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Chicken Soup
for the Soul

“
*Happiness
is a warm
puppy.*

Charles M. Schulz

UpComing Events

Saturday, March 26

State DI at Tri-Valley

Monday, March 28

7 p.m.: School Board Meeting

FFA CDE at Tri-Valley

Friday, April 1

FFA CDE at SDSU, Brookings

Saturday, April 2

ACT testing in Groton, 8 a.m. to Noon

Truss Pros Help Wanted

Truss Pros in Britton is looking to hire a CDL driver to deliver trusses in the tri-state area. Home every night. Competitive wage! Full benefit package!

To apply call 605-277-4937 or go to www.uslbm.com/careers and search for jobs in Britton, SD.

Vender Fair

A vender 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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THE PANTRY



It's a dream that is coming true. Nancy Larsen has talked about the need of a food pantry in Groton.

It is true that the school has the BAGS program at the school, but she said there are other people and families that are in need of food from time to time. Larsen brought up the idea to the Groton Lions Club and they have taken on the job of making that dream come true.

The Lions Club will serve as the conduit to receive food from Feed South Dakota. The northwest room of the Community Center is now serving as The Pantry.

Hours have not been set up yet. If you have a donation for The Pantry, contact Paul Kosel by calling or texting him at 605/397-7460.



Nancy Larsen is pictured with the first delivery of food items to The Pantry. The donation was from Emmanuel Lutheran Church. (Photo by Paul Kosel)



Karyn Babcock cleaned off the shelves in The Pantry. The shelves were moved by the Groton Public Works Department from the basement of City Hall over to the Community Center. (Photo by Paul Kosel)





National Honor Society

The induction ceremony was Monday, March 21, 2022 @ 7:00 in the library conference room. School Board President Deb Gengerke gave a talk to the new National Honor Society Members about having Good Character.

Front left: Cadance Tullis, Aspen Johnson, Madisen Bjerke, Brooke Gengerke

Back Left; Elliana Weismantel, Caleb Hanter, Andrew Marzahn, Jacob Lewandowski

(Photo Courtesy Brenda Madsen)

Decline in freshwater mussels an indicator of poor river and stream health in South Dakota

Julie Bolding

South Dakota News Watch

Nestled in the silt, sand or fine gravel of South Dakota's rivers and streams live some of the state's least appreciated yet most ecologically important creatures — freshwater mussels.

Their names spark the imagination: Fatmucket, White Heelsplitter, Higgins Eye, Round Pigtoe, Giant Floater, Plain Pocketbook, Fawnsfoot.

Usually hidden beneath the water's surface, mussels do the quiet work of filtering water in South Dakota's rivers and streams, helping other aquatic species such as fish thrive. They are a natural food source for otters, ducks, herons and fish.

Many species of these critical members of freshwater ecosystems may be vanishing within South Dakota. Recent surveys of the state's 14 major river basins — comprising the first comprehensive assessment of living mussel species and their population sizes in South Dakota rivers and streams — found only 17 of the 36 species once known to live in state waters, a 53% decline.

The decline of freshwater mussel populations in waterways in South Dakota and across North America is a major concern on several environmental levels.

Freshwater mussels are powerful filter feeders, consuming phytoplankton, algae and even bacteria from rivers and streams while also filtering out particles at rates measured in gallons per day. At least one mussel species can clear lake water of significant amounts of *E. coli*, a bacteria that can cause serious illness in humans. Research continues into their promising abilities to 'treat' manmade contaminants.

Mussels have not been studied as intensively as other animal groups and much remains to be known about them. "Despite uncertainty about the precise value of freshwater mussels, it is clear that they have substantial value to humans, possibly many millions of dollars in individual ecosystems, which should be taken into account in environmental decision making," wrote David L. Strayer, a freshwater ecologist at the Cary Institute of Ecosystem Studies in his article, "What are freshwater mussels worth?"

Experts say the reduction in mussel populations in South Dakota waterways is further evidence of largely poor water quality in a state where 78% of South Dakota stream-miles and 85% of lake acres are considered "impaired" in some way.



South Dakota State University graduate student Kaylee Faltys and undergraduates Michelle Wilson, Akash Suryavanshi and Daud Talukder gather around the mussels they found in one location during a survey of state mussel populations. The mussels were returned to their underwater homes after the picture was taken. Photo: Courtesy Kaylee Faltys



The Giant Floater is the most common freshwater mussel found in South Dakota waterways, but mussel species overall are on a decline. Photo: Julie Bolding

Harm to mussels done by humans

Freshwater mussels have been on the decline for two centuries — all for reasons related to the actions of man.

In the late 1800s and for several decades, mussels were harvested for their pearls and shells from South Dakota waters, including the Big Sioux River. Tuscan, located four miles southwest of Menno, was a center of mussel harvesting, according to a 2009 article in South Dakota Magazine.

Mussels were boiled to open their shells and remove the meat. While some people ate the mussel meat, often it was fed to pigs, or used as catfish bait if rotten. Boxcars filled with tons of shells were shipped by rail to Iowa factories to be made into iridescent buttons. Plastic replaced shell for buttons in the 1950s.

South Dakota's mussel populations have yet to recover from that decimation.

After over-harvesting came land-use changes that altered water quality and stream bed stability, further harming mussel populations.

Accelerating land-use changes — often tied to expansion of agriculture — lead to soil runoff, sedimentation and non-point pollution from manure, fertilizer and pesticides. Water clouded with clay, silt and other particles, including algae, can affect the fish hosts mussels rely on to reproduce. Increased sediment smothers mussels. Pesticides can poison them. Fertilizer runoff causes excessive algae growth that depletes oxygen.

Thirty-six percent of tested water in South Dakota rivers and streams has excessive amounts of total suspended solids, according to the 2020 South Dakota Integrated Report for Surface Water Quality Assessment prepared by the state. Suspended solids, which can include soil particles, can increase turbidity and water temperatures, decrease oxygen levels and generally degrade conditions for fish and other aquatic life.

"Similar to previous reporting periods, nonsupport for fishery/aquatic life uses was caused primarily by total suspended solids from agricultural non-point sources and natural origin," the report states. "Non-point source pollution is the most serious and pervasive threat to the water quality of South Dakota's waters."

The South Dakota Department of Agriculture and Natural Resources and the Department of Game, Fish & Parks have worked for decades with the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, farmers, ranchers and other organizations to improve water quality in South Dakota's rivers, streams, lakes and reservoirs.

Farming and ranching organizations say that their members are good stewards of the land on behalf of future generations, and that those who work the land are the "original environmentalists." Many South Dakota landowners participate in conservation efforts, such as the reduction of sediment flowing from the Bad River basin into the Missouri River. But state data tell a story of high levels of agricultural pollution of surface waters.

"While substantial progress has been made toward reducing pollution from point sources such as wastewater and industrial plants after the passage and implementation of the [1972] Clean Water Act, non-point source pollution remains an entrenched problem. NPS pollution is unregulated as agricultural activities are exempt from most of the provisions of the Clean Water Act," the state report says. As of 2019, 78% of assessed stream-miles were impaired. E. coli, a bacteria living in livestock and wildlife feces, and total suspended solids, which often include materials from soil erosion, were the contaminants in first and second places.

The DANR did not respond when asked in an email if the agency has specific numeric goals for reducing the percentage of impaired waters in South Dakota or reducing the percentage of total suspended solids within specific timeframes.

"The technical and financial assistance currently available is not sufficient to solve all NPS pollution issues in the state. Landowners need to understand the non-point source issues and how their activities contribute to NPS pollution. Educating the public about NPS pollution issues may prompt landowners to voluntarily implement activities that control NPS pollution. The continuation of existing activities coupled with the addition of innovative new programs may reduce non-point source pollution in South Dakota," the state report says.

After poor water quality come physical barriers. Thousands of impoundments on tributaries restrict the natural volume and velocity of water that mussels need to reproduce. "Even dams as low as 1 meter in height have been found to inhibit the distribution of mussels as they can create unnatural sedimentation and flow regimes as well as cause barriers to fish host locality and movement, thus inhibiting the ability for successful mussel recruitment," Faltys writes.

Perched culverts and other blockages to mussel larvae movement need to be adjusted so that mussel larvae and host fish can move beyond short stream segments. "It's important to maintain that connectivity," says Rich Biske, resilient waters director for the Nature Conservancy in South Dakota, North Dakota and Minnesota.

The increasing spread of invasive zebra mussels add to the threats to native mussels as the invaders move up South Dakota's navigable waterways and into lakes. These non-native, proliferating mussels prefer attaching to live mussels over empty shells or stones. Many zebra mussels can team up to keep a single native mussel from opening up to feed or reproduce. In great numbers, they deplete the phytoplankton native mussels need for food.

Studies find evidence of clear declines

Measuring and cataloging the mussel population in South Dakota waterways was an arduous and time-consuming but critically important process that is necessary to understand where mussels exist and why they are dying off.

During 2014 and 2015, Kaylee Faltys and her research team waded in streams, feeling the muck for mussels with their bare hands at 202 sites within the 14 major river basins across the state. Faltys earned her master's degree in biology at South Dakota State University by leading the first statewide assessment of mussel species and their populations.

Researchers did not wear gloves as they felt stream bottoms with their hands, reaching as deep as four inches into silt. "Snapping turtles definitely were a concern. At one of the sites we even had carp jumping out of the water at us," Faltys said.

Besides, gloves would get in the way. "Once you feel a mussel, you know it's a mussel. Whereas if you have gloves on, it could just be a rock."

The more exciting scientific work started when they pulled mussels out of the water.

"When we did find mussels ... we were pretty thrilled when we found them," Faltys said, noting that mussels were found at only 44 of the 202 sites searched.



SDSU student researcher Kaylee Faltys records mussel data in the field during her study of freshwater mussel populations in more than 200 sites within state waterways in 2014 and 2015. Photo: Courtesy Kaylee Faltys

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Non-point pollution, including from agricultural runoff, is a significant cause of poor water quality in many South Dakota waterways and is detrimental to populations of freshwater mussels. Photo: News Watch file

sizes at the 44 locations with living mussels. A live Spike mussel and a half-shell of the Ellipse mussel were discovered, the first time each species has been found in South Dakota. Two additional known native species also were found in 2016: a Plain Pocketbook and a Fawnsfoot, bringing the study total to 17 out of 36.

Faltys made a point in 2016 of surveying seven locations previously surveyed by other researchers between 1975 and 2005. She found a decline in the number of the mussel species at five sites. The number of species increased at the sixth site and stayed the same at the seventh.

Faltys also found a decline of overall species richness or diversity. About 63% of the mussels found in the statewide survey were Giant Floaters and 10% were White Heelsplitters. Both species have glochidia, or baby mussels, that can survive in impounded waters and attach to any fish. This indicated that other species with more specific habitat requirements and fish hosts may be severely reduced in numbers or have vanished from South Dakota.

"This stark decline in species richness may suggest that habitat conditions in South Dakotan streams and rivers are degrading, possibly due to a variety of factors such as land-use changes, impoundments, habitat destruction and host fish availability," she said.

A 2019 study by Katherine Wollman, an SDSU master's student in wildlife and fisheries science, checked freshwater mussel populations in 116 East River lakes and reservoirs, finding just seven native species and two invasive ones, the zebra mussel and Asian clam.

Like Faltys' study of rivers and streams, the predominant species at 76% of specimens found, was the widely adaptable Giant Floater.

"They're hardy," Faltys says of Giant Floaters. "They're the most generalist species you'll find. We'd find those in some of the nastiest streams. You would never imagine mussels would be in there. They just live anywhere, thankfully."

Faltys' and Wollman's studies were funded by the Game, Fish and Parks Department and the South

The work involved identifying the species, measuring the mussel's dimensions, photographing it and returning the animal to its original location, right-side up. "We made sure not to put them upside-down or they'd suffocate," she says. "We would actually go put them back in the sediment."

When a mussel species was abundant in an area, an individual mussel could be selected for on-campus research. This mussel would be separated from its shell and preserved in ethanol.

Although they did not go to river or stream segments too deep to wade, the shallower waters where they looked were tributaries to those deep waters and reasonable places to search. Searching in deeper waters wouldn't have provided additional species and would have required scuba diving equipment and multiple licenses, she says.

After visiting the 202 sites, Faltys produced a grim tally: only 15 species of 36 anticipated species were found, 11 as live specimens and four in the form of recently used whole or half-shells. Of the 202 survey sites, only 91 total sites had live or empty-shell evidence of mussels. No evidence of mussels was found at 111 of the sites, more than half.

A silver lining appeared later in 2016, when Faltys and her colleagues separately assessed population

Dakota Agricultural Experiment Station. The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service also helped fund Faltys' study.

Freshwater mussels species vulnerable to decline

Freshwater mussels (Latin name Bivalvia: Unionidae) are ancient creatures, believed to have originated in East and Southeast Asia during the Jurassic period and to have expanded into North America in the Cretaceous, when dinosaurs still roamed the continent.

While saltwater mussels are considered a seafood delicacy, freshwater mussels are not so tasty. One critic has compared their flavor to dirt.

Scientists think the ancestors of today's mussels moved into freshwater rivers and streams created as the last glacier scoured eastern South Dakota 10,000 years ago, dragging mussels from warmer waters upstream. Glaciation gave us the diagonal form of today's Missouri River, the James River basin, and our small lakes in the far northeastern part of the state. West River was not similarly glaciated, and freshwater mussel species are fewer.

The U.S. and Canada have the most diverse populations of freshwater mussel species in the world, with 301 total species, according to NatureServe Explorer, an online biodiversity database. But a January 2021 NatureServe analysis shows 63% of freshwater mussel species are vulnerable, imperiled or critically imperiled, second only to freshwater snails. In comparison, 40% of amphibian, 34% of freshwater and anadromous fish, 17% of mammal and 13% of bird species are at similar risk. As of January 2022, NatureServe listed 25 North American freshwater mussels as extinct, with eight declared gone from the earth by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service last October.

Freshwater mussels reproduce in complex ways, which in turn complicates their conservation. Because they anchor themselves in the substrate, they require a moving host and usually flowing water to genetically diversify and carry larvae away to new locations.

This is generally accomplished by a male mussel releasing sperm into moving water; these are taken up by a nearby female through an intake siphon. The female broods fertilized eggs in her gills until they mature to microscopic glochidia. Glochidia are released from her gills and must attach to the fins or gills of fish.

Some mussel species will settle for any fish, while others only reproduce with the help of a specific species. If glochidia attach to the wrong fish, that fish's immune system kills the baby mussel. After glochidia hitch a ride on an appropriate fish, they stay attached for a few weeks to a month, then drop off. They must alight on suitable substrate to burrow and begin growing in their new homes. In the right location and conditions, some species of freshwater mussels can live for more than 100 years.

Conditions in North America hundreds of years ago were ideal for the creation of large and concentrated assemblages of mussels: adequate food, only natural sedimentation and relatively stable stream beds. Miles-long assemblages of multiple species of mussels were created, paving river bottoms like cobblestones. Their combined consumption of phytoplankton, algae, bacteria, fine and dissolved organic materials and compounds kept freshwater streams clear and contributed to a natural balance that benefitted fish and other aquatic species.

In South Dakota, the most diverse and abundant assemblages were and continue to be east of the Missouri River. Those conditions changed with the arrival of European settlers and the use of most of South Dakota's land to cultivate row crops and raise livestock.



SDSU student researcher Michelle Wilson feels for mussels in the Belle Fourche River during a statewide survey of freshwater mussel species and their population sizes in 2014-2015. Photo: Courtesy Kaylee Faltys



A White Heelsplitter mussel found in a South Dakota waterway. Photo: Courtesy Kaylee Faltys

Extinction a real potential outcome

The Higgins Eye, Winged Mapleleaf and Scaleshell are native mussels listed as federally endangered, meaning they are endangered throughout the nation. None of these was found in Faltys' surveys of South Dakota waterways. The Winged Mapleleaf and Mapleleaf are two distinct species.

The latest state GFP Wildlife Action Plan lists the Higgins Eye and Scaleshell as in need of conservation but not as threatened or endangered within state borders. The Creek Heelsplitter, Elktoe, Hickorynut, Mapleleaf, Pimpleback, Rock Pocketbook and Yellow Sandshell mussels also are listed by the state as in need of conservation.

The state list's omission is puzzling. A study by Anthony Ricciardi and Joseph B. Rasmussen, published more than 20 years ago in *Conservation Biology*, stated that no other group of North American land,

marine or freshwater animals is going extinct as fast as mussels.

"This [overall decline in freshwater fauna] is compelling evidence that North American freshwater biodiversity is diminishing as rapidly as that of some of the most stressed terrestrial ecosystems [tropical rainforests]. Although larger absolute numbers of species are at risk in the tropics, the elimination of even a few species in temperate habitats can promote further extinctions and disrupt ecosystem functioning," the authors wrote.

The state Wildlife Action Plan does categorize eight of the nine mussels in need of conservation as "critically imperiled" and "especially vulnerable to extinction." The ninth, Mapleleaf, is "imperiled because of rarity" and "very vulnerable to extinction." Those categorizations mean South Dakota's "conservation goal is to improve the species' abundance and distribution," the plan says.

Of these nine mussels, Faltys found only the Mapleleaf.

In contrast, the state lists five fish as endangered and four more as threatened. The endangered fish are the banded killfish, blacknose shiner, finescale dace, pallid sturgeon and sicklefin chub. The state-listed threatened fish are the longnose sucker, northern pearl dace, northern redbelly dace and sturgeon chub. The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service lists the pallid sturgeon and Topeka shiner as endangered, and the shovelnose sturgeon as threatened.

Of the state-listed endangered or threatened fish species, at least five inhabit clear streams that also are mussels' natural habitat: the blacknose shiner, finescale dace, longnose sucker, northern pearl dace, and northern redbelly dace. Nine additional fish are listed as being between extremely rare or vulnerable to extinction and very rare, found abundantly in only some locations or vulnerable to extinction.

In the South Dakota Game, Fish and Parks Commission's 2020 biennial review of the threatened and endangered species list, mussels are mentioned only once, under State Wildlife Grant Accomplishments, in a 2008 study that sampled Minnesota River tributaries in South Dakota for their compositions of fish, mussel and other aquatic invertebrate species, with an emphasis on identifying rare species.

Experts: more action needed to protect mussels

Since Faltys' study was published, the state's only specific action to protect freshwater mussels has been a 2020 state administrative rule that bans commercial and noncommercial harvesting of freshwater mussels. State regulations allow people to pick up empty mussel shells, but not those of endangered or threatened species.

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Chelsey Pasbrig, a GFP aquatic biologist, said in an email that her agency is concerned about the decline of freshwater mussel populations in South Dakota, and it is aware they are among the most endangered animals in North America.

"GFP has begun collaborations with other states to explore the option for augmenting populations with propagated individuals; however, this is in its infancy" she wrote. "Kaylee Faltys' study provided us a snapshot of the status of freshwater mussels in South Dakota; however, future research and monitoring is likely needed."

Pasbrig added that no current mussel monitoring efforts are underway in South Dakota.

"Unfortunately, the professor at SDSU who could assist with this expertise is since retired, therefore future monitoring and research efforts have not continued at this time. There are endless questions that exist regarding the status of freshwater mussels in S.D. and across the country; however, limited resources both financially and staffing exist," she wrote.

Since at least 1995, the GFP also has sponsored mussel research by a retired University of Sioux Falls faculty member and a retired departmental wildlife biologist, among others.

Pasbrig says the department currently addresses water quality issues that may be contributing to decreased mussel abundance and diversity through the Conservation Reserve Program, the James River and Big Sioux River Conservation Reserve Enhancement programs, the EPA 319 non-point source watershed projects and riparian buffer programs. The state agency also recently expanded its private lands habitat program and aquatic habitat program, which partner with landowners and other conservation entities to improve habitat, Pasbrig says.

GFP did not respond to follow-up questions asking for figures on the net numbers of additional landowners and acres in the expanded private lands habitat and aquatic habitat programs. A request for the number of stream miles of riparian buffers created in the last several years also was not answered, but previous reporting by News Watch has showed that state efforts to encourage implementation of agricultural buffer strips has been extremely slow to catch on.

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service declined to comment on its role in monitoring and protecting freshwater mussels in South Dakota at this time.

Faltys and others have called for further research and monitoring of freshwater mussel populations in South Dakota.

"Our research ... suggests that the statewide unionid structure is changing quickly, thus adequate conservation strategies are needed for the future survival of this group," Faltys said.

Biske, of the Nature Conservancy, agrees that "more can be done" in South Dakota to monitor and conserve existing freshwater mussel populations

But under the two major federal acts pertaining to water, the Clean Water Act and Safe Drinking Water Act, individual and groups of South Dakotans do not have the right to take legal action against ag-related nonpoint source polluters, says David Ganje an Aberdeen native who practices natural resource and commercial law in South Dakota.

However, when endangered species are involved, government entities have the right to intervene to protect the endangered species, although this is rarely done, he said.

Individual states do have the power to regulate non-point source pollution and protect wildlife, should their policymakers choose to do so. South Dakota law states that both South Dakota's waters and wildlife are the property of all South Dakota residents.

Ganje points to Wisconsin as a state that manages non-point source pollution well, with a published 5-year, 110-page plan. Wisconsin's approach results in better surface water quality, despite intensive farming and industrial activity. Its most recent report states that 83% of its waters are healthy, 13% are impaired and 4% are being restored. South Dakota's corresponding numbers are almost reversed: 78% of stream-miles are impaired in some way, while only 22% are healthy. Lake acres are 85% impaired and only 9% healthy.

Wisconsin also has a strategy to reduce phosphorus and nitrogen pollution from fertilizer applications.

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"If over time those parties in society [agricultural, manufacturing, construction industries] are put in the limelight, invited to meetings, having the DENR/DANR sit down with them and say 'What can we do as a group? What should we do? These numbers are getting worse and worse and worse.' You know, there might even be some press that shows up to some of those meetings. That's how you change this stuff," Ganje said.

The Nature Conservancy, which works to conserve 900,000 acres in South Dakota and the two neighboring states, is looking at how it can help streams in good condition stay that way by promoting soil-healthy agricultural practices such as no-till, reduced till, cover crops, buffer strips and adding rotations of small grains and hay to fields usually planted with corn or soybeans.

Faltys says options for conservation could include propagating young mussels of existing species and releasing them into streams with small populations, reintroducing species that once lived in certain streams, restoring mussel populations to historic levels and creating easements that would increase buffer zones to reduce sedimentation.

She identified the Big Sioux, James and Minnesota river basins as areas of high mussel diversity that would be optimal sites for mussel conservation. She recommends focusing on the Whetstone River in Roberts and Grant counties, Bios de Sioux River in Roberts County, Medary and Six Mile creeks in Brookings County, Split Rock Creek in Minnehaha County, Shue Creek in Beadle County, Lone Branch Creek in Hutchinson County, Cottonwood Creek in Jackson County and the James River in Hanson County.

Areas Faltys listed as high priorities overlap with South Dakota GFP Aquatic Conservation Opportunity Areas. These areas are diverse aquatic habitats, low in human-caused stressors and have some public ownership.

Standardized surveys of South Dakota freshwater mussel populations should be done, and the public needs to be educated about freshwater mussel conservation, Wollman said. "Expressing why we do not want invasive species, like zebra mussels, is important, but there is currently minimal effort expended to provide information regarding species we are trying to protect."

One ray of hope for additional funding to protect wildlife in need of conservation is the bipartisan Recovering America's Wildlife Act of 2021. Pasbrig calls it "a potential game changer for state and tribal wildlife agencies" that would help the agency implement portions of its Wildlife Action Plan for the state's 104 species of greatest conservation need, including the nine freshwater mussel species.

But U.S. Sen. John Thune, R-South Dakota, expressed hesitation in 2018 about an earlier version of the law, saying he favors additional funding for wildlife preservation but wants to know more about where the money is coming from and where it will go. All three members of the state's congressional delegation were called in January 2022 and asked for their positions on the recovering wildlife act. Staff members in the office of U.S. Sen. Mike Rounds and Rep. Dusty Johnson responded but did not provide official stances on the act.

"If conservation efforts keep going, I have hope," Faltys says of mussels' chances of avoiding extinction in South Dakota. "I think that South Dakota Game, Fish and Parks, they do have an awareness of this, and they do want to conserve the species there."

What the Nature Conservancy advocates in South Dakota is to "ensure we don't lose those populations that we have," Biske said. "We can't afford to lose any more."

— This article was produced by South Dakota News Watch, a non-profit journalism organization located online at SDNewsWatch.org.

ABOUT JULIE BOLDING

Julie Bolding is a freelance writer for South Dakota News Watch. Bolding works as a registered nurse in Sioux Falls and previously worked at the South Dakota Department of Transportation, State Archives and the Sioux Falls Argus Leader.

Kathy Gubin named Aberdeen American Legion's Nurse of the Year



Kathy Gubin receives the Nurse of the Year Award from Legion Commander Ron Krogman. (Courtesy Photo)

ABERDEEN, S.D. – Kathy Gubin, Palliative Care RN, was recently chosen as Nurse of the Year by the local American Legion.

Commander Ron Krogman presented Kathy the award last week.

"We asked various places to submit nominations for Nurse of the Year in Aberdeen and we got an outstanding candidate in Kathy," Krogman said. "It sounds like she's got a tough job... and she does an admirable job."

As the palliative care nurse, Kathy often assists patients and families with difficult conversations and decisions relating to symptom management, advanced directives, treatment choices and care at the time of death. As her nomination reads, "Kathy does all of this very gracefully, time and time again. She meets patients and families wherever they are in the process and supports them unconditionally."

During COVID, Kathy worked to ensure that patients and families made it through difficult times, and that end of life goals were carried out with dignity and respect.

She was at the bedside to provide comfort to the patients and mourn with the families. Kathy also remembered to celebrate those patients that beat the odds as she organized hallway cheering celebrations when patients were discharged, the nomination reads.

Kathy has also been instrumental in being a listening ear and a resource for her colleagues.

Kathy has been a registered nurse for 26 years at Avera St. Luke's Hospital. She has served as the Palliative Care RN for the last 15 years. She meets the needs of inpatients in the Intensive Care Unit, consults with outpatients in the Emergency Department or Avera Cancer Institute as needed, and meets with nursing home residents and their families to ensure their goals of care are met as health statuses change.

This is the first year the American Legion has given this award. The Legion also gives a Law Officer of the Year and a Hero of the Year Award. Kathy's nomination will also be sent to the state level, Krogman said.

2022 Groton Area Elementary

Kindergarten Roundup (Screening) for children turning

5 on or before September 1, 2022

Friday, April 1, 2022

If your child is currently attending Junior Kindergarten at Groton Area Elementary school, please DISREGARD this notice. Your teacher will be sending information if necessary.

