in the midst of the pandemic.

Zuckerberg and his wife, Priscilla Chan, in 2020 donated \$350 million nationwide to help local election offices collect and count ballots. Those donations, which were made through the Chicago-based Center for Technology and Civic Life, have been targeted in Republican-run states, spurred by anger and suspicion that Zuckerberg's money benefited Democrats.

Noem has in the past joined conservatives in accusing the tech mogul's social media platform of censoring right-wing voices as part of its campaign against misinformation.

"Elections should be funded by government, and we will not risk creating avenues for big-tech billionaires to unfairly influence our free and open elections," Noem said in a statement that disparaged the donations as "Zuck Bucks."

The Center for Technology and Civic Life has said its grant program helped make the 2020 election the most secure in history while turnout soared even amid the COVID-19 pandemic. Federal officials from the Cybersecurity and Infrastructure Security Agency have also said that the election was the most secure in American history.

In several other red states, the move to bar private donations from funding election costs has come alongside packages that also put new limits on how voters can cast ballots and imposed new requirements on county or city-based election officials.

The South Dakota Legislature this year considered several other bills that would have put new restrictions on elections into place, but Senate Republicans rejected those.

Meanwhile, Noem on Wednesday signed 13 other bills she branded as "good government" laws, including a bill that clarifies that non-disparagement clauses in settlement agreements with the state cannot be used to stop people from speaking in closed-door meetings to a pair of the Legislature's oversight committees.

That proposal arose after lawmakers were hampered at times last year as they tried to find out why a former state employee who directed the state's Appraiser Certification Program was pressured to retire and eventually received a \$200,000 payment from the state as part of a settlement agreement.

The state employee, Sherry Bren, had months earlier been called into a meeting with Noem, her daughter and other top officials, just days after the Appraiser Certification Program moved to deny her daughter's application.

Noem's daughter, after the meeting, received what Bren described as an unprecedented additional opportunity to show she could meet federal requirements with her appraisal work. But Noem has repeatedly denied wrongdoing for involving her daughter in the meeting and insisted she was solely focused on solving problems with the certification of appraisers.

Jail time for man whose marijuana brownies sickened seniors

TYNDALL, S.D. (AP) — A South Dakota man has been ordered to spend 60 days in jail for providing the marijuana in the brownies his mother unknowingly served to seniors at a card game.

Michael Koranda, 46, had earlier pleaded guilty to a felony drug charge. A judge in Bon Homme County Tuesday also sentenced the Tabor man to two years of probation and ordered him to pay more than \$3,400 in court costs and restitution. He must also write an apology letter to the seniors who ate the marijuana brownies.

Koranda resigned his position with the Bon Homme school district as its vocal music teacher as a result of his court case.

At his sentencing, Koranda expressed regret for his actions and its impact on others, including those who sought medical attention, the Yankton Press and Dakotan reported.

"I'm really sorry. This impacted so many in the community, and I'm sorry for that," he said. "So many people got sick, and that wasn't my intention for that to happen."

Judge Cheryl Gering told Kornada she realizes he didn't intend for the brownies to be served at the community center card game, but his actions — including transporting THC-laced butter from Colorado

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— harmed the unsuspecting victims.

A report from Bon Homme County Sheriff's Office says dispatchers received several calls about possible poisonings on Jan. 4. All the calls involved seniors who had earlier been at a community center card game in Tabor.

An investigation into the incident led authorities to believe the patients were all under the influence of THC, the compound in cannabis that produces the high sensation and that the THC came from a batch of brownies brought by a woman to the community center,

Live updates: Further Russian airstrikes on Mariupol

By The Associated Press undefined

LVIV, Ukraine -- Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy's office says Russia carried out further airstrikes on the besieged port city of Mariupol early on Thursday morning.

Zelenskyy's office did not report casualties for the latest strikes. They come amid rescue efforts in the city after a theater where hundreds had been sheltering was destroyed Wednesday in what Ukrainian authorities say was a Russian air strike.

"People are escaping from Mariupol by themselves using their own transport," Zelenskyy's office said, adding the "risk of death remains high" because of Russian forces previously firing on civilians.

The presidential office also reported artillery and air strikes around the country overnight, including in the Kalynivka and Brovary suburbs of the capital, Kyiv. It said fighting continues as Russian forces try to enter the Ukraine-held city of Mykolaiv in the south and that there was an artillery barrage through the night in the eastern town of Avdiivka.

Ukraine says Russian forces are increasingly resorting to artillery and air strikes as their advance stalls.

The Ukrainian General Staff says "the enemy, without success in its ground operation, continues to carry out rocket and bomb attacks on infrastructure and highly populated areas of Ukrainian cities."

KEY DEVELOPMENTS IN THE RUSSIA-UKRAINE WAR:

- Russian airstrike hit Mariupol theater where hundreds had been sheltering
- U.N. Security Council to meet ahead of vote on Russian humanitarian resolution
- Biden flatly calls Putin a war criminal, but investigations for determining that have only begun
- Cheap but lethal Turkish drones bolster Ukraine's defenses
- Palestinians with Ukraine ties empathize with victims of war
- Zelenskyy unites Republicans and Democrats 2 years after featuring in US impeachment
- Go to <https://apnews.com/hub/russia-ukraine> for more coverage

WHAT ELSE IS HAPPENING TODAY:

BANGKOK — A U.N. agency is warning that the conflict in Ukraine is likely to hinder access to food and fuel for many of the world's most vulnerable people.

A report by the United Nations Conference on Trade and Development notes that Russia accounted for nearly a third of wheat imports for Africa, or \$3.7 billion, in 2018-2020, while 12%, worth \$1.4 billion, came from Ukraine.

The report said initial assessments point to a "substantive reduction" in access to food and fuel despite efforts to prevent disruptions of supplies of key commodities such as wheat. Meanwhile, rising costs for shipping and for grains and other staple foods is pushing prices higher, hitting poorest people the hardest, the report says.

The report said up to 25 African countries, especially the least developed economies, relied on wheat imports from Russia and Ukraine. The lack of spare capacity in Africa limits the ability of those countries to offset any lost supplies, while surging costs for fertilizer will be an extra burden for farmers.

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BERLIN — Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy has accused Germany of putting its economy before his country's security in the run-up to the Russian invasion.

In an address to Germany's parliament Thursday, Zelenskyy criticized the German government's support for the Nord Stream 2 pipeline project meant to bring natural gas from Russia. Ukraine and others had opposed the project, warning that it endangered Ukrainian and European security.

Zelenskyy also noted Germany's hesitancy when it came to imposing some of the toughest sanctions on Russia for fear it could hurt the German economy.

The Ukrainian president called on Germany not to let a new wall divide Europe, urging support for his country's membership of NATO and the European Union.

He also called for more help for his country, saying thousands of people have been killed in the war that started almost a month ago, including 108 children.

Referring to the dire situation in the besieged city of Mariupol, he said: "Everything is a target for them," including "a theater where hundreds of people found shelter that was flattened yesterday."

LONDON — Britain's defense ministry says Russia's invasion of Ukraine "has largely stalled on all fronts" amid stiff Ukrainian resistance.

The Ministry of Defence says Russian forces have made "minimal progress" on land, sea or air in recent days, and are suffering heavy losses.

In an intelligence update on social media. It says Ukrainian resistance remains "staunch and well-coordinated." It says most of Ukraine's territory, including all major cities, remains in Ukraine's hands.

Earlier, U.K. defense officials said Russia had probably used up "far more stand-off air launched weapons than originally planned" during its three-week invasion, and was resorting to older, less precise weapons more likely to cause civilian casualties.

KYIV, Ukraine — Ukrainian officials say the status of people sheltering in a theater in Mariupol is still uncertain because the entrance was under the rubble caused by a Russian airstrike.

Pavlo Kyrylenko, head of the Donetsk regional administration, said on Telegram on Wednesday evening that "several hundred" residents of Mariupol were sheltering in the Drama Theater. He rejected the claims by the Russian military that the Azov battalion was headquartered in the theater, stressing that "only civilians" were in it when it was struck earlier Wednesday.

Kyrylenko said the airstrike also hit the Neptune swimming pool complex. "Now there are pregnant women and women with children under the rubble there. It's pure terrorism!" the official said.

At least as recently as Monday, the pavement outside the once-elegant theater was marked with huge white letters spelling out "CHILDREN" in Russian, according to images released by the Maxar space technology company.

LVIV, Ukraine — Russian forces freed the mayor of the Ukrainian city of Melitopol in exchange for nine of their captured conscripts, an official from Ukraine's presidential office said Wednesday.

Kyiv accused the Russians of kidnapping Mayor Ivan Fedorov about a week ago. Surveillance video showed him being marched out of city hall apparently surrounded by Russian soldiers.

Residents of Melitopol, a city in southeast currently under Russian control, have been protesting to demand his release.

Daria Zariwna, spokeswoman of the head of Ukraine's president's office, said Wednesday that Fedorov has been released from captivity, and Russia "got nine of its captive soldiers, born in 2002-2003, practically children, conscripts Russia's Defense Ministry said weren't there."

Moscow initially denied sending conscripts to fight in Ukraine, but later the Russian military admitted that some conscripts have been involved in the offensive and even got captured by Ukrainian forces.

UNITED NATIONS — The U.N. Security Council will meet Thursday at the request of six Western nations

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that sought an open session on Ukraine ahead of an expected vote on a Russian humanitarian resolution that they have sharply criticized for making no mention of Moscow's war against its smaller neighbor.

"Russia is committing war crimes and targeting civilians. Russia's illegal war on Ukraine is a threat to us all," tweeted the U.N. mission of the United Kingdom, one of the six countries that requested the meeting.

Russia circulated a proposed Security Council resolution Tuesday that would demand protection for civilians "in vulnerable situations" in Ukraine and safe passage for humanitarian aid and people seeking to leave the country but without mentioning the war or the parties concerned.

The resolution is expected to be voted on by the council Friday.

LVIV, Ukraine — Ukrainian and Russian delegations held talks again Wednesday by video.

Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy's adviser Mikhaïlo Podolyak said Ukraine demanded a cease-fire, the withdrawal of Russian troops and legal security guarantees for Ukraine from a number of countries.

"This is possible only through direct dialogue" between Zelenskyy and Russian President Vladimir Putin, he said on Twitter.

An official in Zelenskyy's office told The Associated Press the main subject under discussion was whether Russian troops would remain in separatist regions in eastern Ukraine after the war and where the borders would be.

Just before the war, Russia recognized the independence of two regions controlled by Russian-backed separatists since 2014. It also extended the borders of those regions to areas Ukraine had continued to hold, including Mariupol, a port city now under siege.

The official, speaking on condition of anonymity to discuss the sensitive talks, said Ukraine was insisting on the inclusion of one or more Western nuclear powers in the negotiations and on the signing of a legally binding document with security guarantees for Ukraine. In exchange, the official said, Ukraine was ready to discuss a neutral status.

Russia has demanded that NATO pledge never to admit Ukraine to the alliance or station forces there.

Associated Press writer Yuras Karmanau in Lviv contributed to this report.

PANAMA CITY — Three Panama-flagged ships have been hit by Russian missiles in the Black Sea during Russia's war in Ukraine and one sank, Panamanian authorities said Wednesday.

The crews of the ships "are safe," Maritime Authority Director Noriel Araúz said.

The ship that sank was the Helt, but Araúz did not say when that occurred. The others hit were the Lord Nelson and Namura Queen. Panamanian officials previously said the Namura Queen, owned by a Japanese company and operated by a firm in the Philippines, was hit in February.

Araúz said 10 Panama-flagged ships were in the Black Sea, including the three hit. Combined they have about 150 crew members of various nationalities who have not been allowed to leave, he said.

"We are in constant communication with the ships ... because we know that the Russian navy is not letting them leave the Black Sea," Araúz said.

Panama leads the world in registered merchant ships and has advised its merchant fleet to be on high alert in Ukrainian and Russian waters.

As Ukraine war rages, diplomats near Iran nuclear agreement

By MATTHEW LEE AP Diplomatic Writer

WASHINGTON (AP) — As the war in Ukraine rages on, diplomats trying to salvage the languishing 2015 Iran nuclear deal have been forging ahead with negotiations despite distractions caused by the conflict. They now appear to be near the cusp of a deal that would bring the U.S. back into the accord and bring Iran back into compliance with limits on its nuclear program.

After 11 months of on-and-off talks in Vienna, U.S. officials and others say only a very small number of issues remain to be resolved. Meanwhile, Russia appears to have backed down on a threat to crater an

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agreement over Ukraine-related sanctions that had dampened prospects for a quick deal.

That leaves an agreement — or at least an agreement in principle — up to political leaders in Washington and Tehran. But, as has been frequently the case, both Iran and the U.S. say those decisions must be made by the other side, leaving a resolution in limbo even as all involved say the matter is urgent and must be resolved as soon as possible.

"We are close to a possible deal, but we're not there yet," State Department spokesman Ned Price said Wednesday. "We are going to find out in the near term whether we're able to get there."

Also Wednesday in Berlin, German Foreign Ministry spokesman Christofer Burger said work "on drafting a final text has been completed" and "the necessary political decisions now need to be taken in capitals."

"We hope that these negotiations can now be swiftly completed," he said.

Reentering the 2015 deal known as the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action, or JCPOA, has been a priority for the Biden administration since it took office.

Once a signature foreign policy achievement of the Obama administration in which now-President Joe Biden served as vice president, the accord was abandoned in 2018 by then-President Donald Trump, who called it the worst deal ever negotiated and set about restoring and expanding on U.S. sanctions that had been lifted.

The Biden administration argues that any threat currently posed by Iran would be infinitely more dangerous should it obtain a nuclear weapon. Deal opponents, mostly but not entirely Republicans, say the original deal gave Iran a path to developing a nuclear bomb by removing various constraints under so-called "sunset" clauses. Those clauses meant that certain restrictions were to be gradually lifted.

Both sides' arguments gained intensity over the weekend when Iran targeted the northern Iraqi city of Irbil with missile strikes that hit near the U.S. consulate compound. For critics, the attack was proof that Iran cannot be trusted and should not be given any sanctions relief. For the administration, it confirmed that Iran would be a greater danger if it obtains a nuke.

"What it underscores for us is the fact that Iran poses a threat to our allies, to our partners, in some cases to the United States, across a range of realms," Price said. "The most urgent challenge we would face is a nuclear-armed Iran or an Iran that was on the very precipice of obtaining a nuclear weapon."

Meanwhile, a new glimmer of hope for progress emerged Wednesday when Iran released two detained British citizens. The U.S., which withdrew from the nuclear deal in 2018, and the three European countries that remain parties to it had said an agreement would be difficult if not impossible to reach while those prisoners, along with several American citizens, remain jailed in Iran.

Should the prisoner issue be resolved, Price said Tuesday, the gaps in the nuclear negotiations could be closed quickly if Iran makes the political decision to return to compliance.

"We do think that we would be in a position to close those gaps, to close that remaining distance if there are decisions made in capitals, including in Tehran," Price said.

Yet, Iranian Foreign Minister Hossein Amirabdollahian said a deal depends entirely on Washington.

"More than ever, (the) ball is in U.S. court to provide the responses needed for successful conclusion of the talks," he said after meeting with Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov in Moscow on Tuesday. Amirabdollahian said he had been "reassured that Russia remains on board for the final agreement in Vienna."

Lavrov said the negotiations were in the "home stretch" and suggested that last-minute Russian objections to the potential spillover of Ukraine-related sanctions into activities Moscow might undertake with Tehran under a new nuclear deal had been overcome.

He said the agreement under consideration would carve those activities out, something the U.S. has not denied and has said the Russians should have understood from the beginning.

"We would not sanction Russian participation in nuclear projects that are part of resuming full implementation of the (deal)," Price said. "We can't and we won't and we have not provided assurances beyond that to Russia."

He said the U.S. would not allow Russia to flout Ukraine-related sanctions by funneling money or other assets through Iran. Any deal "is not going to be an escape hatch for the Russian Federation and the

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sanctions that have been imposed on it because of the war in Ukraine.”

Deal critics are skeptical that Russia won't at least try to evade Ukraine sanctions in dealings with Iran and have warned that potential sanctions-busting is just one reason they will oppose a new agreement.

Earlier this week, all but one of the 50 Republicans in the Senate signed a joint statement vowing to dismantle any agreement with Iran that has time limits on restrictions to advanced nuclear work, or that does not address other issues they have, including Iran's ballistic missile program and military support for proxies in Syria, Lebanon and Yemen.

While the GOP won't be able to stop a deal now, it may have majorities in both houses of Congress after November's midterm elections. That would make it difficult for the administration to stay in any deal that is reached.

Another concern of deal critics is the scope of sanctions relief that the Biden administration is ready to provide Iran if it comes back into compliance with the deal. Iran has been demanding the removal of the Trump administration's designation of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps as a "foreign terrorist organization."

The U.S. has balked at that, barring Iranian commitments to stop funding and arming extremist groups in the region and beyond. The matter is of considerable interest in Washington, not least because the IRGC is believed to be behind specific and credible threats to former Secretary of State Mike Pompeo and the Trump administration's Iran envoy Brian Hook.

U.S. Olympian Alysa Liu, father targeted in Chinese spy case

By SALLY HO Associated Press

U.S. Olympic figure skater Alysa Liu and her father Arthur Liu – a former political refugee – were among those targeted in a spying operation that the Justice Department alleges was ordered by the Chinese government, the elder Liu said late Wednesday.

Arthur Liu told The Associated Press he had been contacted by the FBI last October, and warned about the scheme just as his 16-year-old daughter was preparing for the Winter Olympics that took place in Beijing in February. The father said he did not tell his daughter about the issue so as not to scare her or distract her from the competition.

"We believed Alysa had a very good chance of making the Olympic Team and truly were very scared," Arthur Liu said.

The Justice Department earlier Wednesday announced charges against five men accused of acting on behalf of the Chinese government for a series of brazen and wide-ranging schemes to stalk and harass Chinese dissidents in the United States.

Arthur Liu said he and his daughter were included in the criminal complaint as "Dissident 3" and "family member," respectively.

Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesperson Zhao Lijian said he was "not aware of the specifics" surrounding the allegations, but said China is "firmly opposed to the U.S. slandering by making an issue of this out of thin air."

"China always asks Chinese citizens to abide by the laws and regulations of host countries, and we would never ask our citizens to engage in activities that violate local laws," Zhao told reporters at a daily briefing Thursday. "The so-called transnational harassment schemes are just trumped up."

Liu said he took a stand against China's bullying by allowing his daughter to compete at the recent Olympic Winter Games, where she placed 7th in the women's event.

"This is her moment. This is her once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to compete at the Olympic Games. I'm not going to let them stop her from going and I'll do whatever I can to make sure she's safe and I'm willing to make sacrifices so she can enjoy the moment," Arthur Liu said. "I'm not going to let them win — to stop me — to silence me from expressing my opinions anywhere."

The father said he agreed to let his daughter compete with assurances from the State Department and U.S. Olympic Committee that Alysa Liu would be closely protected and kept safe while competing in China.

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They said she would have at least two people escorting her at all times.

"They are probably just trying to intimidate us, to ... in a way threaten us not to say anything, to cause trouble to them and say anything political or related to human rights violations in China," Arthur Liu said. "I had concerns about her safety. The U.S. government did a good job protecting her."

Arthur Liu said a man called him in November claiming to be an official with the U.S. Olympic & Paralympic Committee, and asked for his and his daughters' passport numbers. Arthur Liu refused to provide them and said he would call his contact at Team USA the next day.

"I didn't feel good about it. I felt something fishy was going on," Arthur Liu said. "From my dealings with the U.S. Figure Skating association, they would never call me on the phone to get copies of our passports. I really cut it short once I realized what he was asking for."

The U.S. Olympic & Paralympic Committee couldn't immediately be reached for comment. A spokesman for U.S. Figure Skating deferred comment to Team USA.

Arthur Liu does not remember being approached in person by Matthew Ziburis, who was arrested Tuesday on charges that include conspiring to commit interstate harassment and criminal use of a means of identification. Ziburis was released on a \$500,000 bond.

Prosecutors allege that Ziburis was hired to perform surveillance on the family and pose as a member of an international sports committee to ask Arthur Liu for a copy of his and Alysa Liu's passports by claiming it was a travel "preparedness check" related to COVID-19. The complaint said when Arthur Liu refused, Ziburis threatened to delay or deny them international travel.

The elder Liu said he left China in his 20s as a political refugee because he had protested the Communist government following the 1989 Tiananmen Square massacre. Arthur Liu eventually settled in the Bay Area, put himself through law school and nurtured one of America's most promising athletes.

His daughter visited their ancestral homeland for the first time while at the Olympics. Arthur Liu said his daughter has generally been warmly embraced by Chinese fans and media, who considered Alysa Liu to be one of their own.

But through the spying investigation, he learned that China was aware of an Instagram message about human rights violations against the ethnic minority Uyghurs that his daughter once posted. During the Games, Alysa Liu also told her father that she was approached by a stranger late one night at a cafeteria after the free skate event, and that the man followed her and asked her to come to his apartment.

"I've kind of accepted my life to be like this because of what I chose to do in 1989, to speak up against the government. And I know the Chinese government will extend their long hands into any corner in the world," Arthur Liu said. "I'm going to continue to enjoy life and live life as I want to live. I'm not going to let this push me down and I'm not going to let them succeed."

Russia-Ukraine war: Key things to know about the conflict

Russia's invasion of Ukraine entered its fourth week on Thursday, with Russian forces largely bogged down outside major cities and shelling them from a distance, raining havoc on civilians.

In the besieged southern city of Mariupol, a Russian airstrike destroyed a theater where hundreds of people were sheltering, burying many of them in the rubble, Ukrainian officials said. They said the number of casualties in the Wednesday attack was unclear as the entrance was blocked by debris.

