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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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Groton hosts District 6 South Dakota Municipal League Meeting



Groton Mayor Scott Hanlon gave the welcome at the District 6 South Dakota Municipal League Meeting. The event was held at the Groton Post #39 conference center. (Photo by April Abeln)



Brad Wilson is the administrator of the SDML Worker's Compensation and Employer Liability. He gave a report of the benefits that the company can provide to municipalities. (Photo by Paul Kosel)



A good crowd was on hand for the District 6 Municipal League Meeting. It has been a long time since Groton has hosted the event with the last mayor to host it was Roy Olson. Hecla will host it next year. (Photo by Paul Kosel)

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Ipswich Councilman Mike Hammrich was elected as the vice-chair of the District 6 SD Municipal League. Bowdle Mayor Rick Boschee was re-elected as chairman.

(Photo by Paul Kosel)



Lynn Bren is the administrator of SDML worker's compensation and Employer liability pool. She gave a report of the program.

(Photo by Paul Kosel)



Emilie Miller gave a report on the South Dakota Public Funds Investments Trust (FIT). Many municipalities have funds invested in FIT. (Photo by Paul Kosel)

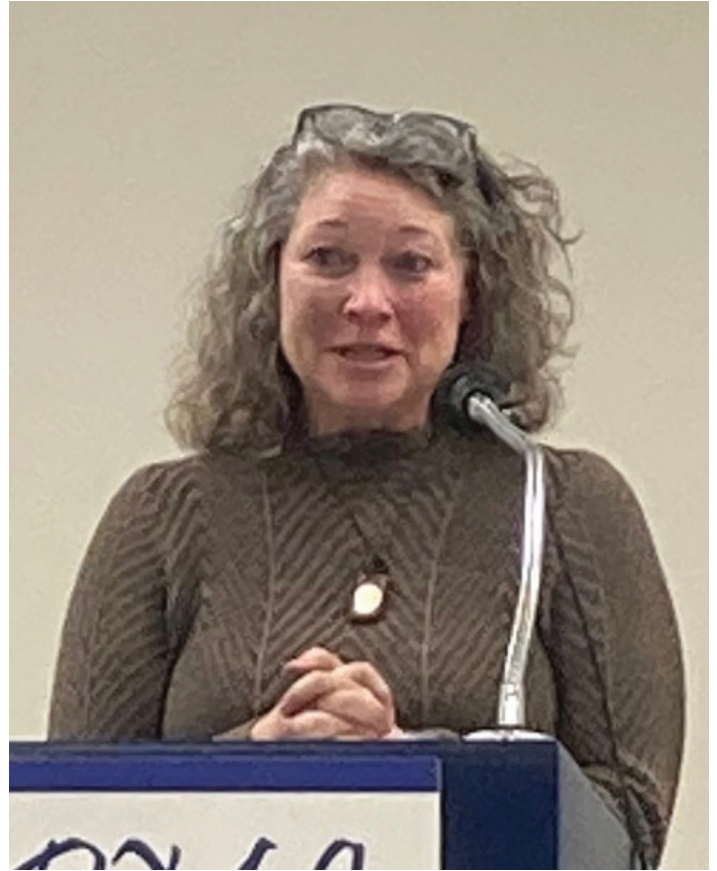
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Rapid City Mayor Steve Allender RC Mayor is the president of the SD Municipal League. He gave various reports and encouraged the members that local control is very important.

(Photo by Paul Kosel)



Yvonne Taylor is the Executive Director and is hired by the 19-member Board of Directors, and is responsible for all aspects of the operations of the League. She gave a legislative briefing. Some things of interest is that there 552 bills submitted with 252 that passed. The legislature passed a bill for \$200 million in housing funds and \$600 million in water and sewer projects funding. Homegrown cannabis is allowed, but is limited to two flowering and two non-flowering plants. (Photo by Paul Kosel)

Gov. Noem Signs Pro-Life Bills into Law

PIERRE, S.D. – Today, Governor Kristi Noem signed two pro-life bills into law, including HB 1318, which prohibits medical abortion by telemedicine and increases the penalty for the unlicensed practice of medicine when performing a medical abortion.

“The time is drawing near for the Supreme Court to issue a ruling on the Dobbs case. I hope that case will overturn Roe v. Wade, but until that day, South Dakota will continue to advance legislation that protects the lives of unborn children,” said Governor Kristi Noem. “The two bills that I am signing today are crucial because they are also protections for mothers. We must remember that abortion has two victims: both the unborn child who loses their life and the mother who must go through the physical and emotional trauma of the procedure.”

Governor Noem also signed HB 1113, which prohibits threats made with the intent to coerce an abortion.

“We are proud to stand with Governor Noem, the South Dakota Legislature, and all our local allies working tirelessly to safeguard women and children,” said Marjorie Dannenfelser, President of the Susan B. Anthony List. “Under Noem’s leadership, South Dakota has achieved a record low abortion rate and continues to set a standard for what a pro-life America looks like.”

“The permanent protections enacted today are vital to stop the proliferation of dangerous mail-order abortion drugs, which puts both unborn children and their mothers at serious risk,” continued Dannenfelser. “Pushed by the profit-driven abortion industry and the Biden administration, these drugs are sending women to the emergency room at a rate that has increased more than 500% since the early 2000s. We thank Gov. Noem, the legislature, and all pro-life South Dakotans for taking swift action to fight back.”

Additionally, Governor Noem signed the following two bills into law:

SB 44 authorizes the Board of Regents to contract for the demolition of Briscoe Hall and the existing Lincoln Hall, and the design and construction of the new Lincoln Hall, at Northern State University and makes an appropriation therefor.

SB 55 appropriates funds for the expansion of broadband infrastructure.

Governor Noem has signed 220 bills into law and vetoed one this legislative session.

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Drought Concerns Continue With 2022 Spring Climate Outlook

Brookings, S.D. - The climate outlook for the spring season has increased concern for drought to continue in South Dakota. On March 17, the U.S. Drought Monitor showed two-thirds of the state in either moderate or severe drought. The climate outlook, released the same day, has odds leaning toward warmer and drier than average climate for most of the state through June 2022.

The National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration's (NOAA) Climate Prediction Center released their official April temperature and precipitation outlooks, as well as seasonal outlooks for 3-month periods through the remainder of 2022.

Precipitation in April is leaning towards drier than average for most of the state. However, the northern South Dakota border has equal chances of drier, wetter or near average precipitation for the month. South Dakota is at the northern edge of a large area in the Central and Southern Plains with odds leaning toward drier than average throughout April.

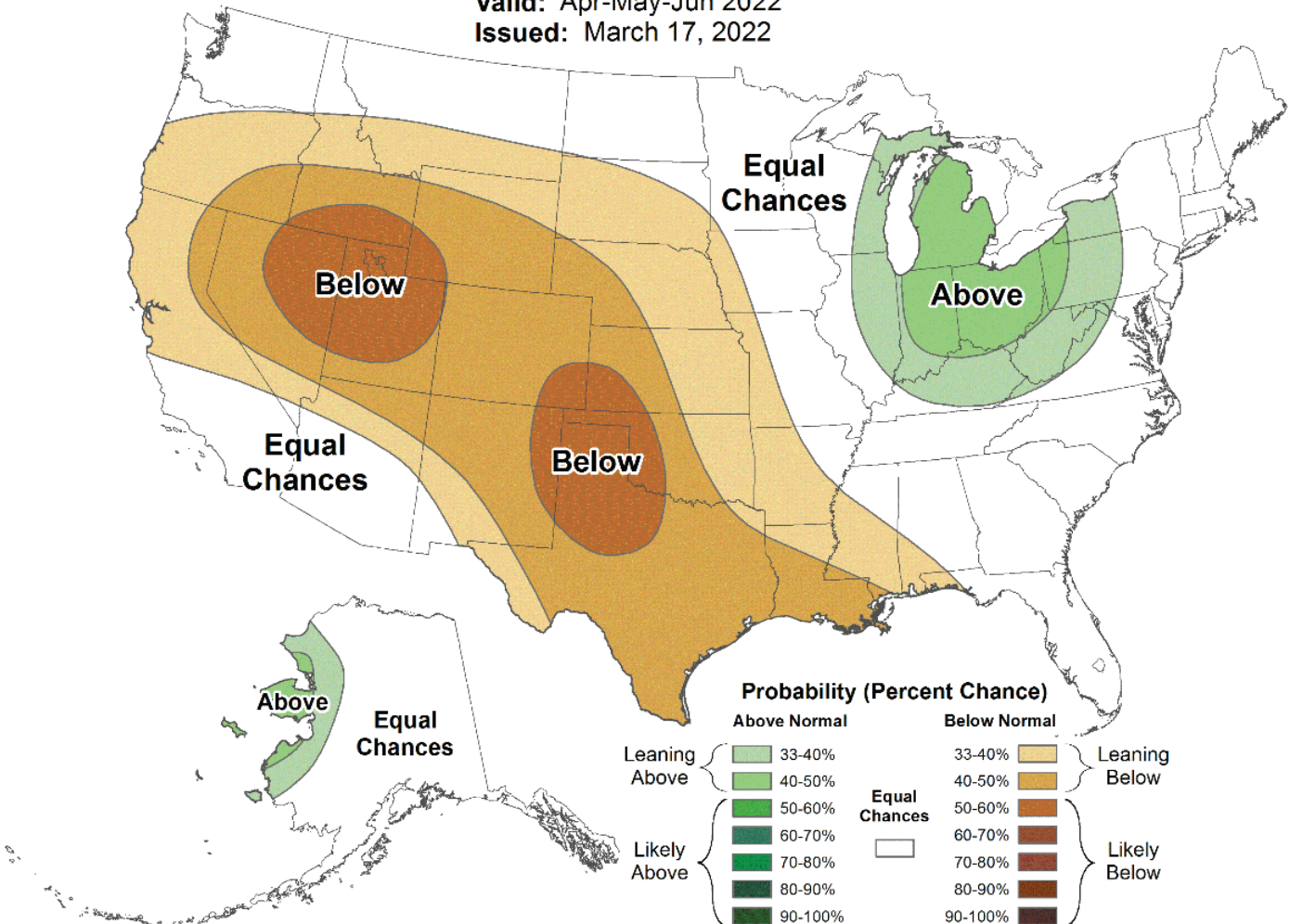


Seasonal Precipitation Outlook



Valid: Apr-May-Jun 2022

Issued: March 17, 2022



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Similarly, the months of April through June have an increased likelihood of drier than average conditions across the state. These conditions are particularly concerning as these three months comprise about 40 percent of annual precipitation, depending on location in the state.

“For farmers and ranchers, dry conditions during this time could certainly have a large impact on farm operations and decisions throughout the year,” said Laura Edwards, SDSU Extension State Climatologist.

The current drought in central and western South Dakota has been ongoing since mid-2020. Many areas are carrying soil moisture shortages from the previous dry years, and stock ponds and surface water for both human and livestock uses are lower than average for this time of year. Spring season moisture is critical for re-growth of grasses in pastures and hay fields that provide feed later in the year and over the next winter season. Therefore, South Dakota’s farmers and ranchers will need to rely on spring rainfall more this year than a typical year.

For temperatures in April, South Dakota straddles a line between an area favored for colder temperatures in the north and warmer temperatures in the south. As a result, southern South Dakota is slightly favored to have warmer than average temperatures in the month ahead, with the northern counties holding equal chances of warmer, colder or near average temperatures.

The three-month outlook for the months of April, May and June tells a very similar story, with all but the northwest region of the state leaning toward warmer than average temperatures for this period.

The NOAA outlook indicates even more concern ahead for drought in the upcoming summer season. For the months of June, July and August, there are even higher probabilities of warmer than average temperatures and dry conditions across South Dakota. Drought can increase in coverage and intensify quickly under dry and hot conditions throughout the summer season.

“Now is the time for farmers, ranchers and others to prepare for drought and plan ahead for what they can do in the event of worsening conditions,” said Edwards.

Drought resources for farmers and ranchers are available at on the SDSU Extension website.

For more information, contact Laura Edwards, SDSU Extension State Climatologist, at 605-626-2870 or Laura.Edwards@sdstate.edu.

SDDVA Secretary Whitlock's March Column – Call for Action – We Need to Hear from Our Veterans!

Recently, the United States Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) released its health care facility recommendations to the Asset and Infrastructure Review (AIR) Commission. These proposals are the first step in a multi-year process. Under the law, all VA proposals are required to be reviewed by the Commission, the President, and Congress.

In 2018, the VA MISSION Act was signed into law. Among its many provisions, the law instructed the VA to review all health care facilities in its nationwide network. It also required the VA to make recommendations for proposed changes to the AIR Commission.

For South Dakota, the report shows the following proposals for the east river footprint: reduce emergency room capacity to urgent care in Sioux Falls, continue expansion of outpatient services, add 30 nursing home beds, and close the Wagner community-based outpatient clinic. For the VA west river footprint, the recommendation is to add a new VA Medical Center and Community Living Center in Rapid City, relocate psycho-social rehab from Hot Springs to Rapid City, change existing Hot Springs and Fort Meade campuses to out-patient care only, and relocate all Hot Springs and Fort Meade in-patient services to Rapid City.

Here is the timeline moving forward: the Commission will review the report, hold hearings, and submit their recommendations to the President. The President will review and approve/disapprove and submit the findings to Congress, which will have 45 days to respond. If approved, the VA will have to begin implementing the recommendations.

Some things that concern the South Dakota Department of Veterans Affairs include: would veterans be forced to rely on uncoordinated, private, for-profit care? Would veterans face long wait times for care? Would veterans be without the unique expertise and integrated services that only the VA provides? Would veterans pay more out-of-pocket expenses? Would providers wait months for reimbursement from the VA?

Our veterans faced many challenges while serving our country – hostile environments, exposure to toxins, intense heat and cold, dehydration, sandstorms, sleep deprivation, lengthy deployments, multiple deployments, survivor's guilt, missing family milestones, and more.

Our veterans wrote a blank check made payable to "The United States of America," for an amount up to and including their life. They fought our wars, defended our freedoms, and protected our way of life. Let's make sure we are fighting for them and protecting their way of life. It is our nation's solemn obligation to provide veterans the health care, services and support they have earned.

Before Congress and the President implement any recommended changes to VA medical services, we need to make sure these changes are in the best interest of our veterans and their families. Cost should not be the factor.

That's why we need to hear from our veterans about their thoughts, wishes, and needs for medical care. Are we as a country meeting those needs?

We ask that you share your thoughts by writing us at:

South Dakota Department of Veterans Affairs

425 E. Capitol

Pierre, SD 57501

Or, by emailing us a message. Go to our website: <https://vetaffairs.sd.gov/aboutsddva/contactus.aspx#general>, and scroll down to general inquiries and click on the email button on the right side.

At the end of each day, our true measure of success will be the timeliness, the quality, and the consistency of the services provided to our veterans. They deserve nothing less.

To all those who have faithfully served, we thank you!

Greg Whitlock, Secretary

South Dakota Department of Veterans Affairs

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.

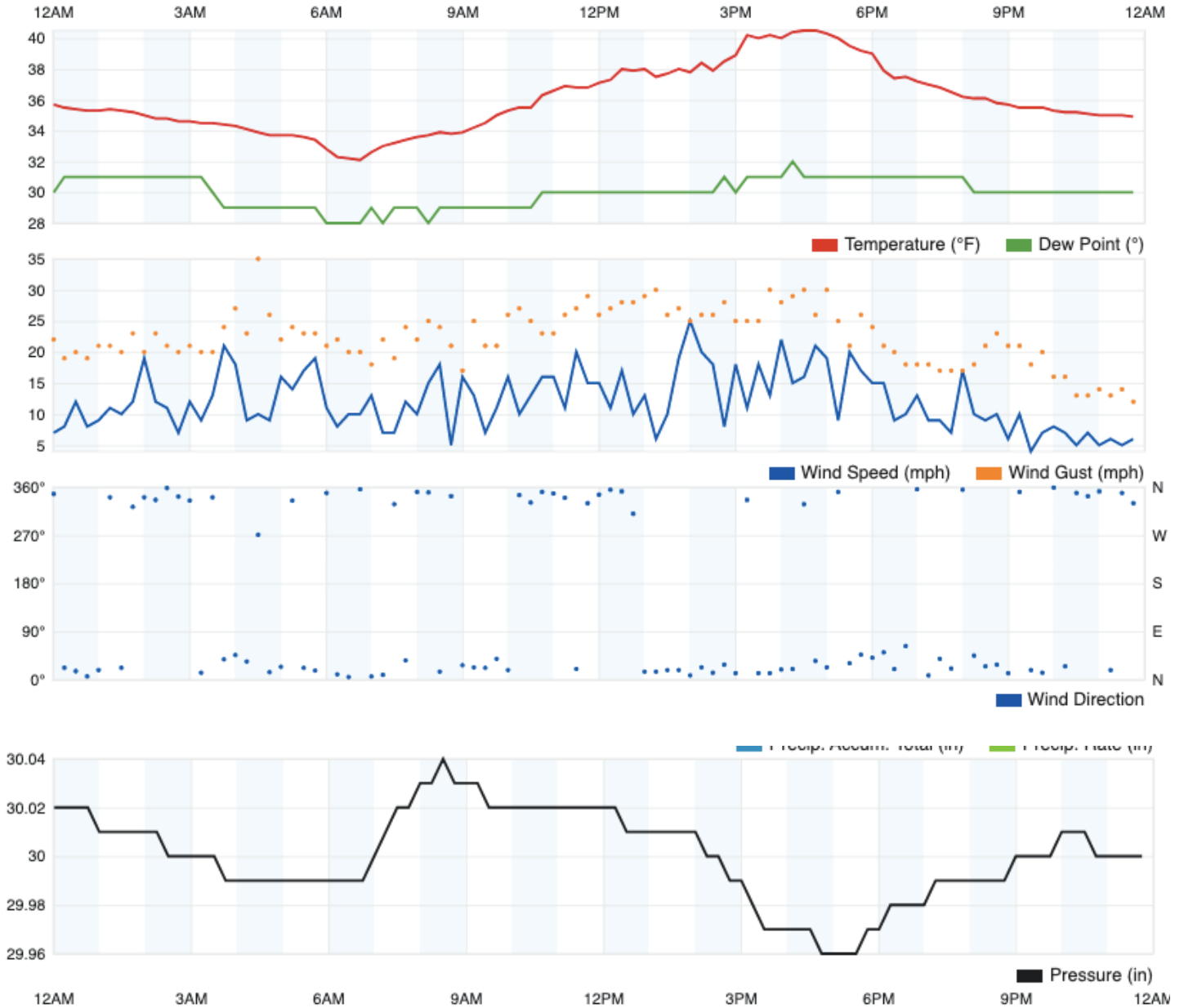
Packets are being sent home this week with information regarding KG Roundup. These would apply to families who have children eligible for KG and JK this coming 2022-2023 school year who are not currently enrolled in our school. Please contact the school if you do not receive a packet. We do not have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



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Yesterday's Groton Weather Graphs



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Today



Mostly Cloudy

High: 56 °F

Tonight



Decreasing Clouds and Breezy

Low: 32 °F

Friday



Sunny and Windy

High: 50 °F

Friday Night



Mostly Clear and Blustery then Mostly Clear

Low: 21 °F

Saturday



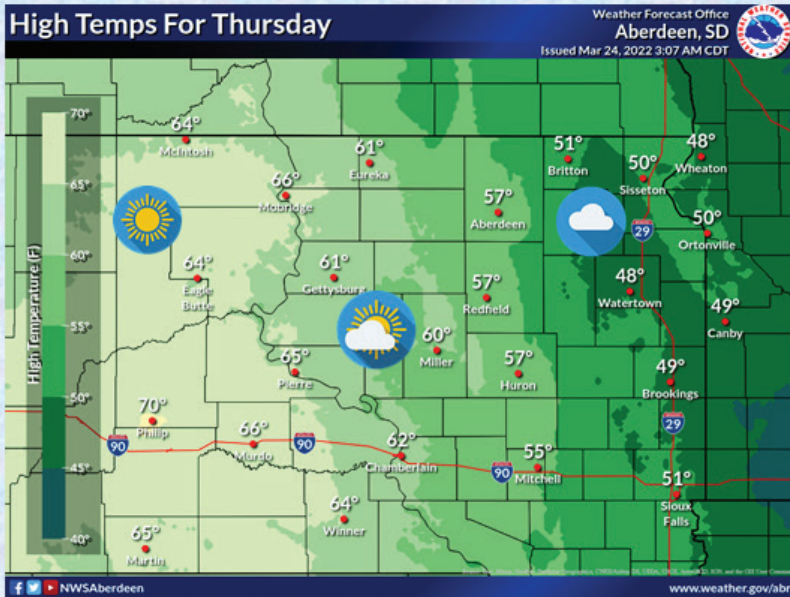
Mostly Sunny

High: 41 °F



Warmer Today Windy conditions west of the James River

High Temps For Thursday



Maximum Wind Gust Forecast

	3/24 Thu		3/25 Fri			Maximum		
	6am	12pm	6pm	12am	6am		12pm	6pm
Aberdeen	15	23	32	33	41	43	35	43
Britton	17	23	30	35	41	45	35	45
Eagle Butte	18	38	41	38	37	40	29	41
Eureka	18	33	38	38	45	47	36	47
Gettysburg	12	25	33	33	37	37	28	37
Kennebec	14	25	33	32	40	44	33	44
McIntosh	29	53	52	41	48	47	35	53
Milbank	20	17	23	32	40	43	41	43
Miller	17	20	30	33	40	43	32	43
Mobridge	14	32	37	33	37	37	29	37
Murdo	18	37	41	37	41	43	33	43
Pierre	8	26	35	30	37	38	28	38
Redfield	16	20	30	33	38	40	36	40
Sisseton	18	18	33	37	41	47	36	47
Watertown	20	17	23	32	41	43	39	43
Wheaton	18	14	23	33	44	46	37	46

WARMER



National Weather Service
Aberdeen, SD

www.weather.gov/abr

Graphic Created
3/24/2022 4:42 AM

Clouds will continue in eastern/northeastern SD into western MN while skies clearing late in central SD for today. Otherwise, gusty winds once again west of the James River this afternoon becoming more widespread for Friday.