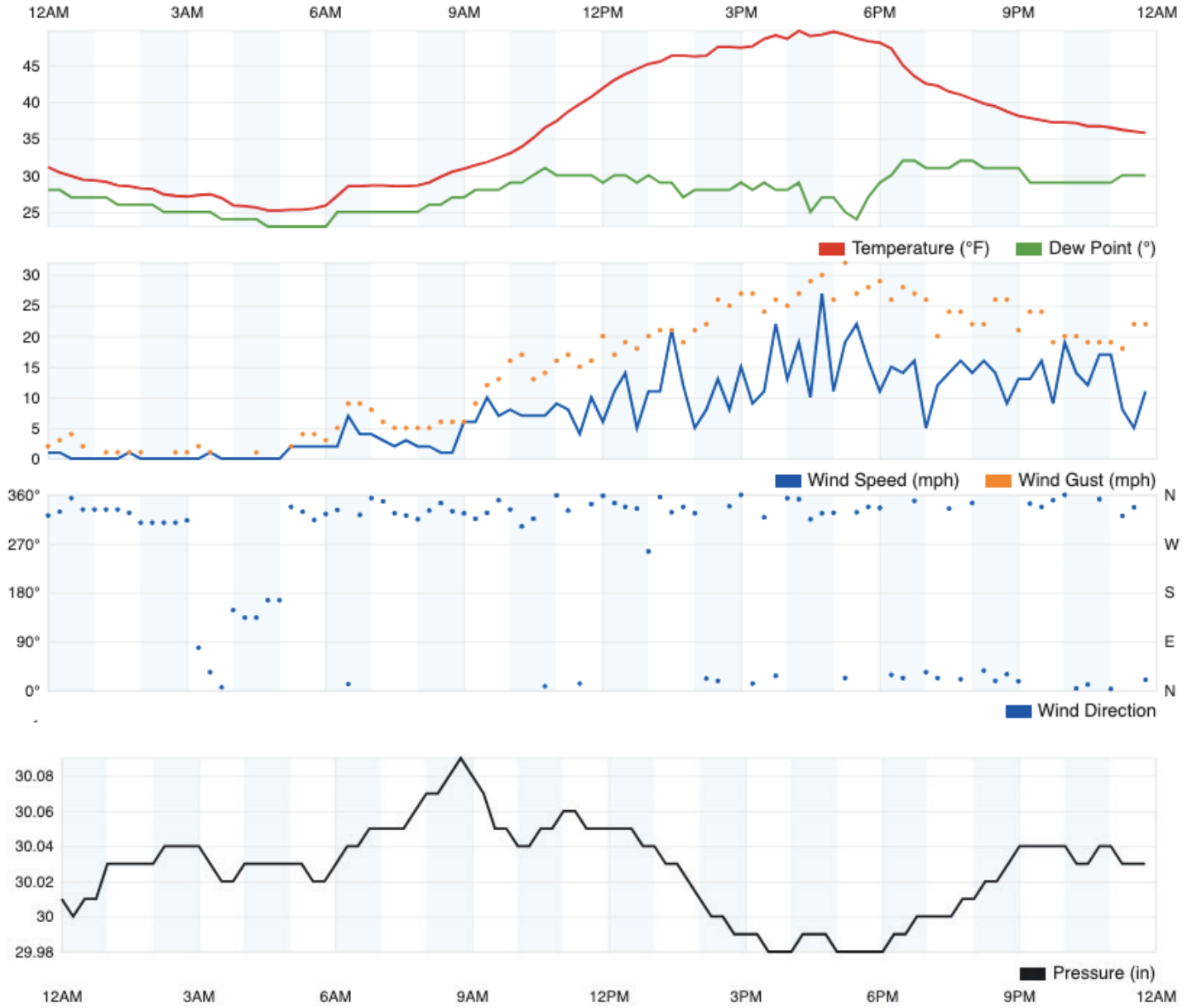
Packets are being sent home this week with information regarding KG Roundup. These would apply to families who have children eligible for KG and JK this coming 2022-2023 school year who are not currently enrolled in our school. Please contact the school if you do not receive a packet. We do not have all children in our census. Thank you!!!



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Yesterday's Groton Weather Graphs



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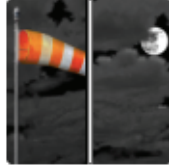
Today



Mostly Cloudy and Breezy

High: 45 °F

Tonight



Mostly Cloudy and Blustery then Mostly Cloudy

Low: 27 °F

Thursday



Mostly Sunny

High: 58 °F

Thursday Night



Partly Cloudy and Breezy

Low: 32 °F

Friday



Sunny and Breezy

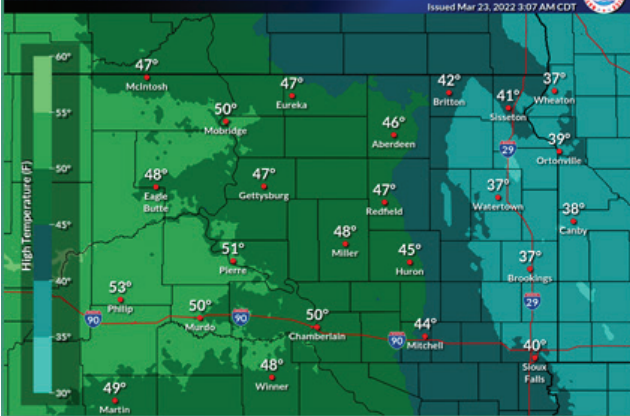
High: 51 °F

Another Windy Day Today

Maximum Wind Gust Forecast

	3/23 Wed			3/24 Thu		Maximum
	6am	12pm	6pm	12am	6am	
Aberdeen	41	44	38	26	16	44
Britton	40	41	37	26	20	41
Eagle Butte	35	37	33	21	17	37
Eureka	40	45	41	23	17	45
Gettysburg	35	37	33	21	14	37
Kennebec	38	44	38	23	16	44
McIntosh	38	41	40	21	26	41
Milbank	38	40	37	28	24	40
Miller	37	41	37	23	17	41
Mobridge	33	37	33	16	10	37
Murdo	41	45	44	24	21	45
Pierre	33	37	35	14	13	37
Redfield	38	40	35	26	17	40
Sisseton	40	41	37	30	24	41
Watertown	37	40	35	28	21	40
Wheaton	37	38	35	26	21	38

Highs for Wednesday



National Weather Service – Aberdeen, SD

www.weather.gov/abr

NWSAberdeen

@NWSAberdeen

Another windy day out there today! Otherwise, dry weather expected with highs in the upper 30s to the lower 50s.

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Today in Weather History

March 23, 1987: Strong winds and heavy snow produced blizzard conditions across South Dakota March 23rd through the 25th. Snow amounts ranged from 6 to 19 inches. Snow totals included 19" at Winner (in Tripp County), 15" at Murdo (in Jones County), and 12" at Woonsocket (in Sanborn County) and Platte (in Charles Mix County). The wind piled the snow into drifts up to 10 feet deep. The heavy, wet snow broke power lines in several counties in the south-central and east-central parts of the state knocking out power for up to a few days.

March 23, 2011: A low-pressure system brought a variety of precipitation to central and eastern South Dakota and west central Minnesota on March 22nd and 23rd. Areas experienced rain, hail, sleet, snow and in some cases thundersnow.

1907: Today was the warmest March day ever recorded in Washington, DC with a maximum temperature of 93 degrees. Washington DC has seen three, 90 degrees days in March, all of which occurred in 1907.

1913 - A vicious tornado hit the city of Omaha, NE. The tornado struck during the late afternoon on Easter Sunday, and in just twelve minutes cut a swath of total destruction five miles long and two blocks wide across the city killing 94 persons and causing 3.5 million dollars property damage. (David Ludlum)

1916 - Pocatello, ID, received a record 14.6 inches of snow in 24 hours. (The Weather Channel)

1987 - A blizzard raged across western Kansas, and the panhandle of Texas and Oklahoma. Pampa TX received 21 inches of snow, and winds gusted to 78 mph at Dodge City KS Altus OK. Governor Hayden declared forty-six counties in western Kansas a disaster area. In southwest Kansas, the storm was described as the worst in thirty years. (The National Weather Summary) (Storm Data)

1988 - Thunderstorms developing along a strong cold front spawned tornadoes near Roberts ID and Bridger MT. Strong and gusty winds prevailed in the western U.S. Wind gusts in the southwest part of Reno NV reached 89 mph. (The National Weather Summary) (Storm Data)

1989 - Charlotte and Wilmington, NC, reported rainfall records for the date as showers and thunderstorms prevailed in the southeastern U.S. Freezing rain glazed parts of North Carolina and southern Virginia. Gale force winds produced a heavy surf along the coast of North Carolina. (The National Weather Summary) (Storm Data)

1990 - An upper level storm system produced heavy snow in the Lower Missouri Valley. Snowfall totals ranged up to nine inches at Kansas City MO, with eight inches reported at Falls City NE, Columbia MO and Saint Louis MO. Thunderstorms produced heavy snow in the Kansas City area during the evening rush hour. (The National Weather Summary) (Storm Data)

2007: A tornado obliterates a section of the town Clovis in eastern New Mexico, flattening about 100 homes and businesses, snapping telephone poles and even heaving a trailer through a bowling alley. At least three schools are damaged. The tornado is one of thirteen that strike a dozen communities along the New Mexico - Texas border, leaving two people critically injured.

2007 - A trailer is thrown through a bowling alley as a tornado moves through Clovis, NM. About 100 homes and businesses are destroyed, at least three schools are damaged and telephone poles are snapped. Thirteen tornadoes struck a dozen communities along the New Mexico/Texas border. Two people were critically injured.

2011 - A series of tornados are spawned from severe thunderstorms in Pennsylvania. In Hempfield Township dozens of homes and a high school auditorium where students are rehearsing a play are severely damaged.

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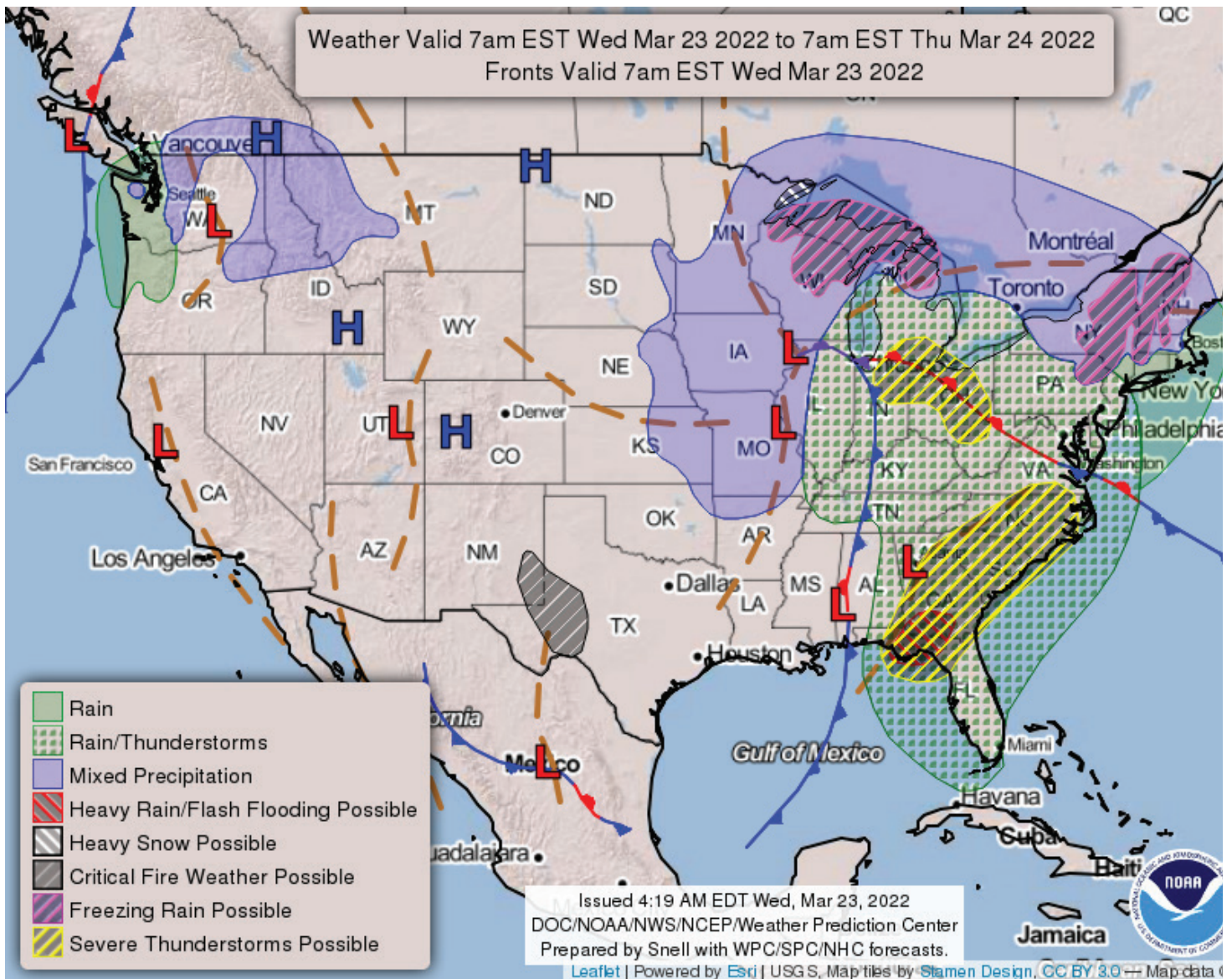
Yesterday's Groton Weather

High Temp: 50 °F at 4:15 PM
Low Temp: 25 °F at 4:49 AM
Wind: 34 mph at 5:15 PM
Precip: 0.00

Day length: 12 hours, 22 minutes

Today's Info

Record High: 81 in 1963
Record Low: -21 in 1899
Average High: 46°F
Average Low: 23°F
Average Precip in Mar.: 0.61
Precip to date in Mar.: 0.00
Average Precip to date: 1.78
Precip Year to Date: 0.97
Sunset Tonight: 7:50:11 PM
Sunrise Tomorrow: 7:25:40 AM





PRAY - BUT HOW AND FOR WHAT?

Mary Jane was snuggling down in bed when her mother entered her room. "Did you pray before getting in bed?"

"Well, kind of," was her reply.

"Kind of?" asked her Mom. "What does that mean?"

"Well, I started to pray, and my list was the same as it was yesterday and the day before that. So, I decided to tell Jesus the story about Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs. And you know what, Mom? I think He enjoyed it!"

The attitude of the Psalmist was very different from Mary Jane's: "May my cry come before You, Lord; give me understanding according to Your Word." Not only was he intense and sincere, but he was also passionate and purposeful!

He did not speak to God in a still, soft voice. On this occasion, he literally "cried" to God requesting a "direct audience." He wanted his prayer to go directly to Him!

He must have known that there were certain conditions that he would have to meet. He must have been aware of this. What would hinder his prayers?

1. Disobedience: We get what we ask for if we are obedient. John wrote we "receive what we ask for because we keep His commandments." (1 John 3:22)

2. Doubt: When we ask for food, we need to have a container available to carry it home. "Whatever you ask for, if you believe you will receive." (Mark 11:24)

3. Disagreement: We must ask for things that are consistent with His nature. "Ask in my name." (John 16:32)

God hears our cries if we meet His criteria!

Prayer: Help us, Father, to align our requests with Your requirements and live within Your will for our lives. Give us the wisdom Your Word promises. In Jesus' Name, Amen.

Scripture For Today: May my cry come before You, Lord; give me understanding according to Your Word. Psalm 119:169

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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

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News from the Associated Press

SD Lottery

By The Associated Press undefined

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

Mega Millions

08-15-21-27-61, Mega Ball: 8, Megaplier: 3

(eight, fifteen, twenty-one, twenty-seven, sixty-one; Mega Ball: eight; Megaplier: three)

Estimated jackpot: \$39 million

Powerball

Estimated jackpot: \$167 million

Utah governor vetoes transgender sports ban, faces override

By LINDSAY WHITEHURST and SAM METZ Associated Press

SALT LAKE CITY (AP) — Utah Gov. Spencer Cox vetoed a ban on transgender students playing girls' sports on Tuesday, becoming the second Republican governor this week to overrule state lawmakers taking on youth sports amid broader culture wars as LGBTQ visibility grows.

Leaders in the GOP-dominated Legislature, however, quickly called a veto override session and indicated they had enough support to keep the ban in place.

There's also pushback against Indiana Gov. Eric Holcomb's Monday decision to veto a statewide ban. Holcomb said Indiana's Legislature had not demonstrated that transgender kids had undermined fairness in sports.

Cox, for his part, referenced the potential effects on transgender youth.

"I struggle to understand so much of it and the science is conflicting. When in doubt however, I always try to err on the side of kindness, mercy and compassion," Cox wrote in a letter to Utah legislative leaders.

The vetoes come as Cox and Holcomb's counterparts in nearly a dozen conservative-leaning states have enacted similar legislation and politicians have honed in on transgender kids in sports as a campaign issue in states ranging from Missouri to Pennsylvania.

As election season approaches, Republican leaders in Utah said listening to their constituents inspired the move to override the veto. "Doing nothing is taking a step backward for women. Finding a solution to this complicated issue is necessary to maintain fair competition now and in the future," Utah Senate President Stuart Adams said in a statement.

Shortly after announcing his veto, the governor also called for a special session to provide taxpayer funding for lawsuits filed against school districts and youth sports organizations, an apparent acknowledgement that his veto would not stand.

In Utah, there are four transgender players out of 85,000 who are competing in school sports after being ruled eligible by the state's high school athletic association. Only one competes in girls sports. There are no public concerns about competitive advantages.

"Four kids who are just trying to find some friends and feel like they are a part of something. Four kids trying to get through each day," Cox said in the letter explaining his veto, in which he cited suicide rates for transgender youth. "Rarely has so much fear and anger been directed at so few. I don't understand what they are going through or why they feel the way they do. But I want them to live."

Banning transgender kids from competition, their advocates argue, would have little impact on sports but would send a wider, deeply painful message to already vulnerable kids that they don't belong in an important piece of American school culture.

Supporters of a ban argue, amid growing transgender visibility, more players could soon be in girls leagues around the country and eventually dominate, changing the nature of girls sports.

The issue was one of the most contentious of the year in a state where most lawmakers are members

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of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints and respectful politics are prized as "The Utah Way." Deeply conservative leaders and LGBTQ advocates have brokered compromises to advance rights and protections in the past. But not this time.

In Utah, the ban was introduced less than four hours before lawmakers were set to adjourn for the session, upending a year of negotiations over alternative requirements framed as a compromise. Those requirements would have allowed transgender kids to play after getting approval from a government-appointed commission. Cox was on board, but the measure struggled to win support from either social conservatives or the LGBTQ advocacy group Equality Utah.

Sue Robbins, who serves on the group's Transgender Advisory Council, said the last-minute change came as a blow. "We were trying to find a middle ground," she said. "Then all of a sudden this comes about ... it was kind of crushing."

For one Utah woman whose 13-year-old transgender child loves sports, it was brutal. "I still don't think they understand what it means and how much those kids have to overcome, to even get to the point of competing," said the mother, who The Associated Press agreed not to name to avoid identifying her daughter.

The late change destroyed what faith she had in the legislative process. "I was appalled ... This is probably where they wanted to be all along and just played the game."

Much of the discussion since the bill's passage has centered on legal challenges that even backers say could thwart the ban from being enacted.

For Utah's Republican-supermajority Statehouse, where lawmakers frequently exalt fiscal responsibility, the costs of potential lawsuits are hard to anticipate and could depend on whether challenges seek to block the ban's enactment or allege discrimination and seek damages, Republican House Speaker Brad Wilson said.

Regardless, lawmakers think the legislation is worth the possible costs, he added. "One of the things we care a lot about is competitive and safe women's sports. And if there is a cost to the state of Utah to preserve and protect that, that clearly is policy that lawmakers are comfortable with."

The sponsor of the legislation, Republican Rep. Kera Birkeland, said after it passed that she once preferred the compromise commission but eventually came around to social conservatives' view that a ban was more clear-cut, especially because the transgender community shuddered at the idea of subjecting a small subset of kids to review and scrutiny.

The nature of the issue, she said, unfortunately doesn't lend itself to compromises. "We've just kind of furthered the culture war on this issue. I'm not happy about that. I wanted to believe that a lot of progress was made," she said about attempts to find middle ground. "I think on these types of issues, it's next to impossible to do it."

Eleven states have enacted bans targeting transgender athletes — Alabama, Arkansas, Florida, Idaho, Iowa, Mississippi, Montana, South Dakota, Tennessee, Texas and West Virginia.

Lawmakers in at least 12 other states are considering some form of a ban on transgender student-athletes in youth sports, according to a tally from the National Conference of State Legislatures.

Noem signs bill wiping away fees for concealed gun permits

PIERRE, S.D. (AP) — South Dakota Gov. Kristi Noem on Tuesday signed a bill to wipe away state and county fees for concealed firearm permits.

The Republican governor brought the proposal this year as a way to both tout her support for gun ownership rights and cut government fees. She initially proposed eliminating state business filing fees as part of the bill, but lawmakers struck that portion from the legislation. They argued it would have created a flood of out-of-state entities applying for business registrations in South Dakota.

"It will not cost you a penny to exercise your Second Amendment rights in South Dakota," Noem said in a statement announcing the bill signing.

The bill is estimated to cost the state about \$110,000 annually in lost revenue. The Secretary of State's

office will reimburse counties for the revenue they will lose from being unable to collect permit fees.

The governor also signed 13 other bills dealing with business regulations and tax structures. They include an \$8 million allocation to the state's system for handling applications for unemployment benefits and a bill that allows ranchers to classify land based on soil type to avoid it being taxed as cropland.

Hotel owner wants to ban Native Americans from property

RAPID CITY, S.D. (AP) — A social media post from an owner of a South Dakota hotel attempting to ban Native Americans from the property following a weekend shooting drew quick condemnation from the leader of the Cheyenne River Sioux Tribe and the city's mayor.

Connie Uhre, one of the owners of the Grand Gateway Hotel in Rapid City, said in a Facebook post Sunday that she cannot "allow a Native American to enter our business including Cheers," which is the establishment's bar and casino.

That followed a shooting at the hotel early Saturday involving two teenagers. Rapid City police spokesman Brendyn Medina said both the victim and the shooting suspect are Native American.

Cheyenne River Sioux Tribe Chairman Harold Frazier condemned Uhre's post, calling it racist and discriminatory, and demanded an apology.

"It is foolish to attack a race of people and not all of the issues affecting the society in which we live. This includes racism," Frazier said in a statement. "The members of the Great Sioux Nation who visit our sacred Black Hills are often subject to this kind of behavior. Those members that choose to live on our treaty territory are often treated as a problem, no matter how we choose to live."

Messages left at the hotel for Uhre and her son Nick Uhre, a manager, were not immediately returned.

Mayor Steve Allender posted a screenshot of Connie Uhre's comment and said Monday on Twitter that neither the shooting nor the hotel's response reflects the city's values.

"I just felt that I couldn't be silent and pretend like this is just a harmless venting out of frustration," he said. "This is an attack on not only the 12% of Rapid Citians who are Native American, but also the larger Native American population nationwide.."

Allender said discrimination based upon race is unlawful in addition to being wrong and heartless.

"This is a much larger issue that they'll have to defend to someone else, not me," the mayor told the Rapid City Journal.

Rapid City, known to many as the gateway to Mount Rushmore, is home to more than 77,000 people. According to the U.S. Census Bureau, at least 11% of its residents identify as American Indian or Alaska Native.

Uhre's post and the tense reaction it attracted is the latest incident involving fragile race relations in Rapid City. A demonstration in the city last Fourth of July holiday called for better treatment of Indigenous people by police and others.

Editorial Roundup: South Dakota

By The Associated Press undefined
Yankton Press & Dakotan. March 21, 2022.

Editorial: Yankton Transit And Manpower Issues

We often tend to notice some of the most vital services in our community only when they aren't there or have to alter their ability to serve us.

That currently applies, in a way, to Yankton Transit, a nonprofit transportation service. It's not disappearing, but Transit officials announced last week that they will be ending morning bus routes involving the transportation of children to school for the remainder of the school year. This becomes effective March 28.

Yankton Transit is facing the same issue that many businesses and other nonprofits are dealing with these days: the lack of manpower. In this case, it's the overall lack of drivers to cover all the potential routes. There are 14 drivers currently available to handle various shifts, but the service has lost more than 150 hours of manpower since the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic two years ago, and that shortfall

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is forcing Transit officials to focus on their priorities.

On top of that list are community members — often, the elderly or disabled — who rely on Yankton Transit for transportation to medical appointments or other needs.

"We have been denying medical rides, and that's heartbreaking when you can't give someone a ride to a medical appointment, and they don't have the funds to pay for a taxi ride," Terry Kirchner, Yankton Transit operations manager, told the Press & Dakotan last week. "It really hurts when we have to tell people, 'No.'"

Yankton Transit's cost of \$2.50 per ride is a fraction of what cab services charge, and the monetary difference can greatly impact those on fixed incomes.

This is a vital service that this nonprofit agency provides. It's one many of us take for granted.

Yankton Transit has provided its services for others, too, and that includes parents sending kids to and from school. (Fortunately, the change in morning service will not affect the afternoon bus schedules.) The service can also be a key component when the community hosts major events. For instance, Yankton Transit logged thousands of miles last September while working with the world archery tournaments here. Transit's ability to reliably shuttle archers to and from other towns to Yankton was essential to the success of the tournaments, which brought global attention to the community.

So, when this service has issues, it impacts a lot of people.

What Yankton Transit needs now are bus drivers willing not only to be trained and get licensed, but also to interact courteously with customers and offer them assistance, if its needed, in using the buses. And that could allow for the return of expanded services.

Transit officials are hopeful that issues can be resolved to allow it to resume morning school transportation this fall.

In the meantime, while they seek more drivers, we can get a better focus on what this relatively simple service truly means to our community.

London Symphony, Simon Rattle work with California students

By RONALD BLUM Associated Press

Simon Rattle was getting ready to leave Europe for the first time since the start of the pandemic and head to California with the London Symphony Orchestra for a residency with students at Santa Barbara's Music Academy of the West.

"It's kind of a miracle that it's happening," he said.

A U.S. tour started Saturday in Palo Alto, continued on to Berkeley and Costa Mesa before three concerts in Santa Barbara this week.

The symphony launched its partnership with the academy in 2018 when five section principals spent 10 days teaching and picked a dozen students as fellows to work with the orchestra in London the following January. Rattle did not accompany the company on its summer 2019 trip to California, and then the pandemic disrupted the world.

A 67-year-old Briton who is among the world's leading conductors, Rattle was at his home in Berlin for much of the next year.

"We spent so much of our life having everything organized two or three years in advance, at least," he said. "And now the fact that we don't always know what's going on next week means that sometimes it gives you a sense of vertigo, but in other ways it makes you very alive for anything."

"I have still on my desk a huge pile of programs that we had to change — and then the second change and then fourth," he said. "In a way I suppose, musicians, we should be willing to do what ever turns up. Now we can't always be hermetically sealed and booked far ahead, so we've learned to be more flexible."

Rattle gained renown as head of Britain's City of Birmingham Symphony Orchestra from 1980-98, then succeeded Claudio Abbado as chief conductor of the Berlin Philharmonic from 2002-18.

On occasion, he listens to his old performances.

"Sometimes you think, oh, God, that's better than I thought it would be. Other times you think, oh, that should have been taken behind the barn and shot," he said. "It doesn't always feel like the same person

even.”

His white, bushy hair trimmed shorter as he gets older, Rattle became music director of the LSO in 2017 and ends that tenure in 2023, when he starts a five-year contract as chief conductor of Munich’s Bavarian Radio Symphony Orchestra.

“Every great orchestra has its own personality,” he said. “There is a particular type of fierceness. of excitement, the kind of hell-for-leather feeling, which always was a very London Symphony Orchestra quality, an extremely flexible orchestra, kind of open everything, but there’s a particular type of feeling, of electricity and rhythmic charge, which is very much theirs.

“The weight of the Berlin Philharmonic is a very particular thing, but they would kill to have the kind of rhythmic precision of an orchestra like the LSO. It’s fascinating as a conductor, because often you’re playing the same piece with different orchestras and you come out with very different stories.”

William Cedeño, a 30-year-old principal flutist of the South Dakota Symphony Orchestra, earned a fellowship with the music academy to train with Rattle. He learns from the conductor’s methods as much as from his mechanics.

“There is an aura that he has about music that just kind of is very contagious,” Cedeño said. “One of the most interesting things that I learned was actually the way he worked in rehearsals and the way he spoke about music. It was just a emotionally, a philosophical way of explaining things to be done. And he’s very good at showing them instead of really just kind of fixing rehearsal things by just like: ‘Oh, you guys play louder, you guys play softer, you play with more articulation.’”

Rattle withdrew from concerts on March 3 and 6 celebrating the 40th anniversary of London’s Barbican Centre while he was recovering from neck surgery. He is more reticent to agree to opera engagements far from home, such as his acclaimed appearances at New York’s Metropolitan Opera of Debussy’s “Pelléas et Melisande” in 2010, Wagner’s “Tristan und Isolde” in 2016 and Strauss’ “Der Rosenkavalier” in 2019, the latter featuring his wife, mezzo-soprano Magdalena Kožená, as Octavian.

“I can’t imagine that my life now allows two months away from home, away from a young family That’s the kind of thing that has changed in the last years. I think that part of my life is over,” he said. “I was never an enormously peripatetic conductor like some of my colleagues, but I was still away a lot. And we all just have to find the way we can make that work. I was always one for kind of long relationships anyway, so I gave up the permanent guest-conducting tennis game relatively early.”