The strike came as Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy invoked 9/11 during an urgent appeal to the U.S. Congress for more weapons to stem the Russian assault. U.S. President Joe Biden announced an additional \$800 million for Ukraine's military and said Russian President Vladimir Putin is a "war criminal."

Putin meanwhile warned against attempts by the West and his Russian opponents to bring about the "destruction of Russia," signaling an even greater crackdown on opposition to the war.

He said Russians "will always be able to distinguish true patriots from scum and traitors and will simply spit them out like a gnat that accidentally flew into their mouths."

The fighting has led more than 3 million people to flee Ukraine, the U.N. estimates. The death toll remains unknown, though Ukraine has said thousands of civilians have died.

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Here are some key things to know about the conflict:

WHAT IS HAPPENING ON THE GROUND?

Ukrainian Foreign Minister Dmytro Kuleba said the attack on the theater in Mariupol is a "horrendous war crime." Satellite imagery from the Maxar space technology firm showed the word "CHILDREN" written in large white letters in Russian in front of and behind the building.

Pavlo Kyrylenko, the head of the Donetsk regional administration wrote on Telegram late Wednesday that "several hundred" residents were sheltering in the Drama Theater when it was hit and that the entrance is buried under rubble. The official said the airstrike also hit the Neptune swimming pool complex, burying women and children.

The Russian Defense Ministry denied bombing any targets in Mariupol on Wednesday.

A fire broke out in an apartment building in the capital, Kyiv, early Thursday after it was hit by the remnants of a downed Russian rocket, killing one person and injuring at least three others, according to emergency services.

Fighting continued in Kyiv's suburbs, depriving thousands of heat and clean water.

Ten people were killed Wednesday while standing in line for bread in the northern city of Chernihiv, the Ukrainian General Prosecutor's Office said. Maxar images showed Russian artillery and multiple-rocket launchers deployed on the outskirts of Chernihiv, aimed at the city.

Russian forces meanwhile freed the mayor Melitopol in exchange for nine captured conscripts, a Ukrainian official said Wednesday. Residents of the Russian-held Ukrainian city had demanded the release of Mayor Ivan Fedorov, who Kyiv says was detained by Russian forces last week.

WHAT HAS THE AP DIRECTLY WITNESSED OR CONFIRMED?

In Mariupol, workers afraid for their own lives braved relentless shelling to dump the bodies of children in a mass grave. Local officials have tallied 2,500 deaths in the siege, but many bodies crushed in the rubble can't be counted because of the assault.

Bodies lie out in the street. Workers tell families to leave their dead outside because it's too dangerous to hold funerals.

In Kharkiv, doctors are struggling to treat COVID-19 patients as the bombs fall outside. Several times a day, air raid sirens wail at a local hospital, sending virus patients — some connected to ventilators and struggling to breathe — into bomb shelters.

"Bombing takes place from morning into night," hospital director Dr. Pavel Nartov said. "It could hit at any time."

WHAT DETAILS HAVE EMERGED FROM NEGOTIATIONS BETWEEN RUSSIA AND UKRAINE?

Zelenskyy's adviser Mikhailo Podolyak said Ukraine is demanding a cease-fire, the withdrawal of Russian troops and legal security guarantees for Ukraine from a number of countries. Ukrainian and Russian delegations held talks again Wednesday by video.

Another official in Zelenskyy's office, speaking on condition of anonymity because of the sensitivity of the talks, said the main subject under discussion was whether Russian troops would remain in separatist regions in eastern Ukraine after the war and where the borders would be.

Just before the war, Russia recognized the independence of two regions controlled by Russian-backed separatists since 2014 and extended the borders of those regions to areas Ukraine had continued to hold, including Mariupol.

HOW IS THE WORLD RESPONDING TO THE WAR?

Six Western nations have called for a U.N. Security Council meeting on Ukraine on Thursday. The United Kingdom's U.N. Mission tweeted Wednesday that "Russia is committing war crimes and targeting civilians. Russia's illegal war on Ukraine is a threat to us all."

The mission said the meeting was requested by six Security Council members and posted their flags -- the U.K., United States, France, Ireland, Norway and Albania. It has not yet been officially scheduled.

Zelenskyy acknowledged in his speech to the U.S. Congress that the no-fly zone he has sought to "close the sky" over his country may not happen. Still, he said the U.S. must sanction Russian lawmakers and

block imports, in addition to providing military assistance.

"We need you right now," Zelenskyy said in remarks livestreamed to the U.S. Capitol, which were punctuated with a graphic video showing the grisly aftermath of the invasion.

Biden announced that the U.S. is sending an additional \$800 million in military assistance — including anti-aircraft and anti-armor weapons and drones — to Ukraine, making a total of \$2 billion in such aid sent to Kyiv since Biden took office more than a year ago.

Biden also plans to travel to Europe next week for talks with European leaders about the Russian invasion, and will attend an extraordinary NATO summit in Brussels. NATO has been bolstering its eastern flank with troops and equipment to deter Russia from invading any of its members.

Zaghari-Ratcliffe, Ashoori back in Britain after Iran deal

By DANICA KIRKA and JON GAMBRELL Associated Press

LONDON (AP) — Two British citizens who had been jailed in Iran for more than five years — charity worker Nazanin Zaghari-Ratcliffe and retired civil engineer Anoosheh Ashoori — returned home to their families' hugs and tears Thursday after the U.K. settled a decades-old debt to Iran.

Zaghari-Ratcliffe hugged her 7-year-old daughter, and her husband and members of Ashoori's family tearfully embraced one another after the two arrived via a government-chartered aircraft at the Brize Norton air force base in Oxfordshire in the early morning hours.

The British government said a third detainee, Morad Tahbaz, who holds U.S., British and Iranian citizenship, was released from prison on furlough as part of the same deal.

The breakthrough was reached as world leaders try to negotiate the return of both Iran and the U.S. to an international agreement designed to limit Tehran's nuclear enrichment program — talks that have been complicated by the prisoner issue. Negotiators have edged closer to a roadmap for restoring the accord, though recent Russian demands slowed progress.

"Looking forward to a new life," said Richard Ratcliffe, who had worked tirelessly for his wife's release. "You can't get back the time that's gone. That's a fact. But we live in the future."

The release of Zaghari-Ratcliffe and Ashoori came as the U.S., Britain and other countries seek to secure the release of dozens of dual nationals detained by Iran, which doesn't recognize their right to hold citizenship in another country. Family members and human rights activists accuse Iran of arresting the dual nationals on trumped up charges to squeeze concessions out of Western nations.

British Foreign Secretary Liz Truss told lawmakers that the change of government in Iran last summer had been instrumental in moving the talks forward. President Ebrahim Raisi is a hard-line protégé of Iran's supreme leader known for his hostility to the West.

"I was able ... to reset the relationship, to be clear that we were serious about resolving the outstanding issues that Iran had, and they were clear they were serious about resolving the outstanding issues we had," Truss said in the House of Commons.

Extensive diplomacy secured the release of the dual nationals and led to agreement to repay the debt in a way that complies with U.K. and international sanctions. Britain agreed to pay Iran 393.8 million pounds (\$515.5 million), which will be ring-fenced so the money can only be used for humanitarian purposes. The British government declined to offer details of the arrangement.

While the British government has refused to acknowledge a link between the debt and the detention of the dual nationals, Zaghari-Ratcliffe's husband has been outspoken in arguing that Iran was holding her hostage to force Britain to pay.

The debt has been a sticking point in British-Iranian relations for more than 40 years.

After the Islamic Revolution in 1979, the U.K. canceled an agreement with the late Shah of Iran to sell the country more than 1,500 Chieftain tanks. Since the shah's government had paid in advance, the new Iranian government demanded repayment for the tanks that were never delivered. The two countries have haggled over the debt ever since.

Hope for a deal had been growing since Tuesday, when the member of Parliament who represents

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Zaghari-Ratcliffe's neighborhood in London announced that Iranian authorities had returned her passport.

Zaghari-Ratcliffe was taken into custody at Tehran's airport in April 2016 as she was returning home to Britain after visiting family in Iran. She was employed by the Thomson Reuters Foundation, the charitable arm of the news agency, but she was on vacation at the time of her arrest.

Zaghari-Ratcliffe was sentenced to five years in prison after she was convicted of plotting the overthrow of Iran's government, a charge that she, her supporters and rights groups deny. She had been under house arrest at her parents' home in Tehran for the last two years.

Antonio Zappulla, CEO of the Thomson Reuters Foundation, said his organization was "overjoyed" that Zaghari-Ratcliffe had been freed.

"No one can begin to imagine what Nazanin has endured throughout the past tortuous six years; denied her freedoms, separated from her husband and young child, battling significant illness, thrown in solitary confinement," Zappulla said in a statement. "An innocent victim of an international dispute, Nazanin has been one of many used as political pawns. Her treatment has been utterly inhumane."

Ashoori was detained in Tehran in August 2017. He had been sentenced to 12 years in prison for alleged ties to Israel's Mossad intelligence agency, something long denied by his supporters and family.

Tahbaz, a British-American conservationist of Iranian descent, was caught in a dragnet targeting environmental activists while visiting Iran in January 2018. The 66-year-old served on the board of the Persian Heritage Wildlife Association, a prominent conservation group in Iran.

Iran convicted Tahbaz, along with seven other environmentalists including his colleagues, on charges of spying for the U.S. He was sentenced to 10 years and taken to Evin Prison.

Truss tweeted she was delighted with the release of Zaghari-Ratcliffe and Ashoori and said the British government would continue to work for Tahbaz's freedom. "Pleased Morad Tahbaz has been released on furlough and is reunited with his family in Iran, but this is far from sufficient. We will continue to work intensively to secure his departure from Iran," she tweeted.

In France, the family of a French tourist jailed in Iran since May 2020 welcomed the release and urged French authorities to accomplish "without delay" what British authorities achieved.

Benjamin Brière was arrested after taking pictures in a desert area where photography is prohibited, and asking questions on social media about Iran's obligatory Islamic headscarf for women. He was sentenced to eight years in prison on what his lawyer said are trumped-up espionage and propaganda charges. He started a hunger strike in December.

Wednesday's release comes as negotiators in Vienna say they have nearly finalized a roadmap for both the U.S. and Iran to rejoin Tehran's 2015 nuclear deal with world powers. The U.S. unilaterally withdrew from the deal in 2018, sparking years of tensions across the wider Mideast as the Islamic Republic enriches uranium closer than ever to weapons-grade levels.

Those negotiations were disrupted last week by a Russian demand that Moscow not be affected by Western sanctions over its war on Ukraine. It remains unclear when they'll resume in Vienna.

Palestinians with Ukraine ties empathize with victims of war

By WAFAA SHURAFI and FARES AKRAM Associated Press

GAZA CITY, Gaza Strip (AP) — The al-Astal family in the Gaza Strip is once again confronting the horrors of war — air raids, food shortages, power cuts, frantic phone calls. But this time, they are on the outside looking in.

They are among dozens of Palestinian-Ukrainian families in the isolated territory who have experienced several wars firsthand — the most recent last May — and are now watching another unfold in Ukraine, where many of them have loved ones.

Oksana al-Astal has barely slept since the fighting began. Her parents, in their 80s, live in a small Ukrainian village where food and medicine are already running low. As soon as she gets home every day from working in her clinic, the gynecologist calls to see if they are still alive.

"There are constant air raids, so my parents have to hide in basements that are wet and cold," she said.

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"The lights cut out, there's no heating or electricity. It's terrifying."

She knows what it's like, having moved to Gaza with her Palestinian husband in 2008. They have lived through four wars between Israel and Gaza's militant Hamas rulers. In each of them, Israel carried out waves of airstrikes that it said were aimed at military targets, but which also killed hundreds of civilians in the crowded territory that is home to 2 million Palestinians.

"I witnessed the deaths of adults and children. I saw how homes were destroyed, how ambulances raced off, how bombs hit hospitals and what happens to people after that," she said.

Many Palestinians have ties to Russia and Ukraine that date back to when the Soviet Union championed their cause, offering scholarships and other opportunities. Palestinians are divided over the war, with some expressing support for Russia against Western countries that have always backed Israel.

On social media, many have seized on a tweet from Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy from last May expressing horror at Palestinian rocket attacks on Israel. They say he ignored the lopsided death toll from the war, in which some 260 Palestinians, including 66 children and 40 women, were killed. Thirteen civilians, including two children and a soldier, were killed in Israel.

Other Palestinians have echoed the widespread concern for the suffering of Ukrainian civilians. A handful of families in Gaza have raised the Ukrainian flag over their homes, while others are flying Russian colors.

Israelis are also divided over the conflict, and their government is engaged in a delicate balancing act as it tries to mediate.

The al-Astals have always had a blue and yellow Ukrainian flag waving outside their home. It's a tradition that harks back to when Oksana's husband, Raed, a pulmonologist, studied in the Ukrainian city of Sumy. It was there that he met Oksana, the daughter of one of his professors.

Every time they visit Ukraine, including last summer, his father-in-law presents him with a new flag to ensure the colors don't fade in the Gaza sun. Their three children have fond memories of that trip, and Oksana says they are now worried about the children they played with in Ukraine.

Motaz al-Halabi, who studied medicine in Ukraine and returned to Gaza in 2001 with his Ukrainian wife, helped organize the evacuation of Ukrainians from Gaza during last year's war. He says there are currently around 1,400 Palestinian-Ukrainians in Gaza, down from 2,000. Many have joined a wider exodus from the impoverished territory, which has been under an Israeli-Egyptian blockade since Hamas seized power in 2007.

"We've been through all the wars here and never left," said Nataliya Harb, who moved to Gaza in 1998 with her Palestinian husband.

On a recent day she nervously watched a news broadcast from Ukraine with two other Ukrainian women in a Gaza home where the electricity flickered on and off. All wore Islamic headscarves and long gowns, the conservative attire worn by most Gazans.

"The situation was very difficult here for the children," she said. "We know what the word 'war' is, what a 'fallen rocket' is, what 'children fleeing outside' is."

Cleanup begins after 7.4 quake shakes north Japan, killing 4

By MARI YAMAGUCHI Associated Press

TOKYO (AP) — Residents in Fukushima and Miyagi were cleaning their homes after a sleepless night following a powerful 7.4-magnitude earthquake that struck off the northern Japanese coasts, smashing furniture, knocking out power and killing four people.

The region is part of an area devastated by a deadly 9.0 quake and tsunami 11 years ago that caused nuclear reactor meltdowns, spewing massive radiation that still makes some parts uninhabitable.

Chief Cabinet Secretary Hirokazu Matsuno told reporters Thursday morning that four people died during the quake and the cause of their deaths are being investigated, while 107 others were injured. A man in his 60s in Soma city died after falling from the second floor of his house while trying to evacuate, and a man in his 70s panicked and suffered a heart attack, Kyodo News reported earlier.

The Japan Meteorological Agency early Thursday lifted its low-risk advisory for a tsunami along the coasts

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of Fukushima and Miyagi prefectures. Tsunami waves as high as 30 centimeters (11 inches) reached shore in Ishinomaki, about 390 kilometers (240 miles) northeast of Tokyo.

The agency upgraded the magnitude of the quake to 7.4 from the initial 7.3, and the depth from 60 kilometers (37 miles) below the sea to 56 kilometers (35 miles).

Residents in hard-hit areas found new damages in daylight Thursday, cleaning their homes, putting fallen furniture and appliances back into place and scooping up broken dishes and windows.

At a hotel in Yabuki town in the Fukushima prefecture, where its wall was broken, front door thrown out of place, and dishes were broken, employees were starting to clean up.

"I don't even know where to start," hotel president Mineyuki Otake told NHK.

NHK footage showed broken walls of a department store building that fell to the ground and shards of windows scattered on the street near the main train station in the inland prefectural capital of Fukushima city. Roads were cracked and water poured out from pipes underground.

On Thursday, Self-Defense Forces delivered fresh water to residents in Soma, Iitate and several other coastal towns in Fukushima where water systems were damaged.

Footage also showed furniture and appliances smashed to the floor at apartments in Fukushima. Cosmetics and other merchandise at convenience stores fell from shelves and scattered on the floor. In Yokohama, near Tokyo, an electric pole nearly fell.

The Tokyo Electric Power Company Holdings, which operates the Fukushima Daiichi nuclear plant where the cooling systems failed after the 2011 disaster, said Thursday that workers at the site — which is being decommissioned — found some tanks holding treated radioactive water were out of alignment due to the rattling, and what could be a steel beam fell from a roof of the No. 4 reactor building, which has no fuel inside.

Japan's Nuclear Regulation Authority said a fire alarm went off at the turbine building of No. 5 reactors at the Fukushima Daiichi but there was no actual fire. Water pumps for the spent fuel cooling pool at two of the four reactors at Fukushima Daini briefly stopped, but later resumed operation. Fukushima Daini, which survived the 2011 tsunami, is also set for decommissioning.

More than 2.2 million homes were temporarily without electricity in 14 prefectures, including the Tokyo region, but power was restored at most places by the morning, except for about 37,000 homes in the hardest hit Fukushima and Miyagi prefectures, according to the Tohoku Electric Power Co., which services the region.

The quake shook large parts of eastern Japan, including Tokyo, where buildings swayed violently.

East Japan Railway Co. said most of its train services were suspended for safety checks. Many people formed long lines outside of major stations while waiting for trains to resume operation late Wednesday, but trains in Tokyo operated normally Thursday morning.

A Tohoku Shinkansen express train partially derailed between Fukushima and Miyagi due to the quake, but nobody was injured, Prime Minister Fumio Kishida said.

Matsuno, the top spokesman, said, "We are doing the utmost in rescue operations and putting people's lives first."

He urged residents in the affected areas to use extra caution for possible major aftershocks for about a week.

St. Patrick's Day parades turn pandemic blues Irish green

By BOBBY CAINA CALVAN Associated Press

NEW YORK (AP) — St. Patrick's Day celebrations across the country are back after a two-year hiatus, including the nation's largest in New York City, in a sign of growing hope that the worst of the coronavirus pandemic may be over.

The holiday served as a key marker in the outbreak's progression, with parades celebrating Irish heritage among the first big public events to be called off in 2020. An ominous acceleration in infections quickly cascaded into broad shutdowns.

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The full-fledged return of New York's parade on Thursday coincides with the city's wider reopening. Major mask and vaccination rules were recently lifted.

"Psychologically, it means a lot," said Sean Lane, the chair of the parade's organizing group. "New York really needs this."

The city's entertainment and nightlife scenes have particularly welcomed the return to a normal St. Patrick's Day party.

"This is the best thing that happened to us in two years," said Mike Carty, the Ireland-born owner of Rosie O'Grady's, a restaurant and pub in the Theater District.

"We need the business, and this really kicked it off," said Carty, who will be hosting the parade's grand marshal after the procession.

Celebrations are back in other cities, too.

Over the weekend, Chicago dyed its river green, after doing so without much fanfare last year and skipping the tradition altogether during the initial virus onslaught.

Boston, home to one of the country's largest Irish enclaves, is resuming its annual parade Sunday after a two-year absence. So is Savannah, Georgia, where the parade's cancellation disrupted a nearly two-century tradition.

Some communities in Florida, one of the first states to reopen its economy, were also bringing their parades back.

Florida Gov. Ron DeSantis chose St. Patrick's Day two years ago to shutter restaurants, bars and nightclubs — a dramatic move by the Republican and which underscored the fear and uncertainty of the time.

Since then, DeSantis has been one of the country's leading voices against mask and vaccine mandates, as well as other pandemic measures.

New York's parade — the largest and oldest of them all, first held in 1762 — starts at 11 a.m. and runs 35 blocks along Fifth Avenue, past St. Patrick's Cathedral and Central Park.

It's being held as the city emerges from a discouraging bout with the highly contagious omicron variant, which killed more than 4,000 people in New York City in January and February.

New infections and hospitalizations have declined since the surge, prompting city officials to green-light the procession.

On the eve of the holiday, Mayor Eric Adams raised the Irish flag at a park located on the southern tip of Manhattan, not far from Ellis Island, to honor the city's Irish history.

"This St. Patrick's Day, we honor those Irish immigrants who relocated and helped build our city, and the many Irish Americans who serve New York City to this day," the mayor said. "Today, we celebrate the fighting spirit of the Irish with the courage and resilience of this entire city."

Currently, you don't need to show proof of vaccination to dine indoors at a restaurant in New York, but huge numbers of people still wear masks in public and avoid big crowds. Office towers remain partially empty, as many businesses still haven't called employees back to their cubicles. Tourists, once thick enough to obstruct Manhattan sidewalks, are still not back in their usual numbers.

"If you walk around the city, it's still very different," said Lane, the parade organizer and a financial adviser at a major Wall Street firm. "It's a very different vibe when you walk in Manhattan versus what it would have been two years ago, because the people aren't fully back yet."

Allowing the parade to proceed, he said, could provide a surge of confidence among New Yorkers to return to public life.

This year's parade is two years in the making, after token processions during the pandemic.

To keep the tradition going, organizers in 2020 and 2021 quietly held small parades on St. Patrick's Day, right around sunrise, when the streets were empty. Bagpipes accompanied a tiny contingent of officials and a smattering of people drawn by the music.

It remains to be seen if big crowds will show up for this year's parade, although organizers expect hordes — even if many New Yorkers remain skittish about massive, potentially virus-spreading public events.

Organizers hope people will turn out not just to commemorate the holiday, but to honor the first responders who helped the city get through the pandemic, as well as in support of a delegation of Ukrainian

marchers bringing attention to the war in their homeland.