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Today in Weather History

March 24, 1996: North winds of 30 to 40 mph, gusting to 55 mph, combined with the falling snow and the previous day's snowfall to create blizzard conditions. Travel became extremely difficult. Several cars went into ditches, and flights out of Aberdeen were canceled. Schools and activities were either delayed or canceled. Some of the more significant two-day snowfall amounts include 6 inches at Sisseton and Aberdeen, 7 inches at Sand Lake NWR, 8 inches near Veblen, 9 inches at Britton, and 10 inches near Victor.

March 24, 2009: An area of low pressure moved out of the Rockies and into the Northern Plains producing snow and widespread blizzard conditions across central and north central South Dakota. Winds gusting to over 60 mph along with several inches of snow caused hazardous travel conditions. Interstate 90 was closed for a time across much of Jones and part of Lyman County. Power was also out in parts of Pierre and Mobridge for a short period. Some snowfall amounts included; 2 inches at Pierre; 5 inches in Hayes and Timber Lake; 6 inches in Murdo, McLaughlin, and 6 miles southeast of McIntosh; 7 inches 14 miles northeast of Isabel; 8 inches in Eagle Butte; and 12 inches 8 miles southwest of Keldron.

1912: Residents of Kansas City began to dig out from a storm that produced 25 inches of snow in 24 hours. The snowfall total was nearly twice that of any other storm of modern record in Kansas City before or since that time. A record 40 inches of snow fell during March that year, and the total for the winter season of 67 inches was also a record. By late February of that year, Kansas City had received just six inches of snow. Olathe, Kansas received 37 inches of snow in the snowstorm, establishing a single storm record for the state of Kansas. (23rd-24th)

1929: St. Louis, Missouri soared to 92 degrees; their all-time record high for March.

1975: "The Governor's Tornado" hop-scotched a 13-mile path across the western part of Atlanta, GA during the early morning hours, causing considerable damage to the Governor's mansion. Hundreds of expensive homes, businesses and apartment complexes were damaged. Total losses were estimated at \$56 million. Three people lost their lives, and the F3 tornado injured another 152.

1987 - A winter-like storm in the central U.S. produced blizzard conditions from South Dakota to western Kansas. Snowfall totals ranged up to 24 inches at Neligh NE, with 19 inches at Winner SD. Winds gusting to 60 mph created twelve foot snow drifts in Nebraska stranding thousands on the highways. (Storm Data) (The National Weather Summary)

1988 - Thunderstorms developing along a cold front produced severe weather from Minnesota to north-eastern Texas. The thunderstorms spawned ten tornadoes, including one which injured five persons near Raymondville MO. (The National Weather Summary) (Storm Data)

1989 - Low pressure off the coast of Virginia brought heavy rain to the Middle Atlantic Coast States, and heavy snow to the Northern Appalachians. Cape Hatteras NC was soaked with 5.20 inches of rain in 24 hours, and snowfall totals in Vermont ranged up to 12 inches. Winds gusted to 52 mph at New York City. (Storm Data) (The National Weather Summary)

1990 - The storm system which produced heavy snow in the Lower Missouri Valley the previous day, spread heavy snow across parts of the Upper Ohio Valley and the Middle Atlantic Coast Region. Snowfall totals of 2.2 inches at Philadelphia PA and 2.4 inches at Atlantic City NJ were records for the date. Up to six inches of snow blanketed southern Ohio. In the Middle Atlantic Coast Region, snow coated the blossoms of cherry trees which had bloomed in 80 degree weather the previous week. (Storm Data) (The National Weather Summary)

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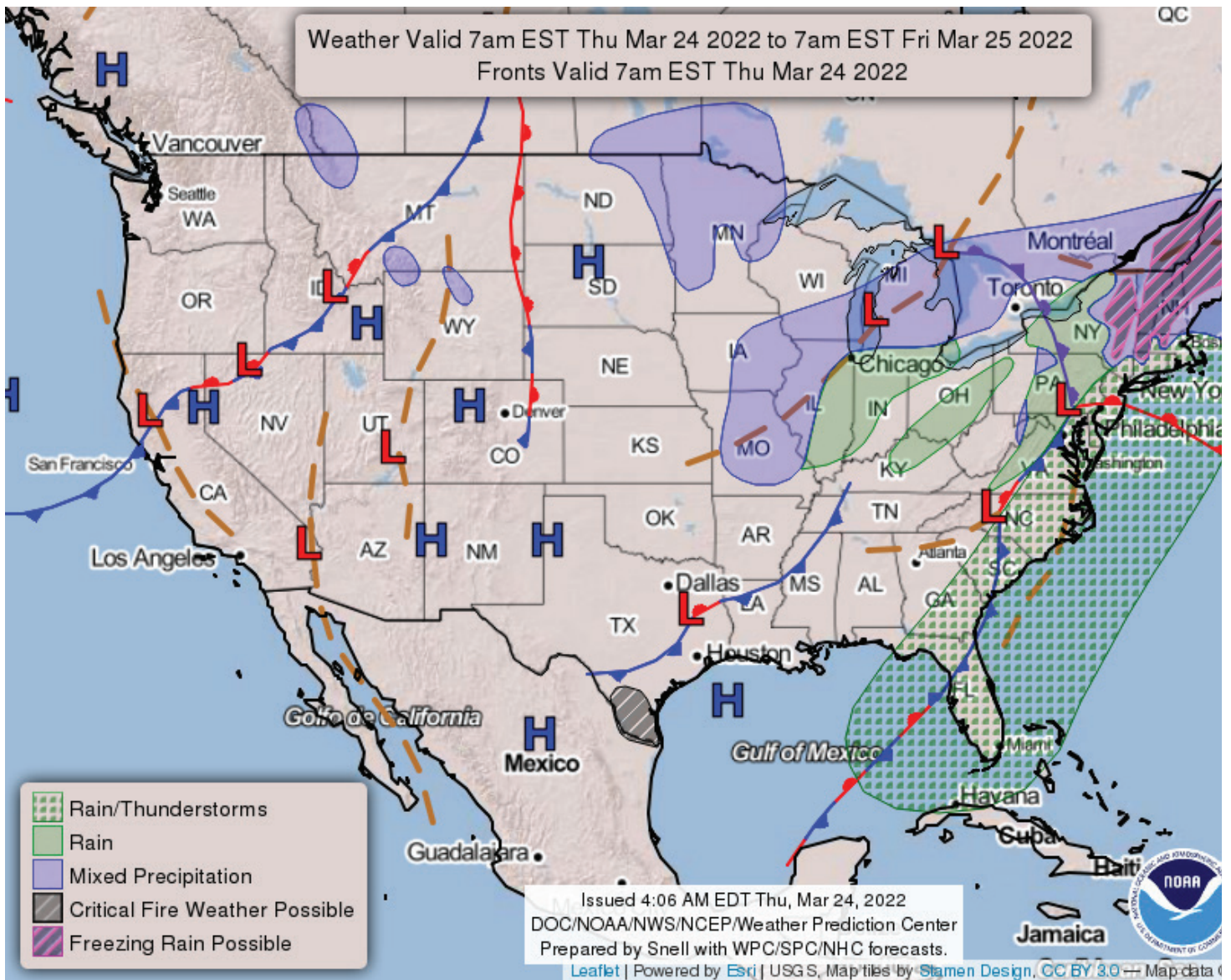
Yesterday's Groton Weather

High Temp: 41 °F at 4:36 PM
Low Temp: 32 °F at 6:39 AM
Wind: 35 mph at 4:22 AM
Precip: 0.00

Day length: 12 hours, 25 minutes

Today's Info

Record High: 80 in 1939
Record Low: -10 in 1893
Average High: 46°F
Average Low: 23°F
Average Precip in Mar.: 0.64
Precip to date in Mar.: 0.00
Average Precip to date: 1.81
Precip Year to Date: 0.97
Sunset Tonight: 7:51:30 PM
Sunrise Tomorrow: 7:23:45 AM



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DO YOU KNOW WHERE YOU ARE?

Jerry and Joan took their daughter Jill to church to enjoy a night of music. The crowd was larger than usual, and Jill became separated from her parents. Frightened, they went to the pastor and told him their predicament. He went to the pulpit and announced, "Jill Williams has been separated from her parents and is lost. If you hear me, Jill, will you please come to the front where your parents are waiting?"

Nothing happened. In great fear, the parents went to the police and reported their daughter missing. Then after a time of prayer, the musical concert began. At the end of the concert, and as he was about to pronounce the benediction, the pastor noticed Jill sitting on the front row. Bursting with excitement, he shouted, "We've found Jill! Let's thank the Lord." He then went to Jill and said, "Why didn't you come to the front and let your parents know you were here?"

Looking surprised she said, "Did you mean me? You said Jill Williams was lost. I'm Jill Williams, but I'm not lost. I'm right here. I knew where I was all the time so I thought it was some other Jill Williams you were looking for!"

Jill did not consider herself lost. She felt safe and secure where she was. Unfortunately, there are many others like her thinking they are safe and secure even though they are traveling through life without the Lord. The Psalmist wrote, "I have strayed like a lost sheep." He was aware of his condition and recognized that he was lost. Knowing this, he wanted to get back to his "Shepherd."

Prayer: Lord, we often think we are where You want us to be. Make us aware of where we really are and lead us to You. In Jesus' Name, Amen.

Scripture For Today: I have strayed like a lost sheep. Psalm 119:176a

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2022 Community Events

- 01/30/2022 84th Carnival of Silver Skates 2pm & 6:30pm (Last Sunday of January)
01/30/2022 Groton Robotics Pancake Feed, 10am – 1pm, Groton Community Center, 109 N 3rd St, Groton,
04/07/2022 Groton CDE
04/09/2022 Lions Club Easter Egg Hunt 10am Sharp at the City Park (Saturday a week before Easter)
04/09/2022 Dueling Pianos Baseball Fundraiser at the Legion Post #39 6-11:30pm
04/23/2022 Firemen's Spring Social at the Fire Station 7pm-12:30am (Same Saturday as GHS Prom)
04/24/2022 Princess Prom 4:30-8pm (Sunday after GHS Prom)
05/07/2022 Lions Club Spring Citywide Rummage Sales 8am-3pm (1st Saturday in May)
St John's Lutheran Church VBS 9-11am
05/30/2022 Legion Post #39 Memorial Day Services (Memorial Day)
Transit Fundraiser at the Community Center 4-7pm (Thursday Mid-June)
06/17/2022 SDSU Alumni & Friends Golf Tourney at Olive Grove Golf Course 12pm Start
06/18/2022 Groton Triathlon
Ladies Invitational at Olive Grove Golf Course 9am Registration 10am Start
07/04/2022 Firecracker Couples Golf Tourney at Olive Grove Golf Course 9am Registration, 10am Start
(4th of July)
07/10/2022 Lions Club Summer Fest/Car Show at the City Park 9am-4pm (Sunday Mid-July)
Legion Auxiliary #39 Salad Buffet & Dessert Bar 11am-1pm at the Groton Legion
Baseball Tourney
07/21/2022 Pro Am Golf Tourney at Olive Grove Golf Course
Ferney Open Golf Tourney at Olive Grove Golf Course 9am Start
How can we... "Love Groton"? United Methodist Church 9:30am
Moonlight Swim at the Swimming Pool 9-11pm for 9th grade to age 20
Golf Fundraiser Lunch at Olive Grove Golf Course 11a-1pm
08/05/2022 Wine on Nine at Olive Grove Golf Course 6pm
08/12/2022 GHS Basketball Golf Tournament
United Methodist Church VBS 5-8pm
Groton Firemen Summer Splash Day 4-5pm GHS Parking Lot
09/10/2022 Lions Club Fall Citywide Rummage Sale 8am-3pm (1st Saturday after Labor Day)
6th Annual Doggie Day at the Swimming Pool 3:30-5pm
09/11/2022 Couples Sunflower Tourney at Olive Grove Golf Course 12pm
Groton Airport Fly-In/Drive-In, Groton Municipal Airport
10/14/2022 Lake Region Marching Band Festival 10am (2nd Friday in October)
10/01/2022 Pumpkin Fest at the City Park 10am-3pm
10/31/2022 Downtown Trick or Treat 4-6pm (working day on or closest to Halloween)
10/31/2022 United Methodist Church Trunk or Treat 5:30-7pm
11/12/2022 Legion Post #39 Turkey Party 6:30pm (Saturday closest to Veteran's Day)
11/24/2022 Community Thanksgiving at the Community Center 11:30am-1pm (Thanksgiving)
12/03/2022 Tour of Homes & Holiday Party at Olive Grove Golf Course
Santa Claus Day at Professional Management Services 9am-12pm
01/29/2023 Carnival of Silver Skates 2pm & 6:30pm (Last Sunday of January)

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The Groton Independent Printed & Mailed Weekly Edition

Subscription Form

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News from the Associated Press

White House releases report on Native American voting rights

By FELICIA FONSECA Associated Press

FLAGSTAFF, Ariz. (AP) — Local, state and federal officials must do more to ensure Native Americans facing persistent, longstanding and deep-rooted barriers to voting have equal access to ballots, a White House report released Thursday said.

Native Americans and Alaska Natives vote at lower rates than the national average but have been a key constituency in tight races and states with large Native populations. A surge in voter turnout among tribal members in Arizona, for example, helped lead Joe Biden to victory in the state that hadn't supported a Democrat in a White House contest since 1996.

The Biden administration's report comes a year after he issued an executive order promoting voting rights and establishing a steering committee to look at particular barriers to voting in Indigenous communities. Those include state laws and local practices that disenfranchise Indigenous voters, unequal access to early voting and reliance on a mail system that is unreliable, the report stated.

"For far too long, members of tribal nations and Native communities have faced unnecessary burdens when they attempt to exercise their sacred right to vote," the White House said.

The administration called on Congress to pass voting rights legislation, including the John R. Lewis Voting Rights Advancement Act and another focused on Native Americans. But those bills are going nowhere. Republicans don't want them and neither does Democratic Sen. Joe Manchin of West Virginia, meaning they don't have enough votes in the Senate.

In the states, Republican legislatures and governors recently have passed dozens of restrictive laws dealing with voting and elections. They have limited the use of mail voting, which proved hugely popular during the pandemic, implemented strict voter ID requirements, eliminated ballot drop boxes and created several penalties for local election officials who could be accused of violating certain laws.

The U.S. Supreme Court ruled last year in a broader case over Arizona voting regulations to uphold a prohibition on counting ballots cast in the wrong precinct and returning early ballots for another person. Native American voting rights advocates saw it as another notch in a long history of voting discrimination.

Bills that Arizona Gov. Doug Ducey signed last year to codify the practice of giving voters who didn't sign mail-in ballots until 7 p.m. on Election Day to do so and that address voter rolls, also would complicate voting, tribal leaders said.

Democrats say the new laws are designed to target their voters, although the mail voting restrictions also tend to hurt Republicans.

In the absence of action, the Biden administration is seeking changes at more local levels while maintaining pressure on Congress. The White House pointed to enhanced safeguards for Native American voters in Nevada, Washington and Colorado and suggested other states follow their lead.

The report recommended further recommended that jurisdictions serving Native voters offer language assistance even when they're not legally required to. And the U.S. Postal Service should consider adding routes or boosting personnel in Indian Country, the report said.

The White House highlighted efforts within federal agencies that include the Interior Department working to designate tribal colleges in New Mexico and Kansas as voter registration centers. The Treasury Department will provide voter education through its income tax assistance centers, the White House said.

And the U.S. Department of Justice has more than doubled its voting rights enforcement to ensure election officials are complying with federal law, senior administration officials said. The administration noted, though, that the protections in the Voting Rights Act to prohibit racial discrimination in voting no longer are adequate.

Tribal leaders in Alaska told the steering committee that despite successful litigation to ensure language assistance, the services haven't reached their communities, according to the committee's report. A tribal

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leader on the Blackfeet reservation in Montana said a county election official did not comply with a directive to provide drop boxes on the reservation until three days before the election, the report states.

Poverty among Native Americans, Alaska Natives and Native Hawaiians, hostility between Indigenous and non-Indigenous communities, and cultural disrespect also impact voting patterns in Indigenous communities, the administration noted.

The White House report will be translated into six Indigenous languages: Navajo, Ojibwe, Cherokee, Yu'pik, Lakota and Native Hawaiian.

The report builds on the work of other groups, including the Native American Rights Fund that outlined the challenges to voting in Indian Country, deepened by the pandemic: online registration hampered by spotty or no internet service, ballots delivered to rarely-checked post office boxes and turnout curbed by a general reluctance to vote by mail.

Despite the challenges, Native American voting rights groups increasingly have mobilized over the years to boost turnout that is about 13% lower than the national average, according to the White House. The states with the largest percentage of Native Americans and Alaska Natives are: Alaska, Oklahoma, New Mexico, South Dakota and Montana.

SD Lottery

By The Associated Press undefined

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

Dakota Cash

01-11-16-24-25

(one, eleven, sixteen, twenty-four, twenty-five)

Estimated jackpot: \$20,000

Lotto America

36-45-47-51-52, Star Ball: 6, ASB: 4

(thirty-six, forty-five, forty-seven, fifty-one, fifty-two; Star Ball: six; ASB: four)

Estimated jackpot: \$9.47 million

Mega Millions

Estimated jackpot: \$50 million

Powerball

31-32-37-38-48, Powerball: 24, Power Play: 2

(thirty-one, thirty-two, thirty-seven, thirty-eight, forty-eight; Powerball: twenty-four; Power Play: two)

Estimated jackpot: \$167 million

Vetoes show lack of GOP lockstep on transgender sports bans

By LINDSAY WHITEHURST and SAM METZ Associated Press

SALT LAKE CITY (AP) — Republican governors in two states this week rejected legislation to ban transgender players from girls sports — signs that there are some remaining fractures among GOP leaders over how to navigate gender's reemergence as a culture war issue.

Still, those decisions to buck the party's conservative wing could prove short-lived against a fired-up GOP base and lawmakers angling to overrule the governors.

Utah Gov. Spencer Cox and Indiana Gov. Eric Holcomb vetoed bills passed by state lawmakers that would ban transgender girls from participating in gender-designated youth sports.

Their opposition puts them at odds with some of their high-profile counterparts in states such as Iowa, Florida and South Dakota, where politically ambitious governors have leaned into the debates as LGBTQ Americans have grown increasingly visible in society and pop culture.

Given the very few transgender student-athletes playing in both states — four in Utah and none in Indiana — Cox and Holcomb say bans address a problem that is virtually nonexistent and distract from a broader conservative agenda.

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Holcomb said in a veto letter that Indiana lawmakers' rationale for a ban "implies that the goals of consistency and fairness in competitive female sports are not currently being met."

"After thorough review, I find no evidence to support either claim even if I support the effort overall," he added.

The Associated Press last year reached out to two dozen lawmakers in the more than 20 states considering similar youth sports measures and found that only a few times has it been an issue among the hundreds of thousands of teenagers who play high school sports.

But lawmakers in Utah and Indiana are undeterred, arguing transgender girls can have a physical advantage.