Remaining home during the pandemic reinforced his outlook.

“Anybody in Europe who had a garden was so pathetically grateful,” he said. “We missed all kinds of extraordinary musical experiences, but also that I was here for them. For my 5-year-old daughter learning to ride the bike, which I probably would have missed. Look, I mean, all of us have had a reset over this time. Everybody has to decide what’s most important to them and how they can live their life. Those of us who have been able to find benefits from it, we have to realize that we’re the lucky ones.”

Canadian Pacific to resume operations after work stoppage

The Associated Press undefined

Thousands of conductors, engineers, train and yard workers will return to work Tuesday after an agreement between Canadian Pacific Railway and the Teamsters Canada Rail Conference ended a two-day work stoppage.

A work stoppage that began Sunday brought trains to a halt across Canada and interrupted fertilizer and other shipments to and from the U.S. as 3,000 workers walked off the job.

The two sides will enter into binding arbitration under a new agreement, according to Canadian Pacific Railway Ltd.

Canadian Pacific said that it will immediately begin working with customers to resume normal train operations across Canada as soon as possible.

A lengthy interruption of fertilizer shipments could have hamstrung U.S. farmers who are nearing the spring planting season, as well as exacerbated existing supply chain bottlenecks in the U.S. and Canada

that stem from the COVID-19 pandemic.

CP is the leading carrier of potash, a plant nutrient used in the production of multiple crops. According to investor documents, the railroad carries 70% of the potash produced in North America, all from mines in Saskatchewan.

The railroad also carries fertilizers, including phosphate, urea, ammonium sulfate, ammonium nitrate and anhydrous ammonia. About half its fertilizer shipments originate from processing plants in Alberta.

U.S. trains were not affected by the work stoppage, but the railroad cannot make shipments between the two nations.

Russian Olympians face backlash after Vladimir Putin rally

LONDON (AP) — Russian Olympic athletes who participated in a rally supporting President Vladimir Putin and the invasion of Ukraine are facing a backlash, with one losing a sponsorship deal and facing a disciplinary investigation.

Medalists from cross-country skiing, gymnastics, figure skating and swimming gathered on stage at the Luzhniki Stadium on Friday as part of the concert and entertainment program around Putin's speech.

Olympic champion swimmer Evgeny Rylov is under investigation for attending the event, the sport's governing body told The Associated Press.

"FINA is deeply disappointed to note the reports regarding Evgeny Rylov's appearance at the Luzhniki Stadium during Friday's rally. We are investigating the matter further," the governing body said in an e-mail Tuesday.

Rylov has also lost his endorsement deal with swimwear manufacturer Speedo because of his involvement in the pro-Putin rally.

"Following his attendance at the Luzhniki Stadium in Moscow at the weekend, Speedo can confirm that it has terminated the sponsorship of Evgeny Rylov with immediate effect," the company said. "We condemn the war in Ukraine in the strongest possible way and stand in solidarity with the people of Ukraine, our athletes and our teammates who have been impacted by the conflict."

Speedo added it will donate the remainder of Rylov's sponsorship fee to UNHCR, the United Nations agency caring for refugees.

Most of the athletes, including Rylov, were pictured wearing jackets with a "Z" on the chest at the rally. The letter isn't part of the Russian alphabet but has become a symbol of support for Russian troops after it was used as a marker on Russian armored vehicles operating in Ukraine.

Other Olympic medalist athletes in attendance included figure skaters Victoria Sinitsina, Nikita Katsalapov, Evgenia Tarasova and Vladimir Morozov; cross-country skier Alexander Bolshunov; and rhythmic gymnastic twin sisters Dina and Arina Averina.

The athletes stood on stage as the national anthem was played in an apparent reference to how Russian teams at last year's Summer Olympics in Tokyo and this year's Winter Olympics in Beijing didn't have the anthem at their ceremonies in the fallout from years of doping disputes.

The event was held on the anniversary of Russia's 2014 annexation of Crimea from Ukraine, with patriotic songs and praise for troops and Russia-backed separatists.

"Not so long ago we supported them in this difficult Olympic season, now they support the war against us and our country," Ukrainian ice dancer Oleksandra Nazarova wrote on Instagram last week with a picture of four Russian skaters taking part in the rally.

Nazarova and partner Maksym Nikitin are both from Kharkiv, the mostly Russian-speaking city in north-eastern Ukraine which has been subjected to intense bombardments by Russian forces.

Since the invasion, dozens of sports banned Russian and Belarusian athletes from their events after the International Olympic Committee recommended they be expelled from competition. Belarus has been an ally of Russia in the war.

There is a precedent for a Russian competitor being personally punished for supporting government policies. Gymnast Ivan Kuliak is facing a disciplinary hearing for wearing a "Z" symbol on the podium next

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to a Ukrainian competitor, and chess player Sergey Karjakin was suspended for six months Monday for social media posts with strident support for Putin and Russian troops.

The governing bodies for skiing, gymnastics and skating have all barred Russian teams from their events. Swimming has not but says Russians and Belarusians will have to compete "in a neutral capacity."

Rylov, however, posted on Instagram on Wednesday that he will boycott the swimming world championships in June and July "as a sign of support" for Russian athletes who were barred from other competitions.

What they want: Allies meet in Europe for Ukraine summits

By RAF CASERT Associated Press

BRUSSELS (AP) — Even before Air Force One touches down in Brussels to bring President Joe Biden to three Ukraine summits on Thursday, Western allies have already found what they are looking for — that all too rare sense of unity.

They have Russian President Vladimir Putin to thank for that.

After Russia's invasion of neighboring Ukraine on Feb. 24 and its brutal war since then over the past month, allies from Washington to Tokyo and Brussels have acted in unison.

And they did it with such staggering speed to hit the Kremlin with unprecedented sanctions and offers of help to Kyiv. That symbolism has the space to trump urgent problem-fixing this week.

With staccato rhythm, Biden will attend a NATO, Group of Seven and European Union summits all within 12 hours of driving around Europe's diplomatic capital from one headquarters to another. The only reason this is possible is because all agree on the major issues so, basically, little time will be needed to paper over deep differences.

On Friday, Biden will be traveling to Poland, the humanitarian hub of the crisis where more than 2 million Ukrainian refugees have arrived, and where U.S. forces have shored up NATO's eastern flank.

WHAT BIDEN WANTS

Beyond the all-important handshakes, group photos and warm scenes of togetherness, Biden will use his time in Brussels to announce new sanctions against Russia while underscoring the importance of closing possible loopholes in the avalanche of Western measures that have already been enacted.

At a time when it is essential to avoid fissures in what's been a largely unified Western response to Russia, the U.S. president will look to press important allies like Poland to dial back the idea of deploying a Western peacekeeping mission to Ukraine. It's an idea that the U.S. and some other NATO members see as too risky as they seek to deny Russia any pretext to broaden the war beyond Ukraine's borders.

For his domestic audience, look for Biden to once again underscore the heroics of the Ukrainian military and volunteers who have managed to hold off an imposing Russian military. He will highlight those remarkable efforts — as well as the generosity of the Poles and other allies at the front lines of the humanitarian crisis — as he redoubles his calls for Americans to stand firm against a Russian war that is spurring gas price hikes and adding to inflationary pressures in the U.S.

Overall, Biden also wants to revel in the scenes of unity at the headquarters of NATO and the EU, where memories of an unraveling trans-Atlantic bond riven with disputes under former President Donald Trump are far from forgotten.

WHAT NATO WANTS

That show of unity will also be paramount at NATO headquarters, where the United States has traditionally given orders, with the rest, sometimes grudgingly, going along.

The summit on Thursday will be a new opportunity for the 30-nation military organization to publicly show that Washington is consulting its allies, something that was sorely lacking under the Trump administration.

Biden and his counterparts are expected to discuss the kinds of "red lines" that might draw NATO out of its defensive posture — the world's biggest security organization has mostly bolstered its own defenses since the invasion a month ago — to respond with force.

Nuclear, chemical or a massive cyberattack appear the most likely triggers, but NATO remains wary of any response that might draw it into a full-scale war with nuclear-armed Russia.

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The leaders are also set to discuss the longer-term future of NATO's defenses along its eastern flank, ranging from Estonia in the north, down around western Ukraine to Bulgaria on the Black Sea. Military commanders have been ordered to draw up options.

NATO Secretary-General Jens Stoltenberg said last week that the "new defense posture" would include substantially more land forces at higher readiness, more air power filling NATO skies and aircraft carrier strike groups, submarines and combat ships "on a persistent basis" at sea. Expect applause and full support when such issues are raised.

WHAT THE EU WANTS

Even if it gained a brutal enemy on its eastern doorstep, the 27-nation bloc also fully regained an old friend, and it will be able to shake on that friendship when Biden attends a summit of all EU leaders which had already been months in the making.

No European will mind. Together with the Biden administration, the EU has been standing shoulder to shoulder in pushing through four packages of sanctions against Putin, his advisers and oligarchs, cutting deeper than many would have thought. This comes after feeling looked down upon for four years under Trump, who among other things, even slapped sanctions on the EU.

"It is to show this message of unity," said Europe Minister Clement Beaune of France, which holds the rotating EU presidency. He also set the scene for more sanctions pressure in a show of solidarity with Ukraine.

At the same time, the EU is hoping Biden won't push demands for sanctions too far for a partner whose trade ties with Russia are far bigger and intricately intertwined.

"Sanctions must not hit European states harder than the Russian leadership. That is our principle," German Chancellor Olaf Scholz said Wednesday. "Nobody is served if we consciously gamble with our economic base."

Such unity will also help the EU on the global stage since the optics of a strong embrace of Biden will also not be lost on Chinese President Xi Jinping, with whom the EU has a summit set for next week.

WHAT UKRAINE WANTS

There won't be a seat reserved anywhere for Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy, yet he will be on everyone's mind — not least because he will have a video link at the NATO summit.

It has been crystal clear what he wants from Western allies.

With passion and rhetorical flair, he has pleaded with legislatures in the United States, the EU, Britain, Japan and Canada, for more military and humanitarian aid. But his demands for NATO to enforce a no-fly zone to protect his people have been rejected, with the alliance making clear it won't risk an all-out war with Russia.

He will get the same reply from Scholz.

"I hear the voices of those who demand a no-fly zone or NATO peacekeepers in Ukraine," the German leader said Wednesday. "In almost 80 years of post-war history we have successfully avoided the unthinkable - a direct military confrontation between our western defense alliance, NATO, and Russia. It must stay that way."

Zelenskyy has been having a series of conversations with Western leaders in the days before Thursday's summits and he expects them to approve more sanctions to punish Russia and more help for Ukraine.

"We will work, we will fight, as hard as we can, to the last, bravely and openly," he said in a video address Wednesday.

Amid protests, Europe limited in curbing high energy prices

By KELVIN CHAN and ARITZ PARRA Associated Press

MADRID (AP) — Across Europe, governments are slashing fuel taxes and doling out tens of billions to help consumers, truckers, farmers and others cope with spiking energy prices made worse by Russia's invasion of Ukraine.

But it's not enough for some whose livelihoods hinge on fuel.

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Miguel Ángel Rodríguez was one of 200 concrete truck drivers who held a slow-driving protest around Madrid this week. He said filling up used to cost 1,600 euros (\$1,760) a month, but he's been forking out an extra 500 euros since the start of the year because of the rising price of diesel.

"We will continue striking because, at the end of the day, it's pretty much the same for us to go out to work or to stay at home," Rodríguez said. He warned that his rising costs were part of "a domino effect that is only going to drive us all to our ruin unless the government takes some definitive action."

He's among those in industries like trucking or fishing who are staging protests to push politicians to ease their financial pain. The war has exacerbated a monthslong energy crunch in Europe, which is dependent on Russian oil and natural gas. Governments have limited options to provide lasting relief as households and businesses face crippling energy bills, high prices at the pump and other effects. Volatile energy markets control natural gas and oil prices that have soared and fueled record inflation.

Countries like Italy, the Netherlands, Belgium, Greece, Sweden and Cyprus are doing what they can, passing temporary efforts to provide immediate help: slashing fuel taxes, rolling out heating and power subsidies or rebates, and capping energy bills for households and small businesses.

Such measures "are sensible, and some of them, such as energy tax cuts, could be sustained indefinitely — even if prices continue to increase," said Elisabetta Cornago, a senior research fellow at the Centre for European Reform think tank who specializes in EU energy policy.

But she called them partial solutions that "only make a small difference."

"The main problem is that these measures to keep energy prices low will also suppress incentives for energy efficiency, for investment in green energy generation, and for electrifying sectors that currently rely on fossil fuels — so they could make the long-term pain of adjustment harder," Cornago said.

Raising interest rates, the tool wielded by central banks to tame inflation, also would do little to rein in energy prices — which European Central Bank President Christine Lagarde noted last month. That's because "rising energy prices are due to fundamental shifts in energy markets," Cornago said.

The energy crisis will be a hot topic at a European Council summit starting Thursday in Brussels, where leaders from Spain, Portugal, Italy and Greece will call for an urgent, coordinated bloc-wide response. EU officials said Tuesday that they're moving toward the joint purchase of natural gas and ensuring the bloc's storage facilities are topped up.

In the meantime, workers are taking to the streets.

Truckers around France, dissatisfied with aid they consider "insufficient," held a day of action Monday, with a group of independent drivers in Normandy and the English Channel region staging a blockade that prevented hundreds of trucks from moving.

Collateral damage included a Paris gig by British hard rock group Royal Blood. The band tweeted the cancellation of its show Monday night because its gear was stuck at a service station near Paris and "the protesters will not allow the (equipment) trucks to leave."

In Cyprus, hundreds of livestock breeders protested Monday outside the country's Presidential Palace and demanded compensation to offset the sharp increase in animal feed prices because of higher transport costs tied to fuel price hikes.

Spanish truck drivers have been disrupting delivery of fresh produce and other goods for supermarkets for more than a week, while farmers paraded their tractors through Madrid on Sunday. Outside government offices, cattle breeders poured out milk that they said costs them more to produce than they earn selling it.

With the country's logistics in disarray from the trucker protests, Spain's national fishing federation said members can't even move their catch from the ports to the markets further inland.

"Right now, it makes no sense to set out to sea to lose money," said Basilio Otero, head of the FNCP guild.

Italian truck drivers and fishing boat owners and crews also have held one-day protests over high fuel costs.

Their actions come even as governments have spent billions to help businesses and households. France last week unveiled a multibillion-euro economic assistance package, including partial subsidies of fuel

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for fishing boats and trucks over the next four months, and 3 billion euros to help some companies pay soaring gas and electric bills.

Greece is giving a one-off subsidy to taxi drivers, and Britain is pledging help for households as utility bills are set to rise 54% in April because of soaring natural gas costs.

Officials in Cyprus say they have lowered fuel taxes to the "absolute minimum permissible" under EU regulations for the next six months, which will cost the government 30 million euros in lost revenue.

Albania, which normally relies on hydroelectric dams for energy, has ran up against a dry winter, forcing it to turn to fossil fuel imports. To save energy, the government has cut power to streetlights on some main roads and intersections and has public employees working from home for two to three days. It's paying up to 80% of electricity bills for households and small businesses.

To bring down prices long term, there are two options, Cornago said: investment in renewables and measures like better insulation for homes or electrifying industries that rely on natural gas.

In the nearer future, an EU proposal for a common strategic gas reserve could work to improve security of supply by next winter.

"But realistically, refilling reserves at a time of tight gas markets is also going to result in higher prices for consumers generally," Cornago said.

4 weeks, still defiant: Ukraine fights into 2nd month of war

By NEBI QENA and CARA ANNA Associated Press

KYIV, Ukraine (AP) — One month of war, still defiant. With its government still standing and its outnumbered troops battling Russian forces to bloody stalemates in multiple places, Ukraine is scarred, wounded, mourning its dead but far from beaten as it braces for a second month of bombing, combat, casualties and resistance.

When, on Feb. 24, Russia unleashed its Ukraine invasion force in Europe's biggest offensive since World War II and floated the prospect of nuclear escalation if the West intervened, a lightning-swift toppling of Ukraine's democratically elected government seemed possible.

But with Wednesday marking four full weeks of fighting, Russia is instead bogged down in an increasingly attritional, costly and uncertain military campaign, with untold numbers of dead, no immediate end in sight, and encircled by western sanctions biting hard on its economy and currency. U.S. President Joe Biden and key allies meeting in Brussels and Warsaw this week will discuss possible new sanctions and additional military assistance for Ukraine.

Repeatedly pushed back by hit-and-run Ukrainian units armed with Western-supplied weapons, Russian troops are shelling targets from afar, falling back on tactics they previously used in reducing cities to ruins in Syria and Chechnya. Major Russian strategic objectives remain unfulfilled: The capital Kyiv has been repeatedly hit but not taken or even encircled.

More shelling and gunfire shook the city again Wednesday, with plumes of black smoke rising from the western outskirts, where the two sides battled for control of multiple suburbs. A shopping mall and buildings were hit, injuring four people, the city administration reported.

In the south, the port city of Mariupol has seen the worst devastation of the war, under weeks of siege and bombardment. So far, the Ukrainian forces' defense has prevented its fall. That is thwarting the Russian aim of opening up another permanent and secured land link from the Crimean peninsula, seized from Ukraine in 2014, to Russia.

Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy says 100,000 civilians remain in the shattered city that has been struck from the air, land and sea. Repeated efforts to get desperately needed food and other supplies to those trapped have often failed.

"They bombed us for the past 20 days," said 39-year-old Viktoria Totsen, who fled from Mariupol into Poland. "During the last five days, the planes were flying over us every five seconds and dropped bombs everywhere — on residential buildings, kindergartens, art schools, everywhere."

Zelenskyy, speaking Tuesday in his nightly video address to his nation, said efforts to establish stable

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humanitarian corridors for Mariupol residents are almost all being "foiled by the Russian occupiers, by shelling or deliberate terror."

He accused Russian forces of seizing one humanitarian convoy. Deputy Prime Minister Iryna Vereshchuk said the Russians were holding captive 11 bus drivers and four rescue workers along with their vehicles.

The head of the International Committee of the Red Cross traveled Wednesday to Moscow for expected discussions with Russian foreign and defense officials on prisoners of war, the conduct of hostilities, aid delivery and other humanitarian issues.

"The devastation caused by the conflict in recent weeks, as well as eight years of conflict in Donbas, has been vast," Peter Maurer, the ICRC president, said.

A senior U.S. defense official, speaking on condition of anonymity to give the Pentagon's assessment, said Russian ships in the Sea of Azov added to the shelling of Mariupol.

The hands of one exhausted Mariupol survivor shook as she arrived by train in the western city of Lviv. "There's no connection with the world. We couldn't ask for help," said Julia Krytska, who was helped by volunteers to make it out with her husband and son. "People don't even have water there."

Russian forces also bombed and destroyed a bridge in the encircled northern city of Chernihiv that crossed the Desna River and connected the city to Kyiv, regional governor Viacheslav Chaus said Wednesday. Deliveries of humanitarian aid and evacuations of civilians went through that bridge. Local authorities have warned of a humanitarian disaster in the city, with no water or electricity.

But as Biden embarked Wednesday on a four-day trip to Europe to shore up pressure on Russia, the Kremlin said Russian President Vladimir Putin hasn't yet achieved his aims in Ukraine.

Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov insisted that the military operation was going "strictly in accordance with the plans and purposes that were established beforehand."

Putin's aims remain to "get rid of the military potential of Ukraine" and to "ensure that Ukraine changes from an anti-Russian center to a neutral country," Peskov said.

Western officials say Ukrainian resistance has brought much of Russia's advance to a halt and that Russian forces are facing serious shortages of food, fuel and cold weather gear, leaving some soldiers suffering from frostbite. Britain's defense ministry said Wednesday the war in northern Ukraine is largely "static," with Russian forces trying to reorganize.

"We have seen indications that the Ukrainians are going a bit more on the offensive now," Pentagon spokesman John Kirby told reporters separately in Washington. He said that was particularly true in southern Ukraine, including near Kherson, where "they have tried to regain territory."

Russia's far stronger, bigger military has many Western military experts warning against overconfidence in Ukraine's long-term odds. Russia's practice in past wars in Chechnya and Syria has been to grind down resistance with strikes that flattened cities, killing countless civilians and sending millions fleeing.

But Russian forces appeared unprepared and have often performed badly against Ukrainian resistance.

The U.S. estimates Russia has lost a bit more than 10% of the overall combat capability it had at the start of the fight, including troops, tanks and other materiel.

The invasion has driven more than 10 million people from their homes, almost a quarter of Ukraine's population, according to the United Nations.

Thousands of civilians are believed to have died. Estimates of Russian military casualties vary widely, but even conservative figures by Western officials are in the low thousands.

Talks to end the fighting have continued by video. Zelenskyy said negotiations with Russia are going "step by step, but they are going forward."

U.N. Secretary-General Antonio Guterres said he saw progress "coming into view on several key issues," and that the gains are enough to end hostilities now. He gave no details.

In their last update on March 15, Mariupol officials said at least 2,300 people had died in the siege. Accounts from the city suggest the true toll is much higher, with bodies lying uncollected. Airstrikes the past week destroyed a theater and an art school where many civilians were taking shelter.

Zelenskyy said more than 7,000 people were evacuated from Mariupol on Tuesday. Those who remain

suffer “in inhuman conditions, under a full blockade, without food, without water, without medicine and under constant shelling, under constant bombardment,” he said.

Before the war, 430,000 people lived in Mariupol.

Perched on the Sea of Azov, Mariupol is a crucial port for Ukraine and lies along a stretch of territory between Russia and Crimea. It’s not clear how much of the city Russia holds, with fleeing residents saying fighting continues street by street.

Further west in the seaside city of Odesa, street musicians played Tuesday under cloudless skies as barricades lined the streets and couples parted ways at the station in tears, as residents prepared for a potential escalated Russian assault.

Fondly known as the Pearl of the Black Sea, Odesa was awash with a bittersweet air — sandbags and security forces clashing with romantic jazz rippling from the train station speakers.

“I can’t understand what has happened,” said Igor Tropskiy, a 56-year-old musician who’s been playing the drums on the streets of Odesa for over three decades.

At the central station, a young man on the platform said goodbye by phone to his girlfriend sitting inside the train. Only a pane of glass separated them.

Biden seeks new sanctions, help for Ukrainians in Europe

By CHRIS MEGERIAN and AAMER MADHANI Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — With Europe facing its most precarious future since World War II, President Joe Biden will huddle with key allies in Brussels and Warsaw this week as the leaders try to prevent Russia’s war on Ukraine from spiraling into an even greater catastrophe.

Biden embarks Wednesday on a four-day trip that will test his ability to navigate the continent’s worst crisis since WWII ended in 1945. There are fears that Russia could use chemical or nuclear weapons as its invasion becomes bogged down in the face of logistical problems and fierce Ukrainian resistance.

Humanitarian challenges are growing as well. Millions of refugees have fled the fighting, mostly by crossing the border into Poland, and the war has jeopardized Ukraine’s wheat and barley harvests, raising the possibility of rising hunger in impoverished areas around the globe.

Jake Sullivan, Biden’s national security adviser, said the president would coordinate with allies on military assistance for Ukraine and new sanctions on Russia. He added that Biden is working on long-term efforts to boost defenses in Eastern Europe, where more countries fear Russian aggression. The president is also aiming to reduce the continent’s reliance on Russian energy.

“This war will not end easily or rapidly,” Sullivan told reporters at a White House briefing on Tuesday. “For the past few months, the West has been united. The president is traveling to Europe to make sure we stay united.”

Sullivan said Vladimir Putin’s references to nuclear weapons at the beginning of the conflict are “something that we do have to be concerned about,” adding that Biden would be talking with allies about “potential responses” if the Russian leader takes that step.

Sullivan’s description of Biden’s trip was another sign that the crisis is entering a new and uncertain phase.

After the initial invasion failed to topple Ukraine’s government, the war has become a grinding endeavor for Putin, who is relying on airstrikes and artillery that are devastating civilian communities. Negotiations between Ukraine and Russia have not produced a cease-fire or a path to ending the conflict, and the U.S. continues to rush weapons like anti-tank missiles to Ukrainian forces.

The war’s ripple effects are also spreading. Biden warned that Russia could be planning cyberattacks that would affect U.S. companies, and he spoke to Chinese President Xi Jinping on Friday to warn him against backing Russia with military or financial assistance. Meanwhile, a top State Department official visited India this week shortly after that country decided to purchase more Russian oil.

“This is one of those decisive moments for an American leader that defines their legacy internationally,” said Timothy Naftali, a presidential historian at New York University.

Biden’s first stop is Brussels, where he’ll attend back-to-back-to-back meetings.

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NATO is holding a hastily arranged emergency summit, where Biden is expected to reiterate his support for Article 5 of the alliance's charter, which commits all members to collective defense if any are attacked.

"I think the meeting of all heads of state and government in NATO will provide us with yet another platform to demonstrate our unity, our support to Ukraine, but also our readiness to protect and defend all NATO allies," NATO Secretary-General Jens Stoltenberg told NBC's "Meet the Press" on Sunday. "And by sending that message, we are preventing an escalation of the conflict to a full-fledged war between NATO and Russia."

Biden will also participate in meetings of the European Union and the Group of Seven, which includes the world's richest democracies.

He'll then travel to Warsaw on Friday to meet Polish officials to discuss the enormous humanitarian strain caused by the Ukrainian refugee crisis. Biden is scheduled to meet with Polish President Andrzej Duda on Saturday.

Duda, whose country suffered a brutal Nazi occupation during World War II, compared Russian actions in Ukraine to Adolf Hitler's infamous SS forces. Visiting Bulgaria on Tuesday, Duda said Putin's army "is behaving in exactly the same way." He said he hoped that those responsible for attacks on civilians would be brought before international courts.

Polish leaders have pressed for a Western peacekeeping mission to intervene in Ukraine, a step that the U.S. and other Western allies worry could lead to a broadening of the war. The Polish leadership also wants an increased military presence along NATO's eastern flank.

Sullivan said Biden's trip to Poland is an important opportunity to "meet with a frontline and very vulnerable ally." Poland is also host to a growing number of U.S. troops, and Sullivan suggested Biden may visit them as well.

Last week, at NATO's Brussels headquarters, U.S. Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin and his counterparts weighed what defenses to set up on the organization's eastern flank, from Estonia in the north through Latvia, Lithuania and Poland down to Bulgaria and Romania on the Black Sea.

The aim is to deter Putin from ordering an invasion of any of the 30 allies, not just for the duration of the war in Ukraine but into the future.

Putin has demanded that NATO withdraw its forces on its eastern flank and stop expanding.

Sullivan said that Biden, during his talks in Europe, "will work with allies on longer-term adjustments to NATO force posture."

Biden's visit to Poland follows on Vice President Kamala Harris' visit to Warsaw and Bucharest earlier this month. While Harris was in Poland, Duda called on the Biden administration to expedite visa procedures for Ukrainians who have family living in the United States so that they could resettle in the U.S. at least temporarily.

Live updates: Ukraine leader urges heavier sanctions by Asia

By The Associated Press undefined

LVIV, Ukraine — Ukraine's president is urging Japan and other Asian countries to step up sanctions on Russia over its invasion of Ukraine.

In an address by video link to Japan's parliament on Wednesday, President Volodymyr Zelenskyy called on Japan to place a national embargo on trade with Russia. He also asked Japanese companies to pull out of the Russian market.

"I call on Asian states and your partners to unite their efforts so that Russia seeks peace and stops the tsunami of its brutal invasion of our state," Zelenskyy said in the address.

He told the Japanese lawmakers that over the past 28 days, "thousands of people, including 121 children" were killed in Ukraine and about nine million were forced to leave their homes.

"Our people cannot even adequately bury their murdered relatives, friends and neighbors. They have to be buried right in the yards of destroyed buildings, next to the roads," Zelenskyy said.

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KEY DEVELOPMENTS IN THE RUSSIA-UKRAINE WAR:

- Ukrainian leaders accuse Russia of seizing 15 workers from aid convoy
- Biden starts a trip to Europe as Russia's war in Ukraine bogs down, challenges grow
- Amid Russia's new crackdowns, small signs of defiance emerge
- A new fund directs its support to Ukraine's long-term needs
- Security Council taking up Russian resolution on Ukraine crisis as Assembly hears rival resolutions
- Spanish ties provide safe havens for Ukrainian refugees
- Go to <https://apnews.com/hub/russia-ukraine> for more coverage

OTHER DEVELOPMENTS:

WARSAW, Poland — Poland's Internal Security Agency says it is expelling 45 Russian intelligence officers using diplomatic status as cover to stay in country.