Analysis: Zelenskyy, Biden show different styles, missions

By ZEKE MILLER and CHRIS MEGERIAN Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — U.S. President Joe Biden and Ukraine's Volodymyr Zelenskyy are men of different generations, countries and styles — and with very different missions.

Zelenskyy is fighting to save his nation. Biden to restore a shattered world order — without igniting a world war.

The contrasts were on vivid display Wednesday. First the Ukrainian leader delivered an impassioned plea to Congress for additional military assistance to fight off Russia's three-week old invasion. Then came Biden, with a more technocratic address promising more arms and humanitarian assistance but making clear the limits of what the U.S. is willing to do.

Zelenskyy, 44, was vigorous though unshaven and fatigued. In military green, he appealed for lethal aid via video link from a nondescript bunker. Biden, nearly 80, was staid as he spoke of sanctions and coalition building from the made-for-television set built next to the White House.

"I'm almost 45 years old; today my age stopped when the hearts of more than 100 children stopped beating," Zelenskyy told U.S. lawmakers. "I see no sense in life if it cannot stop the deaths."

Speaking for 15 minutes, he invoked uniquely American moments of strife and significance: the bombing of Pearl Harbor, the Sept. 11 attacks, the quest led by Martin Luther King Jr. for civil rights. He called on Biden to be "the leader of peace."

It marked the latest stop on Zelenskyy's livestreamed global tour, as he seeks to portray Ukraine as defending more than just its own land and tries to elicit even tougher military and other action against Russia.

"We are fighting for the values of Europe and the world," he told lawmakers.

Zelenskyy begged the U.S. to engage more directly to help his people — including for the U.S. to help Ukraine get Soviet-built aircraft to use against Russia and for an enforced no-fly zone over Ukraine, even if he acknowledged it was unlikely. Biden has warned that fulfilling such requests could push Russia and the U.S. — two nuclear-armed nations — into direct conflict. It's a chance he's not willing to take.

Biden watched Zelenskyy's speech from the White House residence and called it "powerful."

His own remarks — three hours later and half as long — were less lofty, delivered from a small auditorium studio to a room full of reporters. He spoke of what the U.S. can do now, stopping well short of granting all Zelenskyy sought.

Biden has spent the past several months working to align NATO allies and Group of Seven partners behind stiff economic sanctions against Russia. That began as an attempt to head off the invasion and has now shifted to an effort to ensure the conflict leaves Russia isolated and economically debilitated.

Biden ticked through the U.S. arms to come in the latest tranche of missiles, drones and bullets. He reviewed the sanctions already imposed on Russia and the humanitarian assistance flowing to Ukraine. Mostly, though, while lamenting the horrific casualties so far, he cast America's interest in the conflict in terms of protecting democracy around the globe — rather than focusing on Ukraine itself.

"What's at stake here are the principles that the United States and the united nations across the world stand for," Biden said. "It's about freedom. It's about the right of people to determine their own future. It's about making sure Ukraine never -- will never be a victory for Putin, no matter what advances he makes on the battlefield."

Max Bergmann, a former State Department official who is now a senior fellow at the Democratic-leaning Center for American Progress, said that despite their general alignment, Biden and Zelenskyy are playing very different roles.

For Zelenskyy, "this is an existential threat to him. The very survival of Ukraine is at stake here." The Ukrainian leader, he said, shows "determination and desperation."

Biden, he said, is showing empathy for Zelenskyy's position. "This isn't just moving chess pieces around the chess board. This is about standing up for a country that's fighting for freedom."

But Biden, he said, has limits. "There's going to be a difference and we just have to understand that. That's part of what being the leader of the free world is about, which is weighing those competing demands."

White House press secretary Jen Psaki acknowledged the divergent interests, "If we were President Zelenskyy, we would be asking for everything possible as well," Psaki said. "But how President Biden makes decisions is through the prism of our own national security."

Daniel Fried, a former U.S. ambassador to Poland, says that Biden's age — and his having come of age during the Cold War — helps him understand the stakes in a different way from the Ukrainian leader.

"Biden does not look at Zelenskyy with chilly indifference," Fried said. "He grew up with those lessons." "The Ukrainians have backing. And I think they feel it. But very hard tests await."

Biden's China 'pivot' complicated by Russia's war in Ukraine

By AAMER MADHANI and CHRIS MEGERIAN Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — President Joe Biden set out to finally complete the "pivot to Asia," a long sought adjustment of U.S. foreign policy to better reflect the rise of America's most significant military and economic competitor: China.

But Russia's brutal invasion of Ukraine has made that vexing move even more complicated. China's government has vacillated between full embrace and more measured responses as Russian President Vladimir Putin prosecutes his war, making the decisions for Biden far more layered.

"It's difficult. It's expensive," Kurt Campbell, the coordinator for Indo-Pacific Affairs on the White House National Security Council, said during a recent forum of maintaining a high-level U.S. focus in two regions. "But it's also essential, and I believe we're entering a period where that's what will be required of the United States and of this generation of Americans."

That leaves the Biden administration needing to focus East and West at the same time, balancing not simply economic imperatives but military ones as well.

The president has been deeply invested in rallying NATO and Western allies to respond to Russia with crippling sanctions, supplying an overmatched Ukraine military with \$2 billion in military assistance — including \$800 million in new aid announced Wednesday — and addressing a growing humanitarian crisis.

Eastern flank NATO allies, including Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland and Romania, have made clear to the Biden administration that they want the U.S. to increase its military presence in the region and do more to address the worst humanitarian crisis in Europe since World War II. More than 3 million Ukrainian refugees have fled their country in recent weeks.

Though the war in Ukraine has dominated Biden's focus of late, White House officials insist they haven't lost sight of China — and are watching intently to see how Xi Jinping decides to play his hand.

In recent months, Biden has announced the sale of nuclear submarines to Australia and raised the profile of the Indo-Pacific security dialogue known as the Quad (Australia, India, Japan and the United States). He's also called out China for military provocations against Taiwan, human rights abuses against ethnic minorities and efforts to squelch pro-democracy advocates in Hong Kong.

Biden's national security team was somewhat surprised that Pacific partners — Australia, Japan, New Zealand, Singapore and South Korea — moved so quickly to hit Russia with sanctions following the invasion, according to a U.S. official familiar with the administration's thinking.

The official, who spoke on condition of anonymity to talk about private discussions, said there was a recognition among the Pacific allies that Beijing is watching how the world responds to Russia as China calculates how aggressive it can be with its smaller neighbors in the region. In backing sanctions, the Pacific nations were trying to send a message to Xi as well as Putin, the official added.

From the first days of his presidency, Biden has said the aims of his China policy are to find ways to cooperate with Beijing on issues of mutual interest — such as stopping North Korea from developing nuclear weapons and coaxing Tehran to return to the Iran nuclear deal with the U.S., China, Russia and other world powers — and to avoid confrontation.

To that end, White House national security adviser Jake Sullivan and senior Chinese foreign policy adviser

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Yang Jiechi met earlier this week for an intense, seven-hour talk about the Russian invasion and other issues. They spent part of their time together discussing North Korea's recent intercontinental missile tests.

Still, Beijing's approach to the Russian invasion is causing Washington concern. The White House has made clear to Beijing that throwing a lifeline to Russia's collapsing economy or assisting its bruised military would be hazardous to a country that sees itself as the next great world power. The White House has not publicly specified what actions it would take should China assist Russia.

"We don't need China to be with us. We just need them not to be against us," said Frank Jannuzzi, president of the Maureen and Mike Mansfield Foundation, which focuses on U.S.-Asia relations.

Xi and Putin met in early February, weeks before the invasion, with the Russian leader traveling to Beijing for the start of the Winter Olympics. During Putin's visit, the two leaders issued a 5,000-word statement declaring limitless "friendship."

In the days after Putin ordered the invasion, Xi's government tried to distance itself from Russia's offensive but avoided criticizing Moscow. The government has offered to act as mediator and denounced trade and financial sanctions against Russia.

At other moments, Beijing's actions have been provocative.

Last week, Chinese foreign ministry spokesman Zhao Lijian echoed unsubstantiated Russian claims that there were 26 bio-labs and related facilities in Ukraine in "which the U.S. Department of Defense has absolute control." The United Nations has said it has received no information backing up such accusations.

White House press secretary Jen Psaki took to Twitter to charge that the Russian claim was "preposterous" and could be part of an attempt by Russia to lay the groundwork for its own use of such weapons of mass destruction against Ukraine. She also blamed China for having "seemingly endorsed this propaganda."

Xi's government has also sought to use the conflict to accentuate Chinese ascendancy and the decline of the West.

But China has its own internal troubles, including a major economic slowdown, difficulties that sanctions against Russia could make worse.

"The Ukraine war has proceeded in ways China did not expect and the war is not conducive to China's rise or development," said Xiong Zhiyong, professor of international relations at China Foreign Affairs University.

Still, concerns that China could come to Russia's aid have only deepened at the White House in recent days.

On the same day of the Sullivan-Yang meeting, the U.S. informed Asian and European allies that American intelligence had determined that China had signaled to Russia that it would be willing to provide both military support for the campaign in Ukraine and financial backing to help stave off the impact of severe sanctions imposed by the West.

White House officials said Sullivan made clear there would be "severe" consequences should China assist Russia.

Ryan Hass, who served as China, Taiwan and Mongolia director at the NSC during the Obama administration, said Beijing faces a "momentous decision" on whether to aid Russia.

If Xi decides to do that, "It's hard for me to see how the path remains open for China to maintain non-hostile relations with the United States and others in the West," Hass said.

At the White House, Psaki has said any country doing business with Russia should "think about where you want to stand when the history books are written on this moment in time."

Honduras judge says ex-president can be extradited to US

By MARLON GONZÁLEZ Associated Press

TEGUCIGALPA, Honduras (AP) — Former President Juan Orlando Hernández should be extradited to the United States to face drug trafficking and weapons charges, a Honduran judge ruled Wednesday.

The country's Supreme Court of Justice said late Wednesday via Twitter that the judge had decided to grant the U.S. extradition request.

U.S. prosecutors in the Southern District of New York have accused Hernández in recent years of fund-

ing his political rise with profits from drug traffickers in exchange for protecting their shipments. He has strongly denied any wrongdoing.

Former first lady Ana García told local journalists while leaving the court that she was confident the truth would eventually come out and her husband be exonerated.

"I regret that this happens to someone who has been an ally" of the United States, she said. "I ask myself, from this point on who else will want to work to combat drug trafficking in any country of the region or Honduras. If today they do this to the one who put himself out there, what can we expect?"

Before the decision was announced, court spokesman Melvin Duarte said that during a hearing earlier in the day, Hernández addressed the court. "In general terms he argued about the motives that have led to this extradition process against him, which he and his wife have said publicly," Duarte said.

Hernández has maintained that statements against him have been made by drug traffickers extradited by his government who wanted to seek revenge against him. He denies having any ties to drug traffickers.

He will have an opportunity to appeal the extradition decision.

"We still have an appeal that must be examined," said Iván Martínez, one of Hernández's lawyers. "We have three days to analyze the decision taken today and make our case in line with law."

During the hearing, the judge presented a document sent by the the U.S. Justice Department through the U.S. Embassy in Tegucigalpa that laid out the charges against Hernández. Hernández's lawyers also presented at least 20 pieces of evidence in his defense.

Hernández left office in January at the conclusion of his second term.

The judge had more time to reach a decision, but in 32 previous extradition cases the decision came in less than a week. All of those decisions were for extradition.

Criminal lawyer German Licona said before the announcement that if the judge ruled for extradition, Hernández could appeal to the full Supreme Court.

Hernández was arrested at his home on Feb. 15 at the request of the U.S. government.

The arrest came less than three weeks after Hernández left office and followed years of allegations by U.S. prosecutors of his alleged links to drug traffickers. His brother, Juan Antonio "Tony" Hernández, was sentenced to life in prison on drug and weapons charges in March 2021.

After his arrest the former president was led before cameras flanked by police, shackled at the wrists and ankles, and wearing a bulletproof jacket. On Wednesday, he appeared in court wearing a blue suit but was similarly shackled.

Zelenskyy pleads for help in impassioned speech to Congress

By LISA MASCARO and AAMER MADHANI Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy summoned memories of Pearl Harbor and the Sept. 11 terror attacks Wednesday in an impassioned live-video plea to Congress to send more help for Ukraine's fight against Russia. Lawmakers stood and cheered, and President Joe Biden later announced the U.S. is sending more anti-aircraft, anti-armor weapons and drones.

Biden also declared that Russian President Vladimir Putin is a war criminal — his strongest condemnation yet — the day after the Senate unanimously asked for international investigations of Putin for war crimes in Ukraine.

In a moment of high drama at the Capitol, Zelenskyy livestreamed his speech to a rapt audience of lawmakers on a giant screen, acknowledging from the start that the no-fly zone he has repeatedly sought to "close the sky" to airstrikes on his country may not happen. Biden has resisted that, as well as approval for the U.S. or NATO to send MiG fighter jets from Poland as risking wider war with nuclear-armed Putin.

Instead, Zelenskyy pleaded for other military aid and more drastic economic sanctions to stop the Russian assault with the fate of his country at stake.

Wearing his now-trademark army green T-shirt, Zelenskyy began his remarks to "Americans, friends" by invoking the destruction the U.S. suffered in 1941 when Japan bombed the naval base at Pearl Harbor in Hawaii, and the 2001 attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon by militants who commandeered

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passenger airplanes to crash into the symbols of Western democracy and economy.

"Remember Pearl Harbor? ... Remember September 11?" Zelenskyy asked. "Our country experiences the same every day right now."

To end the invasion, Zelenskyy told the American lawmakers: "I call on you to do more."

Nearing the three-week mark in an ever-escalating war, Zelenskyy has used the global stage to implore allied leaders to help stop the Russian invasion of his country. The young actor-turned-president has emerged as a heroic figure at the center of what many view as the biggest security threat to Europe since World War II. Almost 3 million refugees have fled Ukraine as the violence has spread, the fastest exodus in modern times.

Biden, who said he listened to Zelenskyy's speech at the White House, did not directly respond to the criticism that the U.S. should be doing more for the Ukrainians. But he said, "We are united in our abhorrence of Putin's depraved onslaught, and we're going to continue to have their backs as they fight for their freedom, their democracy, their very survival."

Later, leaving an unrelated event, he declared of Putin: "He's a war criminal." — the sharpest condemnation yet of Putin and Russian actions by a U.S. official since the invasion of Ukraine.

Biden noted that Russia has bombed hospitals and held doctors hostage.

At the White House, Biden described new help he had already been prepared to announce. He said the U.S. will be sending an additional \$800 million in military assistance, making a total of \$2 billion in such aid since he took office more than a year ago. About \$1 billion in aid has been sent in the past week. Biden said the new assistance includes 800 Stinger anti-aircraft systems, 100 grenade launchers, 20 million rounds of small arms ammunition and grenade launchers and mortar rounds and an unspecified number of drones.

"We're going to give Ukraine the arms to fight and defend themselves through all the difficult days ahead," Biden said.

Zelenskyy, speaking from the capital of Kyiv, showed the packed auditorium of lawmakers a graphic video of the destruction and devastation his country has suffered in the war, along with heartbreaking scenes of civilian casualties.

"We need you right now," he said.

Lawmakers gave him a standing ovation, before and after his short remarks, which Zelenskyy began in Ukrainian through an interpreter but then switched to English in a heartfelt appeal to help end the bloodshed.

"I see no sense in life if it cannot stop the deaths," he said.

Among the new military hardware that Biden approved are 100 Switchblade 300 missile system drones that Zelenskyy had been seeking, according to a U.S. official familiar with the decision. The official was not authorized to comment publicly by name about the sensitive matter and spoke on the condition of anonymity.

Lawmakers, with rare unity, appeared moved by the speech. Sen. Angus King, the Maine independent, said there was a "collective holding of the breath" in the room during Zelenskyy's address. Republican Sen. Lisa Murkowski of Alaska said, "If you did not look at that video and feel there is an obligation for not only the United States but the free countries of the world to come together in support of Ukraine, you had your eyes closed." Senate Majority Whip Dick Durbin called the address heartbreaking and said, "I'm on board with a blank check on sanctions, just whatever we can do to stop this Russian advance."

Outside the Capitol demonstrators held a large sign lawmakers saw as they walked back to their offices. "No Fly Zone=World War 3."

The Ukrainian president is no stranger to Congress, having played a central role in Donald Trump's first impeachment. As president, Trump was accused of withholding security aid to Ukraine as he pressured Zelenskyy to dig up dirt on political rival Biden. Zelenskyy spoke Wednesday to many of the same Republican lawmakers who declined to impeach or convict Trump, but are among the bipartisan groundswell in Congress now clamoring for military aid to Ukraine.

He thanked the American people for the outpouring of support, even as he urged Biden to do more.

"You are the leader of the nation. I wish you to be the leader of the world," he said "Being the leader

of the world means being the leader of peace.”

This was Zelenskyy’s latest visit as he uses the West’s great legislative bodies in his appeals for help. He invoked Shakespeare’s Hamlet last week at the British House of Commons, asking whether Ukraine is “to be or not to be” and telling Congress that people in his country want the same as Americans: “Democracy, independence, freedom.”

He often pushes for more help to save his young democracy than world leaders have so far pledged to provide.

Biden has insisted there will be no U.S. troops on the ground in Ukraine.

“Direct conflict between NATO and Russia is World War III,” he has said.

Zelenskyy appeared to acknowledge the political reality beyond certain limits.

“Is this too much to ask, to create a no fly zone over Ukraine?” he asked, answering his own question. “If this is too much to ask, we offer an alternative,” he said, calling for weapons systems that would help fight Russian aircraft.

Congress has already approved \$13.6 billion in military and humanitarian aid for Ukraine, and the newly announced security aid will come from that allotment, which is part of a broader bill that Biden signed into law Tuesday.

EXPLAINER: Who’s a war criminal, and who gets to decide?

By COLLEEN LONG, MIKE CORDER and ERIC TUCKER Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — President Joe Biden on Wednesday flatly called Russia’s Vladimir Putin a “war criminal” for the unfolding onslaught in Ukraine, where hospitals and maternity wards have been bombed. But declaring someone a war criminal is not as simple as just saying the words. There are set definitions and processes for determining who’s a war criminal and how they should be punished.

The White House had been avoiding applying the designation to Putin, saying it requires investigation and an international determination. After Biden used the term, White House press secretary Jen Psaki said the president was “speaking from his heart” and renewed her statements that there is a process for making a formal determination.

In popular usage, though, the phrase has taken on a colloquial meaning as a generic term for someone who’s awful.

“Clearly Putin is a war criminal, but the president is speaking politically on this,” said David Crane, who has worked on war crimes for decades and served as chief prosecutor for the U.N. Special Court for Sierra Leone, which tried former Liberian President Charles Taylor.

The investigations into Putin’s actions already have begun. The U.S. and 44 other countries are working together to investigate possible violations and abuses, after the passage of a resolution by the United Nations Human Rights Council to establish a commission of inquiry. There is another probe by the International Criminal Court, an independent body based in the Netherlands.

“We’re at the beginning of the beginning,” said Crane, who now heads the Global Accountability Network, which works with the international court and United Nations, among others. On the day of the invasion, his group set up a task force compiling criminal information for war crimes. He’s also drafting a sample indictment against Putin. He predicted an indictment of Putin could happen within a year. But there is no statute of limitations.

Here’s a look at how this all works:

WHO IS A WAR CRIMINAL?

The term applies to anyone who violates a set of rules adopted by world leaders known as the law of armed conflict. The rules govern how countries behave in times of war.

Those rules have been modified and expanded over the past century, drawn from the Geneva Conventions in the aftermath of World War II and protocols added later.

The rules are aimed at protecting people not taking part in fighting and those who can no longer fight, including civilians like doctors and nurses, wounded troops and prisoners of war. Treaties and protocols

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lay out who can be targeted and with what weapons. Certain weapons are prohibited, including chemical or biological agents.

WHAT SPECIFIC CRIMES MAKE SOMEONE A WAR CRIMINAL?

The so-called "grave breaches" of the conventions that amount to war crimes include willful killing and extensive destruction and appropriation of property not justified by military necessity. Other war crimes include deliberately targeting civilians, using disproportionate force, using human shields and taking hostages.

The International Criminal Court also prosecutes crimes against humanity committed in the context of "a widespread or systematic attack directed against any civilian population." These include murder, extermination, forcible transfer, torture, rape and sexual slavery.

The most likely way that Putin could come into the picture as a war criminal is through the widely recognized legal doctrine of command responsibility. If commanders order or even know or are in a position to know about crimes and did nothing to prevent them, they can be held legally responsible.

WHAT ARE THE PATHS TO JUSTICE?

Generally, there are four paths to investigate and determine war crimes, though each one has limits. One is through the International Criminal Court.

A second option would be if the United Nations turns its work on the inquiry commission over to a hybrid international war crimes tribunal to prosecute Putin.

A third would be to create a tribunal or court to try Putin by a group of interested or concerned states, such as NATO, the European Union and the U.S. The military tribunals at Nuremberg following World War II against Nazi leaders are an example.

Finally, some countries have their own laws for prosecuting war crimes. Germany, for example, is already investigating Putin. The U.S. doesn't have such a law, but the Justice Department has a special section that focuses on acts including international genocide, torture, recruitment of child soldiers and female genital mutilation.

WHERE MIGHT PUTIN BE PUT ON TRIAL?

It's not clear. Russia does not recognize the jurisdiction of the International Criminal Court and would not send any suspects to the court's headquarters in The Hague, Netherlands. The U.S. does not recognize the authority of the court, either. Putin could be tried in a country chosen by the United Nations or by the consortium of concerned nations. But getting him there would be difficult.

HAVE NATIONAL LEADERS BEEN PROSECUTED IN THE PAST?