"This is not about the number of children. This is not about a number at all. This is about a fundamental belief — that you either have or you don't — that women's sports need to be preserved for those that are biologically born as and identify as female," said Utah Rep. Kera Birkeland, a Republican high school basketball coach who sponsored the ban.

Legislative leaders say they've whipped the votes to override the vetoes and join nearly a dozen other states in restricting which teams transgender kids can play on. The Indiana bill passed with broad support and legislative leaders are meeting at the end of May and could override it with simple majorities.

Many point to the transgender swimmer Lia Thomas, who won an individual title at the NCAA Women's Division I Swimming and Diving Championship last week. While she also placed 5th and 8th in two other races, her win drew widespread attention, including from Republican politicians like Florida Gov. Ron DeSantis, who issued an official proclamation declaring the runner-up the "real winner."

Until two years ago, no state had passed a law regulating gender-designated youth sports. But the issue has become front-and-center in Republican-led statehouses since Idaho lawmakers passed the nation's first sports participation law in 2020. It's now blocked in court, along with another in West Virginia.

Governors in states like Kansas, Louisiana and North Dakota vetoed similar legislation last year, citing fear of lawsuits or reprisal from businesses or sports associations like the NCAA or NBA. Though the organizations relocated events from North Carolina in 2016 after lawmakers limited which public restrooms transgender people could use, the states that have passed bans on transgender student-athletes have generally not faced similar backlash.

Pushback has come from social conservatives, though. In South Dakota, Gov. Kristi Noem, a possible 2024 presidential hopeful, faced pressure after vetoing a ban last year. She quickly pushed one through this year and promoted the legislation with a series of TV ads.

In Utah, Cox cited in his veto letter the wider message the ban sends to transgender kids, who have disproportionately high suicide rates. In an apparent acknowledgement that lawmakers would override his veto, he said he knew that signing it into law would have been the more politically expedient move.

Lawmakers are confident they'll be able to override the veto after flipping several Republicans who voted against the ban and face reelection challenges from the right in primary races decided by a smaller group of ultra conservative party members.

"Gov. Cox is fearing this may cost him his political career," said Troy Williams, executive director of Equality Utah. "The message that young people and their parents are receiving is that the Legislature is hostile to their lives."

Holcomb and Cox also worry about devoting taxpayer money to legal fees. "Let somebody else, let Idaho spend millions of dollars defending this and then, whatever happens, we can react to that," Cox said.

While LGBTQ advocates and allies may have made inroads with governors, much of the party seems "fairly unified in its anti-transgender stance in the states right now," said Jason Pierceson, professor of political science at the University of Illinois, Springfield.

"I would say the overrides are more the Republican Party story than the governor's vetoes," he said. "There's no political space in the Republican Party right now for pro-transgender rights approach."

The push dates back to the Supreme Court decision legalizing same-sex marriage in 2015 and another authored by the new conservative majority on the high court in 2020 finding the Civil Rights act prohibited

employment discrimination for transgender people, he said.

Some conservative activists are hoping that a federal judiciary with more judges appointed by former President Donald Trump could help new legislation hold up in court, he said.

Meanwhile, there are also bills in several states that would restrict gender-confirming care for transgender youth. DeSantis also signed legislation this year that bars instruction on sexual orientation or gender identity in kindergarten through third grade, dubbed the "Don't Say Gay" bill.

"At this point, Gov. Cox seems like an outlier on this issue," said Chris Karpowitz, a political science professor at Brigham Young University. "This seems to be an issue that is provoking a lot of fear, a lot of anger, a lot of activist energy."

Suit filed over threat to ban Native Americans from hotel

RAPID CITY, S.D. (AP) — Hundreds of demonstrators gathered outside a federal courthouse in a South Dakota city Wednesday to cheer the filing of a federal lawsuit over a hotel owner's pledge to ban Native Americans from the property.

The protesters held a rally and prayer meeting in a Rapid City park then walked the streets in response to a social media post by a Grand Gateway Hotel owner who said she would not allow Native Americans on the property. Demonstrators marched to sounds of drums and carried tribal flags and signs.

One banner that read, "We will not tolerate racist policies and practices" stood as a backdrop for tribal leaders and others to talk about the civil rights suit that cites "a policy, pattern, or practice of international racial discrimination against Native Americans." The suit seeks class action status.

Brendan Johnson, a former U.S. attorney for South Dakota and lawyer for the plaintiffs, said the "rest of the world" needs to know what's going on in Rapid City. The suit seeks unnamed general and punitive damages.

"We need to be clear. We don't file this complaint to send a message. We file this complaint because we want justice," Johnson said at a press conference.

Connie Uhre, one of the owners of the Grand Gateway Hotel in Rapid City, posted the ban notice on Facebook Sunday. That followed a shooting at the hotel early Saturday involving two Native American teenagers, Rapid City police said. Cheyenne River Sioux Tribe Chairman Harold Frazier called the post racist and discriminatory and demanded an apology.

Messages left at the hotel were not immediately returned. Court documents do not list an attorney for defendants.

Red Elk Zephier, the hotel manager, told South Dakota Public Broadcasting that the entire staff at the hotel bar and some hotel workers quit due to the proposed ban. Elk Zephier, who is who is Yankton Sioux and Oneida, also quit.

"I can't have that be a part of my life, that negativity. So I just don't want to be associated with that," said Zephier. "I didn't even think about the money or anything involved, I just, I can't have that in my life."

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.

Noem signs bill aiming to restrict abortion pill access

By STEPHEN GROVES Associated Press

SIOUX FALLS, S.D. (AP) — South Dakota Gov. Kristi Noem on Wednesday signed a bill that would make the state one of the most difficult places to get abortion pills, though most of the law will not be enacted unless the state prevails in a federal court battle.

The Republican governor pushed the legislation this year to enshrine a similar rule from her administration that attempted to require abortion-seekers to make three separate visits to a doctor to take abortion pills. But a federal court issued a preliminary injunction against that rule last month, and the bill Noem signed contains language that says the restrictions are not enforceable unless the state convinces a federal

court to overturn that order.

U.S. District Judge Karen Schreier halted the state from implementing the rule after finding that it would have created "an undue burden on a person's right to seek an abortion." However, South Dakota has appealed that decision to the Eight Circuit Court of Appeals.

Noem cast the law as prohibiting telemedicine prescriptions for abortion pills. The Food and Drug Administration last year permanently removed a major obstacle for women seeking the medication by eliminating a long-standing requirement that they pick it up in person. About 40% of all abortions in the U.S. are now done through medication rather than surgery.

However, women in South Dakota are already required to make two trips to an abortion clinic to get the pills. First, for an initial screening, then they must wait 72 hours before they can return to the clinic to get both drugs in the two-dose regimen. They can take the second dose at home.

Noem's law, if it were to take effect, adds a third mandatory visit that would require women to wait at least a day before returning to the abortion clinic to take the second drug in the regimen.

Planned Parenthood, which operates the state's only clinic that regularly provides abortion services, has argued that the restriction would have made it practically impossible for the clinic to provide any medicine-induced abortions.

Noem said in a statement announcing the bill signing that she is hoping the U.S. Supreme Court will this year overturn *Roe v. Wade*, the 1973 landmark case that established the nationwide right to an abortion, but she is also not waiting for that to happen.

The law, which will take effect in July, contains a section that does not hinge on the federal courts: increasing to a felony the punishment for anyone who prescribes medication for an abortion without a license from the South Dakota Board of Medical and Osteopathic Examiners.

On Tuesday, Noem also signed a bill that received unanimous support from both Democrats and Republicans in the Legislature to make it a crime to threaten a woman to receive an abortion against her will or compel her to receive an abortion.

"South Dakota will continue to advance legislation that protects the lives of unborn children," Noem said. "The two bills that I am signing today are crucial because they are also protections for mothers."

The ACLU of South Dakota criticized the Republican-controlled Legislature earlier this month for passing the bill restricting access to abortion pills.

Jett Jonelis, the advocacy manager for the organization, reacted to the bill's passage by saying in a statement that "South Dakotans deserve the right to make their own personal decisions about their lives and futures without politicians getting in the middle of the doctor-patient relationship."

South Dakota's March Madness success elicits statewide pride

By ERIC OLSON AP Sports Writer

Mandy Koupal and a South Dakota teammate from nearly two decades ago didn't want to jinx it, but as the Coyotes were closing in on their upset of Baylor and first appearance in the NCAA Sweet 16, the two started planning a road trip.

Koupal and Stacy (Schooley) Hendricks will be riding in a caravan of vehicles from the Mount Rushmore State to Kansas for the Wichita Region semifinal, where the 10th-seeded Coyotes (29-5) play No. 3 seed Michigan (24-6) on Saturday.

"We have the motto at USD, 'It's always a great day to be a Coyote,'" Koupal said Wednesday. "But when stuff like this happens, you have to admit you feel extra bounce in your step. You're so excited to see how far the program has come going from D-II to where it's at today."

Koupal has lived the South Dakota women's basketball experience. She was a two-time Division II national player of the year (2003 and '04) and remains the school's all-time leading scorer. She was a graduate assistant and assistant for four of the five years the Coyotes were transitioning to Division I.

She's now a schoolteacher and assistant on the girls high school team in her hometown of Wagner, South Dakota. She also has stayed on top of things going on on campus in Vermillion.

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"You see how special a team they are — the passion, the positive energy from everyone," Koupal said. "Whether it's the five on the court — the way they play with heart and have this humble confidence about them — or the bench. It's almost as fun to watch the bench as it is the game because they're so into it and good vibes are flowing. How could you not be rooting for them?"

The Coyotes have nine players with at least three years' experience and South Dakota is in its fourth straight NCAA Tournament and fifth overall in its 10th year as a full Division I member. The Coyotes shot 56% from the field while beating seventh-seeded Mississippi 75-61 in the first round. They held second-seeded Baylor to its lowest point total since 2015 in an eye-catching 61-47 win, which ended the Bears' streak of 12 straight Sweet 16s.

"They play basketball the right way, and they're just a solid team," said university president Sheila Gestring, a South Dakota native who played basketball at Sioux Falls College and went to graduate school at USD. "On campus, everybody is excited, and so is the alumni, the community and the state. The buzz has been really, really fun."

Making it especially fun is the close connection between the team and fans. USD has an enrollment of just under 11,000 in Vermillion, population 12,000, in the southeast corner of the state. The Coyotes led the Summit League in attendance, just ahead of their rival 115 miles to the north, South Dakota State.

SDSU also has had high-level success in women's basketball, becoming the first Summit League team to make the Sweet 16 three years ago. Gestring said she hopes even SDSU fans, at least some of them, will root for the Coyotes for at least one weekend.

"They did the same thing back in 2019," Gestring said, "and it brings a great deal of pride to our state overall when our programs are thriving."

Four Coyotes players are from the state and eight others are from neighboring Minnesota, Nebraska and Iowa.

With the growth of AAU summer programs, Koupal said, high school basketball is played at a level that belies the fact South Dakota ranks 46th in population at just under 900,000.

Fifth-year senior Chloe Lamb, the Summit League player of the year, is from the central South Dakota farm town of Onida, pop. 740. Freshman Kyah Watson, who led a defensive effort that limited Baylor All-American Nalyssa Smith to a season-low 10 points, is from Rapid City on the west end of the state.

"The state of South Dakota has done a great job of providing opportunities for girls to really establish their game," Koupal said. "You find hard-working kids who spend a lot of time in the gym or in their driveway at home. They just have a ball in their hands and want to get better and enjoy the sport."

The Coyotes' success in women's basketball dates to regular appearances in the Division II tournaments in the 1980s and again in the early 2000s. They played for the Division II championship in 2008, losing to Northern Kentucky.

"It started in the Division II era, and the great thing is that our alumni have been really, really special in terms of supporting us into the Division I era," sixth-year coach Dawn Plitzuweit said. "It's a big moment for everyone that's involved in our program."

Gestring said she hopes for at least 2,500 fans at 15,000-seat Intrust Bank Arena this weekend. More than 1,200 tickets had been sold through the USD ticket office as of Wednesday, and students can get free tickets and a ride on a charter bus.

"We're particularly loud fans, so it sounds like there are more of us than there are sometimes," Gestring said, laughing. "I think there's going to be quite a following."

Energy Companies Exploring Regional Grid Solutions Engage Utilicast to Oversee Strategic Planning

DENVER--(BUSINESS WIRE)--Mar 23, 2022--

The Western Markets Exploratory Group (WMEG) today announced the hiring of Utilicast, an energy consulting company, to evaluate regional market structures to improve affordability, reliability, and decarbonization opportunities across the West.

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The WMEG, which is made up of 14 western utilities, plans to explore the potential for a staged approach to new market services including day-ahead energy sales, transmission system expansion, power supply and grid solutions, and existing and emerging public policies.

"Utilicast is excited to continue supporting our clients in this ambitious project to create a roadmap for greater regional market solutions in the West," said Brian Holmes, Utilicast Director of Western Markets. "Having worked extensively in support of the evolution of independent system operator and regional transmission organization markets throughout North America, we look forward to helping the WMEG decide which path forward best meets their needs."

The group also hopes to identify market solutions that can help achieve carbon reduction goals while supporting reliable, cost-effective service for customers. WMEG anticipates Utilicast will develop this roadmap before the end of summer 2022.

WMEG participants include Xcel Energy-Colorado, Arizona Public Service, Black Hills Energy, Idaho Power, NV Energy, Inc., PacifiCorp, Platte River Power Authority, Portland General Electric, Puget Sound Energy, Salt River Project, Seattle City Light, and Tucson Electric Power.

With the recent addition of Los Angeles Department of Water and Power and Public Service New Mexico, the WMEG now consists of 14 entities representing nearly 70,000 MW of load and 13 million customers across the Mountain West, Desert Southwest, and Pacific Northwestern part of the Western Interconnection.

Many of the organizations in the group are currently participating in, or preparing to join the California Independent System Operator's Western Energy Imbalance Market or Southwest Power Pool's Western Energy Imbalance Service Market. WMEG's discussions will not impact participation in or evaluation of those markets, as the group is focused on long-term market solutions.

Live updates: China rejects disinformation accusations

By The Associated Press undefined

BEIJING — China is rejecting accusations of helping Russia spread disinformation over Washington's involvement in Ukraine, while repeating Moscow's baseless claims about secret American biological warfare labs in Ukraine.

"Accusing China of spreading disinformation on Ukraine is disinformation in itself," Foreign Ministry spokesperson Wang Wenbin said at a daily Briefing Thursday. He said China has acted in "an objective and just manner."

Wang claimed the international community continues to have "grave concerns" about U.S. biolabs in Ukraine, despite rebuttals from independent scientists.

"The U.S. cannot muddle through with silence or claiming that as disinformation. The U.S. should make serious clarifications on whether that is disinformation or not," Wang said.

The lab claims have also taken root in the U.S., uniting COVID-19 conspiracy theorists, QAnon adherents and some supporters of ex-President Donald Trump.

China claims it is neutral in the conflict, although it maintains what it calls a limitless friendship with Russia, which it calls its "most important strategic partner." China has refused to criticize Russia over its invasion — or even to refer to it as such — and Chinese state media repeatedly regurgitate Moscow's false claims over the conflict.

KEY DEVELOPMENTS IN THE RUSSIA-UKRAINE WAR:

- Ukraine president to press Biden, NATO for more support
- Biden, Western allies gather in Brussels as Ukraine war enters second month
- UN to vote on blaming Russia for Ukraine humanitarian crisis
- Russian stock market, crushed by war, partially reopens
- Go to <https://apnews.com/hub/russia-ukraine> for more coverage

OTHER DEVELOPMENTS:

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NEW YORK — The Russian stock market has resumed limited trading under heavy restrictions, almost one month after prices plunged and the market was shut down following Moscow's invasion of Ukraine. Trading of a limited number of stocks including energy giants Gazprom and Rosneft took place under curbs that are meant to prevent a repeat of the massive selloff that took place Feb. 24 in anticipation of Western economic sanctions. Foreigners cannot sell and traders are barred from short selling, or betting prices will fall. The benchmark MOEX index gained 8% in the first minutes of trading.

COPENHAGEN, Denmark — Two Norwegian media report that Jens Stoltenberg is getting his job as NATO Secretary-General extended for a year.

Stoltenberg's tenure at NATO is due to end later this year. Norwegian broadcaster TV2 and the Dagens Naeringsliv newspaper reported that there was complete unity within NATO to have Stoltenberg continue as secretary-general for another year. They gave no source for the report.

In February, Norway's government announced Stoltenberg's appointment as head of the Scandinavian country's central bank and said it hopes he can start in his new role around Dec. 1.

NEW YORK — The Russian stock market has resumed limited trading under heavy restrictions, almost one month after prices plunged and the market was shut down following Moscow's invasion of Ukraine. Trading of a limited number of stocks including energy giants Gazprom and Rosneft took place under curbs that are meant to prevent a repeat of the massive selloff that took place Feb. 24 in anticipation of Western economic sanctions. Foreigners cannot sell and traders are barred from short selling, or betting prices will fall. The benchmark MOEX index gained 8% in the first minutes of trading.

BRUSSELS -- U.S. President Joe Biden and world leaders have opened the first in a trio of summits in Brussels focused on pressuring Russia to end its war in Ukraine.

Europe's diplomatic capital is hosting an emergency NATO summit as well as a gathering of the Group of Seven industrialized nations and a summit of the 27 members of the European Union.

Biden is attending all three meetings, beginning with the NATO.

The president and the leaders of other NATO countries met for a group photo memorializing their urgent gathering before they went into the meeting, which was expected to last for several hours.

NATO Secretary-General Jens Stoltenberg opened Thursday's meeting by saying the alliance is determined to continue to ratchet up the costs on Russia.

Biden arrived in Brussels on Wednesday with the hopes of nudging allies to enact new sanctions on Russia, which has already seen its economy crippled by a steady stream of bans, boycotts and penalties over the past four weeks.

BRUSSELS — NATO leaders are refusing to rule out retaliation against Russia should it launch a chemical weapons attack on Ukraine — but British Prime Minister Boris Johnson thinks Moscow has already gone too far.

"The reality is that (President) Vladimir Putin has already crossed the red line into barbarism," Johnson told reporters Thursday as he arrived for summit of NATO leaders.

Johnson says that "it's now up to NATO to consider together the appalling crisis in Ukraine, the appalling suffering of the people of Ukraine, and to see what more we can do to help the people of Ukraine to protect themselves."

As an organization, NATO is not providing weapons to Ukraine. The 30-nation alliance refuses to send troops to Ukraine, either for combat or peacekeeping, and has said it will not deploy aircraft to protect civilians or police any no-fly zone.

But member countries are providing weapons and other assistance, individually or in groups.

Belgian Prime Minister Alexander De Croo describes Putin as "a Russian leader who has lost any sense of what is reasonable these days."

De Croo warns that "if chemical weapons or anything else could be used, that would have definitely

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grave consequences." No NATO leader has elaborated yet on what that might mean.

PARIS — French carmaker Renault announced Wednesday night it is suspending "activities at the Renault Moscow plant" with immediate effect.

The move came hours after Ukraine President Volodymyr Zelenskyy spoke virtually to the French parliament, calling on Renault and other French companies with a Russian presence to stop indirectly supporting the war against Ukraine.

The Renault Group board of directors met Wednesday to decide to halt production at the plant that produces Arkana, Kaptur, Duster and Nissan Terrano SUVs amid mounting criticism of its foothold in the Russian Federation.

However, the lion's share of the group's Russian presence goes through its subsidiary AvtoVAZ, through which it sold nearly 500,000 vehicles in Russia in 2021.

Renault said that AvtoVAZ is not immediately withdrawing, but it's "assessing the available options, taking into account the current environment, while acting responsibly towards its 45,000 employees in Russia."

PARIS — France's defense ministry announced Wednesday the country successfully tested the modernized version of its nuclear missile, the Air-Sol Moyenne Portée.

In a statement, it said that it was tested "without a military payload" and was fired from a Rafale twin-engine, multirole fighter aircraft that took off from Cazaux Air Force Base 120 in southwestern France."

The medium-range air-to-ground nuclear ASMP missile, developed by arms manufacturer MBDA, represents part of the air component of the French nuclear deterrence. The announcement comes at the height of the war in Ukraine, as some observers fear the potential for a military escalation by Russia.

BRUSSELS — NATO Secretary-General Jens Stoltenberg says any chemical attack by Russia on Ukraine would change the course of the war but he is not saying whether NATO would take military action.

Asked whether a chemical weapons attack is a red line for NATO, Stoltenberg said, "I will not speculate beyond the fact that NATO is always ready to defend, to protect and to react to any type of attack on a NATO-allied country."