The agency said Wednesday it is asking the Foreign Ministry to urgently expel the Russians, describing them as a danger to Poland's security.

The agency also said it detained a Polish citizen on suspicion of espionage on behalf of the Russian secret services. The suspect worked in Warsaw's registry office and had access to city archives.

"Given the nature of documents kept by those units, the activity of the suspect posed a threat to both the internal and external security of Poland," the agency said in a statement.

BERLIN — Four environmental think tanks say the European Union can stop its imports of Russian gas by 2025, allowing the bloc to end its dependence in the medium term on a key energy source that's been called into question amid the war in Ukraine.

A report published Wednesday by Ember, E3G, the Regulatory Assistance Project and Bellona concludes that ramping up solar and wind power, reducing demand and electrification can replace two-thirds of Russian gas imports within three years.

It suggests that the remaining shortfall can be met through existing gas infrastructure, without the need to build new terminals for LNG imports that some countries are now eyeing.

GENEVA — The Swiss attorney general's office says it is collecting evidence from Ukraine refugees on possible international crimes or embargo violations stemming from Russia's war with Ukraine.

The attorney general's office said in a statement sent to The Associated Press on Wednesday that it's in contact with the Swiss State Secretariat for Economic Affairs, which monitors possible sanctions violations, to see if any violations of embargo law have been committed and merit investigation.

The Swiss government has joined the European Union in imposing sanctions on hundreds of Russian individuals and entities in the wake of Russia's invasion of Ukraine. Switzerland is not part of the EU.

The Swiss Bankers' Association has estimated the assets of Russian clients deposited in Swiss banks total between 150-200 billion Swiss francs (about \$160-\$215 billion).

No criminal proceedings in Switzerland have yet been launched in connection with the war.

GENEVA — The head of the International Committee of the Red Cross has arrived in Moscow for talks at the Russian foreign and defense ministries on humanitarian issues caused by Russia's invasion of Ukraine.

Peter Maurer, the ICRC president, was expected Wednesday to take up issues such as prisoners of war, the conduct of hostilities and the delivery of aid.

"The devastation caused by the conflict in recent weeks, as well as eight years of conflict in Donbas, has been vast," Maurer said in a statement, referring to the region of eastern Ukraine held by Russian-backed separatists.

"There are practical steps guided by international humanitarian law that the parties must take to limit the suffering," Maurer said.

Maurer traveled to Ukraine last week. While in Moscow, he was also expected to meet with the head of the Russian Red Cross, which has been helping people who have fled eastern Ukraine into Russia.

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MOSCOW — The Russian parliament has passed a law expanding military veteran status to troops taking part in the invasion of Ukraine.

Veteran status brings various benefits, such as monthly payments, tax breaks, discounts on utilities and preferential access to medical treatment, among other things.

Russia's lower house of parliament, the State Duma, passed the law on Wednesday, four weeks since the start of the war in Ukraine, with the three required readings taking place at once.

LONDON — Britain's defense ministry says the war in northern Ukraine is largely "static," with Russian forces trying to reorganize before resuming a large-scale assault.

Elsewhere in Ukraine, U.K. defense officials say "Russian forces are attempting to envelop Ukrainian forces in the east of the country as they advance from the direction of Kharkiv in the north and Mariupol in the south."

In an update posted Wednesday on social media, Britain's defense ministry said Russian troops in the south are trying to circumvent the city of Mykolaiv as they push west towards Odesa, a key Black Sea port that has so far been spared major attack.

PARIS — French authorities say a convoy of rescue vehicles and emergency equipment is to leave Paris on Wednesday to be provided to Ukraine's emergency service.

A statement from the French foreign and interior ministries says 100 firefighters and rescue staff will dispatch the vehicles and equipment to Romania, at the border with Ukraine. They include 11 fire engines, 16 rescue vehicles, and 23 trucks transporting 49 tons of health and emergency equipment.

It comes in addition to a convoy of 21 new ambulances, which left on Tuesday.

The statement says the operation is meant to support rescuers from Ukraine's Emergency Situations Service "mobilized day and night to provide relief to victims."

BERLIN — German Chancellor Olaf Scholz has reiterated that his country will not support a no-fly zone over Ukraine or send troops to intervene in the war launched by Russia.

Scholz told German lawmakers on Wednesday that "NATO will not become a party to the war. We are in agreement on this with our European allies and the United States."

Still, the German leader said Ukraine could rely on Germany's help, citing the financial and military aid already provided, the harsh sanctions on Russia and the reception of hundreds of thousands of Ukrainian refugees.

Scholz said Germany would not support a boycott of Russian oil, coal and gas, but is seeking to wean itself off those imports by seeking out other suppliers and ramping up the use of renewable energy.

LVIV, Ukraine - The Kyiv city administration says Russian forces shelled the Ukrainian capital overnight and early Wednesday morning, damaging buildings in two districts.

Kyiv authorities said on Telegram that a shopping mall, some private sector buildings and high-rises came under fire in the districts of Sviatoshynskiy and Shevchenkivskiy.

Four people sustained injuries.

LVIV, Ukraine — Russian forces bombed and destroyed a bridge in the encircled city of Chernihiv, the region's governor, Viacheslav Chaus, said.

The destroyed bridge had been used for evacuating civilians and delivering humanitarian aid. It crossed the Desna River and connected the city to Ukraine's capital, Kyiv.

Chernihiv authorities said Tuesday that the encircled city has no water or electricity and called the situation there a humanitarian disaster.

Explosions and bursts of gunfire shook Kyiv on Wednesday morning, and heavy artillery fire could be

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heard from the northwest, where Russian forces have sought to encircle and take the capital's suburbs.

LVIV, Ukraine — Russian military forces destroyed a laboratory at the Chernobyl nuclear plant that worked to improve management of radioactive waste, the Ukrainian agency responsible for the Chernobyl exclusion zone said Tuesday.

The Russian military seized the decommissioned plant at the beginning of the war last month. The exclusion zone is the contaminated area around the plant, site of the world's worst nuclear meltdown in 1986.

The state agency said the laboratory, built at a cost of 6 million euros with support from the European Commission, opened in 2015.

The laboratory contained "highly active samples and samples of radionuclides that are now in the hands of the enemy, which we hope will harm itself and not the civilized world," the agency said in its statement.

Radionuclides are unstable atoms of chemical elements that release radiation.

Ukraine's nuclear regulatory agency said Monday that radiation monitors around the plant had stopped working.

WASHINGTON — Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov has denied that Russia's invasion has stalled.

Asked on CNN what Russian President Vladimir Putin has achieved in Ukraine, he said: "Well, first of all not yet. He hasn't achieved yet." But he insisted the military operation was going "strictly in accordance with the plans and purposes that were established beforehand."

Peskov reiterated that Putin's main goals were to "get rid of the military potential of Ukraine" and "ensure that Ukraine changes from an anti-Russian center to a neutral country."

LVIV, Ukraine — Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy said Russian forces not only blocked a humanitarian convoy trying to reach besieged Mariupol with desperately needed supplies on Tuesday but took captive some of the rescue workers and bus drivers.

He said the Russians had agreed to the route ahead of time.

"We are trying to organize stable humanitarian corridors for Mariupol residents, but almost all of our attempts, unfortunately, are foiled by the Russian occupiers, by shelling, or deliberate terror," Zelenskyy said in his nighttime video address to the nation.

Deputy Prime Minister Iryna Vereshchuk said the Russians seized 11 bus drivers and four rescue workers along with their vehicles. She said their fate was unknown. The figures couldn't immediately be confirmed.

More than 7,000 people were evacuated from Mariupol on Tuesday, but about 100,000 remain in the city "in inhuman conditions, under a full blockade, without food, without water, without medicine and under constant shelling, under constant bombardment," Zelenskyy said.

Before the war, 430,000 people lived in the port city on the Sea of Azov.

Spanish ties provide safe havens for Ukrainian refugees

By HERNAN MUÑOZ Associated Press

GUISSONA, Spain (AP) — As Ukrainian refugees fleeing bombs and bullets at home fan out across Western Europe, few places they arrive feel as welcoming as a Spanish town known for years as "Little Ukraine."

Even before Russian tanks rolled into Ukraine last month, one in seven residents of Guissona was originally from there. Guissona's population more than doubled to around 7,500 residents, and drew in a lot of immigrant labor, including the Ukrainians, after a regional supermarket chain opened a distribution center nearby two decades ago.

More than 3.5 million people have already fled Russia's war in Ukraine. The refugees are finding safe havens in small communities on the continent where family and friends who went to find work have put down roots.

In Guissona, refugees aren't just staying with their relatives. Familiarity with the Ukrainian community bred local sympathy for the refugees' plight, and Spaniards are making room for them too.

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Miquel Julia, a local businessman, had an empty apartment for sale in the town. He says he's made many Ukrainian friends in recent years, and when a local cousin of a Ukrainian refugee family asked him for help, he handed them the apartment until it's safe for them to go back home.

He couldn't turn a blind eye to the desperate refugees, he says.

"Bad times. Even more so when you see the state in which they arrive, and the stories they bring with them," he said.

He has lent his apartment to Alona Hrykun, a 44-year-old seamstress from Kyiv, who recently arrived with her teenage daughter and small son.

"My husband stayed behind in Kyiv. He is an ambulance driver and is helping move injured and sick people during the invasion," Hrykun said. "I am so proud of being Ukrainian."

Beside her husband, Hrykun left behind her mother and grandmother. Both were physically unable to make the trip of around 2,500 kilometers (1,500 miles) from one side of Europe to the other.

Authorities in Guissona, in northeast Spain's Catalonia region, have worked hard to avoid the creation of ghettos and to help foreign workers integrate into the community.

Many of the town's windows and balconies, including at the town hall, are currently draped with Ukrainian flags and antiwar posters and banners.

More than 200 Ukrainian refugees have arrived in Guissona so far. They are part of the around 25,000 who have sought refuge in Spain.

"They are getting our full support. They feel protected," says Guissona retiree Maria Angels Lopez, who is 67. "We all make the effort to help them and be with them. To stand in solidarity with them."

Every day since the onset of the war, dozens of locals and newly arrived refugees work at a Guissona warehouse filling boxes with food, medicines, clothes, blankets and toys to be sent to Ukraine.

Among the volunteers is Alina Slobodianiuk, who arrived here three days ago with her teenage son Maxim and daughter Yana.

They lived in the industrial Ukrainian city of Dnipro where she worked as a public relations specialist at a leading Ukrainian bank. Slobodianiuk is divorced and her ex-husband is a soldier.

She's left most of her family behind, including her parents, brother and sister. She says they're in contact every day, but that her family opted to stay in the hope that the war will end soon.

"It wasn't an easy decision. Because I love my country. I really love Ukraine," Slobodianiuk said. "But I am afraid for my kids."

The Spanish government was one of the first to adopt special European Union measures in response to the wave of refugees.

Among the temporary measures, refugees fleeing the war in Ukraine are given temporary residency and work permits within 24 hours.

Refugees also have access to public health care, discounted medicine and free schooling, among other benefits.

Just over 115,000 Ukrainian citizens were living in Spain last year, according to the 2021 census.

The web of contacts through Ukrainian immigrants is working elsewhere in Europe too.

In a village in Italy's Apennine Mountains, an hour's drive from Rome, two Ukrainian women who fled with their small children have found peace thanks to family ties and a local couple.

Tania, 30, and Katia, 33, fled the Ukrainian city of Lviv a few days after the outbreak of the war, leaving their husbands behind. They are the daughter and daughter-in-law of Halyna, a Ukrainian carer who lives in the village of Belmonte Sabino.

Halyna used to look after the mother-in-law of a local hotel owner, and he is now putting up the two women and their children.

"We are really happy. The Italian people have a big heart," said Tania, who said she was grateful to the inhabitants of Belmonte Sabino, all of whom they now consider friends.

The Ukrainian women asked that their last names not be used, for fear of reprisals against family in their home country.

One 'black box' found in China Eastern plane crash

By NG HAN GUAN and KEN MORITSUGU Associated Press

WUZHOU, China (AP) — A Chinese aviation official said Wednesday that one of the two "black box" recorders had been found with its casing in severely damaged condition, two days after a China Eastern flight crashed in southern China with 132 people on board.

The exterior is so damaged that investigators were not able to tell whether it was the flight data recorder or the cockpit voice recorder, said Mao Yanfeng, the director of the accident investigation division of the Civil Aviation Authority of China.

"The exterior appearance of the black box is severely damaged," Mao said at a news conference.

Mao gave no information about the condition of the recording device inside. An all-out effort is being made to find the other black box, he said.

Images released by state broadcaster CCTV showed workers placing a bright orange, mud-caked cylinder into a labeled, clear plastic, zip-close bag.

Recovering the so-called black boxes — they are usually painted orange for visibility — is considered key to figuring out what caused the crash.

The search for clues into why a Chinese commercial jetliner dove suddenly and crashed into a mountain in southern China had been temporarily suspended earlier Wednesday as rain slickened the debris field and filled the red-dirt gash formed by the plane's fiery impact.

Searchers had been using hand tools, drones and sniffer dogs under rainy conditions to comb the heavily forested slopes for the flight data and cockpit voice recorders, as well as any human remains. Crews also worked to pump water from the pit created when the plane hit the ground, but their efforts were suspended around midmorning because small landslides were possible on the steep, slick slopes.

The black box was found in the afternoon. The flight data recorder captures information about the plane's airspeed, altitude, direction up or down, pilot actions, and performance of all key systems. The cockpit voice recorder captures sounds including conversations and background engine noise during the flight.

Mao and other officials at the news conference said members of the air crew were healthy, the aircraft had a clean maintenance record, the weather had been good during the flight and the crew had been in regular communication with air traffic controllers prior to going into a dive.

Relatives of passengers began arriving Wednesday at the gate to Lu village just outside the crash zone, where they, along with reporters on the scene, were stopped by police and officials who used opened umbrellas to block the view beyond.

One woman was overheard saying her husband, the father of their two children, had been on board the flight.

"I'm just going in there to take a look. Am I breaking the law?" she said. The woman and a companion were then escorted away and reporters told to stop filming.

Another man, who gave just his surname, Ding, said his sister-in-law had been on the plane. He said he hoped to visit the site but had been told little by the authorities.

"We're just coming here to have a look," said Ding, adding, "My heart sank all of a sudden," upon hearing about the crash. He too was escorted away.

China Eastern Flight 5735 was carrying 123 passengers and nine crew from Kunming in Yunnan province to Guangzhou, an industrial center on China's southeastern coast, when it crashed Monday afternoon outside the city of Wuzhou in the Guangxi region. All 132 people on board are presumed killed.

Investigators say it is too early to speculate on the cause. The plane went into an unexplained dive an hour after departure and stopped transmitting data 96 seconds into the fall.

An air-traffic controller tried to contact the pilots several times after seeing the plane's altitude drop sharply, but got no reply, a grim-faced Zhu Tao, director of the Office of Aviation Safety at the Civil Aviation Authority of China, said at a Tuesday evening news conference.

"As of now, the rescue has yet to find survivors," Zhu said. "The public security department has taken control of the site."

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China Eastern is headquartered in Shanghai and is one of China's three largest carriers with more than 600 planes, including 109 Boeing 737-800s. China's Transport Ministry said China Eastern has grounded all of its 737-800s, a move that could further disrupt domestic air travel already curtailed because of the largest COVID-19 outbreak in China since the initial peak in early 2020.

The grounding order did not imply any mechanical problems with the fleet, but was an "act of responsibility toward passengers," the chairman of China Eastern's Yunnan province subsidiary said at Wednesday's news conference.

The Boeing 737-800 has been flying since 1998 and has a well-established safety record. It is an earlier model than the 737 Max, which was grounded worldwide for nearly two years after deadly crashes in 2018 and 2019.

Monday's crash was China's worst in more than a decade. In August 2010, an Embraer ERJ 190-100 operated by Henan Airlines hit the ground short of the runway in the northeastern city of Yichun and caught fire. It carried 96 people and 44 of them died. Investigators blamed pilot error.

Tornado rips through New Orleans and its suburbs, killing 1

By GERALD HERBERT and REBECCA SANTANA Associated Press

ARABI, La. (AP) — A tornado tore through parts of New Orleans and its suburbs Tuesday night, flipping cars, ripping roofs off homes and killing at least one person in an area of Louisiana pummeled by Hurricane Katrina 17 years ago.

Other tornadoes spawned by the same storm system had hit parts of Texas and Oklahoma on Monday, killing a woman north of Dallas and causing multiple injuries and widespread damage, before moving eastward.

Parts of St. Bernard Parish, which borders New Orleans to the southeast, appeared to take the brunt of the weather's fury, and that is where the fatality occurred. St. Bernard Parish officials gave no details on how the person died; they said multiple other people were injured.

Rescue workers were searching through the suburban parish for more people in need of assistance, according to Sheriff Jimmy Pohlmann. St. Bernard Parish President Guy McInnis said the tornado caused widespread damage throughout the parish.

New Orleans television stations broadcast live images of the storm as it barreled across the metropolitan area.

The tornado appeared to start in a suburb and then move east across the Mississippi River into the Lower 9th Ward of New Orleans and parts of St. Bernard Parish — both badly damaged by Katrina — before moving northeast.

Many residents also suffered damage just last year when Category 4 Hurricane Ida swept through. Stacey Mancuso's family just completed repairs to their home in the suburb of Arabi after Ida ripped off the roof and caused extensive water damage. Then the tornado Tuesday tore through their street. She huddled in the laundry room with her husband; two children, ages 16 and 11; and dogs as part of their new roof was lifted away by the wind.

"We're alive. That's what I can say at this point. We still have four walls and part of a roof. I consider myself lucky," said Mancuso. Still, the twister was the third time they've had major weather damage since Katrina in 2005.

In Arabi, there was a strong smell of natural gas in the air as residents and rescue personnel stood in the street and surveyed the damage. Some houses were destroyed while pieces of debris hung from electrical wires and trees. An aluminum fishing boat in front of one house was bent into the shape of a C with the motor across the street. Power poles were down or leaning over, forcing emergency workers to walk slowly through darkened neighborhoods checking for damage.

Michelle Malasovich lives in Arabi. Initially she had been worried about family to the north who were also getting hit by bad weather. She was texting with them when "all of a sudden the lights started flickering."

Her husband was out on the porch and saw the tornado coming.

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"It just kept getting louder and louder," Malasovich said. After it passed, they came out to survey the damage. "Our neighbor's house is in the middle of the street right now."

Malasovich's house fared relatively well, she said. Some columns were blown off the porch and the windows of her Jeep were blown out. Down the street a house was severely damaged, and parked vehicles had been moved around by the winds: "This is serious for down here."

New Orleans Mayor LaToya Cantrell tweeted late Tuesday that there were no reports of casualties or significant damage within the city and that the power utility was working to restore electricity.

About 13,000 homes and businesses were reportedly without power in the three parishes around New Orleans. Entergy reported that about 3,500 remained without electricity early Wednesday morning.

While people in the metropolitan region are used to dealing with severe weather such as hurricanes or heavy rains, it's rare that a tornado moves through New Orleans. A 2017 tornado caused widespread damage when it touched down in the eastern part of the city.

Louisiana's federal and state authorities reminded thousands of hurricane survivors living in government-provided mobile homes and recreational vehicle trailers to have an evacuation plan because the structures might not withstand the expected weather. More than 8,000 households live in such temporary quarters, officials said

Shelters were opened ahead of the severe weather, and many schools closed early or canceled after-school activities in parts of Louisiana and Mississippi.

The storm front reached Georgia Wednesday morning after dumping heavy rain, downing trees and prompting multiple tornado warnings in the Deep South. The roofs of several homes were damaged in Toxey, Alabama, after tornado warnings were issued there, the National Weather Service tweeted.

The vicious weather hit Texas on Monday, where several tornadoes were reported along the Interstate 35 corridor. In Elgin, broken trees lined the rural roads and pieces of metal — uprooted by strong winds hung from the branches. Residents stepped carefully to avoid downed power lines as they worked to clean the remnants of broken ceilings, torn down walls and damaged cars.

J.D. Harkins, 59, said he saw two tornadoes pass by his Elgin home.

"There used to be a barn there," Harkins said, pointing to an empty plot on his uncle's property covered with scattered debris. He said the building was empty when the first tornado hit, and that his family is thankful nobody was hurt.

Homes and businesses in at least a dozen Texas counties were damaged, according to Storm Prediction Center reports. Texas Gov. Greg Abbott announced a disaster declaration for 16 hard-hit counties. Abbott said 10 people were injured by storms in the Crockett area, while more than a dozen were reportedly hurt elsewhere.

The Grayson County Emergency Management Office said a 73-year-old woman was killed in the community of Sherwood Shores, about 60 miles (95 kilometers) north of Dallas, but provided no details.

Taliban cancels girls' higher education despite pledges

By KATHY GANNON Associated Press

KABUL, Afghanistan (AP) — Afghanistan's Taliban rulers decided against opening schools to girls above the sixth grade, reneging on a previous promise and opting to appease their hardline base at the expense of further alienating the international community.

The unexpected decision, confirmed by a Taliban official Wednesday, came at the start of the new school year in Afghanistan. It is bound to disrupt Taliban efforts to win recognition from potential international donors, at a time when the country is mired in a worsening humanitarian crisis.

The international community has been urging Taliban leaders to open schools and give women their right to public space. A statement by the ministry earlier in the week urged "all students" to come to school.

The decision to postpone a return of girls going to school in higher levels appeared to be a concession to the rural and deeply tribal backbone of the hardline Taliban movement, that in many parts of the countryside are reluctant to send their daughters to school.

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The decision to cancel the return of girls to school came late in the night on Tuesday, Waheedullah Hashmi, external relations and donor representative with the Taliban-led administration, told The Associated Press.

"It was late last night that we received word from our leadership that schools will stay closed for girls," said Hashmi. "We don't say they will be closed forever."

The surprise decision also comes as the movement's leadership has been summoned to southern Kandahar by the reclusive Taliban leader, Haibatullah Akhunzada, amid reports of a Cabinet shakeup, according to an Afghan leader who is also a member of the leadership council. He spoke on condition of anonymity, because he was not authorized to speak to the media. He said it is possible some of the senior interim Cabinet positions could be changed.

There have been persistent reports since the Taliban swept to power in August of differences among the senior leadership, with the more hardline among the movement at odds with the pragmatists among them. The pragmatists reportedly want to see a greater engagement with the world and while staying true to their Islamic beliefs be less harsh than when they last ruled Afghanistan, banning women from work and girls from schools.

Television is allowed in Afghanistan today, unlike in the past and women are not required to wear the all encompassing burqa. but must wear the traditional hijab, covering their heads. Women have also returned to work in the health and education ministry and at Kabul International Airport at passport control and custom.

The Taliban were ousted in 2001 by a U.S.-led coalition for harboring al Qaeda leader Osama bin Laden and returned to power after America's chaotic departure last August..

Girls have been banned from school beyond Grade 6 in most of the country since the Taliban's return. Universities opened up earlier this year in much of the country, but since taking power the Taliban edicts have been erratic and while a handful of provinces continued to provide education to all, most provinces closed educational institutions for girls and women.

In the capital Kabul private schools and universities have operated uninterrupted.

The religiously-driven Taliban administration fears going forward with enrolling girls beyond Grade 6 could alienate their rural base, said Hashmi.

"The leadership hasn't decided when or how they will allow girls to return to school," Hashmi said. While he accepted that urban centers are mostly supportive of girls education, much of rural Afghanistan is opposed, particularly in tribal Pashtun regions.

In some rural areas a brother will disown a brother in the city if he finds out that he is letting his daughters go to school," said Hashmi, who said the Taliban leadership is trying to decide how to open education for girls beyond Grade 6 countrywide.

Most Taliban are ethnic Pashtuns. In their sweep through the country last year, other ethnic groups such as Uzbeks and Tajiks in the north of the country either joined the fight to give the Taliban their victory or simply chose not to fight.

"We did everything the Taliban asked in terms of Islamic dress and they promised that girls could go to school and now they have broken their promise," said Mariam Naheebi, a local journalist who spoke to the Associated Press in the Afghan capital. Naheebi has protested for women's rights and says "they have not been honest with us."

Top-ranked Barty retires at 25, goes out on her own terms

By DENNIS PASSA AP Sports Writer

BRISBANE, Australia (AP) — Ash Barty did things on her own terms as she won three Grand Slam singles titles and spent more than two consecutive years at No. 1 in the women's tennis rankings.

She retired on her own terms, too. At the age of 25, just two months after winning the Australian Open title.

The announcement stunned the tennis world on Wednesday.

"I just know at the moment, in my heart, for me as a person, this is right," Barty said, her voice shaky

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at times, during a six-minute video posted on her Instagram account Wednesday in Australia.

Saying it was time to “chase other dreams,” Barty, who announced her engagement to trainee golf professional Garry Kissick in November, said she no longer feels compelled to do what she knows is required to be the best she can be at tennis.

“It’s the first time I’ve actually said it out loud and, yeah, it’s hard to say,” Barty said during an informal interview with her former doubles partner, Casey Dellacqua. “I don’t have the physical drive, the emotional want and everything it takes to challenge yourself at the very top level any more. I am spent.”

This is not the first time Barty walked away from tennis: She was the Wimbledon junior champion at age 15 in 2011, presaging a promising professional career, but left the tour entirely for nearly two years in 2014 because of burnout, overwhelmed by the pressure and travel required.

She played professional cricket back home in Australia, then eventually picked up a racket once again and returned to her other sport.

Barty went on to win singles major championships on three different surfaces — on clay at the 2019 French Open, on grass at Wimbledon last year and on the hard courts of Melbourne Park in January, becoming the first Australian player in 44 years to triumph at the nation’s Grand Slam tournament.

But she hasn’t played a tournament since being presented with her Australian Open trophy by seven-time Grand Slam singles champion Evonne Goolagong Cawley, her mentor and Indigenous and Australian tennis icon, after a straight-sets final victory over Danielle Collins.

“I am so supportive of Ash that she does what makes her happy,” Goolagong Cawley told The Associated Press. “I can’t wait to see what happens in the next chapter of Ash’s life, and what helps her achieve her dreams.”

Barty won 15 tour-level titles in singles and 12 in doubles since first turning pro in 2010. She spent 121 weeks at No. 1 in the rankings, including the last 114 in a row.

Her announcement was all the more stunning from an on-court perspective given her recent run of success: Barty had won 25 of her last 26 matches and three of her past four events.

Only one other woman has walked away from the sport while atop the WTA rankings: Justine Henin was No. 1 when she retired in May 2008.

In a statement released by the WTA, CEO Steve Simon called Barty “the ultimate competitor.”

During her 21-month sabbatical from tennis as a teen, Barty played cricket with the Brisbane Heat of the Women’s Big Bash League. She returned to tennis in May 2016, playing a \$50,000 ITF event in Eastbourne.

One year later, she was ranked No. 88; by the end of 2017, Barty was an established member of the top 20.

“I know I’ve done this before,” Barty said with a laugh in the retirement video, “but in a very different feeling. I’m so grateful to everything that tennis has given me. It’s given me all of my dreams, plus more, but I know that the time is right now for me to step away and chase other dreams and to, yeah, put the rackets down.”

A semifinal loss to Petra Kvitova in Doha in February was the last match she played in 2020; Barty stayed home in Australia for the balance of the season when the global pandemic emerged.

After six months on the road in 2021 and after winning five titles, including at Wimbledon, Barty ended her season abruptly after a loss to Shelby Rogers at the U.S. Open.

“Wimbledon last year changed a lot for me as a person and for me as an athlete,” Barty said. “When you work so hard your whole life for one goal — to be able to win Wimbledon, which was my dream, the one true dream that I wanted in tennis, that really changed my perspective.”

She described what she termed a “gut feeling” after Wimbledon about maybe being ready to move on, but she also described herself then as not “quite fulfilled.” Her victory at the Australian Open satisfied another gap, and Barty said she was completely aware that “my happiness wasn’t dependent on the results.”

Barty was one of the most popular players on tour, and many praised her in retirement on Wednesday.