Yes. From the post-World War II tribunals in Nuremberg and Tokyo to more recent ad hoc tribunals, senior leaders have been prosecuted for their actions in countries including Bosnia, Cambodia and Rwanda.

Former Yugoslav leader Slobodan Milosevic was put on trial by a U.N. tribunal in The Hague for fomenting bloody conflicts as Yugoslavia crumbled in the early 1990s. He died in his cell before the court could reach a verdict. His Bosnian Serb ally Radovan Karadzic and the Bosnian Serb military leader, Gen. Ratko Mladic, were successfully prosecuted and are both now serving life sentences.

Liberia's Taylor was sentenced to 50 years after being convicted of sponsoring atrocities in neighboring Sierra Leone. Chad's former dictator Hissene Habre, who died last year, was the first former head of state to be convicted of crimes against humanity by an African court. He was sentenced to life.

Study: SUVs, pickups more likely to hit walkers than cars

By TOM KRISHER AP Auto Writer

DETROIT (AP) — Drivers of bigger vehicles such as pickup trucks and SUVs are more likely to hit pedestrians while making turns than drivers of cars, according to a new study.

The research released Thursday by the Insurance Institute for Highway Safety points to the increasing popularity of larger vehicles as a possible factor in rising pedestrian deaths on U.S. roads. The authors also questioned whether wider pillars holding up roofs of the larger vehicles make it harder for drivers to spot people walking near the corners of vehicles.

"The link between these vehicle types and certain common pedestrian crashes points to another way

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that the increase in SUVs on the roads might be changing the crash picture," said Jessica Cicchino, a study author and vice president of research for the institute.

Although the study mentioned previous research showing blind spots caused by the "A-pillars" between the windshield and the cabin, the authors said more study is needed to link the blind spots to the increased deaths.

In 2020, the last year for which complete statistics are available, 6,519 pedestrians were killed in the U.S., according to government data. That's up 59% since 2009, and a 4% increase from 2019, the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration said.

Over the same time period, SUV and pickup truck sales have skyrocketed. In 2009, pickup trucks, SUVs and vans accounted for 47% of all U.S. new vehicle sales, according to Motorintelligence.com. Last year, light trucks were more than three-quarters of new vehicle sales.

Not all SUVs and pickup trucks have the blind spots, though. Compact SUVs, for instance, are now the largest part of the U.S. market.

The study also found that the larger vehicles were more likely than cars to be involved in crashes where pedestrians were standing, walking or running near the edge of the road and away from intersections.

Researchers studied federal crash statistics in which pedestrians were killed, as well as all pedestrian crashes reported to police in North Carolina from 2010 through 2018.

The North Carolina statistics showed that pickups were 42% more likely than cars to hit pedestrians while making left turns. SUVs were 23% more likely to hit people than cars. There was no significant difference in the odds of a right turn crash for the different types of vehicles, the study showed.

Outside of intersections, pickups were 80% more likely than cars to hit a pedestrian along the road. SUVs were 61% more likely, and minivans were 45% more likely to hit people than cars, IIHS said.

Trucks, SUVs and vans typically have thicker "A-Pillars" than cars because of federal roof-strength standards to prevent collapse in rollover crashes, the IIHS said. The pillars typically are wider because they have to withstand the higher weights of the bigger vehicles.

And the pillars aren't the only things creating blind spots in the bigger vehicles. Consumer Reports found last year that high hoods also obstructed driver views of pedestrians crossing in front of the vehicles.

"To see over that high hood, you're going to be looking further down the road," said Jennifer Stockburger, director of operations at Consumer Reports' auto test center.

The magazine and website found that pickup truck hood heights have risen 11% since 2000. The hood of a 2017 Ford F-250 heavy-duty pickup was 55 inches off the ground, as tall as the roofs of some cars, Stockburger said.

Ford, General Motors and Stellantis, which sell the bulk of the large SUVs and pickups in the U.S., all declined comment on the study. Messages were left seeking comment from Auto Innovators, an industry trade group.

Automakers could use stronger metals to make the A-Pillars smaller and increase visibility, said Wen Hu, an IIHS senior transportation engineer and another study author. "These larger vehicles, they need stronger pillars, we all understand that," she said. "Increasing the size of the A-Pillar is not the only way to increase the strength."

IIHS, which is funded by auto insurance companies, studies vehicle safety.

Stockburger said the industry could also examine sight lines on the bigger vehicles, as well as add automatic emergency braking systems that detect pedestrians.

Most automakers have promised to make automatic emergency braking standard equipment on nearly all of their new models by September of this year. In addition, federal safety regulators are proposing to make the systems mandatory on all new vehicles.

9 dead in crash involving U. of the Southwest golf teams

By CEDAR ATTANASIO, JILL BLEED and ANITA SNOW Associated Press

HOBBS, N.M. (AP) — Authorities are trying to determine why a pickup truck crossed into the opposite lane on a darkened, two-lane West Texas highway before colliding head-on with a van, killing nine people

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including a 13-year-old boy in a fiery crash.

Six of the dead were New Mexico university students and a coach returning from a golf tournament. Also killed in Tuesday evening's crash were University of the Southwest students from Portugal and Mexico while two Canadian students were hospitalized in critical condition.

The National Transportation Safety Board was sending an investigative team to the crash site in Texas' Andrews County, about 30 miles (50 kilometers) east of the New Mexico state line.

The golf team was traveling in a 2017 Ford Transit van that was towing a box trailer when it collided with the truck, and both vehicles burst into flames, according to NTSB spokesman Eric Weiss.

He said the vehicles collided on a two-lane asphalt highway where the speed limit is 75 mph (120 kph), though investigators have not yet determined how fast either vehicle was traveling.

The Texas Department of Public Safety identified the deceased as: Golf coach Tyler James, 26, of Hobbs, New Mexico; and players Mauricio Sanchez, 19, of Mexico; Travis Garcia, 19, of Pleasanton, Texas; Jackson Zinn, 22, of Westminster, Colorado; Karisa Raines, 21, of Fort Stockton, Texas; Laci Stone, 18, of Nocona, Texas; and Tiago Sousa, 18, of Portugal.

Also killed were Henrich Siemans, 38, of Seminole County, Texas, and an unidentified 13-year-old boy who had been traveling with him in the 2007 Dodge 2500 pickup.

Critically injured aboard the van were Canadian students Dayton Price, 19, of Mississauga, Ontario, and Hayden Underhill, 20, of Amherstview, Ontario. Both were taken by helicopter to the University Medical Center in Lubbock, about 110 miles (180 kilometers) to the northeast.

Underhill's brother Drew said their parents, Ken and Wendy, were on a plane headed to Texas.

"Hockey was a big part of life for a while, but his true passion is golf," Drew Underhill said. "From a small town in Ontario, he's doing OK."

The Mexican Federation of Golf posted an online note of condolence to the loved ones of Mauricio Sanchez.

Stone's mother wrote of her loss on Facebook Wednesday.

"She has been an absolute ray of sunshine during this short time on earth," Chelsi Stone said in a post. "... We will never be the same after this and we just don't understand how this happened to our amazing, beautiful, smart, joyful girl."

Stone graduated in 2021 from Nocona High School, where she played golf, volleyball and softball. She was a freshman majoring in global business management, according to her biography on the golf team's website.

James' mother, June James, said she knew little about the circumstances of the collision. He coached the men and the women.

"We don't know what happened. It's a huge investigation. We don't have any idea as of yet," James said during a brief phone interview.

Team member Jasmin Collum had been scheduled to play but at the last minute decided instead to visit her parents in Houston, her mother said.

"We knew all those people on board," Tonya Collum said. "Basically the whole team is gone or in the hospital."

The University of the Southwest is a private, Christian college located in Hobbs, New Mexico, near the state line with Texas.

A memorial was set up Wednesday at the course near campus where the team practices. There were flowers, golf balls and a handmade sign with a cross and the initials USW.

"It's the very least we could do for the players, and of course Coach James," said Rockwind Community Links Manager Ben Kirkes.

"These kids were great kids and they were great, great community members," said Kirkes.

New Mexico Gov. Michelle Lujan Grisham said on Facebook that she is "deeply saddened" by the loss of life.

"This is a terrible accident. As we await additional information from authorities, my prayers are with the community and the loved ones of all those involved," she said.

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Texas Gov. Greg Abbott also expressed sympathy.

"We grieve with the loved ones of the individuals whose lives were horrifically taken too soon in this fatal vehicle crash near Andrews last night," Abbott said.

The teams had been taking part in a golf tournament at Midland College, about 315 miles (505 kilometers) west of Dallas.

"We are still learning the details about the accident but we are devastated and deeply saddened to learn about the loss of our students' lives and their coach," University President Quint Thurman said in a statement.

The university said on Twitter that counseling and religious services would be available on campus.

Midland College said Wednesday's play would be canceled because of the crash. Eleven schools were participating in the event.

"All of the players and their coaches from the participating schools met together early this morning," Midland College athletic director Forrest Allen said in a statement Wednesday. "We were all shocked to learn of this tragedy, and our thoughts and prayers are with USW as they grieve this terrible loss."

Jussie Smollett released from county jail during appeal

By DON BABWIN and SARA BURNETT Associated Press

CHICAGO (AP) — Jussie Smollett was released from jail following six nights behind bars after an appeals court agreed with his lawyers that he should be free pending the appeal of his conviction for lying to police about a racist and homophobic attack.

The former "Empire" actor walked out of the Cook County Jail on Wednesday surrounded by security. He did not comment as he got into an awaiting SUV, but his attorneys said Smollett, who is Black and gay, was the target of a racist justice system and people playing politics.

The appeals court ruling came after a Cook County judge sentenced Smollett last week to immediately begin serving 150 days in jail for his conviction on five felony counts of disorderly conduct for lying to police. In an outburst immediately after the sentence was handed down, Smollett proclaimed his innocence and said "I am not suicidal. And if anything happens to me when I go in there, I did not do it to myself. And you must all know that."

The appeals court said Smollett could be released after posting a personal recognizance bond of \$150,000, meaning he didn't have to put down money but agrees to come to court as required.

Smollett defense attorney Neny Uche, speaking to reporters outside the jail after Smollett left, said the Smollett family is "very very happy with today's developments." Uche said during his time at the jail, Smollett had not eaten and drank only water, though he did not say why.

He criticized the special prosecutor's decision to charge Smollett again after the initial charges were dropped by Cook County State's Attorney Kim Foxx and he paid a fine. He also called Judge James Linn's sentence excessive for a low-level felony, adding that the appellate court doesn't "play politics."

"The real question is: Should Black men be walked into jail for a class 4 felony? Shame on you if you think they should," Uche said.

Special prosecutor Dan Webb recommended that Smollett serve "an appropriate amount of prison time" during sentencing.

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

Smollett's attorneys had argued that he would have completed the sentence by the time the appeal process was completed and that Smollett could be in danger of physical harm if he remained locked up in Cook County Jail.

The office of the special prosecutor called the claim that Smollett's health and safety were at risk "factually incorrect," in a response to his motion, noting that Smollett was being held in protective custody at the jail.

The court's decision marks the latest chapter in a strange story that began in January 2019 when Smollett reported to Chicago police that he was the victim of a racist and homophobic attack by two men wearing

ski masks. The manhunt for the attackers soon turned into an investigation of Smollett himself and his arrest on charges that he'd orchestrated the attack and lied to police about it.

Authorities said Smollett paid two men he knew from work on the TV show "Empire" to stage the attack. Prosecutors said he told them what racist and homophobic slurs to shout, and to yell that Smollett was in "MAGA Country," a reference to the campaign slogan of Donald Trump's presidential campaign.

A jury convicted Smollett in December on five felony counts of disorderly conduct — the charge filed when a person lies to police. He was acquitted on a sixth count. Judge James Linn sentenced Smollett last week to 150 days in jail — with good behavior he could have been released in as little as 75 days.

Smollett maintained his innocence during the trial. During sentencing he shouted at the judge that he was innocent, warning the judge that he was not suicidal and if he died in custody it was somebody else, and not him, who would have taken his life.

Uche said the first thing Jussie did when learning the news was push his hands on the glass between them and said he nearly lost hope in the U.S. constitutional system. "I think he had nearly given up," Uche said.

He said the next step will be to file an appeal of the verdict.

Russia's onslaught continues amid optimism over talks

By ANDREA ROSA Associated Press

KYIV, Ukraine (AP) — Russian forces destroyed a theater in Mariupol where hundreds of people were sheltering Wednesday and rained fire on other cities, Ukrainian authorities said, even as the two sides projected optimism over efforts to negotiate an end to the fighting.

The airstrike ripped apart the center of the once-elegant building, where hundreds of civilians had been living since their homes had been destroyed in the fighting, Ukraine's foreign ministry said in a statement.

Many people were buried in the rubble, the statement said, though there was no immediate word on how many had been killed or injured. Satellite imagery from Monday showed the word "CHILDREN" written in Russian in large, white capital letters on the pavement in front of and behind the building, the Maxar space technology company said.

"My heart breaks from what Russia is doing to our people," Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy said in his nightly address, calling for more sanctions on Russia after the bombing.

The Russian defense ministry denied bombing the theater or anywhere else in Mariupol on Wednesday.

In Kyiv, residents huddled in homes and shelters during a citywide curfew that was set to run until Thursday morning, as Russian troops shelled areas in and around the city, including a residential neighborhood 2.5 kilometers (1.5 miles) from the presidential palace. A 12-story apartment building in central Kyiv erupted in flames after being hit by shrapnel.

And 10 people were killed while standing in line for bread in the northern city of Chernihiv, the Ukrainian General Prosecutor's Office said.

Earlier Wednesday, Zelenskyy went before the U.S. Congress via video and, invoking Pearl Harbor and 9/11, pleaded with America for more weapons and tougher sanctions against Russia, saying: "We need you right now."

U.S. President Joe Biden announced that the U.S. is sending an additional \$800 million in military aid to Ukraine, including more anti-aircraft and anti-tank weapons and drones. He also called Vladimir Putin a "war criminal" in his sharpest condemnation of the Russian leader since the invasion began.

International pressure against the Kremlin mounted and its isolation deepened as the International Court of Justice, also known as the World Court, ordered Russia to stop attacking Ukraine, though there was little hope it would comply. Also, the 47-nation Council of Europe, the continent's foremost human rights body, expelled Russia.

While Moscow's ground advance on the Ukrainian capital appeared largely stalled, Putin said during a speech Wednesday that the operation was unfolding "successfully, in strict accordance with pre-approved plans." He also decried Western sanctions, accusing the West of trying to "squeeze us, to put pressure on us, to turn us into a weak, dependent country."

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And he accused Russians who are sympathetic to the West or have adopted Western lifestyles of being a "so-called fifth column" and "national traitors."

The anti-Western speech came as Russian law enforcement announced the first known criminal cases under a new that allows for prison terms of up to 15 years for posting what the Kremlin deems is false information about the war. Among those charged was Veronika Belotserkovskaya, a Russian-language cookbook author and popular blogger living abroad.

Meanwhile, Ukraine and Russia resumed talks via video on Wednesday, with Zelenskyy adviser Mikhaïlo Podolyak saying Ukraine was demanding a cease-fire, the withdrawal of Russian troops and legal security guarantees for Ukraine from several countries.

"This is possible only through direct dialogue" between Zelenskyy and Putin, he tweeted.

An official in Zelenskyy's office told The Associated Press that the main subject under discussion was whether Russian troops would remain in the two separatist regions of eastern Ukraine after the war and where the borders would be.

Just before the war, Russia recognized the independence of two regions controlled by Russian-backed separatists since 2014 and extended the borders of those regions to areas Ukraine had continued to hold, including the strategically important port city of Mariupol, which has endured a brutal siege.

The official, speaking on condition of anonymity to discuss the sensitive talks, said Ukraine was insisting on the inclusion of one or more Western nuclear powers in the negotiations and on the signing of a legally binding document with security guarantees for Ukraine. In exchange, the official said, Ukraine was ready to discuss a neutral status.

Russia has demanded that NATO pledge never to admit Ukraine to the alliance or station forces there.

After Tuesday's negotiations, Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov said a neutral military status for Ukraine was being "seriously discussed" by the two sides, while Zelenskyy said Russia's demands for ending the war were becoming "more realistic."

Hopes for diplomatic progress to end the war rose after Zelenskyy acknowledged Tuesday in the most explicit terms yet that Ukraine is unlikely to realize its goal of joining NATO. Putin has long depicted Ukraine's NATO aspirations as a threat to Russia.

Lavrov welcomed Zelenskyy's comment and said "the businesslike spirit" starting to surface in the talks "gives hope that we can agree on this issue."

"A neutral status is being seriously discussed in connection with security guarantees," Lavrov said on Russian TV. "There are concrete formulations that in my view are close to being agreed."

Prospects for a diplomatic breakthrough were highly uncertain, however, given the gulf between Ukraine's demand that the invading forces withdraw completely and Russia's suspected aim of replacing Kyiv's Westward-looking government with a pro-Moscow regime.

The fighting has led more than 3 million people to flee Ukraine, by the United Nations' estimate. The overall death toll remains unknown, though Ukraine has said thousands of civilians have died.

Speaking to Congress, Zelenskyy said Russia "has turned the Ukrainian sky into a source of death." But Biden has rejected Zelenskyy's requests to send warplanes to Ukraine or establish a no-fly zone over the country because of the risk of triggering war between the U.S. and Russia.

Amid the vast humanitarian crisis caused by the war, the Red Cross has helped evacuate civilians from besieged areas and has delivered 200 tons of aid, including medical supplies, blankets, water and over 5,200 body bags to help "ensure the dead are treated in a dignified manner."

Nowhere has suffered more than Mariupol, where local officials say missile strikes and shelling have killed more than 2,300 people. The southern seaport of 430,000 has been under attack for almost all of the three-week war in a siege that has left people struggling for food, water, heat and medicine.

Local authorities said Russian forces took hundreds of people hostage at a Mariupol hospital and were using them as human shields.

Using the flashlight on his cellphone to illuminate a hospital basement, Dr. Valeriy Drengar pulled back a blanket to show the body of an infant 22 days old. Other wrapped bodies also appeared to be children,

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given their size.

"These are the people we could not save," Drengar said.

Nearly 30,000 people managed to escape the city Tuesday in thousands of vehicles by way of a humanitarian corridor, city officials said. Zelensky said 6,000 more left on Wednesday, including 2,000 children, but evacuations elsewhere were stopped because of Russian shelling.

Kyiv regional leader Oleksiy Kuleba said Russian forces had intensified fighting in the Kyiv suburbs and a highway leading west, and across the capital region, "kindergartens, museums, churches, residential blocks and engineering infrastructure are suffering from the endless firing."

In other developments, the mayor of the city of Melitopol, who was seized by Russian forces five days ago, has been freed, said Zelensky chief of staff Andriy Yermak. No details were given about how he became free.

A senior U.S. defense official said the Russians were still making little tangible progress in much of the country, but have begun shelling the suburbs of Odesa, Ukraine's third-largest city and a major naval and shipping hub. The official, who spoke on condition of anonymity to discuss U.S. military assessments, said Russia's aims weren't clear, but Western officials have long worried about a ground assault on the coastal city.

Ukraine also appeared to have successes, with satellite photos from Planet Labs PBC analyzed by the AP showing helicopters and vehicles ablaze at the Russian-held Kherson airport and air base after a suspected Ukrainian strike on Tuesday.

Russia-Ukraine war: Key things to know about the conflict

Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy invoked 9/11 during an urgent appeal Wednesday to the U.S. Congress for more weapons to stem the Russian assault. U.S. President Joe Biden announced an additional \$800 million for Ukraine's military and said Russian President Vladimir Putin is a "war criminal."

In the encircled city of Mariupol, a Russian airstrike destroyed a theater where hundreds of people were sheltering. Many people were buried in the rubble, Ukraine's foreign ministry said in a statement, though the number of casualties wasn't clear.

Putin, in a speech Wednesday to Cabinet members and regional leaders, warned against attempts by the West to use Russians who oppose his rule to bring about the "destruction of Russia."

"But any people, and even more so the Russian people, will always be able to distinguish true patriots from scum and traitors and will simply spit them out like a gnat that accidentally flew into their mouths, spit them out on the pavement," Putin said.

He added that "a natural and necessary self-purification of society will only strengthen our country."

Here are some key things to know about the conflict:

WHAT IS HAPPENING ON THE GROUND?

Ten people were killed while standing in line for bread in the northern city of Chernihiv, the Ukrainian General Prosecutor's Office said.

Satellite images from the Maxar space technology company showed Russian self-propelled artillery and multiple-rocket launchers deployed on the outskirts of Chernihiv, their barrels and tubes aimed at the city.

Ukrainian Foreign Minister Dmytro Kuleba said on Twitter that the attack on the theater in Mariupol is a "horrendous war crime." Maxar's satellite imagery from Monday showed the word "children" written in large white letters in Russian in front of and behind the building.

The Russian defense ministry denied bombing the theater or anywhere else in Mariupol on Wednesday.

In central Kyiv, shrapnel from an artillery shell smashed into a 12-story apartment building early Wednesday, wiping out the building's top floor and starting a fire. Emergency services reported two victims from the blaze, without specifying if they were killed or injured.

Fighting continued in Kyiv's suburbs, depriving thousands of heat and clean water.

Powerful explosions thundered in the region around Kherson, a strategic port near the Black Sea. Ukrainian military forces have dealt a punishing blow to Russian air assets stationed at the airport in Kherson,

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which Russian troops seized early in the war, the Ukraine military's General Staff said late Wednesday.

Satellite photos by Planet Labs PBC analyzed by The Associated Press show helicopters and vehicles on fire at the air base after what Ukraine said was its strike on Tuesday.