Stoltenberg says "any use of chemical weapons would fundamentally change the nature of the conflict. It would be a blatant violation of international law, and it will have widespread and severe consequences."

His remarks Thursday came as he arrived at NATO headquarters in Brussels to chair a summit of the military organization's 30 national leaders, including U.S. President Joe Biden.

NATO allies are worried about Russian rhetoric and fears that Moscow might want to create a pretext to use chemical weapons in Ukraine. The leaders are likely to agree to send equipment to help Ukraine protect against chemical, biological, radiological and nuclear threats.

They're also set to endorse a move to set up four new multinational battlegroups in eastern Europe to deter Russia from attacking any NATO members.

LVIV, Ukraine — Ukraine's navy on Thursday reported destroying Russia's large landing ship, Orsk, near the port city of Berdyansk.

A short Facebook statement about the ship was accompanied with photos and videos of fire and thick plumes of smoke in the port.

The Russian military has not commented on what happened to the ship.

Berdyansk has been under Russian control since Feb. 27.

WASHINGTON — The U.S. State Department says Russia has begun the process of expelling several more diplomats from the U.S. embassy in Moscow.

The department said it received a list of diplomats on Wednesday who have been declared "persona non grata" by the Russian foreign ministry. It didn't say how many diplomats were affected by the order,

which generally results in the expulsion of those targeted within 72 hours.

The Russian foreign ministry summoned U.S. Ambassador to Russia John Sullivan on Monday to protest President Joe Biden's description of Russian leader Vladimir Putin as a "war criminal" over the invasion of Ukraine. After that meeting, Russia warned that it was close to severing diplomatic relations with the United States, which would be unprecedented.

The State Department called Wednesday's move "Russia's latest unhelpful and unproductive step" in relations between the countries. It urged Russia "to end its unjustified expulsions of U.S. diplomats and staff."

Biden, Western allies open 1st of 3 summits on Russian war

By CHRIS MEGERIAN, LORNE COOK and AAMER MADHANI Associated Press

BRUSSELS (AP) — U.S. President Joe Biden and world leaders opened a trio of emergency summits on Thursday with a sober warning from NATO Secretary-General Jens Stoltenberg that the alliance must boost its defenses to counter Russia's invasion of Ukraine and "respond to a new security reality in Europe."

Stoltenberg commented as he called to order a NATO summit focused on increasing pressure on Russian President Vladimir Putin over the assault on Ukraine while tending to the economic and security fallout spreading across Europe and the world.

"We gather at a critical time for our security," Stoltenberg said, addressing the leaders seated at a large round table. "We are united in condemning the Kremlin's unprovoked aggression and in our support for Ukraine's sovereignty and territorial integrity."

He said the alliance is "determined to continue to impose costs on Russia to bring about the end of this brutal war."

Over the course of Thursday, the European diplomatic capital is hosting the emergency NATO summit, a gathering of the Group of Seven industrialized nations and a summit of the European Union. Biden will attend all three meetings and hold a news conference afterward.

The schedule left Brussels interlaced with multiple police checkpoints and road closures to help motorcades crisscross the city as the leaders go from one meeting to the next.

Biden arrived late Wednesday with the hopes of nudging allies to enact new sanctions on Russia, which has seen its economy crippled by several weeks of bans, boycotts and penalties.

While the West has been largely unified in confronting Russia after it invaded Ukraine, there's wide acknowledgement that unity will be tested as the costs of war chip at the global economy.

The bolstering of forces along NATO's eastern flank, almost certainly for at least the next five to 10 years if Russia is to be effectively dissuaded, will also put pressure on national budgets.

"We need to do more, and therefore we need to invest more. There is a new sense of urgency and I expect that the leaders will agree to accelerate the investments in defense," Stoltenberg said before the summit.

Biden's national security adviser, Jake Sullivan, said the U.S. wants to hear "that the resolve and unity that we've seen for the past month will endure for as long as it takes."

The energy crisis exacerbated by the war will be a particularly hot topic at the European Council summit, where leaders from Spain, Portugal, Italy and Greece are hoping for an urgent, coordinated bloc-wide response. EU officials have said they will seek U.S. help on a plan to top up natural gas storage facilities for next winter, and they also want the bloc to jointly purchase gas.

German Chancellor Olaf Scholz has dismissed calls to boycott Russian energy supplies, saying it would cause significant damage to his country's economy. Scholz is facing pressure from environmental activists to quickly wean Germany off Russian energy, but he said the process will have to be gradual.

"To do so from one day to the next would mean plunging our country and all of Europe into recession," Scholz said Wednesday.

Poland and other eastern flank NATO countries will also be looking for clarity on how the United States and fellow European nations can assist in dealing with their growing concerns about Russian aggression as well as a spiraling refugee crisis. More than 3.5 million refugees have fled Ukraine in recent weeks,

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including more than 2 million to Poland.

Biden is scheduled to visit Poland on Friday, where both issues are expected to be at the center of talks with President Andrzej Duda. Another significant moment could come shortly before Biden returns to Washington on Saturday. The White House said he plans to "deliver remarks on the united efforts of the free world to support the people of Ukraine, hold Russia accountable for its brutal war, and defend a future that is rooted in democratic principles."

Sullivan said Biden and fellow leaders would aim to "set out a longer-term game plan" for what forces and capabilities are going to be required for the alliance's eastern flank countries.

Four new NATO battlegroups, which usually number between 1,000-1,500 troops, are being set up in Hungary, Slovakia, Romania and Bulgaria.

Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy, who is expected to address the NATO summit by video, said late Wednesday that he wants the alliance to "declare that it will fully assist Ukraine to win this war" by supplying any weapons necessary.

All the while, national security officials from Washington to Warsaw are increasingly worried that Putin might deploy chemical, biological or even nuclear weaponry. Sullivan said the allies would consult on how to respond to "potential contingencies" of that sort.

Biden said this week that the possibility of Russia deploying chemical weapons was a "real threat."

Stoltenberg declined Thursday to discuss whether such a strike is a red line that would draw the alliance into war with Russia. "I will not speculate beyond the fact that NATO is always ready to defend, to protect and to react to any type of attack on a NATO allied country," he said.

Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov in a CNN interview this week said that Russia could consider using its nuclear weapons if it felt there was "an existential threat for our country."

Ursula von der Leyen, head of the European Union's executive arm, said before Biden's visit that she wants to discuss the possibility of securing extra deliveries of liquefied natural gas from the United States for the 27-nation bloc "for the next two winters."

The EU imports 90% of the natural gas used to generate electricity, heat homes and supply industry, with Russia supplying almost 40% of EU gas and a quarter of its oil. The bloc is looking at ways to reduce its dependence on Russian gas by diversifying suppliers.

Sullivan said the United States was looking for ways to "surge" LNG supplies to Europe to help.

Biden, for his part, was expected to detail plans for new sanctions against Russia and humanitarian assistance for the region.

One new sanctions option that Biden is weighing is to target members of the Russian State Duma, the lower house of parliament, according to a U.S. official who spoke on the condition of anonymity to discuss private deliberations. The new sanctions would be rolled out in coordination with Western allies.

Biden arrived in Brussels with Americans increasingly accepting of the need for the U.S. to help stop Putin, according to a poll from The Associated Press-NORC Center for Public Affairs Research.

But even as concern among Americans has swelled and support for a major U.S. role in the conflict strengthened in the last month, Biden's negative approval rating has not budged, the AP-NORC poll found. Few are very confident that he can handle a crisis, and a majority thinks he lacks toughness in dealing with Russia.

Biden promised voters that he had the experience to navigate a complicated international emergency like the one unfolding in Europe and his trip will be the latest test of that proposition as he tries to maintain unity among Western allies and brace for potentially even bigger challenges.

Circus solidarity: Ukrainian performers find home in Hungary

By JUSTIN SPIKE Associated Press

BUDAPEST, Hungary (AP) — Swinging on trapezes, juggling rings or twirling on aerial silks, young Ukrainians with a passion for the circus who were uprooted by Russia's war are now training in Hungary.

Around 100 Ukrainian circus art students from age 5 to 20, with their adult chaperones, escaped the

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embattled cities of Kharkiv and Kyiv amid Russian bombings.

In neighboring Hungary, fellow circus devotees extended help and solidarity to the refugees, taking them in and allowing them to continue training in the safety of the capital, Budapest.

"I can't stand it when I can't train. I just want to perform in circus shows," said Ira Maiboroda, a 16-year-old acrobat from Kharkiv who arrived in Hungary more than two weeks ago. "When I was in Kharkiv, I dreamed of being in the circus in Europe ... I'm here and I'm really joyful."

After Russia invaded Ukraine, the Capital Circus of Budapest along with a Hungarian school for acrobats arranged for the Ukrainian circus students to come to the capital where they would be provided with food and accommodation.

Gabor Kovacs, director of the Baross Imre School for Acrobats in Budapest which is part of the effort, said that in addition to having their basic needs met, it is important for the students to resume their training.

"We think that the creative work and continuation of their studies can greatly contribute to making their daily lives a little more carefree," Kovacs said on the sidelines of a rehearsal as acrobats leaped through the air in a circular arena.

In a training facility near the Budapest circus hall, the dancers, acrobats, jugglers and contortionists stretched and warmed up.

Ann Lisitska, a 13-year-old performer from Kharkiv, said that while she was initially heartbroken when she had to leave her home and interrupt her studies, the welcome she had received by the circus community in Hungary helped ease the trauma.

"I had no idea what it would be like here. When I left I was very upset, because my home studio was left behind, some of my relatives were left behind," she said. "I didn't expect to be so well received and for it to be so nice."

The performances are physically demanding and often involve potentially dangerous maneuvers as the young artists swing on silks and ropes high above the ground.

According to school director Kovacs, losing out on even a few days of training can mean a rapid decline in a circus artist's skills.

"A week or two off work is about the same as six months off work for a professional athlete," he said. "We have to try to create the possibility of daily practice so that these artistic children are able to work and develop continuously."

This week, the Capital Circus of Budapest held a two-night show from which all proceeds will be used to buy circus equipment for the Ukrainian performers, Kovacs said — a token of the strong bonds within the circus community.

"The circus has always been about bringing performers and circus artists from different nations together to create a show," he said. "In this sense, the circus has always been an art form of solidarity."

Ukrainian president to press Biden, NATO for more support

By NEBI QENA and CARA ANNA Associated Press

KYIV, Ukraine (AP) — Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy called on people worldwide to gather in public Thursday to show support for his embattled country as U.S. President Joe Biden and other world leaders met for talks focused on pressuring Russia to end the invasion that is entering its second month.

"Come to your squares, your streets. Make yourselves visible and heard," Zelenskyy said in English during an emotional video address late Wednesday that was recorded in the dark near the presidential offices in Kyiv. "Say that people matter. Freedom matters. Peace matters. Ukraine matters."

Brussels was the center Thursday of a flurry of diplomatic activity. NATO Secretary-General Jens Stoltenberg opened an emergency summit bringing together Biden and other leaders by saying that the alliance is determined to continue to ratchet up the costs on Russia for its aggression.

Russia unleashed its invasion Feb. 24 in Europe's biggest offensive since World War II, but instead of swiftly toppling Ukraine's government, its forces are bogged down in a grinding military campaign and its economy is laboring under punishing international sanctions.

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The Russian stock market resumed limited trading Thursday under heavy restrictions almost one month after prices plunged and the market was shut down following the invasion. Trading of a limited number of stocks including energy giants Gazprom and Rosneft took place under curbs that are meant to prevent a repeat of the massive selloff that took place Feb. 24 in anticipation of Western economic sanctions. Foreigners cannot sell and traders are barred from short selling, or betting prices will fall. The benchmark MOEX index gained 8% in the first minutes of trading.

Ukraine's navy reported Thursday that it had sunk the Russian ship Orsk in the Sea of Asov near the port city of Berdyansk. It released photos and video of fire and thick smoke coming from the port area. Russia did not immediately comment on the claim.

Russia has been in possession of the port since Feb. 27, and the Orsk had debarked armored vehicles there on Monday for use in Moscow's offensive, the Zvezda TV channel of the Russian Defense Ministry said earlier this week. According to the report, the Orsk was the first Russian warship to enter Berdyansk, which is about 80 kilometers (50 miles) west along the coast from the besieged city of Mariupol.

To keep up the pressure on Russia, Zelenskyy said he would ask in a video conference with NATO members that the alliance provide "effective and unrestricted" support to Ukraine, including any weapons the country needs.

Biden was expected to discuss new sanctions and how to coordinate such measures, along with more military aid for Ukraine, with NATO members, and then talk with leaders of the G7 industrialized nations and the European Council in a series of meetings on Thursday.

On the eve of the meetings, European Union nations signed off on another 500 million euros (\$550 million) in military aid for Ukraine.

With its ground forces slowed or stopped by hit-and-run Ukrainian units armed with Western-supplied weapons, Russian President Vladimir Putin's troops are bombarding targets from afar, falling back on the tactics they used in reducing cities to rubble in Syria and Chechnya.

In its last update March 2, Russia said that nearly 500 of its soldiers had been killed and almost 1,600 wounded. NATO estimates, however, that between 7,000 and 15,000 Russian troops have been killed — the latter figure about what Russia lost in a decade of fighting in Afghanistan.

A senior NATO military official said the alliance's estimate was based on information from Ukrainian authorities, what Russia has released — intentionally or not — and intelligence gathered from open sources. The official spoke on condition of anonymity under ground rules set by NATO.

Ukraine also claims to have killed six Russian generals. Russia acknowledges just one dead general.

Ukraine has released little information about its own military losses, and the West has not given an estimate, but Zelenskyy said nearly two weeks ago that about 1,300 Ukrainian troops had been killed.

In an ominous sign that Moscow might consider using nuclear weapons, senior Russian official Dmitry Rogozin said the country's nuclear arsenal would help deter the West from intervening in Ukraine.

"The Russian Federation is capable of physically destroying any aggressor or any aggressor group within minutes at any distance," said Rogozin, who heads the state aerospace corporation, Roscosmos, and oversees missile-building facilities. He noted in his televised remarks that Moscow's nuclear stockpiles include tactical nuclear weapons, designed for use on battlefields, along with far more powerful nuclear-tipped intercontinental ballistic missiles.

U.S. officials long have warned that Russia's military doctrine envisages an "escalate to deescalate" option of using battlefield nuclear weapons to force the enemy to back down in a situation when Russian forces face imminent defeat. Moscow has denied having such plans.

Rogozin, known for his bluster, did not make clear what actions by the West would be seen as meddling, but his comments almost certainly reflect thinking inside the Kremlin. Putin has warned the West that an attempt to introduce a no-fly zone over Ukraine would draw it into a conflict with Russia. Western nations have said they would not create a no-fly zone to protect Ukraine.

Zelenskyy noted in his national address that Ukraine has not received the fighter jets or modern air-defense systems it requested. He said Ukraine also needs tanks and anti-ship systems.

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"It has been a month of defending ourselves from attempts to destroy us, wipe us off the face of the earth," he said.

In the south, the encircled port city of Mariupol has seen the worst devastation of the war, enduring weeks of bombardment and, now, street-by-street fighting. But Ukrainian forces have prevented its fall, thwarting an apparent bid by Moscow to fully secure a land bridge from Russia to Crimea, seized from Ukraine in 2014.

In their last update, over a week ago, Mariupol officials said at least 2,300 people had died, but the true toll is probably much higher. Airstrikes in the past week destroyed a theater and an art school where civilians were sheltering.

Zelenskyy said 100,000 civilians remain in the city, which had a population of 430,000 before the war. Efforts to get desperately needed food and other supplies to those trapped have often failed.

In the besieged northern city of Chernihiv, Russian forces bombed and destroyed a bridge that was used for aid deliveries and civilian evacuations, regional governor Viacheslav Chaus said.

Kateryna Mytkevich, 39, who arrived in Poland after fleeing Chernihiv, wiped away tears as she said the city is without gas, electricity or running water, and entire neighborhoods have been destroyed.

"I don't understand why we have such a curse," she said.

Dialing up pressure, North Korea tests long-range missile

By KIM TONG-HYUNG and MARI YAMAGUCHI Associated Press

SEOUL, South Korea (AP) — North Korea test-fired possibly its biggest-yet intercontinental ballistic missile toward the sea Thursday, according to its neighbors, raising the ante in a pressure campaign aimed at forcing the United States and other rivals to accept it as a nuclear power and remove crippling sanctions.

The launch, which extended North Korea's barrage of weapons tests this year, came after the U.S. and South Korean militaries said the country was preparing a flight of a new large ICBM it first unveiled in October 2020.

South Korea's military responded with live-fire drills of its own missiles launched from land vehicles, a ship and aircraft.

It said it confirmed readiness to execute precision strikes against North Korea's missile launch points as well as its command and support facilities. The South's reaction underscored a resumption of inter-Korean tensions as nuclear negotiations remain frozen.

South Korea's Joint Chiefs of Staff and Defense Ministry said the ICBM missile fired from the Sunan area near capital Pyongyang traveled 1,080 kilometers (671 miles) while reaching a maximum altitude of over 6,200 kilometers (3,852 miles). This indicated the missile was fired on a higher-than-usual angle to avoid reaching the territorial waters of Japan.

Japan's Deputy Defense Minister Makoto Oniki also said the flight details suggested a new type of ICBM. After arriving in Belgium for the Group of Seven summit meetings, Prime Minister Fumio Kishida told reporters the missile possibly landed near Japanese territorial waters off the northern island of Hokkaido.

"It's an unforgivable recklessness. We resolutely condemn the act," Kishida said.

Tokyo's Chief Cabinet Secretary Hirokazu Matsuno said the missile flew for 71 minutes and that Japan may search for debris inside its exclusive economic zone to analyze the North's weapons technology. Japan's coast guard issued a warning to vessels in nearby waters, but there were no immediate reports of damage to boats or aircraft.

South Korean President Moon Jae-in called an emergency National Security Council meeting where he criticized North Korean leader Kim Jong Un for breaking a self-imposed moratorium on ICBM tests and posing a "serious threat" to the region and the broader international community. Moon instructed officials to pursue "all possible response measures" based on its alliance with the United States and cooperation with other international partners, his office said.

The United States strongly condemned the North's launch, said White House Press Secretary Jen Psaki, calling it a "brazen violation" of U.N. Security Council resolutions that risks destabilizing the region's security.

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"The door has not closed on diplomacy, but Pyongyang must immediately cease its destabilizing actions. The United States will take all necessary measures to ensure the security of the American homeland and Republic of Korea and Japanese allies," she said, referring to South Korea's formal name.

Following a highly provocative streak in nuclear explosive and ICBM tests in 2017, Kim unilaterally suspended such testing in 2018 ahead of his first meeting with then-U.S. President Donald Trump.

North Korea's slew of weapons tests reflects a determination to cement its status as a nuclear power and wrest badly needed economic concessions from Washington and others from a position of strength, analysts say.

Kim may also feel a need to trumpet his military accomplishments to his domestic audience and drum up loyalty as he grapples with a broken economy worsened by pandemic border closures.

"Despite economic challenges and technical setbacks, the Kim regime is determined to advance its missile capabilities," said Leif-Eric Easley, a professor of international studies at Seoul's Ewha Womans University. "It would be a mistake for international policymakers to think the North Korean missile threat can be put on the back burner while the world deals with the pandemic and Russia's invasion of Ukraine."

The Biden administration's passive handling of North Korea so far, while it focuses on Russia's invasion of Ukraine and an intensifying rivalry with China, is allowing more room for the North to dial up its testing activity, some experts say. The administration's actions on North Korea have so far been limited to largely symbolic sanctions imposed over its recent tests and offers of open-ended talks that were quickly turned down by Pyongyang's leadership.

There are views in Seoul that Washington is slipping back to the Obama administration's "strategic patience" policy of ignoring North Korea until it demonstrates seriousness about denuclearization, although that approach was criticized for neglecting a gathering nuclear threat.

It was North Korea's 12th round of weapons launches this year and came after it fired suspected artillery pieces into the sea on Sunday.

The North has also tested a variety of new missiles, including a purported hypersonic weapon and its first launch since 2017 of an intermediate range missile with a potential of reaching Guam, a key U.S. military hub in the Pacific.

It also conducted two medium-range tests in recent weeks from Sunan, home to the country's main airport, that the U.S. and South Korean militaries assessed to have involved components of the North's largest ICBM. The allies had said the missile, which the North calls Hwasong-17, could be tested at full range soon.

Those tests were followed by another launch from Sunan last week. But South Korea's military said the missile likely exploded shortly after liftoff. Details of the explosion and the possibility of civilian damage remain unknown.