“Ash, what can I say, you know I have tears right?” tweeted Simona Halep. “My friend, I will miss you on tour. You were different, and special, and we shared some amazing moments . . . Be happy and enjoy your life to the max.”

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Madison Keys posted: "An incredible tennis player but more importantly one of the nicest people on tour." Alicia Molik, coach of Australia's Billie Jean King Cup team, said Barty's decision was "unusual, retiring at the top."

"It's pretty gutsy, it's pretty noble," Molik said. "What an athlete, what a trailblazer and what a role model."

Andy Murray tweeted: "Happy for (at) ashbarty, gutted for tennis, what a player."

Barty's closing words, at least for now — she plans a media conference in Brisbane on Thursday — came at the end of the video.

"I'll never, ever, ever stop loving tennis," she said. "It will always be a massive part of my life but now I think it's important I get to enjoy the next phase of my life as Ash Barty the person, not Ash Barty the athlete."

Amid Russia's new crackdowns, small signs of defiance emerge

NEW YORK (AP) — When Alexei Navalny was arrested in January 2021, tens of thousands of Russians filled the streets in protest, demanding that the top Kremlin critic be released and chanting slogans against President Vladimir Putin. Thousands were arrested.

In the months since then, Navalny was given 2½ years in prison. His organization, close associates and other opposition activists were either prosecuted, fled the country or had their hands tied by draconian new laws or decrees. Independent news outlets were blocked and social media platforms banned.

Even a silent antiwar protester who held up a blank sign earlier this month in the city of Nizhny Novgorod was arrested.

Putin's crackdown — unprecedented in post-Soviet Russia — has blanketed the country. By the time Navalny's sentence was extended for another nine years by a court on Tuesday, not much dissent could be mustered. The Kremlin had worked hard to see to that.

And yet, there are still flickers of protest and defiance.

"Of course, nine years is a stiff sentence," said Navalny ally Ilya Yashin, who has vowed to remain in Russia. "Rapists, thieves and murderers in Russia often get less. ... But in reality (the sentence) doesn't mean anything, because everyone understands: Alexei will spend as much time behind bars as Putin will sit in the Kremlin."

Addressing Putin, Yashin added sarcastically in his Facebook post, "You're quite the optimist."

After a trial in a makeshift courtroom at the penal colony where he is being held, Navalny was convicted on fraud and contempt of court charges in a move that was seen as an attempt to keep Putin's biggest foe behind bars for as long as possible.

The 45-year-old corruption fighter, who in 2020 survived a poisoning with a nerve agent that he blames on the Kremlin, said on Facebook in a sardonic comment that was posted by his team: "My space flight is taking a bit longer than expected."

His trial, which began a week before Russian troops rolled into Ukraine on Feb. 24, even prompted a small act of defiance by one of the witnesses for the prosecution. Fyodor Gorozhanko, a former activist in Navalny's Anti-Corruption Foundation, who has since left Russia, testified that he had been coerced to give evidence against the opposition leader.

Navalny's foundation and a nationwide network of regional offices were outlawed last year as extremist and ceased operating. The Kremlin also turned up the heat on other opposition activists and groups, as well as on independent media and human rights organizations.

Dozens have been slapped with a crippling "foreign agent" label, which implies additional government scrutiny and scorn. Many have been forced to shut down under pressure.

With the invasion of Ukraine, the crackdown has been expanded — all but silencing most independent news sites. Facebook and Instagram were banned as extremist and were blocked in Russia. Twitter also was blocked, although Russians who use virtual private networks, or VPNs, are able to avoid access restrictions to the social media networks and news outlets banned in Russia.

A sweeping clampdown on antiwar protests was instituted, but that didn't stop them. More than 15,000

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people were detained for demonstrating against the war, according to the OVD-Info rights group that tracks political arrests.

On March 14, a live evening news program on Russia's state TV was interrupted by a woman who walked behind the anchor holding a handmade poster protesting the war in English and Russian. OVD-Info identified her as Marina Ovsyannikova, an employee of the station, who was taken into custody and fined.

A new law was rubber-stamped by the parliament, criminalizing content that deviates from the official line as "fake news" or which discredits the Russian military and its actions in Ukraine. Media outlets have faced pressure over calling the action a "war" or an "invasion," rather than using the government's description of it as a "special military operation." The first criminal cases under the new law appeared shortly after it was adopted and, among others, implicated two prominent public figures who condemned the offensive on social media.

Navalny's team has been undeterred by both the war and the trial of its leader, announcing it was re-booting the foundation as an international organization.

"Corruption kills," read its new website. "As Ukrainian cities are bombed by Putin, this has never been more obvious. Putin and his circle have done everything to stay in power — and steal, and steal, and steal some more. High on their own impunity, they unleashed a war."

"We will find all of their mansions in Monaco and their villas in Miami, and when we do, we will make sure Putin's elite loses everything it owns," the statement said. "We have been fighting Putin since 2011. We will fight him until we win."

The Navalny team also promoted a new YouTube channel it has launched, Popular Politics, that since March 5 has attracted more than 920,000 subscribers.

On Monday, it released a video on YouTube alleging that Putin owns a \$700 million super yacht, which is in an Italian port. The new expose has gotten over 2.8 million views by Tuesday evening. The New York Times reported earlier this month that the vessel's captain denied Putin owned or had ever been on the yacht.

The allegations came in stark contrast to Putin's recent ominous remarks condemning those who oppose the war in Ukraine and juxtaposing elites "who have villas in Miami or the French Riviera, those who can't live without foie gras, oysters" to "our people" and "Russia."

Mikhail Khodorkovsky, an exiled Russian oil tycoon who spent a decade in prison in Russia on charges widely seen as revenge for challenging Putin's rule, spoke Tuesday of his optimism for Navalny.

"Nine years were handed to Navalny. However, what does it matter? What matters is how much time Putin has left. And here I think there is some good news for Alexei," Khodorkovsky tweeted.

A new fund directs its support to Ukraine's long-term needs

By GLENN GAMBOA AP Business Writer

The humanitarian needs of more than 10 million displaced Ukrainians have quickly become staggering. Yet Mark Malloch-Brown, president of the Open Society Foundations, warns that longer-term problems resulting from Russia's invasion will grow ever larger if they aren't sufficiently addressed now.

Experts report an "unprecedented" outpouring of aid for food, medicine and other essential needs of Ukrainians. Comparatively few donations, though, have been earmarked for maintaining Ukraine's culture or democratic foundations.

To address that cause, Open Society Foundations has launched the Ukraine Democracy Fund with a \$25 million pledge, in hopes of raising \$100 million. The foundations, launched by billionaire investor George Soros, are now one of the world's largest funders of democracy, human rights and justice groups.

"Keeping their civil society alive absolutely is the key bit," said Malloch-Brown, who has also served as the United Nations deputy secretary general. "Otherwise, it's a hollow victory. If you neglect or lose that civil society piece, you've lost what this was ultimately all about."

Since Russia invaded Ukraine on Feb. 24, the philanthropy research organization Candid has catalogued \$440 million in grants and \$333 million more in pledges for the victims. Those totals do not, however, include individual donations or donations from nonprofits and corporations that haven't yet publicly reported

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their gifts, meaning that the actual amount of aid is much higher.

"By many measures, this has been an unprecedented philanthropic response by organizations, by individuals," said Laia Grino, Candid's director of data discovery. "Some groups have said that this has exceeded what they were able to raise for COVID-19, what they raised for racial equity, the response to the crisis in Afghanistan."

Grino noted that the bulk of those donations are for immediate needs — food, shelter, safety.

"We haven't seen a lot for longer-term efforts really," she said. "And that will continue to be important."

Malloch-Brown says Open Society has supported Ukraine with about \$230 million in donations since the nation declared its independence from the former Soviet Union in 1991.

"The \$230 million has been primarily invested in developing the sort of civil society and democratic space that has made Ukraine so different from ... Russia," Malloch-Brown said. "Our feeling is that (Russian President Vladimir Putin's) real target is exactly these values our investment represented and sought to build because that's what threatens him — this sort of gloriously humorous, ironic, open, vigorous, debating world of Ukraine versus his locked-down, common, homogeneous values of Russia."

Open Society believes its history within Ukraine and its contacts in the country are tools that must be used to keep the nation's culture intact "by continuing to invest in human rights defenders and journalism and the civil society, which sustain the country's democracy," Malloch-Brown said.

It plans to continue to fund independent media throughout the war and to support journalists and scholars who are documenting war crimes or providing public health information.

"We recognize that it's going to be harder and harder as the Russian military crackdown intensifies," Malloch-Brown said. "A lot of people will be displaced — some into exile, some in the west of the country — but we've got to follow them and enable them to keep working and fighting for those values that they've been fighting to build for so many years."

In two weeks, Open Society's Ukraine Democracy Fund raised an additional \$13 million from the Ford Foundation, the Oak Foundation, the Schmidt Family Foundation and other, anonymous donors.

"Philanthropy can and should anticipate what and where ongoing needs will be and step in preemptively to address them," Darren Walker, president of the Ford Foundation, wrote in a statement. "This crisis calls out for America to rise to the challenge and realize our promise — not just despite our missteps in recent years, but because of them."

After all, Malloch-Brown said, there are plenty of compelling reasons to rally around Ukraine.

"Ukraine is a story about democratic success, not failure," he said. "One can't find many silver linings to this horrific situation, but under Zelenskyy, it was becoming this glorious, New York-like hodgepodge of opinions and views — a real rainbow of pluralism."

Silence replaces old folk tunes in historic quarter of Kabul

By SAMYA KULLAB Associated Press

KABUL, Afghanistan (AP) — Nabih Bakhsh's family has been part of Afghanistan's musical tradition for generations. His great-grandfather was a musician in the court of the Afghan emperor 150 years ago. His father was a famous maestro and singer. Bakhsh too carried on the family art, performing and running an instrument repair shop.

Until now. The 70-year-old had to give up music and turn his shop into a convenience stall selling soda.

Since the Taliban's blitz takeover of Afghanistan six months ago, the songs have gone silent in the historic musicians' quarter of Kabul. Gone are the instruments that once filled shop windows in the alleys of Kucha-e-Kharabat. Their owners packed them and left, putting a centuries-old Afghan musical heritage at risk of vanishing.

Many are being driven out as work has dried up both because of the country's economic collapse and out of fear of the Taliban. The Taliban government has not formally banned music, but musicians say individual Taliban fighters take matters into their own hands and target them, halting performances and breaking their instruments because they say music is "haram," or proscribed by Islamic law.

On a recent day, Nazir Amir Mohammed tearfully bid farewell to his family. A minibus waited to take him

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and other musicians to Iran, where they hope they can practice freely and pass their expertise down to the next generation.

In a bag, concealed between layers of clothing, was his beloved rubab, a traditional lute-like instrument that took Mohammed 10 years to master.

"The Taliban came to this street, told us music is not allowed and should be banned," he said. Like most of the street's residents, his income had come from playing at weddings, concerts and parties. Now that is gone.

Those who stay have adapted to new realities. Instrument repair shops that lined the street have transformed into small stalls selling soda and chips, or garments. Traditional instruments are hidden in homes, or even buried -- including drums, lutes and harmoniums, an accordion-like instrument.

Instruments are also gone in the bazaar of Kucha Shor, meaning "Noise Street." Here, shopkeepers have turned to selling kites, a national pastime. Empty is the famed music school, Afghanistan's only formal one, its pupils and teachers evacuated. Taliban stand guard outside.

In Kucha-e-Kharabat, classical music traditions have been passed down for generations, dating back to the 1860s when Afghan emperor Sher Ali Khan invited Indian masters to enrapture Kabul's royal court.

The convergence of two music cultures bestowed Afghanistan with a unique fusion: Indian classical music structures are blended with Afghan traditional folk songs. Like in India, Afghan music is also an oral tradition. The young study for years under a single master, called an ustad, and carry on their legacy.

Bakhsh's great-grandfather, Ustad Khudabakh, was one of the first Indian masters to heed the emperor's call. After a lifetime in music, Bakhsh now sells sodas to get by, making about 100 afghanis (\$1) a day. Worshippers at the nearby mosque are his main customers.

All that remains of the shop's past life is the empty shell of a harmonium, full of rags. "I don't know what happened to the guy who commissioned me to repair it, he must have left," he said.

"We don't have any other skills, music is our life," he said. "We don't know how to be merchants, we don't even know how to use weapons to rob people."

Residents are fearful of Taliban fighters.

One month ago Zabiullah Nuri, 45, was carrying his harmonium home from his shop when a Taliban patrol saw him.

"They beat me and took my instrument. They broke it with their guns," he said, sitting in his home and holding up the remnants of his harmonium.

To make ends meet, Nuri sold everything he could, including his television.

"Everything is finished, my whole life has changed," he said.

Issa Khan, 38, was an hour into playing at an engagement party in a private residence when a group of Taliban stormed in. The militants also broke his instrument and told him music was forbidden.

He stopped playing after that.

But folk tunes still ring out from the home of Mobin Wesal. The 35-year-old singer's voice enlivens the empty salon, bare except for his instruments packed away in the corner.

The tune is a Pashtu favorite: "Teacher please don't fail me in my exams. Love has made me an idiot."

He was part of a new generation of Afghan musicians breathing life back into their heritage, he said, by introducing new lyrics and clever styles into the art form.

His younger son sat listening intently. "I won't teach him," Wesal said, motioning toward the boy. "He would be in danger."

Tornado rips through New Orleans and its suburbs, killing 1

By GERALD HERBERT and REBECCA SANTANA Associated Press

ARABI, La. (AP) — A tornado tore through parts of New Orleans and its suburbs Tuesday night, flipping cars and ripping roofs off homes and killing at least one person in a region that was pummeled by Hurricane Katrina 17 years ago.

Parts of St. Bernard Parish, which borders New Orleans to the southeast, appeared to take the brunt of

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the weather's fury, and that is where the fatality occurred. St. Bernard Parish officials gave no details on how the person died; they said multiple other people were injured.

Rescue workers were searching through the suburban parish for more people in need of assistance, according to Sheriff Jimmy Pohlmann. St. Bernard Parish President Guy McInnis said the tornado caused widespread damage throughout the parish.

The damage comes after other tornadoes spawned by the same storm system hit parts of Texas and Oklahoma, killing one person Monday and causing multiple injuries and widespread damage.

In New Orleans, video taken by a local television station Tuesday showed a large black funnel visible in the darkened sky looming among the buildings in the eastern part of the city.

The tornado appeared to start in a New Orleans suburb and then move east across the Mississippi River into the Lower 9th Ward of New Orleans and parts of St. Bernard Parish — both of which were badly damaged by Katrina — before moving northeast.

Reggie Ford was nearby in Arabia when the tornado struck. He drove from the area, only to return once it passed, to offer help to anyone who needed it. He said the streets were eerily quiet, only filled with fresh devastation from the twister.

"I see downed powerlines. A church is completely destroyed. Three businesses are completely destroyed. There are eight blocks of houses missing their roofs," the New Orleans resident said. Video he posted on Instagram shows debris cluttered streets and shredded buildings. A battered car was flipped on its roof.

In the New Orleans suburb of Arabi, there was a strong smell of natural gas in the air as residents and rescue personnel stood in the street and surveyed the damage. Some houses were destroyed while pieces of debris hung from electrical wires and trees. An aluminum fishing boat in front of one house was bent into the shape of a C with the motor across the street. Power poles were down and leaning over, forcing emergency workers to walk slowly through darkened neighborhoods checking for damage.

Michelle Malasovich lives in Arabi. Initially she had been worried about family that lives in areas north of Louisiana that were also getting hit by bad weather. She was texting with her family there when, she said, "All of a sudden the lights started flickering."

Her husband was out on the porch and saw the tornado coming.

"It just kept getting louder and louder," Malasovich said. After it passed they came out to survey the damage. "Our neighbor's house is in the middle of the street right now."

Malasovich's house fared relatively well, she said. Some columns were blown off the porch and the windows of her Jeep were blown out. Down the street a house was severely damaged, and parked vehicles had been moved around by the winds: "This is serious for down here."

New Orleans Mayor LaToya Cantrell tweeted late Tuesday that there were no reports of casualties or significant damage to the city and that the power utility was working to restore electricity to the 8,000 customers impacted.

About 13,000 homes and businesses were reportedly without power in the three parishes around New Orleans after the storm.

While people in the metropolitan region are used to dealing with severe weather such as hurricanes or heavy rains, it's rare that a tornado moves through the city. A 2017 tornado caused widespread damage when it touched down in the eastern part of the city.

Ahead of the severe weather, many schools closed early or cancelled after-school activities Tuesday in parts of Louisiana and Mississippi to allow students to get home before the weather deteriorated. Shelters opened for residents who needed a place to stay while the storms traveled through.

Louisiana's federal and state authorities reminded thousands of hurricane survivors living in government-provided mobile homes and recreational vehicle trailers to have an evacuation plan because the structures might not withstand the expected weather. More than 8,000 households live in such temporary quarters, officials said.

After leaving the New Orleans area, the system dumped heavy rain, downed trees and prompted multiple tornado warnings as it moved into Alabama Tuesday evening. The roofs of several homes were damaged

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in Toxey, Alabama, after a storm preceded by tornado warnings passed through the area, the National Weather Service tweeted.

Forecasters had been predicting a line of intense weather moving from Texas eastward into the Deep South, and Monday started out with some vicious weather in Texas.

In Texas, several tornadoes were reported Monday along the Interstate 35 corridor. In Elgin, broken trees lined the rural roads and pieces of metal — uprooted by strong winds hung from the branches. Residents stepped carefully to avoid downed power lines as they worked to clean the remnants of broken ceilings, torn down walls and damaged cars.

J.D. Harkins, 59, said he saw two tornadoes pass by his Elgin home.

"There used to be a barn there," Harkins said, pointing to an empty plot on his uncle's property covered with scattered debris. He said the building was empty when the first tornado hit Monday, and that his family is thankful nobody was hurt.

Homes and businesses in at least a dozen Texas counties were damaged, according to Storm Prediction Center reports. Texas Gov. Greg Abbott announced a disaster declaration for 16 hard-hit counties. Abbott said 10 people were injured by storms in the Crockett area, while more than a dozen were reportedly hurt elsewhere.

The Grayson County Emergency Management Office said a 73-year-old woman was killed in the community of Sherwood Shores, about 60 miles (95 kilometers) north of Dallas, but provided no details.

Greitens accusations revive GOP worries about Senate bids

By STEVE PEOPLES, BRIAN SLODYSKO and JOHN HANNA Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — Accusations that Eric Greitens, a leading Republican contender for the U.S. Senate in Missouri, physically assaulted members of his family added fresh urgency to ensure the GOP doesn't nominate candidates who are so damaged that they risk otherwise safe seats.

Greitens has so far ignored calls to end his campaign from virtually every notable Missouri Republican, including his rivals in the August primary and Sen. Roy Blunt, whose retirement left the seat open. But it had reverberations beyond Missouri, serving as a reminder that Greitens is at least the third statewide Republican this cycle to face accusations of domestic violence.

In other states with competitive Senate races, including Arizona, Georgia, Ohio and Pennsylvania, leading GOP candidates are aggressively courting former President Donald Trump even after he inspired the violent Jan. 6 insurrection at the U.S. Capitol. Others are embracing controversial policy positions on issues like abortion and health care.

For now, Republicans are well positioned to retake the Senate majority, aiming to capitalize on President Joe Biden's unpopularity and concerns about inflation amid rising gas prices. But as the 2022 primary season intensifies later this spring, those advantages could be threatened if the GOP's most loyal voters rally around candidates who may be popular among the base but toxic in a general election campaign, where moderates are often much more decisive.

That concern was clear as Republicans abandoned Greitens, who was forced from the governor's office in 2018 amid a sex scandal.

"He is even more unfit for public office now than in 2018 when I denounced his behavior and called for him to resign as governor," said Missouri Republican donor David Humphreys, whose family gave \$2.2 million to Greitens' campaign in 2016. "Of course he should drop out; he should never have entered the race in the first place."

In a sworn affidavit made public on Monday, Greitens' ex-wife, Sheena Greitens, detailed an encounter in which he "knocked me down." She also described "physical violence toward our children, such as cuffing our then-3-year-old son across the face at the dinner table in front of me and yanking him around by his hair."

Greitens forcefully denied the accusations as "completely fabricated" and "baseless."

"I am seeking full custody of my sons, and for their sake, I will continue to pray for their mother and

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hope that she gets the help that she needs," he said in a statement issued from his Twitter account.

In a social media post Tuesday, Sheena Greitens insisted her allegations in the affidavit were true.

"My only interest is what's best for my two children, and for the last four years, I have gone to great lengths to keep these family matters private to protect them," she wrote in a statement. "I am not interested in litigating this matter anywhere other than the courtroom. At the appropriate time in the legal process, I will provide whatever evidence and documentation the court requests, including testimony under oath."

Given this week's developments, strategists in both parties suggest that a Greitens win in the state's Aug. 2 primary would give Democrats a legitimate opportunity to flip a Senate seat in deep-red Missouri, where Trump won by more than 15 percentage points in 2020. Even if Democrats do not ultimately prevail, a Greitens candidacy would likely force Republicans to devote energy and resources to the contest.

"It is a very safe Republican seat unless Eric Greitens wins the primary, and then it's in play," said Doug Heye, a Washington-based Republican strategist. "It's still Missouri, but Democrats are going to have a chance."

With the Senate currently evenly divided, Republicans need to gain just one seat to regain the majority. But the Greitens allegations surfaced as the party is already sorting through challenges elsewhere.

Trump-backed Republican candidate Sean Parnell was forced to suspend his Pennsylvania Senate campaign after losing custody of his children following allegations of physical abuse. In Georgia, leading Republican Senate candidate Herschel Walker has faced scrutiny of his turbulent personal history, which includes his acknowledged struggles with mental health, violent outbursts and accusations that he repeatedly threatened his ex-wife.

More broadly, GOP primary races in other states are tipping into decidedly nasty territory. A Republican primary debate in Ohio last week devolved into a near-physical altercation between two candidates. Trump, meanwhile, will be in Georgia this weekend to rally his supporters against the state's incumbent Republican governor as retribution for his refusal to cooperate with the then-president's effort to overturn the 2020 election.

For his part, Greitens is focusing on Senate Minority Leader Mitch McConnell, whom he blamed for orchestrating the latest scandal as part of a sustained effort to undermine his candidacy.

"You're going to be able to connect the dots directly to Mitch McConnell. You're going to be able to connect the dots directly to the RINO swamp who always does this," Greitens said on former Trump adviser Steve Bannon's podcast this week. "When I'm elected to the U.S. Senate we're taking on Mitch McConnell."

McConnell has often pointed to the GOP's loss in a 2014 Missouri Senate race as an example of what can happen when the party nominates a candidate who can't win a general election. He tried to sidestep the issue Tuesday on Capitol Hill when pressed by reporters.

"I think all of the developments of the last 24 hours are things the people of Missouri are going to take into account both in the primary, and I would assume they would take into account in the general," he said.

Even before this week's developments, Greitens was viewed as a vulnerable candidate in November's general election in no small part because of the circumstances of his resignation as governor. He left office amid an investigation of an extramarital affair with his St. Louis hairdresser allegedly involving bondage and blackmail. An allegation of a photo taken without the woman's consent for the purposes of blackmail led to a felony criminal charge, which was eventually dropped.

Still, Greitens was considered one of the strongest candidates in the August primary election given his name recognition, the implicit backing of some Trump's allies and the crowded field of Republican candidates expected to split the vote.

Few expect him to leave the race immediately, although it's uncertain whether he can continue to raise campaign cash to sustain his bid. At the end of 2021, when he last filed a fundraising report, Greitens had only \$290,000 cash on hand and was \$154,000 in debt, records show.

"He's doing no fundraisers around the state. No one will host one for him," said former Missouri Lt. Gov. Peter Kinder, who lost the 2016 Republican gubernatorial primary to Greitens and is now backing one of Greitens' Senate rivals. "His expectation is that he has an irreducible minimum floor (with voters) and he

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can get by with a crowded field.”

Greitens’ anemic fundraising has so far been partially offset by two super PACs backing him that are primarily financed by two GOP megadonors.

Bernie Marcus, the co-founder of Home Depot, has put at least \$1 million into a super PAC backing Greitens called Missouri First Action, records show. Billionaire Midwest shipping supply magnate Dick Uihlein, meanwhile, is the sole financier of Team PAC, a separate pro-Greitens super PAC.

“It doesn’t look like he’s a dropout candidate now,” Kinder added. “But he’s the only one who could make this a competitive seat.”

Defending her record, Jackson back for 3rd day of hearings

By MARY CLARE JALONICK and MARK SHERMAN Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — Supreme Court nominee Ketanji Brown Jackson is returning to the Senate for a third day of hearings as Republicans try to paint her as soft on crime and Democrats herald the historic nature of her nomination to become the first Black woman on the high court.

In Tuesday’s marathon hearing, Republicans aggressively questioned Jackson on the sentences she has handed down to sex offenders in her nine years as a federal judge, her advocacy on behalf of terror suspects at Guantanamo Bay, her thoughts on critical race theory and even her religious views. At one point, Republican Sen. Ted Cruz of Texas read from children’s books that he said are taught at her teenage daughter’s school.

Several GOP senators grilled Jackson on her child pornography sentences, arguing they were lighter than federal guidelines recommend. She said she based the sentences on many factors, not just the guidelines, and said some of the cases had given her nightmares.

Could her rulings have endangered children? “As a mother and a judge,” she said, “nothing could be further from the truth.”

In what Judiciary Committee Chairman Dick Durbin, D-Ill., described as “a trial by ordeal,” Jackson spent her first day of hearings answering GOP concerns and highlighting her empathetic style on the bench. The committee’s Republicans, several of whom have their eyes on the presidency, tried to brand her — and Democrats in general — as soft on crime, an emerging theme in GOP midterm election campaigns.

Jackson told the committee that her brother and two uncles served as police officers, and that “crime and the effect on the community, and the need for law enforcement — those are not abstract concepts or political slogans to me.”

Wednesday’s hearing is the second day of questioning, and the third day of hearings, after Jackson and the 22 members of the panel gave opening statements on Monday. On Thursday, the committee will hear from legal experts before an eventual vote to move her nomination to the Senate floor.

President Joe Biden chose Jackson in February, fulfilling a campaign pledge to nominate a Black woman to the Supreme Court for the first time in American history. She would take the seat of Justice Stephen Breyer, who announced in January that he would retire after 28 years on the court. Jackson would be the third Black justice, after Thurgood Marshall and Clarence Thomas, and the sixth woman.

Barring unexpected developments, Democrats who control the Senate by the slimmest of margins hope to wrap up Jackson’s confirmation before Easter, though Breyer is not leaving until the current session ends this summer.

Jackson said the potential to be the first Black woman on the court is “extremely meaningful” and that she had received many letters from young girls. Her nomination also “supports public confidence in the judiciary,” Jackson said.

Democrats have been full of praise for Biden’s Supreme Court nominee, noting that she would not only be the first Black woman but also the first public defender on the court, and the first with experience representing indigent criminal defendants since Marshall.

Republicans praised that experience, too, but also questioned it, focusing in particular on work she did roughly 15 years ago representing detainees at the U.S. facility in Guantanamo Bay, Cuba. Jackson said

public defenders don't pick their clients and are "standing up for the constitutional value of representation." She said she continued to represent one client in private practice because her firm happened to be assigned his case.

Picking up on a thread started by Sen. Josh Hawley, R-Mo., and amplified by the Republican National Committee in fundraising emails, Cruz questioned Jackson on her sentences for child pornographers, at one point bringing out a large poster board and circling sentences he said he found egregious.

Jackson defended her decisions by saying she takes into account not only sentencing guidelines but also the stories of the victims, the nature of the offenses and the defendants' histories.

"A judge is not playing a numbers game," she said. "A judge is looking at all of these different factors."

Cruz, Hawley and Sen. Tom Cotton, R-Ark., are potential 2024 presidential candidates, and their rounds of questioning were some of the most combative, hitting on issues that are popular with the GOP base. Cruz asked her about critical race theory, a premise that centers on the idea that racism is systemic in the nation's institutions. Jackson said the idea doesn't come up in her work as a judge, and it "wouldn't be something I would rely on" if confirmed.