There were also explosions near a train station in the southeastern city of Zaporizhzhia, home to several power stations.

WHAT HAS THE AP DIRECTLY WITNESSED OR CONFIRMED?

In Mariupol, workers afraid for their own lives brave relentless shelling to dump the bodies of children in a mass grave. Local officials struggle to account for the dead. Although they've tallied 2,500 deaths in the siege, many bodies crushed in the rubble can't be counted because of the assault.

Bodies lie out in the street. Workers tell families to leave their dead outside because it's too dangerous to hold funerals.

In Kharkiv, doctors are struggling to treat COVID-19 patients as the bombs fall outside. Several times a day, air raid sirens wail at the Kharkiv Regional Clinical Infectious Diseases Hospital, sending feeble virus patients — some connected to ventilators and struggling to breathe — running for bomb shelters.

"Bombing takes place from morning into night," hospital director Dr. Pavel Nartov said. "It could hit at any time."

WHAT DETAILS HAVE EMERGED FROM NEGOTIATIONS BETWEEN RUSSIA AND UKRAINE?

Zelenskyy's adviser Mikhailo Podolyak said Ukraine is demanding a cease-fire, the withdrawal of Russian troops and legal security guarantees for Ukraine from a number of countries. Ukrainian and Russian delegations held talks again Wednesday by video.

Another official in Zelenskyy's office, speaking on condition of anonymity because of the sensitivity of the talks, said the main subject under discussion was whether Russian troops would remain in separatist regions in eastern Ukraine after the war and where the borders would be.

Just before the war, Russia recognized the independence of two regions controlled by Russian-backed separatists since 2014 and extended the borders of those regions to areas Ukraine had continued to hold, including Mariupol.

HOW IS THE WORLD RESPONDING TO THE WAR?

Six Western nations have called for a U.N. Security Council meeting on Ukraine on Thursday. The United Kingdom's U.N. Mission tweeted Wednesday that the six countries asked for the meeting, saying: "Russia is committing war crimes and targeting civilians. Russia's illegal war on Ukraine is a threat to us all."

The mission said the meeting was requested by six Security Council members and posted their flags -- the U.K., United States, France, Ireland, Norway and Albania. It has not yet been officially scheduled.

Zelenskyy acknowledged in his speech to the U.S. Congress that the no-fly zone he has sought to "close the sky" over his country may not happen. Still, he said the U.S. must sanction Russian lawmakers and block imports, in addition to providing military assistance.

"We need you right now," Zelenskyy said in remarks livestreamed to the U.S. Capitol, which were punctuated with a graphic video contrasting Ukraine before the invasion with the grisly aftermath.

In an unprecedented move, the Council of Europe expelled Russia from the continent's foremost human rights body. Staff even went outside its headquarters in Strasbourg, France, and took down the Russian flag.

Tiny Kox, the president of the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe, said the expulsion "was necessary, and I am glad we dared to do so."

Putin said Wednesday that the operation in Ukraine is unfolding "successfully, in strict accordance with pre-approved plans."

But with the Ukrainian resistance frustrating Kremlin hopes for a lightning victory, Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov said that a "business-like spirit" has emerged in talks with Ukrainian officials, which he described as focused on a "neutral status" for Ukraine's military.

The leaders of three European countries, Poland, the Czech Republic and Slovenia, returned on Wednesday from a risky trip to the besieged Ukrainian capital to show their support and meet with Zelenskyy.

Biden announced that the U.S. is sending an additional \$800 million in military assistance — including

anti-aircraft and anti-armor weapons and drones — to Ukraine, making a total of \$2 billion in such aid sent to Kyiv since Biden took office more than a year ago.

Biden also plans to travel to Europe next week for talks with European leaders about the Russian invasion, and will attend an extraordinary NATO summit in Brussels. NATO has been bolstering its eastern flank with troops and equipment to deter Russia from invading any of its members.

Japan announced it will revoke its "most favored nation" trade status for Russia over its invasion of Ukraine.

Jussie Smollett released from county jail during appeal

By DON BABWIN and SARA BURNETT Associated Press

CHICAGO (AP) — Jussie Smollett was released from jail Wednesday following six nights behind bars after an appeals court agreed with his lawyers that he should be free pending the appeal of his conviction for lying to police about a racist and homophobic attack.

The former "Empire" actor walked out of the Cook County Jail surrounded by security. He did not comment as he got into an awaiting SUV, but his attorneys said Smollett, who is Black and gay, was the target of a racist justice system and people playing politics.

The appeals court ruling came after a Cook County judge sentenced Smollett last week to immediately begin serving 150 days in jail for his conviction on five felony counts of disorderly conduct for lying to police. In an outburst immediately after the sentence was handed down, Smollett proclaimed his innocence and said "I am not suicidal. And if anything happens to me when I go in there, I did not do it to myself. And you must all know that."

The appeals court said Smollett could be released after posting a personal recognizance bond of \$150,000, meaning he didn't have to put down money but agrees to come to court as required.

Smollett defense attorney Nenyé Uche, speaking to reporters outside the jail after Smollett left, said the Smollett family is "very very happy with today's developments." Uche said during his time at the jail, Smollett had not eaten and drank only water, though he did not say why.

He criticized the special prosecutor's decision to charge Smollett again after the initial charges were dropped by Cook County State's Attorney Kim Foxx and he paid a fine. He also called Judge James Linn's sentence excessive for a low-level felony, adding that the appellate court doesn't "play politics."

"The real question is: Should Black men be walked into jail for a class 4 felony? Shame on you if you think they should," Uche said.

Special prosecutor Dan Webb recommended that Smollett serve "an appropriate amount of prison time" during sentencing.

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

Smollett's attorneys had argued that he would have completed the sentence by the time the appeal process was completed and that Smollett could be in danger of physical harm if he remained locked up in Cook County Jail.

The office of the special prosecutor called the claim that Smollett's health and safety were at risk "factually incorrect," in a response to his motion, noting that Smollett was being held in protective custody at the jail.

The court's decision marks the latest chapter in a strange story that began in January 2019 when Smollett reported to Chicago police that he was the victim of a racist and homophobic attack by two men wearing ski masks. The manhunt for the attackers soon turned into an investigation of Smollett himself and his arrest on charges that he'd orchestrated the attack and lied to police about it.

Authorities said Smollett paid two men he knew from work on the TV show "Empire" to stage the attack. Prosecutors said he told them what racist and homophobic slurs to shout, and to yell that Smollett was in "MAGA Country," a reference to the campaign slogan of Donald Trump's presidential campaign.

A jury convicted Smollett in December on five felony counts of disorderly conduct — the charge filed when a person lies to police. He was acquitted on a sixth count. Judge James Linn sentenced Smollett last week to 150 days in jail — with good behavior he could have been released in as little as 75 days.

Smollett maintained his innocence during the trial. During sentencing he shouted at the judge that he was innocent, warning the judge that he was not suicidal and if he died in custody it was somebody else, and not him, who would have taken his life.

Uche said the first thing Jussie did when learning the news was push his hands on the glass between them and said he nearly lost hope in the U.S. constitutional system. "I think he had nearly given up," Uche said. He said the next step will be to file an appeal of the verdict.

Irish leader tests positive for COVID during visit to DC

By ZEKE MILLER and COLLEEN LONG Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — Irish Prime Minister Micheál Martin learned he had tested positive for COVID-19 Wednesday evening while attending an event with U.S. leaders, including President Joe Biden and House Speaker Nancy Pelosi, according to a senior administration official.

Martin — also referred to as Ireland's taoiseach — was attending the Ireland Funds 30th National Gala at the National Building Museum in Washington when he tested positive, ahead of planned St. Patrick's Day celebrations Thursday with U.S. leaders.

The official was not authorized to talk about Martin's condition and spoke to The Associated Press on condition of anonymity.

Biden, who spoke briefly at the event, was not deemed a close contact of Martin, White House spokesman Chris Meagher said. The COVID-19 close call came a day after second gentleman Doug Emhoff tested positive for the virus.

It was not immediately clear how Martin's diagnosis would affect the scheduled St. Patrick's Day events at the White House.

Faith, love of sports linked victims of Texas crash

By JAMIE STENGLE, SUSAN MONTOYA BRYAN and CEDAR ATTANASIO Associated Press

HOBBS, N.M. (AP) — Laci Stone had a special request for her mother. The 18-year-old wanted to get tiny matching heart tattoos before leaving her Texas hometown and returning to New Mexico to finish out her freshman year at the University of the Southwest.

She begged her mother.

And now Chelsi Stone is glad she didn't chicken out.

"I'm so forever grateful that God gave me the courage to go through with it and always have this memory with her," Chelsi Stone wrote on her Facebook page.

She is among the parents, other family members and friends who have been left brokenhearted and devastated after a fiery crash killed Laci, five of her teammates and a coach while they were returning home from a golf tournament in Texas.

Most of the students were freshman who were getting their first taste of life away from home at the private Christian university with enrollment numbering in the hundreds. Some of them were far from home, having come from Canada, Mexico and Portugal.

Chelsi Stone said she wouldn't wish the pain she was feeling on her worst enemy. She described her daughter as a ray of sunshine and said her family will never be the same.

Stone graduated from Nocona High School in 2021, where she played golf, volleyball and softball. Her high school announced on social media that it would be canceling Wednesday's softball game, saying the community was heartbroken over losing one of its own. Instead, dozens of people gathered on the field to pray.

The other victims included golf coach Tyler James of Hobbs; junior Karisa Raines of Fort Stockton, Texas; junior Jackson Zinn of Westminster, Colorado; freshmen Travis Garcia of Pleasanton, Texas; and fellow players Mauricio Sanchez of Mexico; and Tiago Sousa of Portugal.

The two injured students were identified by authorities as Dayton Price of Mississauga, Ontario, Canada, and Hayden Underhill of Amherstview, Ontario, Canada.

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Authorities identified the occupants of the pickup truck that collided with the team's van as Heinrich Siemens, 38, of Seminole, Texas, and a 13-year-old boy who also was from Seminole. Police have yet to release his name.

Authorities said James was bringing the students back to New Mexico on Tuesday night when the crash happened. Those who knew him said it had been his goal to be a head coach, and he was excited to be there.

"That was his dream job, to be a head coach and he was living out his dream," said Ryan Erwin, vice president for student engagement and athletics at East Texas Baptist University in Marshall.

James graduated from ETBU in May with a master's of science in kinesiology. While there, he had been the graduate assistant coach for the golf program.

Erwin said James had not only a love for coaching, but for mentoring students as well.

After beginning his college career playing golf at Ottawa University in Kansas, he transferred to Howard Payne University in Brownwood, Texas, according to his biography on the University of the Southwest website.

Troy Drummond, Howard Payne University's head golf coach and associate athletic director for operations, said James played for three years at Howard Payne and helped coach the team his last year.

"He had a passion for golf, you could tell that from the very start. He'd pretty much eat, sleep and drink golf," Drummond said.

Drew Underhill, Hayden's older brother, said his parents were on a plane headed for Texas so they could be with his brother. Hayden Underhill was going to school on a golf scholarship.

"Hockey was a big part of life for a while, but his true passion is golf," his brother said. "He loves golf. His favorite is Jordan Spieth. And he always loved to watch Jordan, follow Jordan."

Friends of Raines, who was a biology student, started a fundraising page for her family. They described her as "a beautiful and kind soul who will be deeply missed by everyone."

Aside from golf, what tied the teammates and their families together was their faith. Social media pages were inundated Wednesday with a steady stream of offerings of prayers and condolences from fellow college golfers, community members and others.

A short drive from the campus, local golfers set up a memorial at the course where the team practice. Groundskeepers placed flowers, golf balls and a hand-made sign with a Christian cross and the initials USW.

"We have a memorial. It's the very least we could do for the players and of course coach James," said Rockwind Community Links Manager Ben Kirkes. "It's a tough time."

Kirkes said he saw the team members nearly every day, and was close with them.

"These kids were great kids and they were great, great community members," Kirkes said. "They were polite and they were just a pleasure to be around."

He knew that many of the kids were from overseas, and tried to make it a welcome place for them.

"Pursuing a collegiate career in anything sportwise is a great opportunity for kids overseas," Ben Kirkes said. "We wanted to make them feel like they were at home."

Powerful quake off north Japan kills 4, more than 90 injured

By MARI YAMAGUCHI Associated Press

TOKYO (AP) — A powerful 7.4 magnitude earthquake struck off the coast of Fukushima in northern Japan on Wednesday night, smashing furniture, knocking out power and killing four people. A small tsunami reached shore, but the low-risk advisory was lifted by Thursday morning.

The region is part of northern Japan that was devastated by a deadly 9.0 quake and tsunami 11 years ago that caused nuclear reactor meltdowns, spewing massive radiation that still makes some parts uninhabitable.

Prime Minister Fumio Kishida told a parliamentary session Thursday morning that four people died during the quake and the cause of their deaths are being investigated, while 97 others were injured. A man in his 60s in Soma city died after falling from the second floor of his house while trying to evacuate, and

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a man in his 70s panicked and suffered a heart attack, Kyodo News reported earlier.

The Japan Meteorological Agency early Thursday lifted its low-risk advisory for a tsunami along the coasts of Fukushima and Miyagi prefectures. Tsunami waves of 30 centimeters (11 inches) reached shore in Ishinomaki, about 390 kilometers (242 miles) northeast of Tokyo.

The agency upgraded the magnitude of the quake to 7.4 from the initial 7.3, and the depth from 60 kilometers (36 miles) below the sea to 56 kilometers (35 miles).

NHK footage showed broken walls of a department store building fell to the ground and shards of windows scattered on the street near the main train station in the inland prefectural capital of Fukushima city. Roads were cracked and water poured out from pipes underground.

Footage also showed furniture and appliances smashed to the floor at apartments in Fukushima. Cosmetics and other merchandise at convenience stores fell from shelves and scattered on the floor. In Yokohama, near Tokyo, an electric pole nearly fell.

The Tokyo Electric Power Company Holdings, which operates the Fukushima Daiichi nuclear plant where the cooling systems failed after the 2011 disaster, said workers found no abnormalities at the site, which is being decommissioned.

Japan's Nuclear Regulation Authority said a fire alarm went off at the turbine building of No. 5 reactors at the Fukushima Daiichi but there was no actual fire. Water pumps for the spent fuel cooling pool at two of the four reactors at Fukushima Daiichi briefly stopped, but later resumed operation. Fukushima Daiichi, which survived the 2011 tsunami, is also set for decommissioning.

More than 2.2 million homes were temporarily without electricity in 14 prefectures, including the Tokyo region, but power was restored at most places by the morning, except for about 37,000 homes in the hardest hit Fukushima and Miyagi prefectures, according to the Tohoku Electric Power Co. which services the region.

The quake shook large parts of eastern Japan, including Tokyo, where buildings swayed violently.

East Japan Railway Co. said most of its train services were suspended for safety checks. Some local trains later resumed service.

Many people formed long lines outside of major stations while waiting for trains to resume operation late Wednesday, but trains in Tokyo operated normally Thursday morning.

A Tohoku Shinkansen express train partially derailed between Fukushima and Miyagi due to the quake, but nobody was injured, Prime Minister Fumio Kishida said.

He told reporters that the government was assessing the extent of damage and promised to do its utmost for rescue and relief operations.

"Please first take action to save your life," Kishida tweeted.

Chief Cabinet Secretary Hirokazu Matsuno said authorities were scrambling to assess damage. "We are doing our utmost in rescue operations and putting people's lives first," he said.

He urged residents in the affected areas to use extra caution for possible major aftershocks for about a week.

Analysis: Zelenskyy, Biden show different styles, missions

By ZEKE MILLER and CHRIS MEGERIAN Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — U.S. President Joe Biden and Ukraine's Volodymyr Zelenskyy are men of different generations, countries and styles — and with very different missions.

Zelenskyy is fighting to save his nation. Biden to restore a shattered world order — without igniting a world war.

The contrasts were on vivid display Wednesday. First the Ukrainian leader delivered an impassioned plea to Congress for additional military assistance to fight off Russia's three-week old invasion. Then came Biden, with a more technocratic address promising more arms and humanitarian assistance but making clear the limits of what the U.S. is willing to do.

Zelenskyy, 44, was vigorous though unshaven and fatigued. In military green, he appealed for lethal aid

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via video link from a nondescript bunker. Biden, nearly 80, was staid as he spoke of sanctions and coalition building from the made-for-television set built next to the White House.

"I'm almost 45 years old; today my age stopped when the hearts of more than 100 children stopped beating," Zelenskyy told U.S. lawmakers. "I see no sense in life if it cannot stop the deaths."

Speaking for 15 minutes, he invoked uniquely American moments of strife and significance: the bombing of Pearl Harbor, the Sept. 11 attacks, the quest led by Martin Luther King Jr. for civil rights. He called on Biden to be "the leader of peace."

It marked the latest stop on Zelenskyy's livestreamed global tour, as he seeks to portray Ukraine as defending more than just its own land and tries to elicit even tougher military and other action against Russia.

"We are fighting for the values of Europe and the world," he told lawmakers.

Zelenskyy begged the U.S. to engage more directly to help his people — including for the U.S. to help Ukraine get Soviet-built aircraft to use against Russia and for an enforced no-fly zone over Ukraine, even if he acknowledged it was unlikely. Biden has warned that fulfilling such requests could push Russia and the U.S. — two nuclear-armed nations — into direct conflict. It's a chance he's not willing to take.

Biden watched Zelenskyy's speech from the White House residence and called it "powerful."

His own remarks — three hours later and half as long — were less lofty, delivered from a small auditorium studio to a room full of reporters. He spoke of what the U.S. can do now, stopping well short of granting all Zelenskyy sought.

Biden has spent the past several months working to align NATO allies and Group of Seven partners behind stiff economic sanctions against Russia. That began as an attempt to head off the invasion and has now shifted to an effort to ensure the conflict leaves Russia isolated and economically debilitated.

Biden ticked through the U.S. arms to come in the latest tranche of missiles, drones and bullets. He reviewed the sanctions already imposed on Russia and the humanitarian assistance flowing to Ukraine. Mostly, though, while lamenting the horrific casualties so far, he cast America's interest in the conflict in terms of protecting democracy around the globe — rather than focusing on Ukraine itself.

"What's at stake here are the principles that the United States and the united nations across the world stand for," Biden said. "It's about freedom. It's about the right of people to determine their own future. It's about making sure Ukraine never -- will never be a victory for Putin, no matter what advances he makes on the battlefield."

Max Bergmann, a former State Department official who is now a senior fellow at the Democratic-leaning Center for American Progress, said that despite their general alignment, Biden and Zelenskyy are playing very different roles.

For Zelenskyy, "this is an existential threat to him. The very survival of Ukraine is at stake here." The Ukrainian leader, he said, shows "determination and desperation."

Biden, he said, is showing empathy for Zelenskyy's position. "This isn't just moving chess pieces around the chess board. This is about standing up for a country that's fighting for freedom."

But Biden, he said, has limits. "There's going to be a difference and we just have to understand that. That's part of what being the leader of the free world is about, which is weighing those competing demands."

White House press secretary Jen Psaki acknowledged the divergent interests,

"If we were President Zelenskyy, we would be asking for everything possible as well," Psaki said. "But how President Biden makes decisions is through the prism of our own national security."

Daniel Fried, a former U.S. ambassador to Poland, says that Biden's age — and his having come of age during the Cold War — helps him understand the stakes in a different way from the Ukrainian leader.

"Biden does not look at Zelenskyy with chilly indifference," Fried said. "He grew up with those lessons."

"The Ukrainians have backing. And I think they feel it. But very hard tests await."

Florida massacre families to get millions for FBI's inaction

FORT LAUDERDALE, Fla. (AP) — Federal officials confirmed Wednesday that the U.S. Department of Justice has reached a multimillion-dollar settlement with the families of most of those killed or wounded in

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a 2018 Florida high school massacre over the FBI's failure to stop the gunman even though it had received information he intended to attack.

Attorneys for 16 of the 17 killed at Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School in Parkland and some of those wounded previously announced in November that they had reached a monetary settlement with the government over the FBI's failure to investigate a tip it received about a month before the massacre. The 17th family chose not to sue.

The government's announcement Wednesday said the settlement resolves 40 cases connected to the shooting for \$127.5 million. The settlement does not amount to an admission of fault by the United States, according to a Justice Department news release.

About five weeks before the Feb. 14, 2018, shooting, an FBI tip line received a call saying a former Stoneman Douglas student, Nikolas Cruz, had bought guns and planned to "slip into a school and start shooting the place up."

"I know he's going to explode," the caller told the FBI.

But that information was never forwarded to the FBI's South Florida office and Cruz was never contacted. He had been expelled from the school a year earlier and had a long history of emotional and behavioral problems.

Cruz, 23, pleaded guilty last October to 17 counts of first-degree murder. He will receive either a death sentence or life in prison after a penalty trial that is scheduled to start in April.

Fed begins inflation fight with key rate hike, more to come

By CHRISTOPHER RUGABER AP Economics Writer

WASHINGTON (AP) — The Federal Reserve launched a high-risk effort Wednesday to tame the worst inflation since the early 1980s, raising its benchmark short-term interest rate and signaling up to six additional rate hikes this year.

The Fed's quarter-point hike in its key rate, which it had pinned near zero since the pandemic recession struck two years ago, marks the start of its effort to curb the high inflation that followed the recovery from the recession. The rate hikes will eventually mean higher loan rates for many consumers and businesses.

The central bank, in a policy statement, along with quarterly projections and remarks by Chair Jerome Powell at a news conference, pointed to a somewhat more aggressive approach to rate hikes than many analysts had expected.