North Korea's official media insisted that the two successful tests were aimed at developing cameras and other systems for a spy satellite. Analysts say the North is clearly attempting to simultaneously resume ICBM testing and acquire some level of space-based reconnaissance capability under the pretense of a space launch to reduce international backlash to those moves.

The launch may possibly come around a major political anniversary in April, the birthday of state founder Kim Il Sung, the late grandfather of current leader Kim.

The North's previous ICBMs demonstrated potential range to reach the American homeland during three flight tests in 2017. Its development of the larger Hwasong-17, which was first revealed in a military parade in October 2020, possibly indicates an aim to arm it with multiple warheads to overwhelm missile defenses, experts say.

The North last flight-tested an ICBM in November 2017, when the Hwasong-15 flew about 1,000 kilometers (600 miles) for about 50 minutes at a maximum altitude of 4,000 kilometers (2,400 miles). It wasn't immediately clear whether the missile from the latest test was the Hwasong-17.

Denuclearization talks with the U.S. have been stalled since 2019, when the Americans rejected North Korea's demand for a major release of crippling U.S.-led sanctions in exchange for a partial surrender of

its nuclear capabilities.

Kim presided over a ruling Workers' Party meeting on Jan. 19, where Politburo members issued a veiled threat to end his ICBM moratorium, citing U.S. hostility. Eleven days later, the North conducted its first test since 2017 of an intermediate range missile, signaling a resumption of major weapons testing.

South Korea's military has also detected signs that North Korea was possibly restoring some of the tunnels at its nuclear testing ground that were detonated in May 2018, weeks ahead of Kim's first meeting with Trump. The military didn't say whether it believes the North was restoring the site to resume nuclear tests.

Legal experts to weigh in on last day of Jackson hearings

By MARY CLARE JALONICK and MARK SHERMAN Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — Legal experts and interest groups will weigh in on Ketanji Brown Jackson as the Senate Judiciary Committee wraps up four days of hearings on her historic nomination to become the first Black woman on the Supreme Court.

Jackson faced down a barrage of Republican questioning over two days about her sentencing of criminal defendants, her bid to join the Supreme Court veering from lofty constitutional questions to attacks on her motivations on the bench.

On Thursday, the last day of hearings, interest groups including the American Bar Association and civil rights organizations will testify about Jackson's suitability for the court. Witnesses chosen by Republican senators will also speak.

The American Bar Association, which evaluates judicial nominees, last week gave Jackson its highest rating, unanimously "well qualified."

On Wednesday, her final day of Senate questioning, Jackson declared she would rule "without any agendas" as the high court's first Black female justice and rejected Republican efforts to paint her as soft on crime in her decade on the federal bench.

The GOP criticism at her confirmation hearing was punctuated with effusive praise from Democrats, and by reflections on the historic nature of her nomination — none more riveting in the room than from New Jersey Sen. Cory Booker, who used his time not to ask questions but to tearfully speak and draw tears from Jackson as well.

Booker, who is Black, said that he sees "my ancestors and yours" when he looks at her. "I know what it's taken for you to sit here in this seat," he said. "You have earned this spot."

Jackson was silent as Booker talked, but tears rolled down her face, her family sitting behind her.

Jackson was in tears a second time after similar praise from Sen. Alex Padilla, and she responded to the California Democrat that she hopes to be an inspiration because "I love this country, because I love the law."

Though her approval seems all but sure — Democrats are aiming for a vote before Easter — Republicans kept trying to chip away at her record.

In more than 22 hours of hearings, GOP senators aggressively questioned Jackson on the sentences she has handed down to child pornography offenders in her nine years as a federal judge, her legal advocacy on behalf of terror suspects at Guantanamo Bay, her thoughts on critical race theory and even her religious views.

Tempers rose as Wednesday's hearing wore on, with Judiciary Committee Chairman Dick Durbin, D-Ill., slamming down his gavel at one point when Cruz refused to yield after his time expired while he was grilling Jackson.

"You can bang it as long as you want," Cruz snapped, shouting that he just wanted Jackson to answer his question.

"At some point you have to follow the rules," Durbin shot back.

The focus on sentencing was part of a larger effort by the committee's Republicans — several are potential presidential candidates — to characterize Jackson's record, and her judicial philosophy, as too empathetic and soft on criminals who commit the worst offenses. It was also reflective of an emerging emphasis on crime in GOP midterm election campaigns.

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Sen. Thom Tillis, R-N.C., told Jackson she seemed like “a very kind person” — but “there’s at least a level of empathy that enters into your treatment of a defendant that some could view as maybe beyond what some of us would be comfortable with, with respect to administering justice.”

The sustained focus on her record suggested that, contrary to Democratic hopes, Jackson’s confirmation vote in the full Senate is unlikely to garner much, if any, Republican support. Still, several Republicans acknowledged that she is likely to be on the court. Democrats can confirm her without any bipartisan support in the 50-50 Senate as Vice President Kamala Harris can cast the tiebreaking vote.

Jackson, backed by committee Democrats, said the Republicans were mischaracterizing her decisions. Asked if her rulings were endangering children, she told the committee on Tuesday, “Nothing could be further from the truth.”

She said she bases sentences on many factors, not just federal guidelines. Sentencing is not a “numbers game,” she said, noting that there are no mandatory sentences for sex offenders and that there has been significant debate on the subject.

Some of the cases have given her nightmares, she said, and were “among the worst that I have seen.”

She reminded 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.”

President Joe Biden chose Jackson in February, fulfilling a campaign pledge to nominate a Black woman to the Supreme Court. She would take the seat of Justice Stephen Breyer, who announced in January that he would retire this summer after 28 years.

Jackson would be the third Black justice, after Thurgood Marshall and Clarence Thomas, and the sixth woman. Her confirmation would maintain the current 6-3 conservative majority on the court. She would also be the first former public defender on the court, and the first justice with experience representing indigent criminal defendants since Marshall.

Some of the most combative rounds of questioning during the hearings came from the potential GOP presidential candidates, including Cruz, Missouri Sen. Josh Hawley and Arkansas Sen. Tom Cotton. All hit on issues that are popular with the GOP base, including attacks on critical race theory, 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.

Ukraine refugees’ hopes of return waning weeks into war

By SRDJAN NEDELJKOVIC Associated Press

MEDYKA, Poland (AP) — As Russia launched its war in Ukraine last month, exhausted and frightened refugees arrived in neighboring countries. They carried whatever they could grab in a hurry. Many cried. They still do.

The United Nations says that more than 3.6 million people have fled Ukraine since the war started exactly one month ago Thursday in what is the biggest movement of people in Europe since World War II. Unprepared, most refugees believed they would soon be back home. That hope is waning now.

“At the beginning, we thought that this would end pretty soon,” Olha Homienko, a 50-year-old woman from Kharkiv said. “First of all, nobody could believe Russia would attack us, and we thought that it would end quickly.”

Now, Homienko said, “as we can see, there is nothing to look forward to.”

Homienko’s hometown of Kharkiv is among several Ukrainian cities and towns that have been encircled and shelled heavily by the Russians. Refugees coming from besieged towns have told of destruction, death and hunger.

Natalia Lutsenko, from the bombed-out northern town of Chernihiv, said she still thought the Russian invasion must be some kind of “misunderstanding.”

Lutsenko said she couldn’t comprehend why Russian President Vladimir Putin makes Ukrainians suffer so much.

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"Why is he bombing peaceful homes? Why there are so many victims, blood, and killed children, body parts everywhere?" Lutsenko pleaded. "It is horrible. Sleepless nights. Parents are crying, there are no children any more."

After fleeing her home, Lutsenko came to Medyka, a small town on the border between Ukraine and Poland where refugees have been coming since the start of the invasion.

Medyka Mayor Marek Iwasieczko clearly remembers Feb. 24, the first day of the war.

"That day was a big surprise for me. Suddenly the huge number of people appeared in Medyka," Iwasieczko recalled. "They had been traveling for four days. They came terribly exhausted, it was still cold, they were freezing."

Though the Medyka authorities had prepared some facilities in advance for the arrival of refugees, the town was still overwhelmed with the thousands of people arriving at the same time and needing shelter, food, medicines and most of all, warmth and comfort.

Iwasieczko also said everyone believed to the last moment that the war would be avoided.

"Everything was prepared, even though we were not sure whether all this would be necessary, we did not know that the war would start, that this would be Putin's way of doing things," he said. A month later, "we are dreaming about the stabilization and the end of this situation ... We are tired but we are going to help until the end."

To ease the strain on the countries accepting refugees, the European Union announced moves Wednesday to help its member states assist the millions of refugees in accessing schools for their children, health care, accommodation and work.

The measures also aim to help facilitate the movement of refugees between countries that can house them in the EU and other countries such as Canada and the United Kingdom, which already have large Ukrainian communities.

Mostly women and children - Ukrainian men from age 18 to 60 have been banned from leaving the country and stay to fight — the refugees have sought to rebuild their lives in neighboring countries, seek jobs and start schools. Some have moved on other nations where they have relatives.

In Medyka, the refugees are still arriving, though in smaller numbers and in warmer weather. On Wednesday, children could be seen clutching their favorite toys, women carrying babies and people arriving with their dogs, whom they refused to leave behind.

Lutsenko was sitting on her bed in a sports hall that has been turned into a refugee center, with dozens of beds lined up in one central area. She too had thought the war would be over in just a few days.

"Nobody thought it would last this long, for a month.," she said. "I believe that Ukraine will win and I believe in our army. I still believe."

Searchers find wing, engine parts from China Eastern crash

By NG HAN GUAN Associated Press

WUZHOU, China (AP) — Hundreds of searchers wearing rubber boots and full rain gear headed into muddy, forested hills in southern China on Thursday to try to find the second black box from a China Eastern passenger jet that crashed in southern China with 132 people on board earlier this week.

Three days after the crash, officials said they had found 183 pieces of the plane including engine parts and cockpit items, 21 objects belonging to victims and some human remains. State broadcaster CCTV showed footage of workers on a denuded slope trying to dislodge a white wing section with the red and blue China Eastern logo on it.

One of the black boxes, believed to be the cockpit voice recorder, had been found Wednesday. Its outer casing was damaged but the orange cylinder was relatively intact, investigators said.

Pumps were being used to drain a water pond as an off-and-on light rain hampered the search effort for a second straight day. More than 300 searchers were taking part, said Huang Shangwu, a deputy chief in the Guangxi Fire and Rescue Department.

"The water pumping yesterday greatly contributed to the finding of the black box," Huang told reporters

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at a command center inside a wide restricted zone that has been blocked off by authorities.

The Boeing 737-800 was cruising at 29,000 feet (8,800 meters) when it suddenly nose-dived into a remote mountainous area on Monday, setting off a fire in the surrounding forest that could be seen in NASA satellite images. No survivors have been found.

Foreign media were escorted into the zone for the first time Thursday. Parked police and other vehicles lined the highway into the area, and the journalists were driven down small puddled roads covered in red-brown mud to the command center.

When they passed a woman in tears who was being walked away, security officials used open umbrellas to try to block the journalists from filming from their vehicles.

Searchers have been using hand tools, metal detectors, drones and sniffer dogs to comb the heavily forested and steep slopes. Wallets, identity and bank cards and human remains have been found.

CCTV news showed police in olive- and dark-colored rain gear standing in a cleared area on Thursday, some with bare or white-gloved hands atop long-handled tools that appear to be shovels or sickles. They all wore surgical masks.

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

Cockpit voice recorders can capture voices, audio alerts and background sounds from the engine or even switches being moved. The flight data recorder stores information about the plane's airspeed, altitude and direction up or down, as well as pilot actions and the performance of important systems.

Investigators have said it is too early to speculate on the cause. An air-traffic controller tried to contact the pilots several times after seeing the plane's altitude drop sharply, but got no reply, officials have said.

The China Eastern flight was headed from Kunming, the capital of Yunnan province, to Guangzhou, a major city and export manufacturing hub on China's southeastern coast. China Eastern, headquartered in Shanghai, is one of China's four major airlines.

Russian stock market, crushed by war, resumes trading

The Associated Press undefined

NEW YORK (AP) — The Russian stock market resumed limited trading Thursday under heavy restrictions almost one month after prices plunged and the market was shut down following Moscow's invasion of Ukraine.

Trading of a limited number of stocks including energy giants Gazprom and Rosneft took place under curbs that are meant to prevent a repeat of the massive selloff that took place Feb. 24 in anticipation of Western economic sanctions. Foreigners cannot sell and traders are barred from short selling, or betting prices will fall.

The benchmark MOEX index gained 8% in the first minutes of trading.

The reopening of stock trading on the Moscow Exchange has little impact on investors outside Russia. Its market capitalization is a fraction of that of major Western or Asian markets.

Foreign investment managers lost one reason to buy Russian stocks after MSCI Inc. declared the market to be "uninvestable" following the Feb. 24 invasion and removed it from global indexes.

Hundreds of U.S., European and Japanese companies have pulled out of Russia.

There have been bank runs and panic buying of sugar and other staples. The exchange rate of Russia's ruble has tumbled.

Foreigners are barred from selling shares under rules imposed to counter Western sanctions against Russia's weakening financial system and currency.

Trading will be allowed in 33 of the 50 companies that are part of the country's benchmark MOEX index, including air carrier Aeroflot, state-owned gas producer Gazprom and the oil company Rosneft, according to a central bank announcement.

Stocks last traded in Moscow on Feb. 25. A day earlier the MOEX sank 33% after Russian forces invaded Ukraine.

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Moscow's stock exchange had a market capitalization of about \$773 billion at the end of last year, according to the World Federation of Exchanges. That is dwarfed by the New York Stock Exchange, where the total of all equities is roughly \$28 trillion.

Russia's central bank relaunched trading in ruble-denominated government bonds this week.

The central bank estimates that roughly 7.7 trillion rubles, equal to \$79 billion, of Russia's stock was owned by retail investors as of late 2021.

Russia's government may intervene to support its companies and investors. Prime Minister Mikhail Mishustin said March 1 that the country's National Wealth Fund would purchase up to 1 trillion rubles (\$10.2 billion) in Russian shares by the end of the year.

Before the war, foreign investors were showing growing interest in Russian stocks as an emerging markets opportunity. But roughly a week into the war, Russia was removed from emerging markets indexes compiled by MSCI, a division of Morgan Stanley.

MCSI said that after consultation with a large number of asset managers it determined the Russian stock market to be "uninvestable." That took away a primary incentive for fund managers to invest there.

On March 3, the London Stock Exchange suspended trading in shares of 27 companies with links to Russia, including some of the biggest in energy and finance.

The shares lost most of their value prior to the suspension.

Rosneft shares dropped from \$7.91 on Feb. 16 to 60 cents on March 2. Sberbank plunged from \$14.90 to 5 cents.

Russian war in Ukraine marks 1 month with no end in sight

By The Associated Press undefined

Russia's war in Ukraine has killed thousands of people, reduced entire cities to rubble and forced millions to flee their homes. The largest military conflict in Europe since World War II has also upset the international security order and sent dangerous ripples through the global economy.

A look at pivotal moments of the conflict, a month later:

THE ROAD TO WAR

In early 2021, a buildup of Russian troops near Ukraine raised fears of an offensive. Moscow withdrew some of the forces in April, paving the way for a June summit between President Joe Biden and Russian President Vladimir Putin. Their meeting failed to meaningfully ease Russia-U.S. tensions, however.

A renewed buildup of Russian troops along Ukrainian borders began in late October and reached an estimated 150,000 troops by the year's end. From the beginning of the troop surge, Moscow denied any plans to attack Ukraine, calling such Western concerns part of a campaign to discredit Russia. At the same time, it urged the U.S. and its allies to keep Ukraine from joining NATO and roll back the alliance forces from Eastern Europe, demands the West rejected as non-starters.

Then on Feb. 21, Putin abruptly upped the ante, recognizing the independence of pro-Russia rebel regions in eastern Ukraine. Insurgents have been fighting Ukrainian forces there since 2014, when Ukraine's Moscow-friendly president was driven from office by mass protests and Russia responded by annexing the Crimean Peninsula.

INVASION BEGINS

In a televised address on Feb. 24, Putin announced the launch of what he called a "special military operation" intended to demilitarize Ukraine and uproot alleged "neo-Nazi nationalists." As he spoke, the Russian military unleashed a series of air raids and missile strikes on Ukraine's military facilities and key infrastructure. Russian troops rolled into Ukraine from Crimea in the south, all along the eastern border and from Moscow's ally Belarus, which borders Ukraine from the north.

Putin argued that Russia had no choice but to act after Washington and its allies ignored its demand for security guarantees. Western leaders dismissed the claims as a false pretext for the attack.

The Russian military advanced on the Ukrainian capital, Kyiv, located just 75 kilometers (47 miles) south of the border with Belarus, closed in on Ukraine's second-largest city of Kharkiv in the east and pushed

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along the Sea of Azov and Black Sea coasts in the south.

While Russia claimed it was only targeting military facilities, air raids and artillery strikes hit residential areas, schools and hospitals across Ukraine.

The assault turned particularly deadly in March:

— On March 1, a Russian rocket hit the regional administration building in Kharkiv, killing 24.

— On March 9, a Russian airstrike devastated a maternity hospital in the besieged port of Mariupol, killing at least three and injuring 17.

— On March 16, a Russian bomb flattened a historic theater in Mariupol, even after Ukrainians had scrawled the word 'children' in huge white letters on the pavement next to it to indicate that civilians were sheltering inside. Officials said hundreds of people who were hiding in the basement survived.

— On Monday, at least eight people died in a Russian airstrike on a shopping mall in Kyiv.

Russia's top objective in the south is Mariupol, a strategic port on the Sea of Azov that has been under siege for weeks. Relentless bombardment by the Russians has reduced entire neighborhoods to rubble and killed thousands, turning the city into an emblem of civilian suffering.

Thousands have fled the city, part of a wave of refugees fleeing the country that United Nations officials estimate at more than 3.5 million.

RUSSIA STUNG BY WESTERN SANCTIONS

Western allies quickly responded to the invasion with unprecedented economic and financial sanctions.

Several waves of crippling penalties froze an estimated half of Russia's \$640 billion hard-currency reserves, cut key Russian banks out of the SWIFT financial messaging system, barred Moscow from getting cash in dollars and euros and targeted broad sectors of the Russian economy with rigid trade restrictions. Major international companies moved quickly to leave the Russian market.

The severe measures — of a magnitude previously only levied against such countries as Iran and North Korea — sent the ruble into a nosedive, provoked a run on deposits and triggered consumer panic.

Russian authorities responded by introducing tight restrictions on hard-currency transactions and stock markets.

UKRAINE PLEADS FOR MORE WEAPONS, NO-FLY ZONE

While hailing Western sanctions and weapons supplies, Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy has challenged the U.S. and other Western allies to take even stronger measures to stop Russia.

He has continuously urged the U.S. and NATO to declare a no-fly zone over Ukraine, a demand the allies rejected for fear that it could result in a direct confrontation with Russia and even spark a global conflict.

Zelenskyy also has pleaded with Western allies to provide Ukraine with warplanes and long-range air defense systems. Russia has sternly warned the West against such a move, and discussions on possible deliveries of Soviet-era fighter jets and air defense weapons from Eastern Europe to Ukraine have stalled as the West seeks to avoid a dangerous escalation.

Ukraine has also asked the U.S. and the EU to ramp up sanctions to include a ban on Russian oil and gas exports, a move opposed by many EU members that depend on Russia for a large share of their energy needs.

RUSSIAN OFFENSIVE BOGS DOWN

From the first days, the invasion hasn't gone the way Putin expected. After quickly advancing to the outskirts of Kyiv in the first days of the invasion, Russian troops soon got bogged down in the suburbs.

Instead of surrendering as the Kremlin hoped, Ukrainian troops fought back fiercely in every sector, thwarting Russian attempts to quickly roll into other large cities, including Kharkiv and Chernihiv. Russia also failed to win full control of the skies over Ukraine despite massive strikes targeting the country's air force and air defense assets.

Russian military convoys have stretched for dozens of kilometers (miles) along a highway leading from Belarus, becoming an easy target for Ukrainian raids and ambushes. In the east, the Russian troops have faced reinforced Ukrainian positions in the rebel regions and made only incremental gains.

And despite their hold on Mariupol, and a quick capture of the ports of Berdyansk and Kherson, the Russians' have failed to capture the key shipbuilding center of Mykolaiv and press the offensive farther

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west toward Odesa.

Western officials say that throughout the war, Russian troops have been hampered by persistent supply shortages, struggling to get food and fuel and lacking proper cold weather gear.