The Texas senator also questioned her about her daughter's private school in Washington, where she sits on the board, bringing up a book called "Antiracist Baby" that he said was taught to younger children at the school.

"Do you agree with this book that is being taught for kids that babies are racist?" Cruz asked.

Visibly annoyed, Jackson took a long pause. She said no children should be made to feel they are racists, victims or oppressors. "I don't believe in any of that," she said.

Asked about abortion, Jackson readily agreed with comments that conservative Justices Amy Coney Barrett and Brett Kavanaugh made about two landmark cases when they were up for confirmation. "Roe and Casey are the settled law of the Supreme Court concerning the right to terminate a woman's pregnancy. They have established a framework that the court has reaffirmed," Jackson said.

Jackson's answers bypassed a key point: The court right now is weighing whether to overrule those cases that affirm a nationwide right to abortion.

Near the end of the day, Sen. John Kennedy, R-La., asked Jackson when life begins. She told him that she didn't know, and added, without elaborating, "I have a religious view that I set aside when I am ruling on cases."

Jackson pushes back at GOP critics, defends judicial record

By MARY CLARE JALONICK and MARK SHERMAN Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — Supreme Court nominee Ketanji Brown Jackson forcefully defended her record as a judge Tuesday, pushing back against Republican assertions that she was soft on crime and declaring she would rule as an "independent jurist" if confirmed as the first Black woman on the high court.

In a marathon day and evening of questioning that lasted more than 13 hours, Republicans aggressively pressed Jackson on the sentences she has handed down to sex offenders in her nine years as a federal judge, her advocacy on behalf of terror suspects at Guantanamo Bay, her thoughts on critical race theory and even her religious views. At one point, Sen. Ted Cruz of Texas read from children's books that he said are taught at her teenage daughter's school.

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Could her rulings have endangered children? "As a mother and a judge," she said, "nothing could be further from the truth."

In what Judiciary Committee Chairman Dick Durbin, D-Ill., described as "a trial by ordeal," Jackson attempted to answer GOP concerns and also highlight the empathetic style on the bench that she has frequently described. The committee's Republicans, several of whom have their eyes on the presidency, tried to brand her — and Democrats in general — as soft on crime, an emerging theme in GOP midterm

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Jackson told the committee that her brother and two uncles served as police officers, and that "crime and the effect on the community, and the need for law enforcement — those are not abstract concepts or political slogans to me."

Tuesday's hearing was the first of two days of questioning after Jackson and the 22 members of the panel gave opening statements on Monday. On Thursday, the committee will hear from legal experts before an eventual vote to move her nomination to the Senate floor.

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Barring unexpected developments, Democrats who control the Senate by the slimmest of margins hope to wrap up Jackson's confirmation before Easter, though Breyer is not leaving until the current session ends this summer.

She said the potential to be the first Black woman on the court is "extremely meaningful" and that she had received many letters from young girls. Jackson, who grew up in Miami, noted that she had not had to attend racially segregated public schools as her own parents did, "and the fact that we had come that far was to me a testament to the hope and the promise of this country."

Her nomination also "supports public confidence in the judiciary," Jackson said.

Democrats have been full of praise for Biden's Supreme Court nominee, noting that she would not only be the first Black woman but also the first public defender on the court, and first with experience representing indigent criminal defendants since Justice Marshall.

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"A judge is not playing a numbers game," she said. "A judge is looking at all of these different factors."

The White House has rejected the criticism as "toxic and weakly presented misinformation." And sentencing expert Douglas Berman, an Ohio State law professor, wrote on his blog that while Jackson's record shows she is skeptical of the range of prison terms recommended for child pornography cases, "so too were prosecutors in the majority of her cases and so too are district judges nationwide."

Cruz, Hawley and Arkansas Sen. Tom Cotton are potential 2024 presidential candidates, and their rounds of questioning were some of the most combative, hitting on issues that are popular with the GOP base. Cruz asked her about critical race theory, a premise that centers on the idea that racism is systemic in the nation's institutions. Jackson said the idea doesn't come up in her work as a judge, and it "wouldn't be something I would rely on" if confirmed.

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Visibly annoyed, Jackson took a long pause. She said no children should be made to feel they are racists, victims or oppressors. "I don't believe in any of that," she said.

Cotton asked whether there should be more police or fewer, a question she declined to answer, and questioned her on drug sentencing.

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Jackson also bristled at questions from South Carolina Sen. Lindsey Graham, who voted for her confirmation as an appeals court judge last year but has openly expressed his frustration after President Joe Biden picked her over a South Carolina judge. Graham asked her about her religion, and how often she goes to church, angrily noting what he said was unfair criticism of Justice Amy Coney Barrett's Catholicism ahead of her 2020 confirmation.

Jackson — who thanked God in her opening statement and said that faith “sustains me at this moment” — responded that she is a Protestant. But she said she is reluctant to talk about her faith in detail because “I want to be mindful of the need for the public to have confidence in my ability to separate out my personal views.”

Asked about abortion, Jackson readily agreed with comments that conservative Justices Barrett and Brett Kavanaugh made when they were up for confirmation. “Roe and Casey are the settled law of the Supreme Court concerning the right to terminate a woman's pregnancy. They have established a framework that the court has reaffirmed,” Jackson said.

Jackson's answers bypassed a key point: The court right now is weighing whether to overrule those cases that affirm a nationwide right to abortion.

Near the end of the day, Sen. John Kennedy, R-La., asked Jackson when life begins, She told him that she didn't know, and added, without elaborating: “I have a religious view that I set aside when I am ruling on cases.”

The White House said Tuesday that Biden had watched part of the hearings and was proud of Jackson's “grace and dignity.”

The president was struck by how “she swiftly dismantled conspiracy theories put forward in bad faith,” said White House deputy press secretary Chris Meagher.

Ukraine thwarts Russian advances; fight rages for Mariupol

By NEBI QENA and CARA ANNA Associated Press

KYIV, Ukraine (AP) — Ukrainian forces battled continuing Russian efforts to occupy Mariupol and claimed to have retaken a strategic suburb of Kyiv on Tuesday, mounting a defense so dogged that it is stoking fears Russia's Vladimir Putin will escalate the war to new heights.

“Putin's back is against the wall,” said U.S. President Joe Biden, who is heading to Europe this week to meet with allies. “And the more his back is against the wall, the greater the severity of the tactics he may employ.”

Biden reiterated accusations that Putin is considering resorting to using chemical or biological weapons, though Pentagon spokesman John Kirby said the U.S. has seen no evidence to suggest that such an escalation is imminent.

The warnings came as attacks continued in and around Kyiv and Mariupol, and people escaped the battered and besieged port city. Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy accused Russian forces of not only blocking a humanitarian convoy trying to take desperately needed aid to Mariupol but seizing what another Ukrainian official said were 15 of the bus drivers and rescue workers on the aid mission, along with their vehicles.

Zelenskyy said the Russians had agreed to the route ahead of time.

“We are trying to organize stable humanitarian corridors for Mariupol residents, but almost all of our attempts, unfortunately, are foiled by the Russian occupiers, by shelling or deliberate terror,” he said in his nightly video address to the nation.

The hands of one exhausted Mariupol survivor were shaking as she arrived by train in the western city of Lviv.

“There's no connection with the world. We couldn't ask for help,” said Julia Krytska, who was helped by volunteers to make it out with her husband and son. “People don't even have water there.”

Explosions and bursts of gunfire shook Kyiv, and heavy artillery fire could be heard from the northwest, where Russia has sought to encircle and capture several of the capital's suburban areas.

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Early Tuesday, Ukrainian troops drove Russian forces from the Kyiv suburb of Makariv after a fierce battle, Ukraine's Defense Ministry said. The regained territory allowed Ukrainian forces to retake control of a key highway and block Russian troops from surrounding Kyiv from the northwest.

A video posted by Ukrainian police showed them surveying damage in Makariv, including to the town's police station, which an officer says took a direct hit to its roof. The police drove by destroyed residential buildings and along a road pocked by shelling. The town appeared all but deserted.

Still, the Defense Ministry said Russian forces partially took other northwest suburbs, Bucha, Hostomel and Irpin, some of which have been under attack almost since Russia invaded nearly a month ago.

A Western official, speaking on condition of anonymity to discuss military assessments, said Ukrainian resistance has brought much of Russia's advance to a halt but has not sent Moscow's forces into retreat.

"We have seen indications that the Ukrainians are going a bit more on the offensive now," Kirby told reporters separately in Washington. He said that was particularly true in southern Ukraine, including near Kherson, where "they have tried to regain territory."

Asked on CNN what Russian President Vladimir Putin had achieved in Ukraine, Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov said: "Well, first of all, not yet. He hasn't achieved yet." But he insisted that the military operation was going "strictly in accordance with the plans and purposes that were established beforehand."

Putin's aims remain to "get rid of the military potential of Ukraine" and to "ensure that Ukraine changes from an anti-Russian center to a neutral country," Peskov said.

Russia's far stronger, bigger military has many Western military experts warning against overconfidence in Ukraine's long-term odds. Russia's practice in past wars in Chechnya and Syria was to grind down resistance with strikes that flattened cities, killed countless civilians and sent millions fleeing.

But Russian forces appeared unprepared and have often performed badly against Ukrainian resistance. The U.S. estimates Russia has lost a bit more than 10 percent of the overall combat capability it had at the start of the fight, including troops and tanks and other materiel.

Western officials say Russian forces are facing serious shortages of food, fuel and cold weather gear, leaving some soldiers suffering from frostbite.

The invasion has driven more than 10 million people from their homes, almost a quarter of Ukraine's population, according to the United Nations.

Thousands of civilians are believed to have died. Estimates of Russian military casualties vary widely, but even conservative figures by Western officials are in the low thousands.

On Monday, Russia's pro-Kremlin Komsomolskaya Pravda newspaper, citing the Defense Ministry, reported that almost 10,000 Russian soldiers had been killed. The report was quickly removed, and the newspaper blamed hackers. The Kremlin refused to comment. The Western official said the figure is "a reasonable estimate."

Putin's troops are facing unexpectedly stiff resistance that has left the bulk of Moscow's ground forces miles from the center of Kyiv, and they are making slow progress on apparent efforts to cut off fighters in eastern Ukraine. The Russians are increasingly concentrating their air power and artillery on Ukraine's cities and civilians.

Talks to end the fighting have continued by video. Zelenskyy said negotiations with Russia are going "step by step, but they are going forward."

U.N. Secretary-General Antonio Guterres said he saw progress in the talks.

"From my outreach with various actors, elements of diplomatic progress are coming into view on several key issues," and the gains are enough to end hostilities now, he said. He gave no details.

The Western official, though, said that there were no signs Moscow was ready to compromise.

In the last update from Mariupol officials, they said March 15 that at least 2,300 people had died in the siege. Accounts from the city suggest the true toll is much higher, with bodies lying uncollected. Airstrikes over the past week destroyed a theater and an art school where many civilians were taking shelter.

Zelenskyy, in his address, said more than 7,000 people were evacuated from Mariupol on Tuesday. But about 100,000 remain in the city "in inhuman conditions, under a full blockade, without food, without water, without medicine and under constant shelling, under constant bombardment," he said.

Before the war, 430,000 people lived in Mariupol.

Like Zelenskyy, the Red Cross said a humanitarian aid convoy trying to reach the city with desperately needed supplies had not been able to enter.

Perched on the Sea of Azov, Mariupol is a crucial port for Ukraine and lies along a stretch of territory between Russia and Crimea. The siege has cut the city off from the sea and allowed Russia to establish a land corridor to Crimea.

But it's not clear how much of the city Russia holds, with fleeing residents saying fighting continues street by street.

A senior U.S. defense official, speaking on condition of anonymity to give the Pentagon's assessment, said Russian ships in the Sea of Azov have now joined in the shelling of Mariupol. The official said there were about seven Russian ships in that area, including a minesweeper and a couple of landing vessels.

Ukraine's Defense Ministry said that troops defending the city had destroyed a Russian patrol boat and electronic warfare complex.

Those who have made it out of Mariupol told of a devastated city.

"They bombed us for the past 20 days," said 39-year-old Viktoria Totsen, who fled into Poland. "During the last five days the planes were flying over us every five seconds and dropped bombs everywhere — on residential buildings, kindergartens, art schools, everywhere."

Beyond the terrible human toll, the war has shaken the post-Cold War global security consensus, imperiled the world supply of key crops and raised worries it could set off a nuclear accident.

As part of a series of addresses to foreign legislatures, Zelenskyy urged Italian lawmakers to strengthen sanctions against Moscow, noting many wealthy Russians have homes in the country.

"Don't be a resort for murderers," he said from Kyiv.

'Torture and murder': Ronald Greene case turns cop vs. cop

By JIM MUSTIAN and JAKE BLEIBERG Associated Press

BATON ROUGE, La. (AP) — Louisiana State Police investigators who pressed within days to charge troopers in the deadly 2019 arrest of Ronald Greene told lawmakers Tuesday that commanders rejected their concerns and told them to suppress graphic video of the Black motorist's final moments that the agency's own expert described as "torture and murder."

Legislators heard explosive testimony from a supervisor who said he was instructed not to give prosecutors the body-camera footage showing troopers stunning, punching and dragging Greene.

"Nobody in my chain of command wanted anything done," Lt. Scott Brown told a special committee investigating the state's handling of Greene's death. "They can't come here and admit to that. They'd go to prison."

Brown not only disobeyed the orders but reported his superiors to the former head of the state police, who he said turned a blind eye to attempted interference that's now under federal investigation.

The bipartisan committee was convened last month after The Associated Press reported that Gov. John Bel Edwards was informed within hours that troopers arresting Greene had engaged in a "violent, lengthy struggle." But he stayed mostly silent on the case for two years as state troopers told Greene's family and wrote in reports that he died as the result of a car crash after a high-speed chase outside Monroe.

AP last year obtained and published the long-withheld body-camera video that showed what really happened: troopers jolting Greene with stun guns, punching him in the face and dragging him by his ankle shackles as he wailed, "I'm your brother! I'm scared! I'm scared!"

Tuesday's daylong hearing shed little new light on what the governor knew and when. Several lawmakers expressed frustration with state police leaders, saying their vague and circuitous responses were further eroding public trust in the beleaguered agency.

"This is an attempt to not be transparent," state Rep. Tanner Magee, the committee's chairman, said at one point, dressing down the agency's second-in-command, Lt. Col. Doug Cain. "If we trusted you we wouldn't be here right now."

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But the panel heard a flurry of new details about the fallout from Greene's death in interviews with front-line troopers, who told lawmakers their concerns were ignored for months.

Two of the officials testified that, on top of all the other uses of force captured on body camera video, troopers also pepper-sprayed the shackled Greene before he stopped breathing.

"At the end of the day, somebody is going to get me in a deposition or I'm going to be on the trial stand ... and I'll call it torture and murder," Sgt. Scott Davis, the agency's use-of-force expert, told lawmakers.

The lead detective in Greene's death, Albert Paxton, told lawmakers the ranking officer at the scene of Greene's death should be prosecuted for a "cover-up" for denying the existence of his own body camera footage.

Lt. John Clary's video also was withheld for months from both state and federal authorities. Records obtained by AP show Clary remains a focus of the ongoing federal investigation even after state police cleared him of wrongdoing, concluding it was unclear whether his footage was "purposefully withheld."

Federal prosecutors are expected to decide soon whether to charge Clary and others in the case. A grand jury in Shreveport has been hearing testimony in the case.

"It's never been my word," said Paxton, who recently retired from state police, providing his most detailed public account of the case to date. "It's been the evidence."

A use-of-force report obtained by AP indicates Greene was pepper-sprayed at some point during the arrest. "I know that they were spraying him," Davis testified Tuesday.

But federal authorities have expressed private skepticism that they can prove pepper-spray was used during the arrest, even after the FBI enhanced the body-camera videos, according to law enforcement officials familiar with the case. The officials spoke on the condition of anonymity to discuss the ongoing federal investigation.

Federal prosecutors have focused on the pepper spray in recent months as a potential means of demonstrating the troopers acted "willfully" — a component of the federal charges authorities are considering — in their mistreatment of Greene, the law enforcement officials said.

Cain, the agency's second-in-command, also told lawmakers Tuesday that he's being investigated for having his cellphone "sanitized" — erased of all its data — amid the ongoing federal investigation. He said that internal inquiry barred him from answering the panel's questions about the phone wiping.

"I have nothing to hide," Cain said. "I didn't do anything wrong."

Another police official, Triet Le, acknowledged wiping Cain's phone and those of the two top commanders at the time of Greene's death, saying he was then unaware of policies and laws against doing so. Le said he no longer has the phones because internal affairs investigators seized them Monday, the day before he was set to testify.

"I think this IA investigation is malarkey," Magee said.

Oscar Preview: Five big questions ahead of Sunday's awards

By JAKE COYLE AP Film Writer

NEW YORK (AP) — The Academy Awards have always loved a comeback story. This year, the Oscars are attempting to star in one, too.

On Sunday, the Academy Awards will try to bounce back from a 2021 ceremony that was plagued by pandemic restrictions, a botched ending and record-low ratings. The 94th Academy Awards will return to their usual home, Los Angeles' Dolby Theatre, and be broadcast live on ABC beginning at 8 p.m. EDT. (It's also possible to stream it live on services like Hulu Live TV, YouTubeTV and on ABC.com with provider authentication.)

How much of the Oscars' downturn should be chalked up to COVID-19? How much is it the new normal? These are just some of the questions that hang over an Academy Awards that feels like a crossroads for one of America's most enduring pop-culture institutions, and still the most-watched annual show outside the Super Bowl.

Can the Will Packer-produced awards shrug off the pandemic, reverse years of declining ratings for network

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TV award shows and coalesce a big-tent event for a fast evolving movie landscape? In the interminable run-up to the springtime Oscars, many in the industry have been skeptical. Which leads us to the first of five questions heading into the show.

WILL THE OSCARS' LATEST MAKEOVER WORK?

The biggest drama heading into Sunday revolves around a broadcast that has been substantially retooled to stem the ratings slide. As if making up for several host-less years, this time there are three: Amy Schumer, Regina Hall and Wanda Sykes. Will their combined star power move the needle at all?

Facing pressure from ABC, the academy will also first present eight categories — production design, editing, sound, score, makeup and hairstyling, and the three short film awards — before the telecast begins. Clips of their wins and speeches will be edited into the show. Critics throughout the industry, though, have lined up to decry the change. The largest union representing behind-the-scenes workers, IATSE, on Monday called the decision detrimental to the “fundamental purpose” of the Oscars.

So what will Packer do with the extra time? Beyoncé and Billie Eilish will perform their nominated songs. An eclectic group of presenters has also been announced, including some unexpected names like DJ Khaled, Tony Hawk, Sean “Diddy” Combs and Shaun White — so this could finally be the year that Judi Dench learns how to perform a “McTwist.”

WILL A STREAMER TAKE HOME BEST PICTURE?

The two favorites both hail from streaming services, which have ever won best picture. The lead nominee, Jane Campion’s “The Power of the Dog,” up for 12 awards, had long been the presumed frontrunner, and possibly Netflix’s best chance yet to win Hollywood’s top award. But after back-to-back wins with the Screen Actors Guild and the Producers Guild, Sian Heder’s deaf family drama “CODA” may have the edge. The film’s deep-pocketed backer, Apple TV+, has spent big to push a feel-good underdog indie to the front of the pack. If “CODA” wins, it will be the first time since 1932’s “Grand Hotel” that a film with fewer than four nominations (“CODA” has three) took best picture. Some predictions this year have been wildly off, though, so other nominees like Kenneth Branagh’s “Belfast” could still pull off an upset.

HOW MUCH WILL COVID DRAG DOWN THE PARTY?

Last year’s Oscars decamped to Union Station for an intimate show with a small number of attendees and lots of social distancing. This year, a full stage show and red carpet is planned, albeit with uneven COVID-19 protocols. Attendees are required to submit two negative tests and proof of vaccination. Those presenting or performing don’t have to be vaccinated but need recent negative tests. Masks will be in the mix, too, for attendees sitting outside the orchestra at the Dolby and for media on the red carpet. After numerous attendees contracted the virus after attending the March 13 BAFTAs in London, several nominees have been quarantining, including Branagh and “Belfast” co-star Ciarán Hinds. With infection and hospitalization rates way down, Los Angeles County is set to lift many virus restrictions for indoor events on April 1, five days after the Oscars.

WILL WILL SMITH WIN HIS FIRST OSCAR?

Nominated twice before for best actor (for “Ali” and “The Pursuit of Happyness”), Will Smith appears a lock to win his first Academy Award. Smith’s performance as Richard Williams, father to Venus and Serena, in “King Richard” has remained the most likely choice throughout the season. And the speech by the exuberant 53-year-old star should be one of the most lively of the night. A win, though, will have to come over some formidable competition — including the actor who bested Smith’s “Ali” performance 20 years ago: Denzel Washington, a winner then for “Training Day” and a threat this time for “The Tragedy of Macbeth.”

WHO’S SET TO MAKE HISTORY?

Many of the top awards could feature some major milestones. Ari Wegner, cinematographer of “The Power of Dog,” may become the first woman to ever win that award. Her director, Jane Campion, is also poised to make history. Campion, the first woman ever nominated twice for best director, is set to become only the third woman to win the category. It would mark the first time the directing award has ever gone to women in back-to-back years, after “Nomadland” filmmaker Chloé Zhao won last year.

Troy Kotsur of “CODA” is in line to be the first deaf male actor to win an Oscar. His widely expected

win would make him and his "CODA" co-star Marlee Matlin the only deaf actors to land Academy Awards. And supporting actress, which Ariana DeBose seemingly has sewn up for her breakthrough role in Steven Spielberg's "West Side Story," may see the first Afro-Latina and openly LGBTQ actor win in the category. A win for DeBose would come 60 years after Rita Moreno won for the same role, Anita, in the 1961 original. That would be the third time that two actors have won for playing the same role, following Heath Ledger and Joaquin Phoenix as the Joker, and Marlon Brando and Robert DeNiro as Vito Corleone. But we'll have to wait and see if DeBose's "West Side Story" co-star Rachel Zegler is there to cheer her on.

AP FACT CHECK: Republicans skew Jackson's record on crime

By HOPE YEN, BEN FOX and CALVIN WOODWARD Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — Republican senators characterized Supreme Court nominee Ketanji Brown Jackson's judicial views as extremist and soft on crime, using her confirmation hearings to air a line of conservative grievances that relied at times on distortions of her record.

Over the first two days of hearings, Jackson was the subject of misleading rhetoric on critical race theory, her pandemic-era rulings and the Guantanamo Bay, Cuba, detainees she represented as a public defender.

And Democrats and Republicans tangled over whether she had ever called President George W. Bush and his defense secretary war criminals. Both sides left out important detail in those exchanges.

A look at how some claims compare with the reality:

GUANTANAMO

SOUTH CAROLINA SEN. LINDSEY GRAHAM: "What's the recidivism rate at Gitmo? ... It's 31%. How does that strike you? Is that high, low, about right? ... You know how it strikes me? It strikes me as terrible ... Of the ... detainees released from Gitmo — 729 released, 229 have gone back to the fight." — remarks Tuesday.

THE FACTS: Those numbers about the detainees at Guantanamo, or Gitmo, are misleading. The actual recidivism rate is 17%, not 31%, according to the government, and has been far lower — down to about 5% — since the start of the Obama administration.

To get to 31%, Graham is adding cases also listed by the government where detainees are suspected — but not confirmed — to have reengaged in terrorist or insurgent activity. And his numbers don't reflect the pace of recidivism currently or over the last decade.

What's this got to do with Jackson? As a public defender before becoming a judge, she was assigned to represent four men who had been held at Guantanamo, and some Republicans are arguing that makes her soft on terrorism.

Most detainees who were determined to have reengaged as bad actors were released under President George W. Bush, whose administration released 532 detainees overall. Under President Barack Obama, whose administration released 187 detainees, the U.S. introduced measures to screen detainees and determine if they could be safely released.

The Obama administration also required security conditions on detainees in the countries where they were sent. As a result, the re-engagement numbers plummeted.

Of the detainees released after January 2009, 10, or 5%, were confirmed as reengaging and 20, or about 10%, are suspected. It is these lower figures that more accurately represent the reality.

There are now 38 men at Guantanamo, following the release of two each under Presidents Donald Trump and Joe Biden.

TEXAS SEN. JOHN CORNYN: "Why in the world would you call Secretary of Defense Rumsfeld and George W. Bush war criminals in a legal filing?"

JACKSON: "I don't remember that particular reference...I did not intend to disparage the president or the secretary of defense."

GRAHAM: "I've been a lawyer, too, but I don't think it's necessary to call the government a war criminal in pursuing charges against a terrorist. I just think that's too far. I don't know why you chose those words."

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SEN. DICK DURBIN, Democratic chairman of the Judiciary Committee: "So to be clear, there was no time where you called President Bush or Secretary Rumsfeld a quote, war criminal, close quote."

JACKSON: "Correct, senator."

THE FACTS: Everyone is partly right. No one is completely right.

Jackson did not accuse Bush and former Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld of being "war criminals" explicitly, as the Republicans claimed she had. But she did accuse them of committing "war crimes," a fact omitted by Durbin.

In 2005, as an assistant public defender, Jackson signed a petition for habeas corpus on behalf of one of the detainees she represented, alleging he was being held under conditions that violated his rights to dignity and freedom from torture and cruel punishment.

"President Bush has ordered the prolonged, indefinite, and arbitrary detention of individuals including Petitioner Khiali-Gul, without due process of law, and the remaining Respondents have implemented those orders," the petition said.

"By the actions described above, Respondents' acts directing, ordering, confirming, ratifying, and/or conspiring to bring about the torture and other inhumane treatment of Petitioner Khiali-Gul constitute war crimes and/or crimes against humanity in violation of the law of nations under the Alien Tort Statute."

The detainee, identified by the Pentagon as Khi Ali Gul, was repatriated to Afghanistan in 2014.

By any common understanding, accusing people of war crimes is to accuse them of being war criminals. But there are legal reasons to name the president and others; the relevant procedural rules require it, according to Steve Vladeck, a University of Texas legal scholar.

GRAHAM, raising the fact that five former Afghan prisoners now hold senior positions with the Taliban following the U.S. withdrawal from Afghanistan: "These were five people that we had in our control. They're now helping the Taliban run the country. Would you say that our system in terms of releasing people needs to be looked at?" — remarks Tuesday.

THE FACTS: Graham somehow seeks to tie Jackson to an unrelated decision made by the White House. The five former prisoners were exchanged for the release of captive Army soldier Bowe Bergdahl.

Obama, who approved the 2014 prisoner exchange, acknowledged at the time that the U.S. was aware the five detainees might work against the U.S. if released. But the administration decided to go ahead with the exchange because of concerns about Bergdahl's deteriorating health.

Some of the same prisoners took part in peace talks between the Trump administration and the Taliban that led to the U.S. withdrawal from the country.

CRIME

TEXAS SEN. TED CRUZ: "You described in a speech to a law school what you were doing as critical race theory." — remarks Tuesday.

TENNESSEE SEN. MARSHA BLACKBURN: "You have made clear that you believe judges must consider critical race theory when deciding how to sentence criminal defendants." — remarks Monday.

THE FACTS: They're both incorrect. Jackson never called for it to be incorporated in federal sentencing nor said it should be used as part of the work as a judge.

"Critical race theory" is a broad-based term. It started as a line of thinking in law schools that racism is systemic in the nation's institutions. Many Republicans have since cast it as a culture-war effort to rewrite American history and convince white people that they are inherently racist. Still, there is little to no evidence that critical race theory itself is being taught to K-12 public school students, though some ideas central to it, such as lingering consequences of slavery, have been.

Blackburn was referring to a 2015 speech in which Jackson described how she encouraged students to study federal sentencing policy as an academic area implicating many topics.

"Sentencing is just plain interesting on an intellectual level, in part because it melds together myriad types of law — criminal law, of course, but also administrative law, constitutional law, critical race theory,

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negotiations, and to some extent, even contracts," Jackson said in her speech. "And if that's not enough to prove to them that sentencing is a subject ... worth studying, I point out that sentencing policy implicates and intersects with various other intellectual disciplines as well, including philosophy, psychology, history, statistics, economics, and politics."