The projections showed that seven of the central bank's 16 policymakers favor at least one half-point rate hike this year, suggesting that such a large increase "is a live possibility," said Michael Feroli, an economist at JPMorgan Chase.

At his news conference, Powell stressed his confidence that the economy is strong enough to withstand higher interest rates. But he also made clear that the Fed is focused on doing whatever it takes to reduce inflation, over time, to its 2% annual target. Otherwise, Powell warned, the economy might not sustain its recovery from the pandemic recession.

"We're acutely aware of the need to restore price stability," the Fed chair said. "In fact, it's a precondition for achieving the kind of labor market that we want. You can't have maximum employment for any sustained period without price stability."

The Fed also released a set of quarterly economic projections Wednesday that underscored the potential for extended interest rate increases in the months ahead. Seven hikes would raise its short-term rate to between 1.75% and 2% at the end of 2022. Fed officials also forecast four more rate increases in 2023, which would boost its benchmark rate to 2.8%.

That would be the highest level since March 2008. Borrowing costs for mortgage loans, credit cards and auto loans will likely rise as a result.

"Clearly, inflation has moved front and center into the Fed's thinking," said Tim Duy, chief U.S. economist at SGH Macro Advisers.

The central bank's policymakers expect inflation to remain elevated, ending 2022 at 4.3%, according to quarterly projections they released Wednesday. The officials also now forecast much slower economic

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growth this year, of 2.8%, down from a 4% estimate in December.

But many economists worry that with inflation already so high — it reached 7.9% in February, the worst in four decades — and with Russia's invasion of Ukraine driving up gas prices, the Fed may have to raise rates even higher than it now expects and potentially cause a recession.

By its own admission, the central bank underestimated the breadth and persistence of high inflation after the pandemic struck. And many economists say the Fed has made its task riskier by waiting too long to begin raising rates.

The Fed's projections show that by the end of next year, the policymakers expect their short-term rate to be above "neutral" — the level at which they think the rate neither fuels nor slows economic growth.

Roberto Perli, an economist at Piper Sandler, questioned Powell's assurances that the economy could withstand such higher rates.

"In the past, whenever the Fed has approached — let alone exceeded— neutral, the economy weakened sharply," Perli wrote in a note to clients. "The risk of recession in 2023 and beyond is increasing."

Yet Powell downplayed the likelihood of an economic setback.

"The probability of a recession in the next year is not particularly elevated," he said.

At his news conference, Powell said he believed that inflation would slow later this year as supply chain bottlenecks clear and more Americans return to the job market, easing upward pressure on wages.

He also suggested that over time, the Fed's higher rates will reduce consumer spending on interest rate-sensitive items like autos and cars. Americans may also buy less as credit card rates increase. Those trends would eventually reduce businesses' demand for workers and slow pay raises, which are running at a robust 6% annual rate, and ease inflation pressures.

Powell noted that there are a near-record number of job openings, leaving 1.7 available jobs, on average, for every unemployed person. As a result, he expressed confidence that the Fed can lower demand for workers and wage growth without increasing unemployment.

"All signs are that this is a strong economy," he said, "one that will be able to flourish in the face of less accommodative monetary policy."

The Fed's forecast for numerous additional rate hikes in the coming months initially disrupted a strong rally on Wall Street, weakening stock gains and sending bond yields up. But stock prices more than recovered their gains soon after the press conference began.

Most economists say that sharply higher rates are long overdue to combat the escalation of inflation across the economy.

"With the unemployment rate below 4%, inflation nearing 8%, and the war in Ukraine likely to put even more upward pressure on prices, this is what the Fed needs to do to bring inflation under control," said Mike Fratantoni, chief economist at the Mortgage Bankers Association.

Powell is steering the Fed into a sharp U-turn. Officials had kept rates ultra-low to support growth and hiring during the recession and its aftermath. As recently as December, Fed officials had expected to raise rates just three times this year.

One member of the Fed's rate-setting committee, James Bullard, head of the Federal Reserve Bank of St. Louis, dissented from Wednesday's decision. Bullard favored a half-point rate hike, a position he has advocated in interviews and speeches.

The Fed also said it would begin to reduce its nearly \$9 trillion balance sheet, which has more than doubled in size during the pandemic, "at a coming meeting." That step will also have the effect of tightening credit for many consumers and businesses.

Since its last meeting in January, the challenges and uncertainties for the Fed have escalated. Russia's invasion has magnified the cost of oil, gas, wheat and other commodities. China has closed ports and factories again to try to contain a new outbreak of COVID, which will worsen supply chain disruptions and likely further fuel price pressures.

In the meantime, the sharp rise in average gas prices since the invasion, up more than 60 cents to \$4.31 a gallon nationally, will send inflation higher while also probably slowing growth — two conflicting trends

that are notoriously difficult for the Fed to manage simultaneously.

Americans react to Zelenskyy plea with pain, empathy, hope

By JOSEPH FREDERICK, MIKE HOUSEHOLDER and AMY BETH HANSON Associated Press

NEW YORK (AP) — Americans reacted with empathy, pain, frustration and in some cases anger Wednesday to Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy's impassioned speech to the U.S. Congress pleading for more aid for a nation and a people under bloody siege.

Across the country, thousands shared video of Zelenskyy's speech on social media, many especially pained by a clip he shared of bloodied children in hospitals, bodies in neighborhood streets, crumbling facades of apartment buildings and a ditch where the dead of war were being buried.

Many were struck by Zelenskyy's comment that "I see no sense in life if it cannot stop the death."

Eric Bottoms, a day trader from North Little Rock, Arkansas, said after watching the speech that America has an obligation to protect the citizens of Ukraine because Russian President Putin is "purposely targeting" them.

"It's morally the right thing to do," Bottoms said, comparing relative inaction to failing to stop Nazi Germany's early aggressions in the last century. "If we'd done something earlier, how many more lives could have been saved?"

At Streecha, a tiny New York City restaurant that offers Ukrainian comfort food, a small group of workers watched Zelenskyy's remarks live on TV. The canteen's manager, Dmytro Kovalenko, moved to the U.S. from Ukraine in 2014 after the Russian invasion of Crimea.

Kovalenko said he still believed his home country could win the war if America offered more help, like anti-aircraft weapons or the enforcement of a no-fly zone. The latter option has been ruled out, for now, by the U.S. for fear of escalating the war.

"United States proved to be our friends and allies supporting us," Kovalenko said. "Maybe they can do more. We will expect from them to do more. But at least you already proved you are our friends."

Zelenskyy cited Pearl Harbor and the Sept. 11 terror attacks as he appealed to Congress to do more to help Ukraine's fight against Russia. He also appealed for intensified U.S. financial sanctions against Russia.

It was appropriate for Zelenskyy to draw on the horrors of 9/11 and Pearl Harbor in his appeal to Americans, said Taisa Kulyk, a 22-year-old Harvard University senior and Cleveland, Ohio, native whose parents immigrated from Ukraine in 1996. "Ukraine is experiencing this every day, every night for three weeks now," Kulyk said. "The world cannot just stand by and bear witness to terrorism on this scale."

Zelenskyy "appealed to the American experience of terror, thus speaking directly to American voters," said Oleh Kotsyuba, a 41-year-old scholar at Harvard's Ukrainian Research Institute who is originally from Ukraine.

President Joe Biden announced after Zelenskyy's speech that the U.S. will be sending an additional \$800 million in military aid to Ukraine, including more anti-aircraft and anti-tank weapons and drones. That makes a total of \$2 billion in such aid sent to Kyiv since Biden took office more than a year ago.

In the Detroit suburb of Warren, Michigan, dozens of Ukrainian Americans watched as the flag of their homeland was raised in front of City Hall. Among them was Luba Kytasta, who described her initial reaction to Zelenskyy's speech as: "Heartbreak, rage, outrage and hope."

The outrage, Kytasta said, stemmed from "what's happening to my people, to my country that I was born in," as well as with Russian President Vladimir Putin, who she said "wants to kill all of us, not only in Ukraine, because we're suffering here, too."

"I can't eat, I can't sleep — pretty much like all the other Ukrainians," she said. "This is the only thing that's on your mind."

Kytasta said Zelenskyy's address did provide her with hope, though.

"He's very resolute. He's very focused. Pretty much like all the Ukrainian fighters," said Kytasta, who added, "I hope to God" his speech makes a difference.

The ever-lingering question of What to Do dominated social media posts reacting to Zelenskyy's speech.

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A sense of anger — and helplessness — was paramount. Many said they could not sit back and let the carnage continue. Others warned that acceding to Zelenskyy's requests for air power or anti-aircraft missiles could lead to World War III.

Still others criticized U.S. lawmakers who applauded Zelenskyy on Wednesday but had voted against impeaching and convicting then-President Donald Trump for withholding U.S. military aid to Zelenskyy's government in 2019.

In Warren, Mykola Murskyj, with the Ukrainian-American Crisis Response Committee of Michigan, said he has lost 9 pounds worrying about friends and family since the war started.

"We're spending every waking moment working for Ukraine," said Murskyj, who watched Zelenskyy's speech online in the kitchen of his sister's Detroit-area home.

"It was a very moving address," he said. "There are mothers and children dying in the streets, apartments being bombed, nuclear power plants being attacked — things that a month ago were completely unimaginable in Europe.

"And now they're happening, and we have to do something."

Chris Cuomo wants \$125 million for 'unlawful' CNN firing

By DAVID BAUDER AP Media Writer

NEW YORK (AP) — Chris Cuomo wants an arbitrator to award him \$125 million for his firing from CNN, alleging his bosses knew full well how he advised his brother, former New York Gov. Andrew Cuomo, and suggested they did the same themselves.

His filing seeking arbitration on Wednesday exposed more ugliness at the network, where Cuomo, CNN chief Jeff Zucker and his top deputy, Allison Gollust, have all been ousted in the past three months.

Zucker fired Cuomo, host of the network's most popular prime time show, in December after a New York Attorney General's report publicly revealed new details about how he helped his brother strategize to fight sexual harassment allegations.

"It should be obvious by now that Chris Cuomo did not lie to CNN about helping his brother," said his lawyer, Bryan Freedman. "In fact, as the limited information released from Warner Media's investigation makes clear, CNN's highest-level executives not only knew about Chris' involvement in helping his brother but also actively assisted the governor, both through Chris and directly themselves."

There was no comment Wednesday from a representative for Zucker and Gollust. The spokeswoman, Risa Heller, has denied in the past that Gollust, a former press aide to Gov. Cuomo, offered advice or counsel to the governor while she worked at CNN.

CNN declined comment on the filing.

During the height of the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020, Chris Cuomo interviewed his big brother on CNN nine times — a temporary lift of the network's policy that Chris Cuomo not participate in stories concerning the governor.

In his filing Wednesday, Chris Cuomo said CNN leadership demanded the interviews even though he and his brother had expressed reservations about them.

He said that Zucker and Gollust tried to strengthen the network's ties to his brother and pushed the New York governor not to appear on other networks. He said they requested the governor hold his daily briefings at a time CNN's ratings needed a boost.

"Network standards were changed in a calculated decision to boost ratings," Freedman said. "When those practices were called into question, Chris was made the scapegoat."

Cuomo also dragged two former colleagues into his complaint, saying Don Lemon and Jake Tapper were never disciplined for incidents seen as ethical lapses — Lemon texting Jussie Smollett when the actor was accused of making false allegations of a racist attack, and Tapper allegedly offering advice to a politician.

Networks standards were "a moving target," modified as Zucker and Gollust saw fit, the former "Cuomo Prime Time" host said in the complaint.

With his journalistic integrity "unjustifiably smeared," Cuomo will find it difficult to find work in his field

in the future and seeks damages of \$125 million, the complaint said.

Zucker resigned under pressure earlier this year after it was revealed he violated corporate practices by not disclosing his romance with Gollust. She was forced out shortly thereafter.

US works to 'seize and freeze' wealth of Russian oligarchs

By FATIMA HUSSEIN Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — Announcing tough sanctions against Russian oligarchs over the war in Ukraine was step one.

Now the U.S. and its allies are creating new teams to act on their vow to "seize and freeze" the giant boats, estates and other pricey assets of Russian elites.

Treasury Secretary Janet Yellen and Attorney General Merrick Garland on Wednesday for the first time convened a multilateral task force known as REPO, one of several new efforts dedicated to enforcing sanctions.

REPO — short for Russian Elites, Proxies and Oligarchs — will work with other countries to investigate and prosecute oligarchs and individuals allied with Russian President Vladimir Putin.

The group is now looking into 50 individuals, with 28 names publicly announced.

The effort faces several challenges, including varying laws across countries that could make legal discovery difficult and the risk of penalizing innocent people whose property may be tied up in an oligarch's seized assets.

And time presents a problem: Investigations can drag on for months and years.

Germany, the U.K., France, Italy and other countries are involved in trying to collect and share information against Russians targeted for sanctions, the White House said when it announced the formation of the task force.

It will work alongside another group called KleptoCapture, led by the Justice Department to enforce the economic restrictions within the U.S. imposed on Russia and its billionaires, working with the FBI, Treasury and other federal agencies.

The government says the sanctions imposed already have had a biting effect on the Russian economy.

Russia lost access to vital imports for its military gear and more than \$600 billion in assets held by its central bank, and faces ongoing rounds of targeted sanctions against companies and the wealthy elite who are tied to Putin.

The Russian stock market has yet to reopen since the sanctions began, while the ratings company Fitch said Russia would likely default if it used rubles to repay dollar-denominated debt due this week. The Institute of International Finance estimates that the Russian economy will shrink by 15% this year, instead of the 3% growth that was expected pre-invasion.

Andrew Adams, a federal prosecutor who is leading the KleptoCapture task force, stressed property seizures must be conducted within the law.

"You cannot just walk up and grab somebody's yacht. You have to walk through the facts that link the property to a crime," he told MSNBC in an interview this week. "You have to be able to describe not only what crime was committed with a degree of probable cause, but you have to trace the property to the condition of the crime."

Ryan Fayhee, a former Justice Department prosecutor and current sanctions attorney at Hughes Hubbard & Reed in Washington, D.C. said "the challenge and the time involved with it is going to be demonstrating probable cause to actually justify a seizure."

"This isn't like a bank robbery," Fayhee said, adding that the U.S. government is going to have to tie any potential actions to a U.S. criminal offense. "That's going to be the challenge and it will take months or years — not days."

On top of this, the complicated financial instruments that oligarchs invest in will inevitably draw everyday people into seizure actions, says Jonathan C. Poling, a former Justice Department prosecutor who works on sanctions and international trade issues for Akin Gump Strauss Hauer & Feld in D.C.

The concern is how do governments impose sanctions "in a way that doesn't punish innocent people" Poling said.

Both the REPO and KleptoCapture groups will use data analytics, cryptocurrency tracing, intelligence, and data from financial regulators to track sanctions evasion, money laundering and other criminal acts.

Dariya Golubkova, an international trade attorney at Holland & Knight said cooperation between countries will be a benefit to sanctions enforcement, but there are countries that may be "missing from the international cooperation."

Golubkova said countries that serve as havens to oligarch's property will have to cooperate in REPO's effort, or else sanctions will be less impactful.

The EU Tax Observatory think tank, associated with the Paris School of Economics, has called for a European Asset Registry to assist in sanctions efforts.

Golubkova also predicted that because countries have different search and seizure laws "some of these requirements may so mounting that you can't get over them."

Prosecutors: Suspect played music after homeless shooting

By MICHAEL BALSAMO and ASHRAF KHALIL Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — A man suspected of shooting five homeless people in Washington and New York City — killing two of them — appeared to hold up a phone and play music after he shot one of the victims and was caught when a longtime friend identified him after police linked the cases through ballistics evidence, telephone records and the suspect's social media posts, prosecutors said Wednesday.

Gerald Brevard, 30, was ordered held without bail after appearing before a judge in Washington on a first-degree murder charge in connection with the death of 54-year-old Morgan Holmes, who was found shot and stabbed inside a burning tent in Washington this month. Brevard has not been formally charged in the other Washington shootings or the New York cases.

Prosecutors allege Brevard escalated his violence as he stalked and shot homeless people asleep on the streets of the two cities over a 10-day period. The earliest known shooting happened at around 4 a.m. on March 3 in Washington, police said, when a man was wounded in the city's Northeast section.

A second man was wounded on March 8, just before 1:30 a.m. In that shooting, surveillance video captures a man yelling, "no, no, no" and "please don't shoot" after a gunshot was fired, court documents say. The video shows the suspect a few minutes after the shooting sitting on a curb about a block away and playing music from a mobile device, according to the court papers.

In court Wednesday, Magistrate Judge Tanya Jones Bosier pointed to that allegation as one of multiple reasons to hold Brevard without bail, saying he is alleged to have played the music "as if there was some kind of amusement" after the shooting.

Around 3 a.m. the next day, police and firefighters found Holmes dead inside a burning tent. He initially was thought to have suffered fatal burns, but an autopsy revealed he had died of multiple stab and gunshot wounds. Surveillance video showed the suspect pouring gasoline into a cup at a gas station nearby about 30 minutes before the fire was discovered, prosecutors said.

According to court documents, the fatal shooting and the first incident occurred within one-half mile of each other and less than two miles from the second wounding.

"This is a disturbing escalation of violent behavior, particularly against individuals who are already vulnerable because they live on the street," assistant U.S. attorney Sarah Santiago said.

Brevard, she said, carried out "unprovoked attacks of people living on the streets."

Less than an hour after Holmes' body was discovered, the suspect walked into Washington's Union Station and stayed inside the station until he hopped aboard a train around 6:15 a.m., court papers say.

Police believe Brevard then traveled north to New York City. Surveillance video showed a man who investigators believe is Brevard at Penn Station in Manhattan around 3:30 a.m. on March 12.

An hour later, a 38-year-old man sleeping on the street in Manhattan not far from the entrance to the Holland Tunnel was shot in his right arm as he slept. The victim screamed, and the gunman fled, police

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said. About 90 minutes later, the gunman fatally shot another man in SoHo, police said. The man's body was found in his sleeping bag just before 5 p.m. Saturday. He had been shot in the head and neck, said Julie Bolcer, a spokesperson for the New York City medical examiner's office.

Police identified Brevard after a tipster who knew him called and provided his name, telephone number and Instagram profile. Brevard also posted photos on Instagram showing him wearing a black quilted jacket, similar to what was worn by the suspect in two of the shootings.

Police also obtained phone records showing Brevard has been in Washington and New York City when the shootings occurred. Ballistics evidence has connected the New York and Washington cases, prosecutors said.

He was arrested by federal agents early Tuesday morning in Washington.

Brevard's lawyer, Ron Resetarits, argued in court that his client should be released because of conflicting statements about the suspect's description given by witnesses in New York and Washington. He also pointed to the fact that police have not recovered a gun in the case.

His client, he said, has lived in the Washington area for more than 20 years and had worked at a variety of businesses, including a wine store, a nightclub, a bagel shop and restaurants. But prosecutors alleged Brevard had a lengthy criminal history in Washington, Virginia and Maryland on charges that included assaulting a police officer and assault with a deadly weapon. He also had a bench warrant and failed to appear for a trial in Maryland in 2021, prosecutors said.

Texas mail ballot rejections soar under new restrictions

By PAUL J. WEBER and ACACIA CORONADO Associated Press

AUSTIN, Texas (AP) — Texas threw out mail votes at an abnormally high rate during the nation's first primary of 2022, rejecting nearly 23,000 ballots outright under tougher voting rules that are part of a broad campaign by Republicans to reshape American elections, according to an analysis by The Associated Press.

Roughly 13% of mail ballots returned in the March 1 primary were discarded and uncounted across 187 counties in Texas. While historical primary comparisons are lacking, the double-digit rejection rate would be far beyond what is typical in a general election, when experts say anything above 2% is usually cause for attention.

"My first reaction is 'yikes,'" said Charles Stewart III, director of the Election Data and Science Lab at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology. "It says to me that there's something seriously wrong with the way that the mail ballot policy is being administered."

Republicans promised new layers of voting rules would make it "easier to vote and harder to cheat." But the final numbers recorded by AP lay bare the glaring gulf between that objective and the obstacles, frustration and tens of thousands of uncounted votes resulting from tighter restrictions and rushed implementation.

In Texas, a state former President Donald Trump easily won although by a smaller margin than 2016, the trouble of navigating new rules was felt in counties big and small, red and blue. But the rejection rate was higher in counties that lean Democratic (15.1%) than Republican (9.1%).

The unusually high rejection rate to start America's midterm election season is expected to put more attention on changes to the ballot box elsewhere in the country. Texas' election was the debut of more restrictive voting rules the GOP raced to put on the books across the U.S. in time for the midterm elections, a push that took particular aim at mail voting that soared in popularity during the pandemic.

At least 17 other states in the coming months will cast ballots under tougher election laws, in part driven by Trump's baseless and persistent claims of rampant fraud in the 2020 election. The rejected ballots in Texas alone far exceeds the hundreds of even possible voter fraud cases the AP has previously identified in six battleground states that Trump disputed.

The AP counted 22,898 rejected ballots across Texas by contacting all 254 counties and obtaining final vote reconciliation reports. Some smaller counties did not provide data or respond to requests, but the 187 counties that provided full numbers to AP accounted for 85% of the 3 million people who voted in

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the primary.

Last week, AP reported that 27,000 ballots had been flagged in Texas for initial rejection, meaning those voters still had time to "fix" their ballot for several days after the primary and have it count. But the final figures suggest most voters did not.

The most rejections were around Houston, a Democratic stronghold, where Harris County elections officials reported that nearly 7,000 mail ballots — about 19% — were discarded. During the last midterm elections in 2018, Texas' largest county only rejected 135 mail ballots. Harris County elections officials said they received more than 8,000 calls since January from voters seeking help, which they attributed to "confusion and frustration" over the new requirements.