In early March, the Russian military reported the loss of 498 soldiers, then never updated the toll again. In stark contrast, NATO estimated on Wednesday that 7,000 to 15,000 Russian troops were killed in four weeks of fighting. By way of comparison, the Soviet Union lost about 15,000 troops over a 10-year period during the war in Afghanistan.

NUCLEAR THREATS; CHEMICAL WEAPONS FEARS

On the very first day of the assault, Russian forces took control of the decommissioned Chernobyl nuclear power plant, where radioactivity is still leaking from history's worst nuclear disaster 36 years ago.

Several days later, they seized the Zaporizhzhia nuclear power plant, Europe's largest, hitting a training center there and sparking a brief fire that raised fears of a catastrophe until it was put out.

And on Wednesday, Russian military forces destroyed a new laboratory at Chernobyl, according to the Ukrainian state agency responsible for the Chernobyl exclusion zone.

The international community has raised concerns about both plants' safety.

There have been other threats as well.

On March 21, an ammonia leak at a chemical plant in the eastern Ukrainian city of Sumy contaminated an area with a radius of more than 2.5 kilometers (1.5 miles) but didn't hurt any civilians in the city of 263,000 because the wind didn't blow in that direction.

The Russian military has repeatedly alleged that Ukrainian "nationalists" are hatching plans to blow up a nuclear or chemical facility and then blame it on the Russians — warnings that Western officials fear could herald such an attack from Russia.

Many in the West also fear that with the Russian offensive stalled, Putin could order the use of tactical nuclear weapons or chemical weapons to scare Ukraine and bring it to its knees.

WHAT'S NEXT

Even as his offensive stalls and the Russian economy shudders under the blow of Western sanctions, Putin shows no sign of backing down.

Despite the plummeting ruble and soaring consumer prices, Russian polls show robust support for Putin. Observers attribute those results to the Kremlin's massive propaganda campaign and crackdown on dissent.

Putin demands that Ukraine adopt a neutral status, drop its bid to join NATO, agree to demilitarize, recognize Russia's sovereignty over Crimea and acknowledge the independence of the rebel republics in the Donbas region.

Zelenskyy said earlier this week that Ukraine is ready to discuss a neutral status along with security guarantees that would preclude any further aggression. But he's said the status of Crimea and the separatist regions could be discussed only after a cease-fire and the withdrawal of Russian troops.

Putin may now hope to gain more ground and negotiate from the position of force to strong-arm Zelenskyy into making concessions. Russian and Ukrainian negotiators say they are still far from drafting a prospective deal that Putin and Zelenskyy could discuss.

A top-notch hospital in Doha is busy. Only falcons allowed.

By LUJAIN JO Associated Press

DOHA, Qatar (AP) — At first glance, the Souq Waqif clinic in the historic center of Doha could be any other state-of-the-art hospital.

Nurses in blue scrubs move briskly through the bright wards, conducting rounds. Radiology and operating rooms whirl with the beeps and blinks of monitors. Specialists squint at X-rays and masked doctors make incisions with all the high-tech tools of modern surgery on hand.

There's just one thing: The rooms are filled with falcons.

In the tiny, wealthy emirate of Qatar, the desert birds are among the nation's most pampered residents. Long revered across the Arabian Peninsula for their ferocity and hunting prowess, falcons today serve as

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sheikhly status symbols recalling a Bedouin past. The bond between falconers and their falcons has been an inspiration since the Paleolithic period, when drawings of the creatures first appeared on cave walls.

Although less fashionable now than in the days of yore, the art of falconry is still passed down from one generation to the next in Qatar and other oil-rich sheikhdoms of the Persian Gulf. With demand growing in recent years, clubs that teach the sport have sprouted up across the region. Falcons compete in an increasing number of races and beauty contests.

The finest falcons fetch at least a few thousand dollars and Qataris spare no expense to maintain their good health.

"The establishment of the hospital was to support the hobby and heritage of raising falcons. ... it's a pastime that stretches its veins into multiple generations," Souq Waqif hospital director Dr. Ikdam Al Karkhi recently told The Associated Press. "Keeping them alive and well is an essential duty."

Public hospitals like Souq Waqif offer expert care to sick and wounded hawks, roughly 30,000 a year. The marbled reception area bustles with owners and handlers bringing their birds in for check-ups, medical tests, feather replacements, orthopedic surgeries — and even something akin to mani-pedis.

Falcon nail filing is very serious business, as birds transplanted from the desert wild to opulent homes in skyscraper-studded Doha or bred in captivity cannot easily find sharp surfaces on which to trim their talons.

The falcon's hunt may be a long-venerated tradition, but it's also grisly work. The cornered prey at times puts up a fight, clawing an attacking falcon and hobbling its wings. Each of a falcon's feathers is vital to its flight, necessitating careful feather replacement after a scuffle.

Doctors pull from a bank of shed feathers to find one that perfectly matches the wounded bird's breed — plumage of the same pattern, length and color.

"If these damaged feathers remain, it can cause loss or reduction of the bird's fitness," Al Karkhi said. "They must be treated."

Hospital surgeons treat other casualties of the hunt, too. Falcons' beaks and talons suffer damage from all that swooping and plunging and gobbling.

In the clinic waiting room, falcons perch regally on their owners' gloved wrists. The Qatari men in their flowing white robes treat the prized birds like children, stroking their feathers and misting their beaks with water.

"If a person is neglecting their bird, it's a huge problem," said Hamad Al Mehshadi, a falcon festival manager taking his raptor for a regular medical checkup. "When one holds onto their bird, it is something else. The love of the bird is extraordinary."

Oil wealth and global business may have transformed Doha into a futuristic capital with a gleaming array of skyscrapers and megaprojects, including giant stadiums soon to host millions of soccer fans for the upcoming 2022 FIFA World Cup.

But Souq Waqif still sees a steady stream of 150 falcons a day — a sign that the echoes of Qatar's ancient past are not lost.

"Even the look that a falcon and its owner share, it's different than any other look," Al Karkhi said. Falconers "feel the loyalty of this bird — a fierce warrior in the wild and yet a pet in my hand."

In 1st full year of pandemic, biggest metros lost residents

By MIKE SCHNEIDER Associated Press

After returning to metro San Francisco following a college football career, Anthony Giusti felt like his hometown was passing him by. The high cost of living, driven by a constantly transforming tech industry, ensured that even with two jobs he would never save enough money to buy a house.

So he started looking elsewhere, settling on Houston just last year.

"In Houston, I can be a blue-collar entrepreneur. With the Houston housing market, it made sense to come here," said Giusti, who started a house-painting business.

Giusti was one of tens of thousands of residents who vacated some of the nation's biggest, most densely-populated and costly metropolitan areas in favor of Sunbelt destinations during the first full year of the

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pandemic, from mid-2020 to mid-2021, according to new data released Thursday by the U.S. Census Bureau. The pandemic intensified population trends of migration to the South and West, as well as a slowdown in growth in the biggest cities in the U.S.

The exodus from the biggest U.S. metropolitan areas was led by New York, which lost almost 328,000 residents. It was driven by people leaving for elsewhere, even though the metro area gained new residents from abroad and births outpaced deaths.

Metropolitan Los Angeles lost almost 176,000 residents, the San Francisco area saw a loss of more than 116,000 residents and greater Chicago lost more than 91,000 people from 2020 to 2021. The San Jose, Boston, Miami and Washington areas also lost tens of thousands of residents primarily from people moving away.

On the flip side, the Dallas area grew by more than 97,000 residents, Phoenix jumped by more 78,000 people and greater Houston added 69,000 residents, including Giusti. In the Phoenix metropolitan area, growth was driven by moves from elsewhere in the U.S., while it was propelled by a combination of migration and births outpacing deaths in Dallas and Houston.

"Texas has a thing about it, a romantic thing, with cowboys, and there's the idea here of the Lone Star State," said Giusti in describing the lure of Texas.

The U.S. Census Bureau's Vintage 2021 estimates also showed micro areas — defined as having a core city of less than 50,000 residents — gaining population from mid-2020 to mid-2021, after years of slow growth or declining population. The small population gains were driven by people moving there, as deaths continued to outpace births in many of these communities. Growth in micro areas was led by Kalispell, Montana; Jefferson, Georgia; and Bozeman, Montana.

Demographer William Frey said he believes the growth of micro areas and decreases in the biggest metros will be temporary, taking place at the height of people moving during the pandemic when work-from-home arrangements freed up workers from having to go to their offices.

"There is clearly a dispersion, but I think it's a blip," said Frey, senior fellow at the Brookings Institution's metropolitan policy program, Brookings Metro. "We're at one of the lowest levels of immigration in a long, long time, and that affects big metros like New York, Los Angeles and Chicago. That is going to come back. With the natural decrease, we will go back to normal."

Between mid-2020 and mid-2021, there was a stark increase in deaths outpacing births across the country. Almost three-quarters of U.S. counties experienced a natural decrease from deaths exceeding births, up from 55.5% in 2020 and 45.5% in 2019. The trend was fueled by the COVID-19 pandemic, as well as fewer births and an aging population.

"You have more older Americans, and birth rates are low so you don't have many children being born, and then along comes COVID, and it hits older adults the most, often in rural areas without access to good health care," said Kenneth Johnson, a senior demographer at the University of New Hampshire. "It's like a perfect storm, if you will, that produced this natural decrease."

Pittsburgh and Tampa had the largest natural decreases of U.S. metropolitan areas, in the range of 10,000 residents each. Pittsburgh's overall population declined by almost 14,000 residents because people left. But the Tampa area grew bigger because of an influx of more than 45,000 new residents, such as Jennifer Waldholtz who moved from Atlanta with her husband in 2020. They had previously lived in Orlando and missed Florida's palm trees and blue skies.

"We wanted to come back to Florida. It was state-specific," said Waldholtz, who works in nonprofit development. "We loved the way of life in Florida. It's a vibe, the way of living, sunshine, palm trees, but definitely not politically."

Rich countries getting new COVID vaccine before poorer ones

By MARIA CHENG and ANIRUDDHA GHOSAL Associated Press

NEW DELHI (AP) — The company behind a COVID-19 vaccine touted as a key tool for the developing world has sent tens of millions of doses to wealthy nations but provided none yet to the U.N.-backed effort to supply poorer countries, a sign that inequity persists in the global response to the pandemic.

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COVAX had planned to make available 250 million doses from Novavax by March, but the U.N. agency in charge of deliveries says the first shipments now likely won't be made until April or May.

It wasn't supposed to be this way. CEPI, one of the organizations leading COVAX, gave Novavax \$388 million to fast-track the vaccine's development, aimed at making the shot available in poorer countries as the pandemic was exploding two years ago.

The investment guaranteed COVAX the "right of first refusal" to the first Novavax doses, but the deal applied only to factories in the Czech Republic, South Korea and Spain, said CEPI spokesman Bjorg Dystvold Nilsson.

There are other factories that aren't part of the deal — and their shots are going elsewhere.

The Serum Institute of India, the world's largest vaccine maker, has manufactured millions of Novavax doses. According to India's Ministry of External Affairs and the institute, more than 28.9 million of those doses were sent to the Netherlands in January and February, while Australia received about 6 million doses. Indonesia also received about 9 million doses in December.

Thousands of other Novavax doses were also shipped from a Netherlands factory to other EU countries.

"Whatever the reason, a vaccine that was believed to be highly suitable for poor countries is now in large part going to rich countries," said Zain Rizvi, a drug policy expert at the U.S. advocacy group Public Citizen. "It's tragic that in year three of the pandemic, we still cannot get the resources, attention and political will to solve vaccine inequity."

The delay is the latest setback for COVAX, which has been repeatedly hit by supply problems and has missed numerous targets to share doses.

Last year, WHO's director-general Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus decried the chasm in vaccine supplies between rich and poor countries as a "catastrophic moral failure."

Vaccine availability has been improving in poorer regions recently, but logistical problems persist.

According to data from Oxford University, only about 14% of people in low-income countries have received at least one dose of COVID-19 vaccine. More than 680 million doses of COVAX-provided vaccines remain unused or have expired, according to government data.

Even with vaccine supplies improving, some officials were eagerly awaiting the Novavax vaccine in particular because it is easier to transport and store than some other coronavirus shots. They also hoped it might be more enticing to people skeptical of the AstraZeneca vaccine, which suffered through a botched rollout in Europe.

Countries including Zimbabwe, the Central African Republic and Kiribati were among those in line to be offered Novavax doses by March from COVAX.

Before the pandemic, Novavax was a small American company that had never brought any vaccine to market. Its shots have proven highly effective, but it is relying heavily on other companies to make them.

The company, struggling to scale up production, also has delayed delivery to other countries, including some in the European Union. COVAX is supposed to receive more than 1 billion Novavax doses.

In a statement, the Gaithersburg, Maryland, company acknowledged that it had yet to share any shots with the vaccines alliance Gavi, which fronts the COVAX effort, but said it stands ready to do so.

"We continue to work with Gavi to reach our shared goal of ensuring global access to our protein-based vaccine where it is needed most," Novavax said.

Gavi suggested part of the delay is that the Novavax vaccine wasn't authorized by WHO until December. Gavi said it planned to allocate Novavax in the future and was "in close touch with the manufacturer and expects the supply to be available for delivery when countries need it."

Health officials also worry that the urgency to vaccinate people everywhere against COVID-19 has disappeared — especially as many countries roll back precautions and the world's attention is diverted.

"Rich countries have moved on from COVID and everyone is fixated on the war in Ukraine, but COVID-19 remains an acute crisis for most people in the world," said Ritu Sharma, a vice-president at the charity CARE.

She said COVAX was still desperately short of vaccines and that based on the current pace of vaccination, the world was still "years and years" away from immunizing enough people to stop future COVID-19 waves.

Other experts said it was incumbent on public health agencies to ensure their investments into vaccines

would benefit poor countries and to be more transparent about what went wrong.

"Whatever the explanation is, it's unsatisfactory," said Brook Baker, an access to medicines specialist at Northeastern University. "The bottom line is that there are still a lot of unvaccinated people in poor countries and once again, they are at the back of the line."

Russia-Ukraine war fails to fuel Biden rebound: AP-NORC poll

By HANNAH FINGERHUT Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — As President Joe Biden meets with key allies in Brussels to coordinate a stronger response to Russia's monthlong assault on Ukraine, a new poll shows Americans have yet to rally around his leadership.

Concern about Russia has swelled and support for a major U.S. role in the conflict strengthened in the last month, but Biden's negative approval rating has not budged, according to the poll Thursday from The Associated Press-NORC Center for Public Affairs Research. Few are very confident that he can handle a crisis, and a majority thinks he lacks toughness in dealing with Russia.

Only 43% of Americans approve of Biden and a similar percentage approve of his handling of the relationship with Russia. Both measures are little different from an AP-NORC poll conducted days before the Feb. 24 invasion.

The U.S., along with NATO allies, have tried to isolate Russia and Russian President Vladimir Putin with sanctions, including freezing foreign assets of Russia's central bank and cutting off its supply to essential war materiel. But Russia has continued for a month to batter cities in Ukraine with air strikes and artillery, despite a stalled ground invasion.

Over the next three days, the Biden administration aims to work with key European allies on a united strategy to aid Ukraine militarily, increase sanctions on Russia and wrestle with the worsening humanitarian crisis, according to Jake Sullivan, Biden's national security adviser.

Biden does so on shaky ground with the American public. Only about a quarter are very confident that the president has the ability to handle a crisis, promote U.S. standing in the world or effectively manage the U.S. military, though most have at least some confidence.

Fifty-six percent of Americans think Biden has not been tough enough on Russia, while 36% say his approach has been "about right."

Even among members of his own party, Biden faces pressure to do more. The poll shows Democrats are closely divided over the president's response, with 43% saying he hasn't been tough enough. Somewhat more, 53%, say it's been "about right."

"I understand he's between a rock and a hard place," said Rachel Collins, a 41-year-old Democrat from Chicago. "It just feels like Putin's not going to stop at Ukraine."

Collins, an elementary school teacher, said she feels like she's watching history unfolding yet again.

"How many years are we gonna watch this happen and then have to step in anyway?" she added. "It just feels inevitable and, in the meantime, we're just watching all these people suffer."

While support for a major U.S. role has grown since last month, from 26% to 40%, Biden faces a tight-rope walk to avoid war and to curb the impact on the American people. The poll shows close to half of Americans are "extremely" or "very" concerned about being drawn into war with Russia.

Biden has repeatedly said that he will not send American troops to Ukraine, though some have been deployed to neighboring NATO countries.

"I think that he's doing the right thing and being cautious, but it's really hard when you're watching and reading about these stories day to day," Collins said. "More aggressive at where we are means putting troops on the ground, and I don't necessarily know if that's the answer either."

"Then, you know, there'll be people saying 'why are we putting troops in there,'" she added.

While Republicans are less likely than Democrats to support the U.S. having a major role in Russia's war, most also say they think Biden's response has not been tough enough.

"He's scared," said David Stoddard, a retired border patrol agent in Sierra Vista, Arizona. "He's scared

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of Putin. He's scared of (China's) Xi (Jinping). He's scared of everything."

Stoddard, 76, would prefer somebody like former President Donald Trump over Biden to tell Putin "that Putin may have a red button but the United States' red button is bigger," he said.

Stoddard thinks there's more Biden could be doing to strengthen sanctions and support Ukraine militarily, including transferring Polish MiG fighter jets to Ukraine from a NATO air base in Germany, which the Pentagon declined to do earlier in March. The administration has said it is determined to avoid further action that could be seen as escalatory by Putin.

Majorities of Republicans and Democrats alike said they approve of economic sanctions imposed on Russia in general and on the ban on Russian oil in particular, according to the poll. But while 77% of Democrats approve of how Biden is handling the relationship with Russia, just 12% of Republicans do.

While some Democrats acknowledged thinking that Biden could be doing more, many are confident in him to do what's best for the country.

"I'm sure there's more that he could do," said Chris Hollander, a research assistant in Denver. "But as far as being tough, he's not a pushover."

Listening to the intelligence community and getting NATO countries to work together reflect Biden's "behind the scenes" leadership, Hollander, 33, said. "I think he's threading a needle."

'Gargantuan task': Why India's renewable push will be hard

By ANUPAM NATH and ANIRUDDHA GHOSAL Associated Press

NAGAON, India (AP) — Plans to build a sprawling solar park on land cultivated for generations by indigenous farmers in India's Himalayan foothills erupted in violent clashes with police last year after their crops were bulldozed for the development.

Most men from the farming village of a few hundred in Assam state were out looking for work on Dec. 29. One of the few people who remained was Champa Timungpi, who says she was beaten by police and kicked in the stomach when she tried to protest.

Pregnant at the time, the 25-year-old was rushed to a hospital for her injuries. "I came back home at night, and I miscarried," said Tumungpi, who lodged a complaint with police.

The lush green village in Nagaon district — still largely unconnected to the grid and home to families who earn less than \$2 a day — is now framed by blue solar panels, barbed wire and armed guards.

The solar developer Azure Power, listed on the New York Stock Exchange, said in an email that the company legally bought 91 acres (38 hectares) in the village from "recorded landowners" and it's "incorrect and erroneous" to say the land was forcibly taken.

The company's position is strongly disputed by Timungpi and others in the Mikir Bamuni village who say their rights as tenants and established farmers were ignored. Local officials and police didn't respond to requests for comment.

However it plays out in a district court, the dispute not only speaks to India's often-tangled land ownership rules rooted in its colonial era. It also illustrates the complexity and immensity of the challenges facing the country of nearly 1.4 billion people in meeting its renewable power goals for the next decade.

Over the next 20 years, India's demand for electricity will grow more than anywhere else in the world. Unlike most countries, India still has to develop and lift millions like Timungpi from poverty, and it will need to build a power system the size of the European Union's.

How India meets its energy and economic needs will have an outsized impact on the world's climate goals. The country is a major contributor of greenhouse gases from the burning of coal and other fossil fuels.

Prime Minister Narendra Modi said at last year's United Nation climate talks that India would increase its capacity of non-fossil fuels electricity to 500 gigawatts by 2030 — from the 104 gigawatts at the start of this year.

To meet its goals, India must add four times the amount of power the average nuclear plant produces — every month until 2030.

These short-term energy targets won't do much to limit global warming to 1.5 Celsius (34.7 Fahrenheit)

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— the level beyond which scientists warn of catastrophic climate impacts, scientists at last year's United Nations climate conference had warned.

But for India, it'll still be a "gargantuan task," requiring investments between \$20 billion and \$26.8 billion, while only \$10 billion is available, a parliamentary committee said last month.

Some obstacles to renewables — such as the need to build electricity storage for when the sun isn't shining or wind isn't blowing — are global challenges. Others are more specific to India — such as the question of who owns land in poor communities that bear least responsibility for the climate crisis and the need to realign power systems that have relied on coal for centuries.