In other words, she indicates that critical race theory might be one of many potential factors in play in sentencing, not a mandatory consideration.

Asked Tuesday about her speech, Jackson said her comments referred to "the entire laundry list of different academic disciplines that I said relate to sentencing policy" as set by sentencing commissions or legislatures, not courts.

"None of that relates to what I do as a judge," she told the hearing.

BLACKBURN: "At the start of the COVID-19 pandemic, you advocated and again I quote, 'for each and every criminal defendant' in the D.C. Department of Corrections custody, 'should be released.' That would have been 1,500 criminals back on the street if you had had your way." — remarks Monday.

THE FACTS: Blackburn is quoting Jackson out of context. As a federal court judge, Jackson actually did not release criminal defendants en masse onto the streets.

As a U.S. district court judge, Jackson wrote in an April 2020 case that the health dangers of COVID-19 could "reasonably suggest" that defendants in the D.C. correctional facilities should be released from there. Ultimately, however, the judge ruled against releasing a prisoner who was requesting home detention after review of his individual health history and severity of offenses, concluding he was a danger to society.

At the time, COVID-19 was spiking unabated across the U.S., more than 40 D.C. inmates had tested positive and even prosecutors in the case acknowledged a health threat. The Justice Department in 2020 and 2021 separately decided to release thousands of inmates to home confinement as the pandemic ravaged federal prisons.

"The obvious increased risk of harm that the COVID-19 pandemic poses to individuals who have been detained in the District's correctional facilities reasonably suggests that each and every criminal defendant who is currently in D.C. DOC (Department of Corrections) custody — and who thus cannot take independent measures to control their own hygiene and distance themselves from others — should be released," Jackson said in her ruling.

Jackson, however, then proceeded to lay out the law and concluded it falls to the courts to rule "case by case" whether to release inmates consistent "with the dictates of the law."

In the case at hand, Jackson ruled that the young, healthy and violent criminal who wanted out did not merit release.

The nonpartisan Congressional Research Service, in reviewing her wider judicial record, said Jackson was "case-specific" when weighing whether criminal defendants should be released based on COVID concerns and "did not rely on it to grant release automatically."

Disney in balancing act as some workers walk out in protest

By MIKE SCHNEIDER and BRENDAN FARRINGTON Associated Press

ORLANDO, Fla. (AP) — Even though only a small percentage of Walt Disney Co. workers participated in a walkout Tuesday, organizers felt they had won a moral victory with the company issuing a statement denouncing the anti-LGBTQ legislation that sparked employee outrage.

Throughout the day, pockets of employees staged demonstrations at various sites across the country, including near Orlando's Walt Disney World and Walt Disney Animation Studios in California. According to a Disney official, there had been no interruptions in any operations.

Disney employed 190,000 workers last October, with roughly three-quarters working in its theme parks division.

The debate forced the company into a balancing act between the expectations of a diverse workforce and demands from an increasingly polarized, politicized marketplace.

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On one side are LGBTQ advocates and Disney employees calling for the walkout in protest of CEO Bob Chapek's slow response in publicly criticizing Florida legislation that opponents dubbed the "Don't Say Gay" bill. The legislation awaiting the governor's signature bars instruction on sexual orientation or gender identity in kindergarten through third grade.

On the other side are politicians like Republican Gov. Ron DeSantis, who accuse the entertainment conglomerate of bending to woke politics. Earlier this month, the company decided to temporarily suspend political contributions in Florida. DeSantis, who has been tacking toward the Republican base on culture war issues, is seen as a 2024 presidential hopeful.

Union leaders for the tens of thousands of unionized workers at Disney theme parks in Florida and California said they saw no walkout momentum among their members, advising them not to do so because it would defy contractual obligations.

Evan Power, Leon County's Republican Party chairman, said he believes a strident minority of Disney employees are pushing the issue, and DeSantis has more to gain by taking the side of parents who want more control over education and "sexual conversations" in early grades at school.

In a Tuesday Facebook post, Disney wrote that the company opposes "any legislation that infringes on basic human rights" and stands "in solidarity" with LGBTQ employees "who make their voices heard today and every day."

A half-dozen Disney workers gathered Tuesday morning at an Orlando LGBTQ center to write letters in support of queer students. "You're Amazing. You Matter and We Care" and "It Gets Better," they read, next to a drawing of a rainbow.

"We are creators, and we felt that we could be creative and productive and write letters of encouragement to LGBTQ youth," said Gabe, a Walt Disney World product development manager who didn't want his last name used for fear of having his privacy invaded.

Scores of Disney workers marched outside the company's Burbank, California, studios, including one carrying rainbow-colored Mickey Mouse doll and chanting, "Say gay!"

"We had a great group out here just to show our support for our queer employees and their families," said Nora Rogers, a production supervisor at Walt Disney Animation Studios.

Disney, whose movies and properties shaped generations of children around the world, has spoken out several times in recent years about contentious social and political situations.

In January 2021, it said it would suspend political donations to lawmakers who voted against certifying President Joe Biden's electoral victory. It also threatened to pull business from Georgia — a favorite of movie and TV studios — following a 2016 anti-gay bill, which was ultimately vetoed by the then-governor.

Chapek, who became CEO in 2020, has now drawn fire for speaking out about the gender identity bill only after it passed the Florida Legislature.

Republican lawmakers pushing the Florida legislation argued that parents, not teachers, should be the ones talking to their children about gender issues during their early formative years. The legislation attracted scrutiny from Democrats including Biden, who called it "hateful." It has been sent to DeSantis, who is expected to sign it into law.

Chapek has apologized for not coming out more forcefully and publicly against the bill, saying Disney officials worked behind the scenes to stop it. Chapek also announced a pause to political donations in Florida and support for advocacy groups fighting similar legislation in other states, reiterating those points during a company-wide discussion Monday.

Outside Walt Disney World's property, Disney employee Nicholas Maldonado was a lone protester Tuesday, wearing a rainbow flag and holding a sign reading, "Trans rights are human rights" and "#DisneyDoBetter."

"Where was Chapek when the bill was introduced?" said Maldonado, who had a day off from his merchandising job at an Orlando Disney store and, while disappointed with Chapek's initial response, said he felt Disney's leaders were beginning to hear the concerns of the company's workers.

Disney has long been influential in Florida politics, tending to support Republicans who have been in control of Tallahassee, the state capital, for two decades, but also being more open on social issues, said

Patricia Campos-Medina, co-director of the Worker Institute at Cornell University. "That's why people felt surprised that they wanted to stay quiet on this issue," she said.

Walkout organizers maintain that withholding political contributions isn't enough.

The group of employees calling for the walkout said on its website that, until the legislation is repealed, Disney leaders need to stop investments in Florida, including the relocation of 2,000 mostly professional jobs from its California headquarters to Orlando. They also say Disney needs to develop an LGBTQ brand similar to the Onyx Collective, an initiative aimed at developing content by and for people of color.

About 20 Disney workers gathered at New York City's Stonewall Inn, birthplace of the gay rights movement, to write letters in support of families affected by the Florida legislation.

Jonathan Shutt, a senior product manager for Disney Streaming Services, said he was aware that not every worker who wanted to participate could do so and that the company "just needs to do better."

"There are many of us who are privileged enough to be able to do this, to be able to walk out and stand up for people," Shutt said.

Cynthia Cooley, an enterprise program senior manager at Disney Streaming Services, said there was an unspoken signal among workers who decided to walk out, with participating employees putting a rainbow flag next to their names in the Slack messaging app.

"We don't talk about Bruno," she cracked, referring to the catchy song from the Disney movie "Encanto."

Scientists worry virus variant may push up COVID cases in US

By LAURA UNGAR AP Science Writer

With coronavirus cases rising in parts of Europe and Asia, scientists worry that an extra-contagious version of the omicron variant may soon push cases up in the United States too.

Experts are also keeping their eyes on another mutant: a rare delta-omicron hybrid that they say doesn't pose much of a threat right now but shows how wily the coronavirus can be.

The U.S. will likely see an uptick in cases caused by the omicron descendant BA.2 starting in the next few weeks, according to Dr. Eric Topol, head of Scripps Research Translational Institute.

"It's inevitable we will see a BA.2 wave here," he said.

One reason? After about two months of falling COVID-19 cases, pandemic restrictions have been lifted across the U.S. Many people are taking off their masks and returning to indoor spaces like restaurants and theaters.

And the latest data from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention shows the share caused by BA.2 is up significantly. The CDC reported Tuesday that the variant accounted for about 35% of new infections last week. In the Northeast, it was about half.

Dr. Anthony Fauci, the U.S. government's top infectious disease expert, told ABC's "This Week" over the weekend that he also thinks the U.S. will likely face an "uptick" similar to what's happening in Europe, particularly the United Kingdom, where BA.2 is the dominant strain. He said he doesn't think it will be a "surge."

The U.K. has "had the same situation as we've had now," Fauci said. "They have BA.2. They have a relaxation of some restrictions such as indoor masking and there's a waning of immunity" from vaccines and past infections.

Keri Althoff, a researcher at Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health, cautioned that CDC case counts underestimate the true numbers because some people are no longer getting tested and others are testing at home and not reporting the results. Also, she said, not every specimen is genetically sequenced to determine the variant.

It's clear, she said, "BA.2 is coming onto the scene."

One reason the variant has gained ground, scientists say, is that it's about 30% more contagious than the original omicron. In rare cases, research shows it can sicken people even if they've already had an omicron infection — although it doesn't seem to cause more severe disease.

Vaccines appear just as effective against both types of omicron, but breakthrough infections are possible.

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And experts point out that vaccination rates are lower in the U.S. than the U.K. About 74% of those 12 and older are fully vaccinated in the U.S, compared with 86% in the U.K.

"We need to emphasize that we're not protected in this country compared to peer countries," Topol said.

Still, not all experts are equally concerned about a BA.2-related rise in U.S. cases. Dr. James Musser, head of genomic medicine and infectious diseases at Houston Methodist, said the variant has so far only caused about 1% to 3% of cases in his medical system. Cases there have usually tracked closely with what's happening in the U.K.

He called BA.2 "something we're keeping an eye on," but said, "I'm not losing sleep" over it.

That's how many scientists view the other variant that some in the public are calling "deltacron," a hybrid containing genetic information from both delta and omicron.

Earlier this month, Maria Van Kerkhove of the World Health Organization said the hybrid has been detected at "very low levels" in France, the Netherlands and Denmark. And two recent studies, which have not yet been peer-reviewed, point to a tiny number of cases in the U.S.

Much remains unknown about the hybrid. There's no evidence it causes more severe disease, and it doesn't look like it's infecting many people. CDC researchers identified 9 samples, seven from the mid-Atlantic region in a study released Monday that hasn't yet been peer-reviewed. Topol, who was not involved in the research, said there's no evidence it has the potential to spread.

It's common for coronaviruses to shuffle gene segments, said Dr. Stuart Campbell Ray, an infectious disease expert at Johns Hopkins University. With two variants circulating at the same time, people may get double infections, and a "progeny virus" could emerge.

Given the virus' ability to spawn new mutants — and the rise of BA.2 — experts say people should get vaccinated if they're not and keep their masks handy.

"Keep your guard up," Topol said. "This is not over."

Germany honors survivor of Nazi camps, 96, killed in Ukraine

BERLIN (AP) — Germany's parliament on Tuesday paid tribute to Boris Romanchenko, who survived several Nazi concentration camps during World War II but was killed last week during an attack in the Ukrainian city of Kharkiv. He was 96.

The Buchenwald concentration camp memorial said on Monday that Romanchenko, who survived Buchenwald as well as camps at Peenemuende, Dora and Bergen-Belsen, was killed on Friday. It said that, according to his granddaughter, the multistory building where he lived was hit by a projectile.

Romanchenko was dedicated to keeping alive the memory of Nazi crimes and was vice president of the International Buchenwald-Dora Committee, the memorial said.

Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy noted the sad irony of Romanchenko's death.

"Just imagine how much he went through!" Zelenskyy said in a video address late Monday. "He survived Buchenwald, Dora, Peenemuende and Bergen-Belson, the conveyors of death created by the Nazis. And he was killed by a Russian shell that hit an ordinary Kharkiv high-rise. With every day of this war, it becomes more and more obvious what they (Russians) mean by 'de-Nazification.'"

Opening a session of Germany's parliament on Tuesday, deputy speaker Katrin Goering-Eckardt paid tribute to Romanchenko.

She said Romanchenko was taken to Dortmund, Germany as a forced laborer in 1942 and was sent to the concentration camps after an escape attempt in 1943. Nazi Germany invaded the Soviet Union in 1941.

"His death reminds us that Germany has a special historical responsibility toward Ukraine," Goering-Eckardt said. "Boris Romanchenko is one of thousands of dead in Ukraine. Every single life that has been taken reminds us to do everything we can to stop this cruel war that violates international law and to help people in and from Ukraine."

Lawmakers held a moment of silence in memory of Romanchenko and other victims of the war.

Romanchenko "survived four concentration camps and was now killed in the Russian war of aggression on Ukraine," Finance Minister Christian Lindner said. "His fate shows both the criminal character of Russian

policy and why Germany is showing solidarity with Ukraine, why we must show solidarity.”

Wisconsin dad wants cop charged for restraint of daughter

By TODD RICHMOND Associated Press

MADISON, Wis. (AP) — A Wisconsin father wants prosecutors to charge an off-duty police officer who appears to have briefly pressed his knee into his 12-year-old daughter’s neck similar to how Derek Chauvin fatally restrained George Floyd. The hold may have violated the officer’s department’s policies and a new Wisconsin law banning police chokeholds in most cases, but the ban doesn’t provide any penalties and several legal experts say charges are unlikely.

Kenosha police Officer Shawn Guetschow was working his off-duty job as a security guard at Lincoln Middle School on March 4 when Jerrel Perez’s daughter got into a lunchtime fight with another student. Surveillance video shows Guetschow rush over and separate the two.

He scuffles with Perez’s daughter, who appears to throw a punch at him. He falls to the floor and takes her down as other students crowd around. He gets on top of the girl and appears to press his knee into the back of her neck for about 25 seconds while he handcuffs her. He then hauls her to her feet and leads her off-camera.

Perez has threatened to sue. He posted on Facebook a screenshot from the surveillance video next to a photo of Chauvin pressing his knee into Floyd’s neck on a Minneapolis street; Chauvin was convicted last year of murdering Floyd.

“TELL ME WHATS THE DIFFERENCE LUCKILY HE AINT KILL MY BABIE,” Perez wrote alongside the photos.

He told The Associated Press on Tuesday that Guetschow “needs to be charged.”

“This is a grown man we are talking about,” he said.

Perez’s daughter is Black and Guetschow is white. The incident came in a city that was roiled by unrest in 2020 when a white police officer shot a Black man, Jacob Blake, in the back while responding to a domestic dispute. During protests that followed, 17-year-old Kyle Rittenhouse shot three men, killing two of them.

Rittenhouse pleaded self-defense and was acquitted of all charges by a jury last year.

Perez and his family’s attorney, Drew DeVinney, have demanded that Kenosha County District Attorney Michael Graveley charge Guetschow. DeVinney didn’t respond to messages seeking comment.

Wisconsin passed a law last summer prohibiting police from using chokeholds except as a last resort or to defend themselves, joining a host of other states that passed similar laws following Floyd’s death and the national protests that followed.

Technically, the law prohibits police departments from authorizing chokeholds in their use-of-force policies. The law doesn’t specify any penalties for violating it, though.

That means Graveley, who pressed the charges in the Rittenhouse case, can’t charge Guetschow under the chokehold law. He could conceivably charge him with some other count, such as battery or assault or recklessly endangering safety, however. Graveley said Monday that no law enforcement agency had referred possible charges to his office.

Former Waukesha County District Attorney Paul Bucher said charging Guetschow would be an overreaction. He called the use of force reasonable and said the case “isn’t even remotely close to Floyd.”

“It was very short. It was to get (the girl) under control. Under the circumstances it was the fastest way to do it,” Bucher said. “I don’t expect the officer to think, ‘How’s this going to look to the media?’ It’s, ‘How do I get this subject under control as quickly as possible?’”

Julius Kim, a former Milwaukee County assistant prosecutor, said the restraint looks bad at first glance. But when a prosecutor considers the totality of the circumstances, including the dangerousness of the situation, whether some form of restraint was necessary, the amount of force used and the duration, criminal charges probably aren’t justified, he said.

“While the officer may not have used the best judgment here in terms of how he restrained this girl or how he handled the situation, in the continuum of reasonable responses, I don’t think the DA’s office will find that a crime was committed,” Kim said.

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James Palmer, executive director of the Wisconsin Professional Police Association, the state's largest police union, said officers are trained to legally restrain suspects by pressing their knee between a suspect's neck and shoulder. He said it's unclear from the video whether Guetschow was executing that move.

Daniel Adams, another former Milwaukee County assistant prosecutor who now works as a defense attorney, felt differently. He called the video "shocking" and Guetschow's use of force "intolerable."

A law enforcement officer "may only use the level of physical force necessary to carry out their job," Adams wrote in an email to The Associated Press. "Here, there was no necessity in using that level of force. ... In my view, the Kenosha District Attorney has probable cause to charge Guetschow with Strangulation/Suffocation and Battery under Wisconsin's criminal code."

Even if Guetschow, a 36-year-old second-shift patrol officer, isn't charged, he could face sanctions from the Kenosha Police Department, which is investigating. The agency's use-of-force policy bars chokeholds except as a last resort and officers are required to follow policy even when they're off-duty.

Guetschow resigned his security guard position on March 15, saying in an email to school district officials that the incident had caused mental and emotional strain on the community and his family, and that he felt the district hasn't supported him.

District spokeswoman Tanya Ruder said the district would have no comment since the incident might lead to a lawsuit.

Efforts to reach Guetschow for comment were unsuccessful. A possible phone number for him was disconnected, and Pete Deates, president of the Kenosha police union, declined to comment when asked if Guetschow has an attorney, citing the ongoing investigation.

Perez said Tuesday that his daughter suffered a concussion and is still dealing with headaches. He said the family has a Thursday meeting with Graveley to learn whether his daughter will face charges in the lunchroom fight.

Report: Rachel Zegler invited to present at Oscars

By LINDSEY BAHR AP Film Writer

"West Side Story" star Rachel Zegler may get her Oscars moment after all. The 20-year-old actor has been invited to be a presenter at the ceremony, according to a report in The Hollywood Reporter.

The gesture came two days after Zegler, who plays Maria, posted on social media that she had not been invited to the awards and would be rooting for "West Side Story" from her couch. The Steven Spielberg film is nominated for seven Academy Awards, including best picture, director and supporting actress for Ariana DeBose, who is expected to win.

The post drew a lot of attention online as many couldn't fathom why the lead of a best picture nominee wouldn't have been invited to the ceremony or at least been asked to present an award.

"I hope some last minute miracle occurs and I can celebrate our film in person but hey, that's how it goes sometimes, I guess," Zegler wrote on Instagram Sunday. "Thanks for all the shock and outrage — I'm disappointed, too. But that's OK. So proud of our movie."

Best picture nominees are allotted a certain number of tickets by the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences, which the film's studio then doles out as they see fit. Presenters and individual nominees get a pair of tickets. And other spots in the room go to the broadcaster, sponsors and academy members, who can enter a lottery.

Zegler is not nominated, but her next big role is as Snow White, which she is currently filming in London. Some wondered why The Walt Disney Co., which owns Oscars broadcaster ABC, wouldn't want their new Snow White there in some capacity, like presenting or performing. Others saw it as a missed opportunity to have a rising young Latina star represented at the show.

Russ Tamblyn, who played Riff in the 1961 "West Side Story" and is a voting member of the Academy, tweeted that it was the Academy's "duty to find Rachel a seat at the Oscars.... When they say representation matters, this is what that means. Please do right by her."

Alec Baldwin tweeted that he would buy Zegler two tickets to the show.

And "One Day at a Time" showrunner Gloria Calderón Kellett tweeted at ABC and the Academy, "How

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about the rare time that Latine people have a movie nominated for an OSCAR you invite the lead. Latine people are 18.5% of this country. ENOUGH!"

Oscars tickets are always hot commodities and this year are even more limited than usual because of efforts to maintain more space between guests to help prevent the spread of COVID-19. Most Academy members have never gotten to attend.

And the outrage has only intensified as more and more presenters with limited connections to the nominated movies or the movie business at all are announced. On Monday, producers revealed that DJ Khaled, Tony Hawk, Kelly Slater and Shaun White would all be presenting awards at the show, which will be broadcast live on ABC on Sunday starting at 8pm ET.

News of Zegler's invitation to present came Tuesday afternoon. Zegler has yet to comment and it is still unclear if she'll be able to attend on this short notice and with her Snow White production schedule.

Representatives for the Academy, Disney and Zegler did not respond immediately to requests for comment.

Biden press secretary has COVID-19, won't travel to Europe

By DARLENE SUPERVILLE Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — White House press secretary Jen Psaki said Tuesday that she is positive again for COVID-19 and will not accompany President Joe Biden to Europe this week for urgent meetings with world counterparts on Russia's invasion of Ukraine.

Biden tested negative on Tuesday, she said.

Psaki's reinfection follows recent positive tests for Vice President Kamala Harris' husband and Ireland's prime minister, who was in the nation's capital last week for a series of in-person celebrations of St. Patrick's Day with Biden and other officials.

The scares happened as the Biden administration tries to help the United States ease back into its pre-pandemic patterns, even as cases climb in Europe due to a new, more contagious variant of the omicron strain of the coronavirus.

Psaki tweeted that she took a laboratory test for COVID-19 as part of her preparation for the trip, which gets underway on Wednesday, and was later notified of a positive result.

She said she had two "socially distanced meetings" with Biden on Monday and that he is not considered a "close contact" under Centers for Disease Control and Prevention guidelines.

Psaki tweeted and released a statement a short time before she was scheduled to step into the White House press room for her daily briefing, accompanied by National Security Adviser Jake Sullivan, who was joining her to discuss the trip.

After a brief delay, White House deputy press secretary Chris Meagher entered and introduced Sullivan to a waiting White House press corps.

"Obviously, we've had some last-minute adjustments to the briefing, which is why I'm up here today," Meagher said before he read a statement on Supreme Court nominee Ketanji Brown Jackson's performance at her confirmation hearing before the Senate Judiciary Committee. He took no questions.

Sullivan made a statement and spent about 16 minutes answering questions about the trip.

Psaki said she will follow CDC guidance and not accompany Biden to Brussels, where he will attend a series of meetings with European and other world leaders on Russia's war in Ukraine. Biden also plans to visit Poland, which shares a border with Ukraine and has taken in more than 2 million Ukrainians fleeing warfare following Russia's Feb. 24 invasion.

Psaki said she has experienced only mild symptoms of COVID-19 and credited being vaccinated against the disease. Under White House COVID-19 protocols, she said she will work from home and return to work at the end of a five-day isolation period and a negative test.

It's not unheard of for someone who has had COVID-19 to become infected again. Reinfections became more likely after the super-contagious omicron variant emerged, even among the fully vaccinated, but those cases tend to be very mild.

As coronavirus cases plummeted around the United States this year, and states and localities dropped their mask-wearing requirements, the White House did as well. As of March 1, neither White House staff nor reporters were required to wear face masks inside the building.

But some scientists are beginning to worry that the omicron variant known as BA.2 could soon push up COVID-19 cases in the United States, after months of case declines and people taking off their masks and returning to indoor spaces.

Harris' husband Doug Emhoff tested positive on March 15, though he is not considered a close contact of the president. Harris has continued to test negative.

The following day, Irish Prime Minister Micheál Martin learned he had tested positive for COVID-19 while attending a gala with U.S. leaders, including Biden. Martin was due to appear with Biden at the White House on St. Patrick's Day but instead made those appearances on video.

This is the second time that COVID-19 has forced Psaki to bow out of accompanying Biden abroad. She sat out last fall's trip to Rome and Glasgow, Scotland, after learning at the last minute that she had tested positive.

Putin foe Navalny gets 9 more years in Russian prison

MOSCOW (AP) — A Russian court on Tuesday convicted top opposition leader Alexei Navalny of fraud and contempt of court, sentencing him to nine more years in prison in a move that was seen as an attempt to keep President Vladimir Putin's biggest foe behind bars for as long as possible.

The new sentence follows a year-long crackdown by Putin on Navalny's supporters, other opposition activists and independent journalists in which authorities appear eager to stifle all dissent.

Navalny's close associates have faced criminal charges and left the country, and his group's political infrastructure — an anti-corruption foundation and a nationwide network of regional offices — has been destroyed after being labeled an extremist organization.

The 45-year-old Navalny, who in 2020 survived a poisoning with a nerve agent that he blames on the Kremlin, is already serving 2½ years in a penal colony east of Moscow for a parole violation. The new trial was held in a makeshift courtroom at the facility.

In a Facebook post by his team shortly after the sentence, the usually sardonic Navalny said: "My space flight is taking a bit longer than expected."

He added that neither he nor his comrades "will simply wait," announcing that his Anti-Corruption Foundation will become an international organization that will "fight (Putin) until we win."

"We will find all of their mansions in Monaco, their villas in Miami, their riches everywhere — and when we do, we will take everything from the criminal Russian elite," the foundation's new website said.

His new conviction is on charges of embezzling money that he and his foundation raised over the years and of insulting a judge during a previous trial. Navalny, who will appeal the ruling, has rejected the allegations as politically motivated.

In Washington, State Department spokesman Ned Price condemned the court's "sham ruling" as "the latest in a series of attempts to silence Navalny and other opposition figures and independent voices."

Germany also denounced the verdict, with its Foreign Ministry calling it "part of the systematic instrumentalization of the Russian judicial system against dissidents and the political opposition."

It wasn't immediately clear whether Navalny must serve the new nine-year sentence in addition to the 2½ years, or where he will serve it. Prosecutors originally asked for a 13-year sentence. The judge also imposed a fine of 1.2 million rubles (about \$11,500).

Navalny's Twitter account responded to the nine-year sentence by citing "The Wire" television series: "Well, as the characters of my favorite TV series 'The Wire' used to say: 'You only do two days. That's the day you go in and the day you come out.' I even had a T-shirt with this slogan, but the prison authorities confiscated it, considering the print extremist."

Even his lawyers, Olga Mikhailova and Vadim Kobzev, were detained shortly after they commented to reporters on the ruling, although Mikhailova told the Medizona news outlet that the police let them go without any charges.

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Navalny's supporters criticized the decision to move the trial, which opened about a month ago, to the prison, instead of holding it in Moscow. They said it effectively limited access to the proceedings for the media and supporters.

He appeared at hearings in prison garb and made several elaborate speeches, decrying the charges as bogus.

Navalny fell ill while on a domestic flight in 2020 and was diagnosed with being poisoned by a chemical nerve agent Novichok, although Russian officials vehemently denied his accusations that they had any role. He was transferred for treatment to Germany, where he recovered for five months.

He was arrested upon returning to Russia in January 2021, triggering the biggest protests seen in the country in recent years. The next month, a Moscow court ordered him to prison for violating terms of his parole on a 2014 embezzlement conviction that the European Court of Human Rights deemed to be "arbitrary and manifestly unreasonable."

Authorities then unleashed the sweeping crackdown on his organization, associates and supporters. Last month, Russian officials added him and a number of his colleagues to a state registry that labeled them extremists and terrorists.

Several criminal cases have been launched against Navalny individually, leading his associates to suggest the Kremlin intends to keep him behind bars indefinitely.

Navalny's closest ally and longtime strategist Leonid Volkov tweeted Tuesday from abroad that the plan will fail. "Putin plans and has been planning a lot of things: to make Russia one of the top-five world economies, to take over Kyiv in 96 hours, to kill Navalny with Novichok. His plans have always failed. So will these nine years," Volkov said.

March Madness viewer's guide for the Sweet 16

By JOHN MARSHALL AP Basketball Writer

A No. 1 seed and two No. 2s did not get past the first weekend. A band of Peacocks from Jersey City took down a blue blood to reach the Sweet 16. They will be joined by a team that won two games last season.

March Madness lived up to its billing in the opening rounds of the NCAA Tournament and turns the corner to the Sweet 16 this week. If history is any indication, we can expect some next-level madness as the bracket winds toward the Final Four in New Orleans.