In the five counties won by Trump that had the most mail-in primary voters, a combined 2,006 mailed ballots were rejected, a rate of 10% of the total. In the counties won by Biden with the most mail-in voters, which include most of Texas' biggest cities, a combined 14,020 votes were similarly rejected, which amounted to 15.7%.

In rural East Texas, Annette Young voted by mail like usual but received a surprising letter a week after the primary, informing her that the ballot never counted because it didn't comply with a new state law requiring mail voters to include personal identification numbers.

"I just threw it right in the trash," she said.

Most of the rejected ballots, according to county election officials and the Texas secretary of state, failed to adhere to the new identification requirements. The changes were part of the sweeping overhaul to Texas' elections that Republican Gov. Greg Abbott signed into law in October, saying at the time that "no one who is eligible to vote will be denied the opportunity to vote."

Abbott and top Texas Republicans who championed the changes have largely been silent about the high rejection rates. Abbott's office did not respond to requests seeking comment, and messages for Republican Lt. Gov. Dan Patrick and Republican House Speaker Dade Phelan also went unanswered.

Republican state Sen. Paul Bettencourt, a proponent of the changes, said in an email that one issue might have been that ballot instructions printed in different ink colors — red for signature, black for identification numbers — might have left voters with the wrong impression they did not need to provide both.

Federal data on discarded mail ballots in general elections show few instances of double-digit rejection rates. The outliers include Indiana (14.5%) in 2006, Oregon (12.7%) in 2010 and New York (13.7%) in 2018, according to records from the U.S. Election Assistance Commission.

Stewart, of MIT, said generally less is known about trends in primary elections because of lacking data. One assumption, he said, is that because primaries tend to draw the most habitual voters, they are less likely to mistakes that cause rejections. But Stewart said others believe that officials may have more time to scrutinize, and reject, ballot paperwork in low-turnout elections.

The new mail ballot requirements in Texas include listing an identification number — either a driver's license or a Social Security number — on the ballot's carrier envelope. That number must match the county's records, and if a ballot is rejected, voters are given the opportunity to supply the missing information or simply cast a ballot in person instead.

It is unknown how many Texas voters whose mail ballots were rejected may have still had their vote count by deciding to just show up in person instead.

Sam Taylor, a spokesman for the Texas secretary of state, said the office did not yet have its own final comprehensive numbers on ballot rejections. He said a "significant portion" of their efforts this year will be awareness about the new mail-in rules.

"We are confident we will have all the information we need to apply any lessons learned during the primary to an even more robust voter education campaign heading into the November general election," he said.

Delores Tarver Smith, 87, took no chances with a mail ballot this year. She applied in Harris County for a mail ballot Feb. 1, but when none arrived by election day, she went and voted in person.

Last Wednesday — more than a week after the primary — her absentee ballot finally showed up at her home.

"I just went in person to vote, because I had to make sure my vote counted," she said.

'Why? Why? Why?' Ukraine's Mariupol descends into despair

By MSTYSLAV CHERNOV, EVGENIY MALOLETKA and LORI HINNANT Associated Press

MARIUPOL, Ukraine (AP) — The bodies of the children all lie here, dumped into this narrow trench hastily dug into the frozen earth of Mariupol to the constant drumbeat of shelling.

There's 18-month-old Kirill, whose shrapnel wound to the head proved too much for his little toddler's body. There's 16-year-old Iliya, whose legs were blown up in an explosion during a soccer game at a school field. There's the girl no older than 6 who wore the pajamas with cartoon unicorns, among the first of Mariupol's children to die from a Russian shell.

They are stacked together with dozens of others in this mass grave on the outskirts of the city. A man covered in a bright blue tarp, weighed down by stones at the crumbling curb. A woman wrapped in a red and gold bedsheet, her legs neatly bound at the ankles with a scrap of white fabric. Workers toss the bodies in as fast as they can, because the less time they spend in the open, the better their own chances of survival.

"The only thing (I want) is for this to be finished," raged worker Volodymyr Bykovskiy, pulling crinkling black body bags from a truck. "Damn them all, those people who started this!"

More bodies will come, from streets where they are everywhere and from the hospital basement where adults and children are laid out awaiting someone to pick them up. The youngest still has an umbilical stump attached.

Each airstrike and shell that relentlessly pounds Mariupol — about one a minute at times — drives home the curse of a geography that has put the city squarely in the path of Russia's domination of Ukraine. This southern seaport of 430,000 has become a symbol of Russian President Vladimir Putin's drive to crush democratic Ukraine — but also of a fierce resistance on the ground.

In the nearly three weeks since Russia's war began, two Associated Press journalists have been the only international media present in Mariupol, chronicling its fall into chaos and despair. The city is now encircled by Russian soldiers, who are slowly squeezing the life out of it, one blast at a time.

Several appeals for humanitarian corridors to evacuate civilians went unheeded, until Ukrainian officials said Wednesday that about 30,000 people had fled in convoys of cars. Airstrikes and shells have hit the maternity hospital, the fire department, homes, a church, a field outside a school. For the estimated hundreds of thousands who remain, there is quite simply nowhere to go.

The surrounding roads are mined and the port blocked. Food is running out, and the Russians have stopped humanitarian attempts to bring it in. Electricity is mostly gone and water is sparse, with residents melting snow to drink. Some parents have even left their newborns at the hospital, perhaps hoping to give them a chance at life in the one place with decent electricity and water.

People burn scraps of furniture in makeshift grills to warm their hands in the freezing cold and cook what little food there still is. The grills themselves are built with the one thing in plentiful supply: bricks and shards of metal scattered in the streets from destroyed buildings.

Death is everywhere. Local officials have tallied more than 2,500 deaths in the siege, but many bodies can't be counted because of the endless shelling. They have told families to leave their dead outside in the streets because it's too dangerous to hold funerals.

Many of the deaths documented by the AP were of children and mothers, despite Russia's claims that civilians haven't been attacked. Doctors say they are treating 10 civilians for every injured Ukrainian soldier.

"They have a clear order to hold Mariupol hostage, to mock it, to constantly bomb and shell it," Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy said on March 10.

Just weeks ago, Mariupol's future seemed much brighter.

If geography drives a city's destiny, Mariupol was on the path to success, with its thriving iron and steel plants, a deep-water port and high global demand for both. Even the dark weeks of 2014, when the city nearly fell to Russia-backed separatists in vicious street battles, were fading into memory.

And so the first few days of the invasion had a perverse familiarity for many residents. About 100,000 people left at that time while they still could, according to Serhiy Orlov, the deputy mayor. But most stayed

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put, figuring they could wait out whatever came next or eventually make their way west like so many others.

"I felt more fear in 2014, I don't feel the same panic now," Anna Efimova said as she shopped for supplies at a market on Feb. 24. "There is no panic. There's nowhere to run, where can we run?"

That same day, a Ukrainian military radar and airfield were among the first targets of Russian artillery. Shelling and airstrikes could and did come at any moment, and people spent most of their time in shelters. Life was hardly normal, but it was livable.

By Feb. 27, that started to change, as an ambulance raced into a city hospital carrying a small motionless girl, not yet 6. Her brown hair was pulled back off her pale face with a rubber band, and her pajama pants were bloodied by Russian shelling.

Her wounded father came with her, his head bandaged. Her mother stood outside the ambulance, weeping.

As the doctors and nurses huddled around her, one gave her an injection. Another shocked her with a defibrillator. A doctor in blue scrubs, pumping oxygen into her, looked straight into the camera of an AP journalist allowed inside and cursed.

"Show this to Putin," he stormed with expletive-laced fury. "The eyes of this child and crying doctors."

They couldn't save her. Doctors covered the tiny body with her pink striped jacket and gently closed her eyes. She now rests in the mass grave.

The same geography that for so long worked in Mariupol's favor had turned against it. The city stands squarely between regions controlled by the Russia-backed separatists — about 10 kilometers (six miles) to the east at the closest point — and the Crimean Peninsula annexed by Russia in 2014. The capture of Mariupol would give the Russians a clear land corridor all the way through, controlling the Sea of Azov.

As February ended, the siege began. Ignoring the danger, or restless, or perhaps just feeling invincible as teenagers do, a group of boys met up a few days later, on March 2, to play soccer on a pitch outside a school.

A bomb exploded. The blast tore through Iliya's legs.

The odds were against him, and increasingly against the city. The electricity went out yet again, as did most mobile networks. Without communications, medics had to guess which hospitals could still handle the wounded and which roads could still be navigated to reach them.

Iliya couldn't be saved. His father, Serhii, dropped down, hugged his dead boy's head and wailed out his grief.

On March 4, it was yet another child in the emergency room — Kirill, the toddler struck in the head by shrapnel. His mother and stepfather bundled him in a blanket. They hoped for the best, and then endured the worst.

"Why? Why? Why?" his sobbing mother, Marina Yatsko, asked in the hospital hallway, as medical workers looked on helplessly. She tenderly unwrapped the blanket around her lifeless child to kiss him and inhale his scent one last time, her dark hair falling over him.

That was the day the darkness settled in for good — a blackout in both power and knowledge. Ukrainian television and radio were cut, and car stereos became the only link to the outside world. They played Russian news, describing a world that couldn't be further from the reality in Mariupol.

As it sunk in that there was truly no escape, the mood of the city changed. It didn't take long for grocery store shelves to empty. Mariupol's residents covered by night in underground shelters and emerged by day to grab what they could before scurrying underground again.

On March 6, in the way of desperate people everywhere, they turned on each other. On one street lined with darkened stores, people smashed windows, pried open metal shutters, grabbed what they could.

A man who had broken into a store found himself face to face with the furious shopkeeper, caught red-handed with a child's rubber ball.

"You bastard, you stole that ball now. Put the ball back. Why did you even come here?" she demanded. Shame written on his face, he tossed the ball into a corner and fled.

Nearby, a soldier emerged from another looted store, on the verge of tears.

"People, please be united. ... This is your home. Why are you smashing windows, why are you stealing

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from your shops?" he pleaded, his voice breaking.

Yet another attempt to negotiate an evacuation failed. A crowd formed at one of the roads leading away from the city, but a police officer blocked their path.

"Everything is mined, the ways out of town are being shelled," he told them. "Trust me, I have family at home, and I am also worried about them. Unfortunately, the maximum security for all of us is to be inside the city, underground and in the shelters."

And that's where Goma Janna could be found that night, weeping beside an oil lamp that threw light but not enough heat to take the chill off the basement room. She wore a scarf and a cheery turquoise snowflake sweater as she roughly rubbed the tears from her face, one side at a time. Behind her, beyond the small halo of light, a small group of women and children crouched in the darkness, trembling at the explosions above.

"I want my home, I want my job. I'm so sad about people and about the city, the children," she sobbed.

This agony fits in with Putin's goals. The siege is a military tactic popularized in medieval times and designed to crush a population through starvation and violence, allowing an attacking force to spare its own soldiers the cost of entering a hostile city. Instead, civilians are the ones left to die, slowly and painfully.

Putin has refined the tactic during his years in power, first in the Chechen city of Grozny in 2000 and then in the Syrian city of Aleppo in 2016. He reduced both to ruins.

"It epitomizes Russian warfare, what we see now in terms of the siege," said Mathieu Boulegue, a researcher for Chatham House's Russia program.

By March 9, the sound of Russian fighter jets in Mariupol was enough to send people screaming for cover — anything to avoid the airstrikes they knew would follow, even if they didn't know where.

The jets rumbled across the sky, this time decimating the maternity hospital. They left a crater two stories deep in the courtyard.

Rescuers rushed a pregnant woman through the rubble and light snow as she stroked her bloodied belly, face blanched and head lolling listlessly to the side. Her baby was dying inside her, and she knew it, medics said.

"Kill me now!" she screamed, as they struggled to save her life at another hospital even closer to the front line.

The baby was born dead. A half-hour later, the mother died too. The doctors had no time to learn either of their names.

Another pregnant woman, Mariana Vishegirskaia, was waiting to give birth at the maternity hospital when the strike hit. Her brow and cheek bloodied, she clutched her belongings in a plastic bag and navigated the debris-strewn stairs in polka-dot pajamas. Outside the ruined hospital, she stared motionless with wide blue eyes at the crackling flames.

Vishegirskaia delivered her child the next day to the sound of shellfire. Baby Veronika drew her first breath on March 10.

The two women — one dead and one a mother — have since become the symbol of their blackened, burning hometown. Facing worldwide condemnation, Russian officials claimed that the maternity hospital had been taken over by far-right Ukrainian forces to use as a base and emptied of patients and nurses.

In two tweets, the Russian Embassy in London posted side-by-side images of AP photos with the word "FAKE" over them in red text. They claimed that the maternity hospital had long been out of operation, and that Vishegirskaia was an actress playing a role. Twitter has since removed the tweets, saying they violated its rules.

The AP reporters in Mariupol who documented the attack in video and photos saw nothing to indicate the hospital was used as anything other than a hospital. There is also nothing to suggest Vishegirskaia, a Ukrainian beauty blogger from Mariupol, was anything but a patient. Veronika's birth attests to the pregnancy that her mother carefully documented on Instagram, including one post in which she is wearing the polka-dot pajamas.

Two days after Veronika was born, four Russian tanks emblazoned with the letter Z took up position near the hospital where she and her mother were recovering. An AP journalist was among a group of medical

workers who came under sniper fire, with one hit in the hip.

The windows rattled, and the hallways were lined with people with nowhere else to go. Anastasia Erashova wept and trembled as she held a sleeping child. Shelling had just killed her other child as well as her brother's child, and Erashova's scalp was encrusted with blood.

"I don't know where to run to," she cried out, her anguish growing with every sob. "Who will bring back our children? Who?"

By early this week, Russian forces had seized control of the building entirely, trapping medics and patients inside and using it as a base, according to a doctor there and local officials.

Orlov, the deputy mayor, predicted worse is soon to come. Most of the city remains trapped.

"Our defenders will defend to the last bullet," he said. "But people are dying without water and food, and I think in the next several days we will count hundreds and thousands of deaths."

Berlin train station turns into refugee town for Ukrainians

By KIRSTEN GRIESHABER Associated Press

BERLIN (AP) — Every other hour, another packed train from Poland arrives at Berlin's main train station filled with hundreds of Ukrainian refugees, mostly mothers and their children looking for a safe place away from the brutal war in their home country.

As they spilled out of the trains on Tuesday, loudspeakers blared in Ukrainian and English: "Dear refugees from Ukraine, welcome to Germany, please follow the instructions of the volunteers in the yellow and orange vests."

Spread across the platforms, a small army of volunteers in bright-colored vests appeared — yellow for those who speak German, English and other languages, orange for Ukrainian and Russian speakers — ready to maneuver the exhausted masses through the maze of Berlin's sleek and shiny glass-and-steel railway station into the building's basement.

The operation runs so smoothly that the seemingly endless stream of refugees goes largely unnoticed to the city's tens of thousands of regular commuters making their way through the station's five levels. Most don't even know of the sprawling refugee town that has sprung up in the station basement.

Vadim, a 17-year-old teenager who came on his own from Kharkiv in eastern Ukraine, traveled for three days and nights before arriving in Berlin on Tuesday afternoon. "No sleep," is all he said, a tired, petrified look in his eyes.

When asked where his parents were, the teen, who gave only his first name, simply shrugged his shoulders, grabbed a dirty backpack and slowly walked away.

Like Vadim, most refugees were too exhausted and traumatized to say much. Their frightened looks seemed to reflect the horrors of war. They sat huddled on long rows of wooden beer benches and tables, tightly holding onto plastic bags, school backpacks or duffel bags containing the few belongings they packed before fleeing the wailing sirens, detonating missiles and hastily arranged funerals back home.

More than 3 million refugees have left Ukraine since Russia attacked the country three weeks ago. Most have fled to neighboring countries such as Poland, Moldova and Romania. But as the war continues and civilians are increasingly in the crosshairs of the Russian military, many are making their way further west.

Some 160,000 Ukrainian refugees have been officially registered in Germany, but their real numbers are thought to be much higher as Ukrainians can enter Germany without visas and there are no thorough controls along the Polish-German border.

Berlin has become the No. 1 gateway for tens of thousands of refugees, with around 7,500 arriving at the train station every day. Because city officials were initially slow to react to the massive influx, thousands of volunteers have stepped up to help cater to the refugees' every needs.

They take the new arrivals from station platforms to a waiting area in the basement next to a McDonald's. There, an entire refugee town opens up: Volunteers hand out food and hot drinks, stands offer free shampoo, diapers, tampons, sanitary napkins and other hygiene supplies. A nursing tent is set up for moms wanting to breastfeed their babies. There is a safe zone for children with toys and boxes full

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of second-hand clothes, as well as volunteers offering pet food for the many dogs and cats the refugees bring with them.

There's also a stand operated by German railway company Deutsche Bahn handing out free train tickets for those who want to continue their travels to another destination. More than 100,000 tickets have been issued so far.

Two groups catering specifically to the needs of LGBTQ refugees and people of color have set up tables next to a COVID-19 testing station, and there are volunteers handing out cell phone chargers, power banks and German SIM cards so the refugees can keep up their lifelines to the husbands, fathers and sons who stayed back home to defend their country against the Russian invasion.

"When the first thousands of refugees arrived here, it quickly became clear that up on the platforms, where the trains arrive from Poland, there was not enough space. That's why our station management very quickly decided to free up a protected area in the basement," Deutsche Bahn spokeswoman Anja Broeker told The Associated Press.

"There, together with the many volunteers who also very quickly organized themselves ... we have been creating an aid structure that's getting better with each passing day."

The operation runs efficiently: Volunteers know their place and task; they are friendly and patient, but the atmosphere is eerily quiet and subdued. There's no loud laughter or chatter, no shouting, not even babies crying, only the hum of the escalators and the shrieking sound of braking trains entering the station.

About a third of those who arrive plan to stay, but most have no family or friends to welcome and shelter them, no place to sleep. So the volunteers bring them to a big white tent outside the back entrance of the station, next to the Spree River and within sight of the Chancellery.

Here, a constant flotilla of buses stands ready to take the refugees to terminal 5 of Berlin's new BER airport, the city's former Tegel airport or a convention center on its outskirts. In recent days, those places were turned into huge makeshift shelters filled with rows of hundreds of cots. Earlier, volunteers had lined up inside the station holding up signs saying how many refugees they could house at their private homes.

Recently, however, reports of men pretending to offer shelter and then sexually harassing and exploiting women have led authorities to warn refugees not to accept private accommodation offers. On Wednesday, authorities in the western city of Duesseldorf confirmed that a young Ukrainian woman was allegedly sexually assaulted by two men earlier this month.

The many volunteers who spearheaded the initial help have mixed feelings about the city taking control now and some feel sidelined by the authorities.

Maya Grossman, 28, a baker from San Francisco who moved to Berlin three years ago and Alyse Conn-Powers, 30, from Bloomington, Indiana, have come to the train station every other day to drop off supplies they bought with donations raised back home in the U.S.

While they first brought leftover food from Grossman's bakery, the city now no longer wants private food donations or hygiene supplies, so instead the two friends have brought coloring books, pencils, sharpeners and soap bubbles for the kids.

"We're just going to keep working for as long as we can with the money that we have and keep doing as much good as we possibly can," Grossman said.

"It's a marathon, not a sprint, and whatever is happening here is going to be happening for a long time and people are going to need a lot of things."

How higher interest rates will affect Americans' finances

By CHRISTOPHER RUGABER AP Economics Writer

WASHINGTON (AP) — Americans who have long enjoyed the benefits of historically low interest rates will have to adapt to a very different environment as the Federal Reserve embarks on what's likely to be a prolonged period of rate hikes to fight inflation.

Record-low mortgage rates below 3%, reached last year, are already gone. Credit card interest rates and the costs of an auto loan will also likely move up. Savers may receive somewhat better returns, depending

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on their bank, while returns on long-term bond funds will likely suffer.

The Fed's initial quarter-point rate hike Wednesday in its benchmark short-term rate won't have much immediate impact on most Americans' finances. But with inflation raging at four-decade highs, economists and investors expect the central bank to enact the fastest pace of rate hikes since 2005. That would mean higher borrowing rates well into the future.

On Wednesday, the Fed's policymakers collectively signaled that they expect to boost their key rate up to seven times this year, raising its benchmark rate to between 1.75% and 2% by year's end. The officials expect four additional hikes in 2023, which would leave their benchmark rate near 3%.

Chair Jerome Powell hopes that by making borrowing gradually more expensive, the Fed will succeed in cooling demand for homes, cars and other goods and services, thereby slowing inflation.

Yet the risks are high. With inflation likely to stay elevated, in part because of Russia's invasion of Ukraine, the Fed may have to drive borrowing costs even higher than it now expects. Doing so potentially could tip the U.S. economy into recession.

"The impact of a single quarter-point interest rate hike is inconsequential on the household budget," said Greg McBride, chief financial analyst for Bankrate.com. "But there is a cumulative effect that can be quite significant, both on the household budget as well as the broader economy."

Here are some questions and answers about what the rate hikes could mean for consumers and businesses:

I'M CONSIDERING BUYING A HOUSE. WILL MORTGAGE RATES GO STEADILY HIGHER?

They already have in the past few months, partly in anticipation of the Fed's moves, and will probably keep doing so.

Still, mortgage rates don't necessarily rise in tandem with the Fed's rate increases. Sometimes, they even move in the opposite direction. Long-term mortgages tend to track the rate on the 10-year Treasury note, which, in turn, is influenced by a variety of factors. These include investors' expectations for future inflation and global demand for U.S. Treasuries.

Global turmoil, like Russia's invasion, often spurs a "flight to safety" response among investors around the world: Many rush to buy Treasuries, which are regarded as the world's safest asset. Higher demand for the 10-year Treasury would lower its yield, which would then reduce mortgage rates.