While there's no clear roadmap yet for India's renewable energy push, experts cite a federal report last year that said an optimal mix would be getting more than half the country's power from the sun and wind by 2030.

But big solar and wind facilities are sparking conflicts with local communities. This is partly because land ownership is fuzzy at many project sites. For example, some communities have used land for centuries to farm or graze cattle without legal rights over it.

As governments and companies focused on transitioning away from fossil fuels, such conflicts were "collaterals" that had to be managed, Kanchi Kohli, an environmental researcher at the Indian think tank Centre for Policy Research.

Mandatory environmental impact assessments were waived for solar and wind projects to make them more viable. But environmental issues still have arisen.

For instance, India's Supreme Court in April 2021 ordered that transmission lines for solar energy be put underground after environmentalists reported the lines were killing critically endangered great Indian bustards. Nine months later, the federal government said burying the lines to safeguard the birds would be too costly and would impede green energy development. The court is hearing the matter again.

India could reduce its dependence on large solar parks by building solar panels on roofs in cities.

The country's initial rooftop goals were small, but in 2015 it set a target of 40 gigawatts of rooftop solar, enough to power 28 million homes. Customers were allowed to send electricity back to the grid — and the sector grew.

In December 2020, the federal government changed rules restricting large industries and businesses from sending electricity back to the grid. These commercial groups are among the highest paying customers for India's perennially cash-strapped power distribution companies, which lost over \$5 billion in 2020.

With industries sending electricity back to the grid in the evening when demand and power tariffs are highest, distribution companies were losing their best customers said Vibhuti Garg, an energy economist at the Institute for Energy Economics and Financial Analysis.

"They were losing money," Garg said.

The installation cost makes rooftop solar too expensive for most homeowners. That was the case for Siddhant Keshav, 30, a New Delhi entrepreneur, who wanted to put solar panels on his home. "It just didn't make sense," he said.

Homes comprised less than 17% of India's rooftop solar in June 2021, according to a report by Bridge to India, a renewable energy consulting firm. And India has only managed to achieve 4% of its 2022 rooftop solar target.

Wind could become another important element in India's clean energy portfolio. But the most "attractive, juicy, windy sites" have small turbines using old technology, said Gagan Sidhu, the director of energy finance at think tank Council on Energy, Environment and Water.

By retiring old wind turbines built before 2002, India could unlock a capacity of 1.5 gigawatts, according to a 2017 study by Indo-Germany Energy Forum, the consulting firm Idam Infra and India's renewable energy ministry. But experts said it's unclear who would do the retrofitting and pay the bill.

With a coastline of over 4,670 miles (about 7,500 kilometers), India could potentially build enough off-shore wind farms to provide roughly a third of the country's 2021 electricity capacity by 2050, according to an assessment led by the Global Wind Energy Council.

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But these are very expensive to build — and the first such project, a wind farm proposed for the Arabian Sea in 2018, has yet to get underway.

Albright fled the Nazis, climbed to the summit of diplomacy

By MATTHEW LEE AP Diplomatic Writer

WASHINGTON (AP) — Madeleine Albright fled the Nazis as a child and climbed to the summit of diplomacy and foreign policy in the United States, breaking the glass ceiling as the first female secretary of state and setting the pace for other women to follow.

“She has watched her world fall apart, and ever since, she has dedicated her life to spreading to the rest of the world the freedom and tolerance her family found here in America,” President Bill Clinton said in announcing his historic choice for America’s top diplomat in December 1996.

Albright, whose family said she died Wednesday of cancer at age 84, was the daughter of a Czech diplomat, and was born just as Adolf Hitler’s Germany started its move down a path of conquest. The bleak years that followed uprooted Albright’s family and intimidated Europe.

She grew to be outspoken and advised women years later “to act in a more confident manner” and “to ask questions when they occur and don’t wait to ask.”

“It took me quite a long time to develop a voice, and now that I have it, I am not going to be silent,” Albright told HuffPost Living in 2010.

Her determination to use her academic background and her instinct for world affairs, combined with a formidable drive, led to her becoming the first woman to head the State Department. She was not part of the presidential line of succession, however, because of her birth outside the United States.

For decades, Albright was a popular professor at Georgetown University’s School of Foreign Service, where her “Modern Foreign Governments” was a required course and examined autocracies and the rise and fall of nation states, including in Ethiopia, the Czech Republic and the Soviet Union. A scholar influenced heavily by the Cold War, she also took a profound interest in arms control and was a proponent of combating dictatorships.

Albright remained outspoken after leaving government. She criticized President George W. Bush for using “the shock of force” rather than alliances to foster diplomacy. She said he had driven away moderate Arab leaders and created the potential for a dangerous rift with European allies.

When the Senate Foreign Relations Committee asked her in January 2007 whether she approved of Bush’s proposed “surge” in U.S. troops in bloodied Iraq, she responded: “I think we need a surge in diplomacy. We are viewed in the Middle East as a colonial power and our motives are suspect.”

An internationalist, Albright was shaped in part by her background as a refugee. She played a key role in persuading Clinton to go to war against the Yugoslav leader Slobodan Milosevic over his brutal treatment of Kosovar Albanians in 1999.

“My mindset is Munich,” she said frequently, referring to the German city where the Western allies in 1938 abandoned her homeland to the Nazis.

She helped win Senate ratification of NATO’s expansion and a treaty imposing international restrictions on chemical weapons. She led a successful fight to keep Egyptian diplomat Boutros Boutros-Ghali from a second term as secretary-general of the United Nations; he accused her of deception and posing as a friend.

A Democrat, she was U.S. ambassador to the United Nations in Clinton’s first term, but sought to work with Republicans in Congress on issues ranging from Russia to Cuba. As secretary of state she worked with both political parties to reform the State Department and the U.S. Information Agency, which had run Washington’s anti-Soviet messaging since the end of World War II.

Albright advocated a tough U.S. foreign policy, particularly in the case of Milosevic’s treatment of Bosnia. She once exclaimed to Colin Powell, then the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff: “What’s the point of having this superb military you’re always talking about if we can’t use it?”

“Albright has known firsthand what tyranny and totalitarianism can do to ordinary people,” said Michael Zantovsky, a Czech ambassador to Washington. “The lesson of Munich is that you do not appease aggress-

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sors, you stick by your friends, and you take a stand for values and principles that you really believe in.”

“I am an eternal optimist,” Albright said in 1998, amid an effort to promote peace in the Middle East. But she said getting Israel to pull back on the West Bank and the Palestinians to rout terrorists posed serious problems.

As secretary of state, she made limited progress at first in trying to expand the 1993 Oslo accords that established the principle of self-rule for the Palestinians on the West Bank and in Gaza.

But in 1998, she played a leading role in formulating the Wye Accords that turned over control of about 40% of the West Bank to the Palestinians. Still, a comprehensive peace in the Middle East between Israel and the Arabs eluded the Clinton administration.

Albright also helped guide U.S. foreign policy during conflicts in the Balkans and the Hutu-Tutsi genocide in Rwanda.

She enjoyed her reputation for plain-speaking. And she turned her love of jewelry into a weapon, telegraphing her messages with the brooch she chose to wear. Called a snake by the Iraqi government under Saddam Hussein, she sported a snake pin during a U.N. debate on Iraq.

“When devious, I wear a spider; when ready to sting, a bee,” she said.

Marie Jana Korbel was born in Prague on May 15, 1937, the daughter of diplomat Joseph Korbel. The family was Jewish and converted to Roman Catholicism when she was 5. Three of her Jewish grandparents died in concentration camps. Albright later said that she only became aware of her Jewish background after she became secretary of state.

The family returned to Czechoslovakia after World War II, before fleeing again, this time to the United States, in 1948, after the communists rose to power. They settled in Denver, where her father obtained a job at the University of Denver.

She married journalist and publishing heir Joseph Albright in 1959, three days after her graduation from Wellesley College. They had three daughters before divorcing in 1983.

Years later, in an interview with biographer Ann Blackman, Albright said: “Do powerful women attract men? My own experience happens to be yes, in a way that was not true before.”

After college she worked as a journalist and later studied international relations at Columbia University, where she earned a master’s degree in 1968 and a doctoral degree in 1976.

Democratic Sen. Edmund S. Muskie launched her career in politics and diplomacy as a legislative assistant in 1976. She later worked for the National Security Council during the Carter administration and advised Democrats on foreign policy before Clinton’s election. He nominated her as U.S. ambassador to the United Nations in 1993.

She was fluent in Russian, French and Czech, and knew some Polish, Serbian and German. When meeting in Moscow in 1997 with Russian President Boris Yeltsin, her grasp of Russian was so secure that Yeltsin waved away the interpreter as not necessary.

Following her service in the Clinton administration, she headed a global strategy firm, Albright Stonebridge, and was chair of an investment advisory company that focused on emerging markets. She also wrote several books.

She was awarded the Presidential Medal of Freedom, the nation’s highest civilian honor, by President Barack Obama in 2012.

Witness: Whitmer kidnapping would be ‘ignition’ to civil war

By ED WHITE Associated Press

A man who pleaded guilty in a plot to kidnap Michigan Gov. Gretchen Whitmer said her abduction could have been the “ignition” for a U.S. civil war involving antigovernment groups, possibly before the 2020 election.

Ty Garbin described a scheme to get the Democratic governor during his testimony Wednesday against four former allies who are charged with conspiracy. He told jurors that they wanted to attack before the election to prevent Joe Biden from winning the presidency.

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"We wanted to cause as much a disruption as possible to prevent Joe Biden from getting into office. It didn't have to be," Garbin said of a pre-election blitz. "It was just preferred."

The group was arrested in October 2020, a stunning bust near the end of a national campaign that polarized the country. Investigators said the men were extremists who were trying to come up with \$4,000 for an explosive to blow up a bridge in northern Michigan during the kidnapping.

They were angry about Whitmer's statewide COVID-19 restrictions and generally disgusted with politicians, according to trial testimony.

Garbin said a kidnapping would be the "ignition" for civil war "and hopefully other states or other groups would follow suit."

The trial has linked, at times indirectly, the kidnapping plot to a series of events, especially right-wing protests at the Michigan Capitol and elsewhere in response to pandemic orders. Challenges to the results of the 2020 presidential election followed, culminating in the U.S. Capitol riot on Jan. 6.

Garbin explained the Whitmer plan to jurors, taking them through days of training, secret messages and a late night trip to her weekend home. He talked about how he built a "shoot house" with wood, tarp and scrap materials so the men could practice an eventual assault.

The goal was "to kidnap the governor," Garbin said.

"There was no question in your mind that everybody knew?" Assistant U.S. Attorney Nils Kessler asked. "No question," Garbin said.

The jury already had heard from FBI agents and an informant who secretly recorded hours of incriminating, profanity-filled conversations. But Garbin's testimony was striking because it came from someone who pleaded guilty and said he was a willing participant in the plan to snatch Whitmer.

Another man who pleaded guilty, Kaleb Franks, will also testify against Adam Fox, Barry Croft Jr., Daniel Harris and Brandon Caserta.

Defense lawyers claim the men were entrapped by the government. Garbin, however, told jurors that he never heard anyone talk about being swayed by informants.

He said he invited the group to his property in Luther, Michigan, to train for a violent assault on Whitmer's second home. He put together a crude structure so the men could practice going in and out of tight spaces.

"I was kind of ballparking it," Garbin said of the layout. "Every house had a front door. Every house had a living room."

In September 2020, Garbin, Fox, Croft and others traveled to Elk Rapids for night surveillance of Whitmer's property. Garbin said his job was to find it and flash a light to others at a boat launch.

He said his ultimate assignment would be to "perform the actual kidnapping."

Garbin said Fox and Croft were leaders of the cabal. Fox attorney Christopher Gibbons wondered how Garbin could be inspired by a guy who lived in the basement of a Grand Rapids-area vacuum shop, with the living space divided by hanging blankets.

Garbin acknowledged he had called Fox "Captain Autism" and that his shooting skills "weren't top-notch."

The airplane mechanic began cooperating with prosecutors soon after the group was arrested. Garbin was rewarded with a relatively light six-year prison sentence, a term that could be reduced after the trial.

Whitmer rarely talks publicly about the case, though she referred to "surprises" during her term that seem like "something out of fiction" when she filed for reelection on March 17.

She has blamed former President Donald Trump for fomenting anger over coronavirus restrictions and refusing to condemn right-wing extremists like those charged in the case. Whitmer has said Trump was complicit in the Jan. 6 Capitol riot.

New York City to let unvaccinated athletes play home games

By MICHELLE L. PRICE Associated Press

NEW YORK (AP) — New York City's mayor will announce Thursday that he's exempting athletes and performers from the city's vaccine mandate for private workers, a move that will allow Brooklyn Nets star Kyrie Irving to play home games and unvaccinated baseball players to take the field when their season begins.

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Mayor Eric Adams will make the announcement Thursday morning and it will be effective immediately, according to a person familiar with the upcoming announcement who was not authorized to discuss it publicly.

The city's sweeping vaccine mandate for workers will still apply to people with other types of jobs, including government employees.

Adams had said he felt the vaccine rule was unfair when it came to athletes and performers because a loophole in the measure, imposed under his predecessor, allowed visiting players and performers who don't work in New York to still play or perform even if they are unvaccinated.

Irving, a vaccine holdout, had been among the most high-profile people impacted. He was able to re-join the team in January but only when they played out of town games.

Irving and Nets coach Steve Nash said they didn't want to comment until after an official announcement. Irving scored 43 points Wednesday night on his 30th birthday in a 132-120 loss in Memphis after scoring a career-high 60 on March 15 in Orlando in the last game he was eligible to play. The Nets need him as they push for a playoff spot with nine games left in their regular season.

"It just turns the whole team around when he's out there, so hopefully we get some good news," Nets star Kevin Durant said.

This month, concerns had been raised that the rule would also impact Major League Baseball.

Yankees star Aaron Judge refused to directly answer a question about his vaccine status earlier this month, leading to speculation that another New York team would be hobbled by a player's refusal to get inoculated.

When asked Wednesday about a possible vaccine exemption, Judge said he was "happy Kyrie can play some home games."

"If the mandate is not there, it's good for Kyrie," Judge told The Associated Press during spring training in Tampa, Florida, adding he "wasn't too worried" about the mandate's effect on the Yankees.

The Yankees, who open their season at home against the Boston Red Sox on April 7, said earlier this month that the team president was "working with city hall and all other appropriate officials on this matter." The Yankees declined comment Wednesday.

Adams, a Mets fan, is scheduled to make an "economic and health-related announcement" Thursday morning at Citi Field, where the Mets play, according to his official calendar that was released Wednesday night.

Adams has been rolling back vaccine mandates and other coronavirus restrictions, including on Tuesday when he said masks could become optional for children under 5 starting April 4.

Mask mandates for older children have already been removed, as well as rules requiring people to show proof of vaccination to dine in a restaurant, work out at a gym, attend a show, or go to an indoor sporting event.

New York City Mayor Bill de Blasio made vaccination mandatory as a workplace safety rule last year, before leaving office.

All employers are supposed to bar unvaccinated workers from being in shared workplaces.

The city suspended numerous public employees for refusing to get vaccinated, including public servants like firefighters and sanitation workers.

The creation of special exemptions for athletes or entertainers could potentially lead to court challenges arguing the city isn't applying the law evenly. ____

AP freelance writer Mark Dittler in Tampa, Florida, contributed to this report.

NATO: 7,000 to 15,000 Russian troops dead in Ukraine

By NEBI QENA and CARA ANNA Associated Press

KYIV, Ukraine (AP) — NATO estimated on Wednesday that 7,000 to 15,000 Russian soldiers have been killed in four weeks of war in Ukraine, where fierce resistance from the country's defenders has denied Moscow the lightning victory it sought.

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By way of comparison, Russia lost about 15,000 troops over 10 years in Afghanistan.

A senior NATO military official said the alliance's estimate was based on information from Ukrainian authorities, what Russia has released — intentionally or not — and intelligence gathered from open sources. The official spoke on condition of anonymity under ground rules set by NATO.

Ukraine has released little information about its own military losses, and the West has not given an estimate, but President Volodymyr Zelenskyy said nearly two weeks ago that about 1,300 Ukrainian servicemen had been killed.

When Russia unleashed its invasion Feb. 24 in Europe's biggest offensive since World War II, a swift toppling of Ukraine's government seemed likely. But with Wednesday marking four full weeks of fighting, Moscow is bogged down in a grinding military campaign.

Zelenskyy — who has riveted the world's attention with ad hoc videos and speeches to legislatures seeking military aid for his country — seized on the anniversary to plead for people around the world to gather in public Thursday to show support for Ukraine, saying the war breaks the heart of "every free person on the planet."

"Come to your squares, your streets. Make yourselves visible and heard," Zelenskyy said in English during an emotional video address to the nation, recorded in the dark near the presidential offices in Kyiv. "Say that people matter. Freedom matters. Peace matters. Ukraine matters."

Speaking in Russian, Zelenskyy appealed to Russians "to leave Russia so as not to give your tax money to the war." Tens of thousands of Russians already have fled their country since the war began, fearing an intensifying crackdown on dissent that has included the arrest of thousands of antiwar protesters and suppression of the media.

Zelenskyy, who will speak to NATO members by video on Thursday, also said he is asking the alliance to provide "effective and unrestricted" support to Ukraine, including any weapons the country needs to fend off the Russian invasion.

With its ground forces slowed or stopped by hit-and-run Ukrainian units armed with Western-supplied weapons, Russian President Vladimir Putin's troops are bombarding targets from afar, falling back on the tactics they used in reducing cities to rubble in Syria and Chechnya.

A senior U.S. defense official said Wednesday that Russian ground forces appear to be digging in and setting up defensive positions 15 to 20 kilometers (9 to 12 miles) outside Kyiv, the capital, as they make little to no progress toward the city center.

The official, who spoke on condition of anonymity to discuss military assessments, said it appears the forces are no longer trying to advance into the city, and in some areas east of Kyiv, Ukrainian troops have pushed Russian soldiers farther away.

Instead, Russian troops appear to be prioritizing the fight in the Luhansk and Donetsk regions in the Donbas, in what could be an effort to cut off Ukrainian troops and prevent them from moving west to defend other cities, the official said. The U.S. also has seen activity from Russian ships in the Sea of Azov, including what appear to be efforts to send landing ships ashore with supplies, including vehicles, the official said.

In an ominous sign that Moscow might consider using nuclear weapons, a senior Russian official said the country's nuclear arsenal would help deter the West from intervening in Ukraine.

"The Russian Federation is capable of physically destroying any aggressor or any aggressor group within minutes at any distance," Dmitry Rogozin, the head of the state aerospace corporation, Roscosmos, said in televised remarks. He noted that Moscow's nuclear stockpiles include tactical nuclear weapons, designed for use on battlefields, along with far more powerful nuclear-tipped intercontinental ballistic missiles. Roscosmos oversees missile-building facilities.

U.S. officials long have warned that Russia's military doctrine envisages an "escalate to deescalate" option of using battlefield nuclear weapons to force the enemy to back down in a situation when Russian forces face imminent defeat. Moscow has denied having such plans.

Rogozin is known for his bluster, and he did not make clear what actions by the West would be seen as meddling, but his comments almost certainly reflect thinking inside the Kremlin. Putin has warned the

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West that an attempt to introduce a no-fly zone over Ukraine would draw it into a conflict with Russia. Western nations have said they would not create a no-fly zone to protect Ukraine.

As U.S. President Joe Biden left for Europe to meet with key allies about new sanctions against Moscow and more military aid to Ukraine, he warned there is a "real threat" Russia could use chemical weapons.

On the eve of a meeting with Biden, European Union nations signed off on another 500 million euros (\$550 million) in military aid for Ukraine.

Zelenskyy appealed to Western countries to stay united in the face of Russia's efforts to "lobby its interests" with "some partners" to bring them over to its side, and noted during his national address that Ukraine has not received the fighter jets or modern air-defense systems it requested. He said Ukraine also needs tanks and anti-ship systems.

"It has been a month of defending ourselves from attempts to destroy us, wipe us off the face of the earth," he said.

The U.S. has determined that Russian troops have committed war crimes in Ukraine, and it will work to prosecute the offenders, Secretary of State Antony Blinken said. He cited evidence of indiscriminate or deliberate attacks against civilians and the destruction of apartment buildings, schools, hospitals, shopping centers and other sites.

Still, major Russian objectives remain unfulfilled, including in Kyiv, where near-constant shelling and gunfire shook the city Wednesday as the two sides battled for control of multiple suburbs. Mayor Vitali Klitschko said at least 264 civilians have been killed in the capital since the war broke out.