Here's a few things to watch as the tournament shifts to San Francisco, San Antonio, Chicago and Philadelphia for the regional rounds:

TOP SEEDS

Gonzaga (1 seed). The Zags needed a while to get going against Georgia State and had a stiff test against Memphis, but found a way to reach the Sweet 16 for the seventh straight season.

Arizona (1). These swashbuckling Wildcats have a flair for the dramatic and, as their coach has said, a razor-thin margin for error. But know this: Tommy Lloyd's bunch is fun to watch when they get rolling.

Kansas (1). Another NCAA Tournament, another Sweet 16. That's 32 now for the Jayhawks, who have the type of roster to keep it going.

Duke (2): The Blue Devils had to wrestle out a win against Michigan State to keep Coach K's final run through the bracket going. They face another grinder against Mark Adams' roughneck Red Raiders.

Villanova (2). Any team led by Jay Wright and Collin Gillespie is going to be a tough out.

UNDERDOGS

Saint Peter's. The small Jesuit school in Jersey has quickly become America's hoops crush. Taking down No. 2 seed Kentucky in the first round had something to do with it. So does being led by a back-up guard sporting a rad 'stache.

Iowa State. Two wins last season to two opening NCAA Tournament wins. Two more and these scrappy Cyclones will play in the Final Four for the first time since '44.

Miami. Jim Larrañaga's scramble defense left the Hurricanes' first two opponents feeling trapped. Now they're one of three ACC teams left standing.

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Providence. Ed Cooley's crew is in the Sweet 16 for the first time in 25. They've left bruised and battered opponents in their wake.

Michigan. Usually hard to call the Wolverines an underdog, but they are an 11 seed that barely got into the bracket. The preseason projections of greatness are finally coming to fruition.

KEY PLAYERS

Drew Timme, Gonzaga. Footwork of a ballerina, knows all the angles, lives for the big moments. Great 'stache, too.

Jaden Ivey, Purdue. Anticipation on his drives to the basket is like waiting for a rocket to burst in the air — his dunks are more like explosions.

Bennedict Mathurin, Arizona. Spring loaded and clutch. And don't make him mad — TCU found that out the hard way.

Doug Edert, Saint Peters. Has turned into a March folk hero with that caterpillar under his lip and penchant for hitting big shots.

Ochai Agbaji, Kansas. Has a knack for making the biggest plays down the stretch.

MUST-SEE GAMES

Gonzaga vs. Arkansas, West Region, Thursday in San Francisco. The Zags wants to play fast. The Muss Bus will look to slow their roll.

North Carolina vs. UCLA, East Region, Friday in Philadelphia. Blue bloods facing off, an Elite Eight spot on the line? Yes, please.

Iowa State vs. Miami, Midwest Region, Friday in Chicago. One of these two defensive-minded upstarts is going to the Elite Eight. First one to 50 may get it.

Texas Tech vs. Duke, West Region, Thursday in San Francisco. The fate of Coach K's farewell tour could be in the diabolical defensive hands of Red Raiders coach Mark Adams.

Arizona vs. Houston, South Region, Thursday in San Antonio. The Wildcats weren't supposed to go this far in their first season under Tommy Lloyd. Neither were the Cougars after losing two starters to injury. Neither is going to give an inch now that they're here.

THE ODDS

A few Sweet 16 odds, according to FanDuel Sportsbook:

Best bet to win the championship: Gonzaga plus-240, Kansas plus-500, Arizona plus-650.

Worst title odds: Saint Peter's plus-35,000, Iowa State plus-10,000, Providence plus-7,500.

Biggest spread: Purdue minus-12.5 over Saint Peter's.

Smallest spread: Duke minus-1 over Texas Tech.

HOW TO WATCH

The TV and streaming schedule is tantalizing, keep the remote handy:

Thursday, March 24: West Region semifinals in San Francisco on CBS, South in San Antonio on TBS.

Friday, March 25: East Region semifinals in Philadelphia on CBS, Midwest in Chicago on TBS.

Saturday, March 26: West and South regional finals on TBS.

Sunday, March 27: East and Midwest finals on CBS.

Official guilty of illegally entering Capitol grounds Jan. 6

By MICHAEL KUNZELMAN Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — A federal judge on Tuesday convicted an elected official from New Mexico of illegally entering restricted U.S. Capitol grounds but acquitted him of engaging in disorderly conduct during the riot that disrupted Congress from certifying Joe Biden's presidential election victory.

U.S. District Court Judge Trevor McFadden heard one day of testimony without a jury on Monday before handing down a verdict in the misdemeanor case against Otero County Commissioner Couy Griffin, a 48-year-old former rodeo rider who helped found a group called Cowboys for Trump.

McFadden, a nominee of then-President Donald Trump, said there was ample evidence that Griffin knew he was in a restricted area and didn't leave. Griffin crossed over three walls, needing help from others or

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a ladder to get over them, the judge noted.

"All of this would suggest to a normal person that perhaps you should not be entering the area," McFadden said from the bench.

But the judge said prosecutors didn't meet their burden to prove that Griffin engaged in disorderly conduct. "Arguably, he was trying to calm people down, not rile them up," he said.

Griffin's trial in Washington, D.C., was the second among the hundreds of federal cases arising from the Jan. 6, 2021, siege. Earlier this month, in the first trial, a jury convicted a Texas man, Guy Wesley Reffitt, of storming the Capitol with a holstered handgun, interfering with police and obstructing Congress' joint session to certify the Electoral College vote.

The outcome of Griffin's trial could have a ripple effect, helping other Capitol riot defendants decide whether to let a judge or a jury decide their case.

But the case against Griffin is unlike most Jan. 6 cases and may not be a bellwether for defendants who are charged with storming the Capitol.

Griffin is one of the few riot defendants who wasn't accused of entering the Capitol building or engaging in any violent or destructive behavior. His lawyers argued that he was selectively prosecuted for his political views.

Griffin was charged with two misdemeanors: entering and remaining in a restricted building or grounds and disorderly and disruptive conduct in a restricted building or grounds. Both carry maximum sentences of one year imprisonment.

Griffin is scheduled to be sentenced on June 17. He was jailed for more than two weeks after his arrest on Jan. 19, 2021.

Griffin described himself as "halfway pleased" with the split verdict and said he will continue to view his involvement in Jan. 6 as "a badge of honor."

"I stand proud of where I'm at today and the fight that I've been in over the course of the last year-and-a-half," he told reporters outside the courthouse.

Griffin, one of three members of the Otero County Commission in southern New Mexico, is among a handful of riot defendants who either held public office or ran for a government leadership post in the 2 1/2 years before the attack.

He is among only three riot defendants who have asked for a bench trial, in which judges decide a case without a jury. Griffin said he doesn't regret waiving his right to a jury trial.

"If I was anywhere but Washington, D.C., I would say, 'Go with a jury trial,'" Griffin said. "You can't get a fair jury trial in Washington, D.C., if you're someone like me, a strong conservative."

Loyola Law School professor Laurie Levenson said the conviction for entering restricted grounds helps establish for the government that the area was off limits to the public and will discourage other defendants from using similar arguments.

"This will send a message to other defendants that they are unlikely to win on a technical argument that the areas outside the Capitol were not off limits," Levenson said.

The verdicts also may lead some defendants facing the same charges as Griffin to go to trial if they believe the judge deciding their fate has a high standard of what constitutes disorderly conduct, Levenson said. Still, Levenson said the argument wouldn't be helpful to defendants who entered the Capitol building or committed violence on Capitol grounds.

Assistant U.S. Attorney Janani Iyengar said Griffin climbed over metal bike racks, up a plywood ramp and shouted over the crowd about his belief that the election was stolen from then-President Donald Trump.

"He was being extremely loud, climbing over barriers, engaging with the crowd," she said in her closing arguments.

Defense attorney Nicholas Smith said the case against Griffin was "built on a series of false assumptions and premises." Trial testimony showed Griffin went to the Capitol to support "free and fair elections," Smith told the judge.

A key question in Griffin's case was whether he entered a restricted area while Vice President Pence was still present on Capitol grounds, a prerequisite for the U.S. Secret Service to invoke access restrictions.

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Griffin's attorneys said in a court filing that Pence had already departed the restricted area before the earliest that Griffin could have entered it, but Secret Service inspector Lanelle Hawa testified that Pence never left the restricted area during the riot.

Hawa said agents took Pence from his office at the Capitol to a secure location at an underground loading dock on the Capitol complex. Pence remained in the loading dock location for four to five hours, until the joint session of Congress resumed on the night of Jan. 6, Hawa testified.

Smith said prosecutors apparently believe Griffin engaged in disorderly conduct by peacefully leading a prayer on the Capitol steps.

"That is offensive and wrong," Smith told the judge during his brief opening statements.

Prosecutors didn't give any opening statements. Their first witness was Matthew Struck, who joined Griffin at the Capitol and served as his videographer. Struck has an immunity deal with prosecutors for his testimony.

After attending Trump's "Stop the Steal" rally on Jan. 6, Griffin and Struck walked over barriers and up a staircase to enter a stage that was under construction on the Capitol's Lower West Terrace for Biden's inauguration, according to prosecutors.

Prosecutors played video clips that showed Griffin moving through the mob that formed outside the Capitol, where police used pepper spray to quell rioters.

"I love the smell of napalm in the air," Griffin said in an apparent reference to a quote from the war movie "Apocalypse Now."

After climbing over a stone wall and entering a restricted area outside the Capitol, Griffin said, "This is our house ... we should all be armed," according to prosecutors. He called it "a great day for America" and added, "The people are showing that they have had enough," prosecutors said.

In a court filing, prosecutors called Griffin "an inflammatory provocateur and fabulist who engages in racist invective and propounds baseless conspiracy theories, including that Communist China stole the 2020 Presidential Election."

Griffin's attorneys say hundreds if not thousands of other people did exactly what Griffin did on Jan. 6 and haven't been charged with any crimes.

More than 770 people have been charged with federal crimes related to the Capitol riot. More than 230 riot defendants have pleaded guilty, mostly to misdemeanors, and at least 127 of them have been sentenced. Approximately 100 others have trial dates.

Griffin had vowed to arrive at the courthouse on horseback on Monday. Instead, he showed up as a passenger in a pickup truck that had a horse trailer on the back.

'No mercy': Mariupol bombing compared to Nazi war crimes

By VANESSA GERA and SRDJAN NEDELJKOVIC Associated Press

MEDYKA, Poland (AP) — The president of Poland compared Russia's attacks on Ukraine to Nazi forces during World War II, saying Tuesday that besieged Mariupol looks like Warsaw in 1944 after the Germans bombed houses and killed civilians "with no mercy at all."

President Andrzej Duda, who will host President Joe Biden later this week in a Warsaw rebuilt from the ashes of that war, spoke as traumatized people bearing witness to the horrors inflicted on Ukraine by Russian forces continued to flee. They arrived by the thousands in Poland and other neighboring nations.

The United Nations refugee agency announced a staggering milestone Tuesday: More than 3.5 million refugees have now left the country.

Among them was Viktoria Totsen, a 39-year-old from Mariupol who entered Poland as part of an exodus that has become Europe's worst refugee crisis since World War II.

She described how the bombing by Russian planes had become incessant, prompting her to flee with her two daughters.

"During the last five days the planes were flying over us every five seconds and dropped bombs everywhere," she said.

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During a visit to Bulgaria, Duda compared the Russian shelling of schools, hospitals and other civilian targets, to the atrocities committed by German forces during their occupation of Poland during World War II.

"My countrymen, Poles, are looking today at Mariupol and are saying, 'God' — they say it with tears in their eyes — 'Mariupol looks like Warsaw did in 1944 when Nazis, Hitler's Germans, were brutally bombing houses, killing people, killing civilians with no mercy at all,'" Duda said.

"Today the Russian army is behaving in exactly the same way. Russian leaders are behaving in exactly the same way, like Hitler, like the German SS, like the German pilots of the fascist army during World War II."

In the Polish border town of Przemysl, a refugee from Mykolaiv, 45-year-old Natalia Shabadash, described a rocket explosion just 500 meters (yards) from her home.

"It was very scary, that's why we decided to leave our home," she said, explaining that her husband, like many Ukrainian men, remained in the country.

The UNHCR reported Tuesday that 3.53 million people have left Ukraine, with Poland taking in the lion's share — more than 2.1 million — followed by Romania with more than 540,000 and Moldova with more than 367,000. Slovakia and Hungary have also welcomed refugees.

The International Organization for Migration estimates that nearly 6.5 million people are also internally displaced within Ukraine, suggesting that some, if not most, might flee abroad if the war continues.

Many of those who cross into Poland choose to remain, but it is impossible to know the exact number. Poland's Border Guard agency registers them on entry from Ukraine, but not if they move across the open borders of the European Union to Germany, France, Italy or any of the other countries where Ukrainians are heading.

It's clear, however, that many opt to stay in Poland, close to their homeland in hopes of returning after the war and drawn by the linguistic and cultural similarities in the fellow Slavic nation. Large numbers of Ukrainians in recent days have registered their children in Polish schools or applied for a national ID number that will give them access to health care and other social services.

Shabadash, who fled Mykolaiv, said she was treated very well in Poland and felt "so grateful to the Polish people," but intended to go France.

Meanwhile, groups of orphans and sick children from Ukraine are also arriving, sometimes in transit.

In Warsaw, dozens of Ukrainian orphans and their caretakers who are headed to refuge in the U.K. were stuck Tuesday due to missing paperwork from Ukraine.

The nearly 50 youngsters from orphanages in the central Ukrainian city of Dnipro were due to fly to London on Monday before traveling on to Scotland. But they were forced to wait in a hotel until the bureaucratic holdup could be dealt with.

Their journey was organized by a Scottish charity, Dnipro Kids, which was set up in 2005 by supporters of Hibernian Football Club in the Scottish capital, Edinburgh.

U.K. Home Secretary Priti Patel said last week that British authorities were working with Poland and Ukraine "to ensure the children's swift arrival to the U.K."

Duncan MacRae, the media manager of Dnipro Kids, said the children were first evacuated by train from Dnipro to the western Ukrainian city of Lviv. They were then put on a bus and taken to Poland, where they stayed for the past two weeks.

Sally Becker, executive director of the foundation Save a Child, which is helping with the evacuation, said the delay was due to a document that hadn't been provided by Ukrainian authorities, and emerged just as the group was on the way to the airport.

"All we want to do is give them safe, temporary sanctuary in Britain until the war is over and it's safe for them to go home," she said.

US, Ukraine quietly try to pierce Putin's propaganda bubble

By COLLEEN LONG, AMANDA SEITZ and NOMAAN MERCHANT Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — The U.S. and Ukraine have knocked back Russian President Vladimir Putin's efforts to falsely frame the narrative of his brutal war, but they are struggling to get a more accurate view

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of the Kremlin's invasion in front of the Russian people.

While the Russian military suffers thousands of deaths and fails to capture key cities, Putin is intensifying his two-decade crackdown on information. The Kremlin has shut down Russia's last three independent media outlets, barred major social media platforms, created new laws against journalists who defy its propaganda and insisted on calling the war a "special military operation."

The result is a Russian public with little to no access to any alternative to Putin's own anti-Ukraine, anti-Western narrative. It's a heat shield for Putin against any backlash to the war and Western sanctions that have crippled Russia's economy.

Breaking through Putin's propaganda bubble is a key strategic goal for Ukraine and its Western allies. They have tried a series of actions, overt and subtle, to reach ordinary Russians, from encouraging the use of software that circumvents internet blocks to having government briefings for TikTok influencers. The hope is independent voices still operating in Russia, those from the West, and direct pleas from Ukrainians can convince the masses that they're being lied to about the war next door.

The question is no longer "what we do to stop disinformation," former U.S. ambassador to Russia Michael McFaul said, it's how to promote information inside Russia. "Very hard question," he added.

Among the most important steps, he said, is to "fund Russian independent media working outside of Russia."

The Associated Press spoke to half a dozen current and former officials in the U.S. and Ukraine about the challenge. American officials acknowledged that any direct rebuttals of Russian disinformation could be quickly dismissed by Moscow as American propaganda.

Instead, they said, the Biden administration is trying to foster the flow of outside information and make it easier for ordinary Russians to learn the truth about the war themselves. The officials spoke on condition of anonymity to discuss internal strategy.

Many Western companies have stopped doing business in Russia. Quietly, though, U.S. officials have encouraged internet service providers to stay, calculating that Russians need to have the means to find outside information online. Celebrities already well-known in Russia, like Arnold Schwarzenegger, have used Twitter and Telegram to share messages and videos speaking of the atrocities of the war.

McFaul called the Schwarzenegger bit "brilliant," adding: "Those kinds of pieces, though, should be happening every day."

Ukraine has shaped much of the West's perception of the war with videos and social media posts highlighting Russian attacks on civilians and destruction of Ukrainian neighborhoods. And President Volodymyr Zelenskyy has won admiration around the world for his direct-to-camera speeches that are posted and shared online. Zelenskyy, in his last speech before the invasion pleading for peace, noted, "I know that they won't show my address on Russian TV."

The Biden administration has continued to declassify intelligence findings about what it says are Putin's war plans to undercut his ability to carry them out. The U.S. is also increasing funding for its traditional means of reaching audiences in Eastern Europe, adding \$25 million this month for the U.S. Agency for Global Media, which oversees Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty and Voice of America.

Voice of America posted online instructions on how to access its site using a virtual private network, or VPN, or through other means of circumventing Kremlin barriers. The broadcaster's internal statistics suggest thousands of Russians are using those methods.

And the White House met recently with influencers on TikTok, a meeting that sparked some eye-rolling but that a handful of participants said they found helpful.

"The idea of having a White House press briefing with TikTokers who are sharing news ... it's a brilliant idea," said Kahlil Greene, who describes himself on TikTok as a "Gen Z Historian Follow for History and Politics" and has 550,000 followers. "There's an understanding that TikTok is expansive beyond borders. Some of these people have millions of followers that cross outside of the U.S."

But TikTok this month barred new uploads and livestreaming from Russia. In a further crackdown Monday, Russia banned Facebook and Instagram entirely. Twitter, meanwhile, has been difficult for Russians

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to access. The Kremlin also suspended the BBC Russian service, German broadcaster Deutsche Welle and Latvia-based website Meduza. And, on Tuesday, international news channel Euronews said it had been blocked from broadcasting in Russia.

Some social media platforms and news organizations have worked around the bans and government surveillance, using a privacy-protected "onion" service. Russian users can access a version of Twitter if they download the Tor browser, which allows people to access sites on what is also referred to as the "dark web." Instead of .com, onion sites have a .onion suffix. The Russian authorities have had some success blocking those sites, however, too.

It's hard to measure whether any of those efforts are working, but research done in other nations shows that these type of barriers to information make it just hard enough to deter people from persevering.

"It's not impossible to jump the great firewall," said Shelby Grossman, a research scholar at the Stanford Internet Observatory on Russian disinformation on social media. "But the fact that you have to install a VPN to do it could deter people. These tiny frictions have real effects on people."

Another problem is reaching those who don't want to be reached, which is also an issue for Americans. Millions in the U.S., for example, wrongly believe the 2020 election was stolen despite an untold number of efforts to debunk falsehoods about voter fraud.

It's a misinformation environment that the Kremlin relishes, and has helped promote with influence operations against Russia's adversaries.

Russian state media continues to echo false and unsupported claims about Ukraine's government and alleges that it requires "de-Nazification." It has lied about the Russian military's attacks on civilian targets and its destruction of entire neighborhoods.

Thomas Rid, a professor at Johns Hopkins University and expert on disinformation, noted that the U.S. "doesn't really have a great track record" on countering false narratives.

"The way I would play this is via Ukraine," he said. "It has the proximity, the language skills, the family links. We need to help them first and foremost to win and retain access to information."

Zelenskyy came to the presidency with skills well-suited for an information war. He was a showman who played a president on television and founded a successful production company. Shortly after he took office, Ukraine became the focus of former President Donald Trump's first impeachment, an international story that ended up giving Zelenskyy's team valuable training for global information challenges.

Ukraine also has three decades of history as a former Soviet republic that has long had to defend against Moscow's political influence campaigns and cyberattacks.

"We have way more experience and way more practice," said Igor Novikov, an expert on information tactics who served as a Zelenskyy campaign adviser and remains close to members of the president's inner circle. On some aspects of countering disinformation, Novikov said, "the U.S. is five years behind us."

Novikov said he believes celebrities already respected in Russia, like Schwarzenegger, and people trained on how to talk to their relatives will have more success than sending mass text messages or using other less tailored tactics.

"When you're dealing with somebody that's been dealing with an alternate reality, it's a bit like working to plant a conspiracy theory in a good way," Novikov said. "You need to break the bubble with trust and choice."

Ukrainian theater's new drama? Making dumplings for soldiers

By CARA ANNA Associated Press

DROHOBYCH, Ukraine (AP) — The theater was empty. The seats were covered against dust. But it was a moment of drama that Alla Shkondina had prepared for all her life.

"There is a saying that when the guns sound, the muses are silent," the Ukrainian actress said, standing on the bare stage with a shawl wrapped around her to protect against the chill. "But we are not silent."

She has retreated from the spotlight and now makes dumplings to send to soldiers, working alongside fellow artists in the Drohobych repertory theater's cafe. It's one small part of a massive war effort by

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defiant volunteers across the country who often find themselves playing unexpected roles.

In the theater's warmly lit cafe, where snack bar popcorn has gone stale in the nearly month since Russia's invasion, artists in this community near the foot of the Carpathian Mountains in southwestern Ukraine were rolling and filling dough to add to the thousands of dumplings they've sent to the front, or to displaced people in need.

"We did more than 3,000 pounds of meatballs," said theater director Mykola Hnatenko. "One hundred fifty kilograms of stewed cabbage with meat. More than 10,000 verenyky (dumplings) with potato. Seventy kilograms of filling for borscht. Eighty kilograms of fried fish. Two thousand pancakes with meat, and 500 sweet pancakes. Now we've decided to do more food with proteins like meat."

In the courtyard, men, their hands blackened with soot, chopped wood for the cooking fires, overseen by the theater's deputy director, Sergei Havdjak, dressed in military-style drab.

Hnatenko seemed especially proud of the borscht the volunteers were sending to soldiers in places like the capital, Kyiv, where some areas have collapsed into brutal street-to-street fighting in near-freezing weather. He showed a cellphone video of a distribution of food in Kyiv, with a smiling soldier flashing a "V" for victory sign.

The food-making effort began on the second day of Russia's invasion. It takes about 150 volunteers, including artists who have been displaced from other parts of Ukraine and now live at the theater, Hnatenko said.

"It inspires us that we also contribute somehow to the victory of the country," he said.

The theater workers have been shaken by the war and the accounts of people joining them after fleeing from other parts of Ukraine. Shkondina, the actress, described the children arriving with "adult eyes" full of terror, needing time to feel normal again.

"This is like the war I read about in books, or heard about from my grandparents," she said.

While Shkondina was not used to making dumplings — "Because we are actors, we do not have time to do such things," she said — she and others gladly put on performances for the displaced children whose families have fled to Drohobych, to help distract them from the war.

The performances drew from the nostalgia for life before Russia invaded.

On a gold-colored sofa by a piano, in a pool of quiet near the bustle of food preparation, Vasil Nevolov sat alone and contemplated the past. After 50 years of living in Kyiv as an arts critic and professor, he abruptly had to flee.

"Everything around my house is destroyed," he said. "There is no more supermarket. There is no more school." So much of his life's work now seemed to make little sense.

He worried about his grandchildren, who remained in Kyiv. They cannot leave. Their mother is a medical worker, their father a new member of the territorial defense. He is proud of their work, and proud of the work of the volunteers around him.

"Despite my age, which is already quite respectable, 74 years, I want to be useful to the theater," Nevolov said of his new community.

Amid the chaos he is finding optimism. He repeated the saying that has become a rallying cry and reassurance for millions of people: "Everything will be Ukraine" — everything will be fine.

Today in History

By The Associated Press undefined

Today in History

Today is Wednesday, March 23, the 82nd day of 2022. There are 283 days left in the year.

Today's Highlight in History:

On March 23, 1919, Benito Mussolini founded his Fascist political movement in Milan, Italy.

On this date:

In 1775, Patrick Henry delivered an address to the Virginia Provincial Convention in which he is said to have declared, "Give me liberty, or give me death!"

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In 1806, explorers Meriwether Lewis and William Clark, having reached the Pacific coast, began their journey back east.

In 1933, the German Reichstag adopted the Enabling Act, which effectively granted Adolf Hitler dictatorial powers.

In 1942, the first Japanese-Americans evacuated by the U.S. Army during World War II arrived at the internment camp in Manzanar, California.

In 1965, America's first two-person space mission took place as Gemini 3 blasted off with astronauts Virgil I. "Gus" Grissom and John W. Young aboard for a nearly 5-hour flight.

In 1981, the U.S. Supreme Court, in *H.L. v. Matheson*, ruled that states could require, with some exceptions, parental notification when teenage girls seek abortions.

In 1993, scientists announced they'd found the renegade gene that causes Huntington's disease.

In 1994, Aeroflot Flight 593, an Airbus A310, crashed in Siberia with the loss of all 75 people on board; it turned out that a pilot's teenage son who was allowed to sit at the controls had accidentally disengaged the autopilot, causing loss of control.

In 1998, "Titanic" tied an Academy Awards record by winning 11 Oscars, including best picture, director (James Cameron) and song ("My Heart Will Go On").

In 2003, during the Iraq War, a U.S. Army maintenance convoy was ambushed in Nasiriyah (nah-sih-REE'-uh); 11 soldiers were killed, including Pfc. Lori Ann Piastewa (py-ES'-tuh-wah); six were captured, including Pfc. Jessica Lynch, who was rescued on April 1, 2003.

In 2010, claiming a historic triumph, President Barack Obama signed the Affordable Care Act, a \$938 billion health care overhaul.

In 2020, President Donald Trump said he wanted to reopen the country for business in weeks, not months; he asserted that continued closures could result in more deaths than the coronavirus itself. Britain became the latest European country to go into effective lockdown, as Prime Minister Boris Johnson ordered the closure of most retail stores and banned public gatherings.

Ten years ago: Urging Americans to "do some soul searching," President Barack Obama injected himself into the emotional debate over the fatal shooting of Trayvon Martin in Florida, saying, "If I had a son, he'd look like Trayvon." The U.S. Army formally charged Staff Sgt. Robert Bales with 17 counts of premeditated murder in the deaths of 17 villagers, more than half of them children, during a shooting rampage in southern Afghanistan. Pope Benedict XVI landed in Mexico to throngs of faithful who lined more than 20 miles of his route into the city of Leon.

Five years ago: Abandoning negotiations, President Donald Trump demanded a make-or-break vote on health care legislation in the House, threatening to leave "Obamacare" in place and move on to other issues if the next day's vote failed. (Trump and GOP leaders ended up pulling their bill when it became clear it would fail badly.)

One year ago: A cargo ship the size of a skyscraper ran aground and became wedged in the Suez Canal; hundreds of ships would be prevented from passing through the canal until the vessel was freed six days later. Israeli voters took part in parliamentary elections that would leave Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu without a majority, forcing him from office. George Segal, nominated for an Oscar for his role in "Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf," died in California at 87; he had worked into his late 80s on the ABC sitcom "The Goldbergs."

Today's Birthdays: Movie director Mark Rydell is 93. International Motorsports Hall of Famer Craig Breedlove is 85. Former Secretary of State Rex Tillerson is 70. Singer Chaka Khan is 69. Actor Amanda Plummer is 65. Actor Catherine Keener is 63. Actor Hope Davis is 58. Actor Richard Grieco is 57. Actor Marin Hinkle is 56. Rock singer-musician Damon Albarn (Blur) is 54. Actor Kelly Perine is 53. Actor-singer Melissa Errico is 52. Rock musician John Humphrey (The Nixons) is 52. Bandleader Reggie Watts (TV: "The Late Late Show With James Corden") is 50. Actor Randall Park is 48. Actor Michelle Monaghan is 46. Actor Keri Russell is 46. Actor Anastasia Griffith is 44. Gossip columnist-blogger Perez Hilton is 44. Actor Nicholle Tom is 44. Actor Brandon Dirden is 44. Country singer Brett Young is 41. Actor Nicolas Wright is 40. Actor Ben Rappaport is 36. NBA point guard Kyrie Irving is 30.

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