For now, though, faster inflation and strong U.S. economic growth are sending the 10-year Treasury rate up. The average rate on a 30-year mortgage, in turn, has jumped almost a full percentage point since late December to 3.85%, according to mortgage buyer Freddie Mac.

HOW WILL THAT AFFECT THE HOUSING MARKET?

If you're looking to buy a home and are frustrated by the lack of available houses, which has led to bidding wars and eye-watering prices, that's unlikely to change anytime soon.

Economists say that higher mortgage rates will discourage some would-be purchasers. And average home prices, which have been soaring at about a 20% annual rate, could at least rise at a slower pace.

But Odeta Kushi, deputy chief economist at First American Financial Corporation, notes that there is such strong demand for homes, as the large millennial generation enters its prime home-buying years, that the housing market won't cool by much. Supply hasn't kept up. Many builders are struggling with shortages of parts and labor.

"We'll still have a pretty robust housing market this year," Kushi said.

WHAT ABOUT OTHER KINDS OF LOANS?

For users of credit cards, home equity lines of credit and other variable-interest debt, rates would rise by roughly the same amount as the Fed hike, usually within one or two billing cycles. That's because those rates are based in part on banks' prime rate, which moves in tandem with the Fed.

Those who don't qualify for low-rate credit cards might be stuck paying higher interest on their balances, and the rates on their cards would rise as the prime rate does.

Should the Fed decide to raise rates 10 times or more over the next two years — a realistic possibility — that would significantly boost interest payments.

The Fed's rate hikes won't necessarily raise auto loan rates as much. Car loans tend to be more sensitive to competition, which can slow the rate of increases.

WILL I BE ABLE TO EARN MORE ON MY SAVINGS?

Probably, though not likely by very much. And it depends on where your savings, if you have any, are parked.

Savings, certificates of deposit and money market accounts don't typically track the Fed's changes. Instead, banks tend to capitalize on a higher-rate environment to try to thicken their profits. They do so by imposing higher rates on borrowers, without necessarily offering any juicier rates to savers.

This is particularly true for large banks now. They've been flooded with savings as a result of government financial aid and reduced spending by many wealthier Americans during the pandemic. They won't need to raise savings rates to attract more deposits or CD buyers.

But online banks and others with high-yield savings accounts will likely be an exception. These accounts are known for aggressively competing for depositors. The only catch is that they typically require significant deposits.

If you're invested in mutual funds or exchange-traded funds that hold long-term bonds, they will become a riskier investment. Typically, existing long-term bonds lose value as newer bonds are issued at higher yields.

Talking to kids about nukes: Parents, experts suggest truth

By LEANNE ITALIE Associated Press

NEW YORK (AP) — Jillian Amodio went with the truth when her 10-year-old daughter had some pointed questions about the war in Ukraine.

"When she asked what nuclear weapons were, I explained in simple terms that they're explosive devices used in warfare that are capable of releasing tremendous amounts of energy and causing widespread harm and damage," said the Annapolis, Maryland, founder of a support group called Moms for Mental Health.

But her daughter wasn't finished there.

"She asked if we were in danger of being hit with nuclear weapons," said Amodio. "And I explained that leaders around the world are responsible for ensuring that nuclear warfare doesn't occur, and that we have learned from past instances just how devastating the effects of nuclear warfare can be."

She did what many parents and experts recommend: She led with the truth, though she chose her details based on what she knew her child could handle emotionally.

The day Russian President Vladimir Putin ordered his nuclear forces placed on high alert late last month was a big one for some parents with inquisitive kids.

On social media, in classrooms and at the playground, children who hear about Russia's invasion of Ukraine are wondering where the war could lead. It's a moment that can feel similar to growing up during the Cold War, when there was talk of nuclear winter, radiation and the atomic bomb.

Unlike in the past, however, today's kids have greater unchecked access to both accurate images, video and information but loads of disinformation, too. What some also have are loved ones with personal experiences of tense nuclear times.

"With younger kids, speak simply and avoid discussing scary topics in detail. With adolescents, honesty is the best policy. Always be transparent," said Dr. Beth Oller, a family physician in Stockton, Kansas, and mom of four kids, ages 2 to 9. "Speak to what's actionable to help put their minds at ease."

Fear of nuclear devastation can have a lifelong impact on children, said Nathaniel N. Ivers, an associate professor of counseling at Wake Forest University. During the Cold War, studies showed that vulnerable populations, including children and caregivers, experienced greater fear and anxiety over the nuclear threat than others, he said.

And parents who expressed more anxiety about a nuclear threat, he said, "tended to have children who were more anxious about nuclear bombs."

A threat of nuclear detonation — something like the Cuban Missile Crisis, for instance — may create in children a profound awareness of their mortality and vulnerability. "Children know there is very little they

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can do to protect themselves if a nuclear bomb were to hit their area, which can create feelings of helplessness and hopelessness," Ivers said. "It also can create a sense of nihilism, especially in older children and adolescents."

Henry Williams, a digital designer in Brooklyn, reached for film when his 11-year-old son came to him with questions about nuclear weapons and the war. Not the nuclear submarine spy thriller "The Hunt for Red October." Not "The Sum of All Fears," another thriller in the Jack Ryan series that tracks a sinister plot to draw the United States and Russia into World War III.

He chose the unflinching "Threads," an apocalyptic war drama that follows a young couple in Sheffield, England, in the deadly and chaotic aftermath of a nuclear bombing. The film, filled with realistic horrors, was made for BBC television and first broadcast in 1984. Now, it has cult status.

Williams, who grew up near Sheffield, was home in the U.K. on vacation with his kids when the war in Ukraine broke out.

"We had BBC news on all day long every day. That prompted questions," he said. "It's a much more realistic movie. Like, this is what it's like on the ground."

His 11-year-old wasn't visibly shaken, Williams said. As for his younger son, who's 5 and didn't watch the film, the questions were far simpler: "So, we'll just all be dead?"

To which his father responded: "Well, yes, but that's very unlikely. He had that notion in his head, that that could happen, which I thought was incredible. Even then, he wasn't freaked out by it. I said, we'll be there if it ever happens, and that comforted him, I think."

Dr. Jessica Griffin, a child psychologist and executive director of the Child Trauma Training Center at the UMass Chan Medical School in Worcester, Massachusetts, said it's important to make sure children aren't consumed by their worries or what's on the news.

"Children can be encouraged to ask questions but also encouraged to engage in their daily routines of schoolwork, play and bedtime," she said. "Routines can send signals to the brain that children are safe, and are calming for children in anxiety-provoking situations."

After Putin ordered his forces on alert, Ricardo Groll took a straightforward approach with his two girls, ages 9 and 12.

"I decided to explain what 'nuclear' was and how it could hurt people in Europe," said Groll, in the southern Brazil city of Novo Hamburgo. From the 9-year-old, he said, came: "Daddy, is that man bad? Is he going to hurt our family? How?"

"As I always do with my kids, I told the truth," Groll said. "Now I'm pretty sure if anybody asks Giovanna what a nuclear weapon is, she will say to them, 'It's a bomb that could destroy the world.' She doesn't seem to be traumatized by my straight-to-the-point explanation, but I confess that I'm not so sure she knows what 'destroying the world' is."

Things are different, of course, for children already touched by war or other traumas.

"For children who have a prior history of trauma, seeing disturbing images may be even more distressing and triggering" and they might "require increased reassurance and support," Griffin said.

JR Guerrieri in Lavallette, New Jersey, has two girls, ages 8 and 13. As the founder of a digital communications platform, he does business in Ukraine, and has friends and colleagues there. His daughters have been asking questions about the war and the possibility of nuclear weapons being used.

He showed them photos of the devastation in Hiroshima after the U.S. dropped an atomic bomb in 1945. They learned about it in school, he said, but without real depth.

"Up until now, there was no reason to really talk about it," Guerrieri said. "You want them to learn history, of course. But, you know, to instill that fright in a child is not really necessarily the best thing in the world."

Israel's Bennett emerges as a mediator in Russia-Ukraine war

By JOSEF FEDERMAN Associated Press

JERUSALEM (AP) — A year ago, Naftali Bennett was struggling for his political survival as Israel headed toward its fourth consecutive election. Today, the Israeli prime minister is at the forefront of global efforts

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to end the war in Ukraine.

Just as Bennett took advantage of unique circumstances to become the most unlikely of prime ministers, he has managed to leverage Israel's good relations with both Ukraine and Russia and his personal rapport with their leaders to turn himself into an unexpected mediator.

Although he has not yet delivered any major diplomatic breakthroughs, he is one of the few world leaders to speak regularly to both sides, providing a rare glimmer of hope for ending the 3-week-old war.

Bennett himself has said little in public about his mediation since making a surprise visit to Moscow for talks with President Vladimir Putin on March 5. His office says there have been two more phone calls with Putin and six with Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy.

Bennett describes his efforts as a moral obligation to do whatever is possible to end the fighting. Underscoring that message, Bennett flew to Moscow to meet Putin on the Jewish sabbath, when observant Jews like himself do not travel unless it is a life-saving situation.

"Israel will continue to act to prevent bloodshed and bring the sides from the battlefield to the conference table," Bennett said this week.

While Israel is well over 1,000 miles from the war zone, its involvement isn't entirely surprising.

Israel's ties with Russia and Ukraine run deep. Both countries have large Jewish communities, and over 1 million Jews from the region have moved to Israel since the collapse of the Soviet Union three decades ago.

Zelenskyy, who is Jewish, appears to have an affinity for Israel, while the Israeli and Russian militaries have maintained close communications in recent years to prevent clashes in the sky over Syria. Russia has provided support to Syrian President Bashar Assad in the civil war, while Israel often strikes what it says are enemy Iranian and Hezbollah targets aligned with Assad on the territory of its neighbor.

Beyond Israel's geopolitical strengths, Bennett's personality also appears to be a factor.

In last year's election, Bennett's tiny Yamina party barely squeaked into parliament with just seven of the chamber's 120 seats. But through some creative wheeling and dealing, Bennett positioned himself as a kingmaker, providing the critical votes to form a majority coalition. That allowed him to become prime minister in a power-sharing agreement that ousted his former mentor, Benjamin Netanyahu, from the top job.

Bennett, a former high-tech executive who led two companies that were later sold in nine-figure deals, has shown similar creativity in office. Long before the war, he moved quickly to establish good working relations with world leaders, including President Joe Biden as well as Putin and Zelenskyy. His mediation efforts were first encouraged by Germany, and he carefully coordinates his activities with Washington and other Western allies.

This calibrated approach appears to have gained the trust of both sides. Zelenskyy's chief of staff, Andriy Yermak, this week pinned hopes on Israeli negotiating efforts.

"Israel took upon itself the difficult but noble mission of mediator in the search of peace and an end to Russia's aggression against Ukraine," he said.

Zelenskyy previously said he believed Bennett could play an "important role" and even suggested that Israel might be a host for future cease-fire talks. That would mark a major accomplishment for Bennett.

Toward that end, Bennett has been careful to maintain a relative air of neutrality. While Israeli Foreign Minister Yair Lapid has repeatedly condemned Russia's invasion, Bennett's criticism has been muted. Israel has delivered humanitarian aid to Ukraine, but has not joined its Western allies in sending military assistance or imposing sanctions on Russia and the many Russian-Jewish oligarchs who have second homes in Israel.

At times, Bennett's refusal to be tougher against Russia has drawn criticism at home and abroad. But it appears to have allowed him to retain Putin's trust.

Israeli officials have been careful not to exaggerate Bennett's role and say he is not actively making proposals or pressuring the sides. Instead, they describe him as a channel of communication, passing messages from the sides in what they describe as a frank and realistic manner.

The officials, speaking on condition of anonymity because they were discussing diplomatic efforts, say there has been a "positive shift" in the rhetoric from both sides. They declined to elaborate. Zelenskyy

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acknowledged in the most explicit terms yet Tuesday that Ukraine's goal of joining NATO is unlikely to be met, while Putin appears to have backed away from earlier comments questioning Ukraine's right to exist as an independent country.

Vera Michlin-Shapir, who previously worked on Israel's National Security Council and published a book on Russia last year, said Bennett's main advantages are that he is seen as neutral and that Israel is a small country far removed from the conflict.

Putin "obviously has some sympathy for Israel," she said, in part because of its large Russian-speaking minority and its Christian holy sites. The military relations in Syria, while sometimes strained, have "added depth to the relationship."

Nadav Eyal, an Israeli journalist and author of the book, "Revolt: The Worldwide Revolution Against Globalization," described Bennett as a good listener, fast learner and straight shooter. These skills, and his close ties with the White House, position him to be an effective mediator.

But he said ultimately that only Putin will decide when "to climb down the ladder" and end the war.

"Bennett might be a useful tool in order to bring the Russian side back to some sort of civility in its approach to Ukraine," he said.

Lake Powell hits historic low, raising hydropower concerns

By SAM METZ and FELICIA FONSECA Associated Press

SALT LAKE CITY (AP) — A massive reservoir known as a boating mecca dipped below a critical threshold on Tuesday raising new concerns about a source of power that millions of people in the U.S. West rely on for electricity.

Lake Powell's fall to below 3,525 feet (1,075 meters) puts it at its lowest level since the lake filled after the federal government dammed the Colorado River at Glen Canyon more than a half century ago — a record marking yet another sobering realization of the impacts of climate change and megadrought.

It comes as hotter temperatures and less precipitation leave a smaller amount flowing through the over-tapped Colorado River. Though water scarcity is hardly new in the region, hydropower concerns at Glen Canyon Dam in Arizona reflect that a future western states assumed was years away is approaching — and fast.

"We clearly weren't sufficiently prepared for the need to move this quickly," said John Fleck, director of the University of New Mexico's Water Resources Program.

Federal officials are confident water levels will rise in the coming months once snow melts in the Rockies. But they warn that more may need to be done to ensure Glen Canyon Dam can keep producing hydropower in the years ahead.

"Spring runoff will resolve the deficit in the short term," said Wayne Pullan, regional director for the U.S. Bureau of Reclamation, which manages water and power in more than a dozen states. "However, our work is not done."

Though both Lake Powell and its downstream counterpart, Lake Mead, are dropping faster than expected, much of the region's focus has been on how to deal with water scarcity in Arizona, Nevada and California, not electricity supply.

For Glen Canyon Dam, the new level is 35 feet (11 meters) above what's considered "minimum power pool" — the level at which its turbines would stop producing hydroelectric power.

If Lake Powell drops even more, it could soon hit "deadpool" — the point at which water likely would fail to flow through the dam and onto Lake Mead. Arizona, Nevada, California, and Mexico already are taking a combination of mandatory and voluntary cuts tied to Lake Mead's levels.

About 5 million customers in seven states — Arizona, Colorado, Nebraska, Nevada, New Mexico, Utah and Wyoming — buy power generated at Glen Canyon Dam.

The government provides it at a cheaper rate than energy sold on the wholesale market, which can be wind, solar, coal or natural gas.

For the cities, rural electric cooperatives and tribes that rely on its hydropower, less water flowing through

Glen Canyon Dam can therefore increase total energy costs. Customers bear the brunt.

The situation worries the Navajo Tribal Utility Authority, one of the 50 tribal suppliers that rely on the dam for hydropower. It plans to spend \$4.5 million on an alternative energy supply this year.

"It's a very sensitive issue for all of us right now," said Walter Haase, the tribal utility's general manager.

Bureau of Reclamation officials last summer took an unprecedented step and diverted water from reservoirs in Wyoming, New Mexico, Utah and Colorado in what they called "emergency releases" to replenish Lake Powell. In January, the agency also held back water scheduled to be released through the dam to prevent it from dipping even lower.

Anxieties stretch beyond hydropower. Last summer, tourism and boating were hobbled by falling lake levels. The Glen Canyon National Recreation Area is taking advantage of the low levels at Lake Powell to extend boat ramps. Most are now closed or come with warnings to launch at your own risk.

In Page, Arizona, which benefits from recreation at Lake Powell, officials launched a campaign this month to highlight that lower levels aren't necessarily bad for visitors, noting receding shorelines have revealed sunken boats, canyons and other geographic wonders.

"There's tremendous amounts of history out there," City Councilman Richard Leightner said. "You can see some of the old dwellings, and parts of the Old Spanish Trail are accessible now. It's an opportunity, but it just depends on the person's frame of mind."

The record low also comes after a tough year for hydropower. Last year, as U.S. officials worked to expand renewable energy, drought in the West drove a decline in hydropower generation, making it harder for officials to meet demand. Hydropower accounts for more than one-third of the nation's utility-scale renewable energy.

Nick Williams, the bureau's Upper Colorado Basin power manager, said many variables, including precipitation and heat, will determine the extent to which Lake Powell rebounds in the coming months.

Regardless, hydrology modeling suggests there's roughly a 1 in 4 chance it won't be able to produce power by 2024.

How to cushion the financial hit from sky-high gas prices

By TOM KRISHER AP Auto Writer

DETROIT (AP) — Any motorist who has had to fill up lately could be forgiven for wincing in disbelief.

Fueled largely by Russia's invasion of Ukraine, gas prices worldwide have skyrocketed.

In the U.S., they've reached record highs above \$4.30 a gallon. That's 50%, or \$1.43 per gallon, more than they were a year ago.

The average owner of a full-size SUV is spending about \$110 more each month on fuel than at this time last year, Kelley Blue Book says. Even owners of compact cars are paying \$60 more monthly, on average.

And if you're like many people, the prices of both new and used cars are so high now that it may be prohibitively expensive to buy another, more fuel-efficient vehicle. That's if you could find one. New and used vehicles are in historically short supply.

The average used vehicle cost \$29,646 last month. The average new one? \$45,596, according to Edmunds.com.

Generally, comparable electric vehicles are even more expensive than gasoline-fueled ones, though charging the battery is typically much cheaper.

All is not necessarily lost. There are steps you can take to make an old car, truck or SUV perform better, go farther and perhaps save some money on fuel:

— Make sure there's enough air in the tires. Underinflated tires create more rolling resistance with the pavement, thereby reducing gas mileage. Inflate your tires to the pressure recommended on the inside of your driver's side door. Check them periodically with a tire pressure gauge. "Typically, your gas mileage is going to be impacted by about 5% to 10% if you don't have proper inflation," said David Bennett, manager of repair systems for AAA. But don't over-inflate. Doing so could cause tires to wear out more quickly.

— Properly maintain your vehicle. Follow the manufacturer's recommendations for oil and other fluid

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changes and for replacing air and other filters. Replacing spark plugs at the proper intervals can help, too. "The vehicle is going to operate at its peak efficiency" with good maintenance, Bennett said. It will cost between \$219 and \$268 for new spark plugs on, say, a 10-year-old Ford F-150 pickup with a 3.7-liter V6, according to Repairpal.com.

— Watch your speed. AAA says fuel economy peaks around 50 miles per hour on most vehicles, then drops as speed rises. Reducing highway speeds by 5 mph (8 kilometers per hour) to 10 mph improves gas mileage by up to 14%.

— Plan your route in advance. Try to minimize backtracking. Do multiple tasks on each trip. Avoid rush hours and other peak travel times.

— Don't idle too much. An engine burns one-quarter to a half-gallon (1.9 liters) of gas per hour when idling, but a warm engine needs only around 10 seconds worth of fuel to restart, according to AAA. So when safely possible, shut your engine off if you'll be stopped for more than a minute. Many new vehicles do this on their own. Bennett says owners shouldn't disable their new "stop-start" system.

— Coast to stop lights. Time your travel to keep rolling and avoid unnecessary stops. Cars must consume a lot of fuel to get moving from a dead stop.

— Fill up with gasoline designated as "Top Tier." Oil companies put additives in Top Tier gas that cuts carbon deposits. "As you start getting carbon buildup, the vehicle will not be running as efficiently," Bennett said. Gasoline brands with the additives have stickers on the pumps. They can be found at <https://toptiergas.com/licensed-brands/>

Today in History

By The Associated Press undefined

Today in History

Today is Thursday, March 17, the 76th day of 2022. There are 289 days left in the year. This is St. Patrick's Day.

Today's Highlight in History:

On March 17, 1969, Golda Meir became prime minister of Israel.

On this date:

In 1762, New York held its first St. Patrick's Day parade.

In 1776, the Revolutionary War Siege of Boston ended as British forces evacuated the city.

In 1905, Anna Eleanor Roosevelt married Franklin Delano Roosevelt in New York.

In 1941, the National Gallery of Art opened in Washington, D.C.

In 1942, six days after departing the Philippines during World War II, Gen. Douglas MacArthur arrived in Australia to become supreme commander of Allied forces in the southwest Pacific theater.

In 1950, scientists at the University of California at Berkeley announced they had created a new radioactive element, "californium."

In 1966, a U.S. Navy midget submarine located a missing hydrogen bomb that had fallen from a U.S. Air Force B-52 bomber into the Mediterranean off Spain. (It took several more weeks to actually recover the bomb.)

In 1970, the United States cast its first veto in the U.N. Security Council, killing a resolution that would have condemned Britain for failing to use force to overthrow the white-ruled government of Rhodesia.

In 2003, edging to the brink of war, President George W. Bush gave Saddam Hussein 48 hours to leave his country. Iraq rejected Bush's ultimatum, saying that a U.S. attack to force Saddam from power would be "a grave mistake."

In 2010, Michael Jordan became the first ex-player to become a majority owner in the NBA as the league's Board of Governors unanimously approved Jordan's \$275 million bid to buy the Charlotte Bobcats from Bob Johnson.

In 2016, finally bowing to years of public pressure, SeaWorld Entertainment said it would no longer breed killer whales or make them perform crowd-pleasing tricks.