The shelling also claimed the life of another journalist Wednesday. The independent Russian news outlet The Insider said Russian journalist Oksana Baulina had been killed in a Kyiv neighborhood.

In the south, the encircled port city of Mariupol has seen the worst devastation of the war, enduring weeks of bombardment and, now, street-by-street fighting. But Ukrainian forces have prevented its fall, thwarting an apparent bid by Moscow to fully secure a land bridge from Russia to Crimea, seized from Ukraine in 2014.

Zelenskyy said 100,000 civilians remain in the city, which had 430,000 people before the war. Efforts to get desperately needed food and other supplies to those trapped have often failed.

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

In their last update, over a week ago, Mariupol officials said at least 2,300 people had died, but the true toll is probably much higher. Airstrikes in the past week destroyed a theater and an art school where civilians were sheltering.

In the besieged northern city of Chernihiv, Russian forces bombed and destroyed a bridge that was used for aid deliveries and civilian evacuations, regional governor Viacheslav Chaus said.

Kateryna Mytkevich, who arrived in Poland after fleeing Chernihiv, wiped away tears as she spoke about what she had seen. The city is without gas, electricity or running water, said Mytkevich, 39, and entire neighborhoods have been destroyed.

"I don't understand why we have such a curse," she said.

Despite plenty of evidence to the contrary, Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov insisted the military operation is going "strictly in accordance" with plans.

The NATO official said 30,000 to 40,000 Russian soldiers are estimated to have been killed or wounded. In its last update, Russia said March 2 that nearly 500 soldiers had been killed and almost 1,600 wounded.

Ukraine also claims to have killed six Russian generals. Russia acknowledges just one dead general.

The figures from NATO represent the alliance's first public estimate of Russian casualties since the war began. The U.S. government has largely declined to provide estimates of Russian or Ukrainian casualties, saying available information is of questionable reliability.

Ex-prosecutor: Trump 'guilty of numerous felony violations'

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By MICHAEL R. SISAK Associated Press

NEW YORK (AP) — A prosecutor who had been leading a criminal investigation into Donald Trump before quitting last month said in his resignation letter that he believes the former president is “guilty of numerous felony violations” and he disagreed with the Manhattan district attorney’s decision not to seek an indictment.

In the letter, published Wednesday by The New York Times, Mark Pomerantz told District Attorney Alvin Bragg there was “evidence sufficient to establish Mr. Trump’s guilt beyond a reasonable doubt” of allegations he falsified financial statements to secure loans and burnish his image as a wealthy businessman.

“The team that has been investigating Mr. Trump harbors no doubt about whether he committed crimes — he did,” Pomerantz wrote.

Pomerantz and his former co-leader on the Trump probe, Carey Dunne, resigned on Feb. 23 after clashing with Bragg over the future of the case.

Both were top deputies tasked with running the investigation on a day-to-day basis. Both started on the probe under former District Attorney Cyrus Vance Jr., and Bragg asked them to stay when he took office in January. Both Vance and Bragg are Democrats.

In his resignation letter, Pomerantz wrote that Vance had directed his deputies to present evidence to a grand jury and seek an indictment of Trump and other defendants “as soon as reasonably possible.” No former president has ever been charged with a crime.

“I believe that your decision not to prosecute Donald Trump now, and on the existing record, is misguided and completely contrary to the public interest,” Pomerantz wrote.

Danielle Filson, a spokesperson for Bragg, said in a statement Wednesday night that the investigation into Trump is continuing and that a “team of experienced prosecutors is working every day to follow the facts and the law. There is nothing we can or should say at this juncture about an ongoing investigation.”

A message seeking comment was left with Trump’s lawyer.

Trump has called the investigation a politically motivated “witch hunt.”

The Associated Press requested copies of Pomerantz and Dunne’s resignation letters under New York’s open records law, but the district attorney’s office rejected the request Feb. 25.

In its rejection, the office said: “The criminal matter both individuals were assigned remains pending; as such, the public release of the letters which reflect internal deliberations and opinions about an on-going investigation will likely interfere with that investigation.”

The Manhattan district attorney’s office started investigating Trump in 2019, first examining hush-money payments paid to women on his behalf and then expanding into an inquiry into whether the president’s company misled lenders or tax authorities about the value of its properties.

So far, the three-year investigation has resulted only in tax fraud charges against Trump’s company, the Trump Organization, and its longtime finance chief Allen Weisselberg relating to lucrative fringe benefits such as rent, car payments and school tuition.

Pomerantz, a former mafia prosecutor, was brought out of private practice by Vance to add his expertise in white collar investigations to the Trump probe. Dunne argued before the U.S. Supreme Court in a successful, multiyear fight for Trump’s tax records.

After taking office in January, Bragg said he was proud of the continuity that Dunne and Pomerantz had brought in running the high-profile investigation as he took over the D.A.’s office from Vance, who retired after a dozen years in office.

Also in January, New York Attorney General Letitia James claimed in court filings in a parallel civil investigation that her office had uncovered evidence the Trump Organization used “fraudulent or misleading” valuations of assets to get loans and tax benefits.

Trump has given his Statement of Financial Condition — a yearly snapshot of his holdings — to banks to secure hundreds of millions of dollars worth of loans on properties such as a Wall Street office building and a Florida golf course, and to financial magazines to justify his place among the world’s billionaires.

His lawyers have argued that the statements were accurate, and that any attempts to spin disagree-

ments about the value of real estate into a crime were politically motivated.

Some legal experts had said that Manhattan prosecutors faced a potential hurdle in proving that Trump or his company intentionally falsified financial statements.

In his resignation letter, Pomerantz wrote that Trump should be prosecuted "without any further delay," noting that much of the evidence related to before Trump was president, that the investigation had already been prolonged by the tax return battle and other fights.

Waiting to see if more damning evidence could be found would likely be unfruitful, he wrote, and would only "raise additional questions about the failure to hold Mr. Trump accountable for his criminal conduct."

"No case is perfect. Whatever the risks of bringing the case may be, I am convinced that a failure to prosecute will pose much greater risks in terms of public confidence in the fair administration of justice," Pomerantz wrote.

Madeleine Albright, 1st female US secretary of state, dies

By MATTHEW LEE AP Diplomatic Writer

WASHINGTON (AP) — Madeleine Albright, a child refugee from Nazi- and then Soviet-dominated Eastern Europe who rose to become the first female secretary of state and a mentor to many current and former American statesmen and women, died Wednesday of cancer, her family said. She was 84.

A lifelong Democrat who nonetheless worked to bring Republicans into her orbit, Albright was chosen in 1996 by President Bill Clinton to be America's top diplomat, elevating her from U.S. ambassador to the United Nations, where she had been only the second woman to hold that job.

As secretary of state, Albright was the highest-ranking woman in the history of the U.S. government. She was not in the line of succession to the presidency, however, because she was born in what was then Czechoslovakia. Still, she was universally admired for breaking a glass ceiling, even by her political detractors.

"We have lost a loving mother, grandmother, sister, aunt and friend," her family said in a statement.

President Joe Biden ordered flags at the White House and other federal buildings and grounds to be flown at half-staff until March 27.

Outpourings of condolences came quickly.

Biden said, "America had no more committed champion of democracy and human rights than Secretary Albright, who knew personally and wrote powerfully of the perils of autocracy."

"When I think of Madeleine," Biden added, "I will always remember her fervent faith that 'America is the indispensable nation.'"

Secretary of State Antony Blinken said Albright was "a brilliant diplomat, a visionary leader, a courageous trailblazer, a dedicated mentor, and a great and good person who loved the U.S. deeply and devoted her life to serving it."

Clinton called her "one of the finest Secretaries of State, an outstanding U.N. Ambassador, a brilliant professor, and an extraordinary human being."

"And through it all," Clinton added, "even until our last conversation just two weeks ago, she never lost her great sense of humor or her determination to go out with her boots on, supporting Ukraine in its fight to preserve freedom and democracy."

Former President George W. Bush said Albright "lived out the American dream and helped others realize it. ... She served with distinction as a foreign-born foreign minister who understood firsthand the importance of free societies for peace in our world."

Linda Thomas-Greenfield, U.S. envoy to the United Nations, honored Albright as a "trailblazer and a luminary" in remarks on the General Assembly floor.

In 2012, President Barack Obama awarded Albright the Medal of Freedom, the nation's highest civilian honor, saying her life was an inspiration to all Americans.

Albright remained outspoken through the years. After leaving office, she criticized Bush for using "the shock of force" rather than alliances to foster diplomacy and said Bush had driven away moderate Arab leaders and created potential for a dangerous rift with European allies.

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As a refugee from Czechoslovakia who saw the horrors of both Nazi Germany and the Iron Curtain, she was not a dove and she played a leading role in pressing for the Clinton administration to get militarily involved in the conflict in Kosovo.

She also took a hard line on Cuba, famously saying at the United Nations that the Cuban shootdown of a civilian plane was not "cojones" but rather "cowardice."

Albright advised women "to act in a more confident manner" and "to ask questions when they occur and don't wait to ask."

"It took me quite a long time to develop a voice, and now that I have it, I am not going to be silent," she told HuffPost Living in 2010.

When the Senate Foreign Relations Committee asked her in January 2007 whether she approved of Bush's proposed "surge" in U.S. troops in bloodied Iraq, she responded: "I think we need a surge in diplomacy. We are viewed in the Middle East as a colonial power and our motives are suspect."

Albright was an internationalist whose point of view was shaped in part by her background. Her family fled Czechoslovakia in 1939 as the Nazis took over their country, and she spent the war years in London. After the war, as the Soviet Union took over vast chunks of Eastern Europe, her father, a Czech diplomat, brought his family to the United States.

As secretary of state, Albright played a key role in persuading Clinton to go to war against the Yugoslav leader Slobodan Milosevic over his treatment of Kosovar Albanians in 1999. As U.N. ambassador, she advocated a tough U.S. foreign policy, particularly in the case of Milosevic's treatment of Bosnia and NATO's intervention in Kosovo, was eventually dubbed "Madeleine's War."

"My mindset is Munich," she said frequently, referring to the German city where the Western allies abandoned her homeland to the Nazis.

Albright helped win Senate ratification of NATO's expansion and a treaty imposing international restrictions on chemical weapons. She led a successful fight to keep Egyptian diplomat Boutros Boutros-Ghali from a second term as secretary-general of the United Nations. He accused her of deception and posing as a friend.

And she once exclaimed to Colin Powell, then chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, who would later succeed her as secretary of state: "What's the point of having this superb military you're always talking about if we can't use it?"

Powell, who died last year, recalled in a memoir that Albright's comment almost made him have an "aneurysm."

Despite her championing of diplomacy in the Middle East and a late Clinton-era foray to North Korea, which made her the highest-ranking U.S. official to visit the Stalinist state, Albright drew criticism for her support of sanctions against Iraq that many blame for humanitarian suffering in the country under Saddam Hussein.

"I am an eternal optimist," Albright said in 1998, amid an effort as secretary of state to promote peace in the Middle East. But she said getting Israel to pull back on the West Bank and the Palestinians to rout terrorists posed serious problems.

Albright made limited progress at first in trying to expand the 1993 Oslo Accords that established the principle of self-rule for the Palestinians on the West Bank and in Gaza. But in 1998, she played a leading role in formulating the Wye Accords that turned over control of about 40% of the West Bank to the Palestinians.

She also spearheaded an ill-fated effort to negotiate a 2000 peace deal between Israel and Syria under then-President Hafez al-Assad. She helped guide U.S. foreign policy during conflicts in the Balkans and the Hutu-Tutsi genocide in Rwanda.

As an outspoken Democrat in private life, Albright often joked that she had her "political instincts surgically removed" when she became secretary of state. True to that, she formed an unlikely friendship with arch-conservative North Carolina Sen. Jesse Helms to increase funding for the State Department and U.S. diplomacy and oversaw a radical change in Washington's handling of Cold War-era messaging.

Born Marie Jana Korbel in Prague on May 15, 1937, she was the daughter of a diplomat, Joseph Korbel.

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The family was Jewish and converted to Roman Catholicism when she was 5. Three of her Jewish grandparents died in concentration camps.

Albright later said that she became aware of her Jewish background after she became secretary of state. The family returned to Czechoslovakia after World War II but fled again, this time to the United States, in 1948, after the Communists rose to power.

They settled in Denver, where her father obtained a job at the University of Denver. One of Josef Korbel's best students, a young woman named Condoleezza Rice, would later succeed his daughter as secretary of state and was the first Black woman to hold that office.

Among current officials who worked closely with Albright are Biden's domestic policy adviser and former U.N. Ambassador Susan Rice, as well as Deputy Secretary of State Wendy Sherman and a host of others.

Albright graduated from Wellesley College in 1959. She worked as a journalist and later studied international relations at Columbia University, where she earned a master's degree in 1968 and a Ph.D. in 1976.

She worked for the National Security Council during the Carter administration and advised Democrats on foreign policy before Clinton's election. He nominated her as U.S. ambassador to the U.N. in 1993.

Following her service in the Clinton administration, she headed a global strategy firm, Albright Stonebridge, and was chair of an investment advisory company that focused on emerging markets.

She also wrote several books. Albright married journalist Joseph Albright, a descendant of Chicago's Medill-Patterson newspaper dynasty, in 1959. They had three daughters and divorced in 1983.

Vetoes show lack of GOP lockstep on transgender sports bans

By LINDSAY WHITEHURST and SAM METZ Associated Press

SALT LAKE CITY (AP) — Republican governors in two states this week rejected legislation to ban transgender players from girls sports — signs that there are some remaining fractures among GOP leaders over how to navigate gender's reemergence as a culture war issue.

Still, those decisions to buck the party's conservative wing could prove short-lived against a fired-up GOP base and lawmakers angling to overrule the governors.

Utah Gov. Spencer Cox and Indiana Gov. Eric Holcomb vetoed bills passed by state lawmakers that would ban transgender girls from participating in gender-designated youth sports.

Their opposition puts them at odds with some of their high-profile counterparts in states such as Iowa, Florida and South Dakota, where politically ambitious governors have leaned into the debates as LGBTQ Americans have grown increasingly visible in society and pop culture.

Given the very few transgender student-athletes playing in both states — four in Utah and none in Indiana — Cox and Holcomb say bans address a problem that is virtually nonexistent and distract from a broader conservative agenda.

Holcomb said in a veto letter that Indiana lawmakers' rationale for a ban "implies that the goals of consistency and fairness in competitive female sports are not currently being met."

"After thorough review, I find no evidence to support either claim even if I support the effort overall," he added.

The Associated Press last year reached out to two dozen lawmakers in the more than 20 states considering similar youth sports measures and found that only a few times has it been an issue among the hundreds of thousands of teenagers who play high school sports.

But lawmakers in Utah and Indiana are undeterred, arguing transgender girls can have a physical advantage.

"This is not about the number of children. This is not about a number at all. This is about a fundamental belief — that you either have or you don't — that women's sports need to be preserved for those that are biologically born as and identify as female," said Utah Rep. Kera Birkeland, a Republican high school basketball coach who sponsored the ban.

Legislative leaders say they've whipped the votes to override the vetoes and join nearly a dozen other states in restricting which teams transgender kids can play on. The Indiana bill passed with broad support

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and legislative leaders are meeting at the end of May and could override it with simple majorities.

Many point to the transgender swimmer Lia Thomas, who won an individual title at the NCAA Women's Division I Swimming and Diving Championship last week. While she also placed 5th and 8th in two other races, her win drew widespread attention, including from Republican politicians like Florida Gov. Ron DeSantis, who issued an official proclamation declaring the runner-up the "real winner."

Until two years ago, no state had passed a law regulating gender-designated youth sports. But the issue has become front-and-center in Republican-led statehouses since Idaho lawmakers passed the nation's first sports participation law in 2020. It's now blocked in court, along with another in West Virginia.

Governors in states like Kansas, Louisiana and North Dakota vetoed similar legislation last year, citing fear of lawsuits or reprisal from businesses or sports associations like the NCAA or NBA. Though the organizations relocated events from North Carolina in 2016 after lawmakers limited which public restrooms transgender people could use, the states that have passed bans on transgender student-athletes have generally not faced similar backlash.

Pushback has come from social conservatives, though. In South Dakota, Gov. Kristi Noem, a possible 2024 presidential hopeful, faced pressure after vetoing a ban last year. She quickly pushed one through this year and promoted the legislation with a series of TV ads.

In Utah, Cox cited in his veto letter the wider message the ban sends to transgender kids, who have disproportionately high suicide rates. In an apparent acknowledgement that lawmakers would override his veto, he said he knew that signing it into law would have been the more politically expedient move.

Lawmakers are confident they'll be able to override the veto after flipping several Republicans who voted against the ban and face reelection challenges from the right in primary races decided by a smaller group of ultra conservative party members.

"Gov. Cox is fearing this may cost him his political career," said Troy Williams, executive director of Equality Utah. "The message that young people and their parents are receiving is that the Legislature is hostile to their lives."

Holcomb and Cox also worry about devoting taxpayer money to legal fees. "Let somebody else, let Idaho spend millions of dollars defending this and then, whatever happens, we can react to that," Cox said.

While LGBTQ advocates and allies may have made inroads with governors, much of the party seems "fairly unified in its anti-transgender stance in the states right now," said Jason Pierceson, professor of political science at the University of Illinois, Springfield.

"I would say the overrides are more the Republican Party story than the governor's vetoes," he said. "There's no political space in the Republican Party right now for pro-transgender rights approach."

The push dates back to the Supreme Court decision legalizing same-sex marriage in 2015 and another authored by the new conservative majority on the high court in 2020 finding the Civil Rights act prohibited employment discrimination for transgender people, he said.

Some conservative activists are hoping that a federal judiciary with more judges appointed by former President Donald Trump could help new legislation hold up in court, he said.

Meanwhile, there are also bills in several states that would restrict gender-confirming care for transgender youth. DeSantis also signed legislation this year that bars instruction on sexual orientation or gender identity in kindergarten through third grade, dubbed the "Don't Say Gay" bill.

"At this point, Gov. Cox seems like an outlier on this issue," said Chris Karpowitz, a political science professor at Brigham Young University. "This seems to be an issue that is provoking a lot of fear, a lot of anger, a lot of activist energy."

Sacramento teachers strike as Minneapolis walkout continues

By STEVE KARNOWSKI, OLGA R. RODRIGUEZ and HEATHER HOLLINGSWORTH Associated Press

Thousands of teachers and other school workers in Sacramento walked off the job Wednesday as the California capital became the second big U.S. school district this month to see a work stoppage over pay and staffing shortages as a teachers strike in Minneapolis entered its third week.

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The disputes in Sacramento and Minneapolis, where teachers walked out March 8, come as school districts across the country deal with fallout from the coronavirus pandemic and limited resources.

Across the country, union workers are seizing the opportunity posed by tight labor markets to recover some of the power they feel they lost in recent decades as unions shrank in size and influence. And experts expect to see more labor strife as the country emerges from the pandemic.

The Sacramento City Unified School District canceled classes Wednesday at its 76 schools, affecting 43,000 students, after negotiations failed with the Sacramento City Teachers Association and the Service Employees International Union Local 1021.

The unions — representing 2,800 teachers and 1,800 school employees — voted overwhelmingly earlier this month to strike. Teachers say Sacramento has serious staffing shortages despite federal funding and a district budget surplus that it could tap.

“The district has misplaced priorities and no sense of urgency,” said teacher union president David Fisher.

These labor actions are part of a trend across the country that started with the pandemic, said Steve Smith, spokesman for the California Labor Federation, which includes SEIU Local 1021.

“Workers are really fed up with poor treatment, generally few safety protections, low pay. Many of these are essential workers who really stepped up to keep our economy going in the roughest of possible times,” Smith said.

Bradley Marianno, a professor of education policy at the University of Nevada, Las Vegas, who studies teacher unions and collective bargaining, said teacher strikes were on the rise before the pandemic, and he expects to see educators making more noise again after two stressful years.

“Tight labor markets create bargaining power,” Mariano said, adding: “School districts are saying this: ‘It is difficult to staff classrooms right now.’ And real or not that perception creates bargaining power for teachers unions to negotiate higher teacher pay.”

Elsewhere in Northern California, teachers in the Mount Diablo district in the San Francisco Bay Area reached a tentative agreement on Saturday. In Sonoma County’s Cotati-Rohnert Park district, teachers returned to work last Thursday after a six-day strike. Spokespeople for the two largest national educators’ unions said they knew of no other teacher strikes on the horizon.

The Sacramento district said that the 2% pay increase it proposed is what it can afford. It’s also offering to pay 100% of health care coverage.

More than 4,500 educators and support staff are still on strike in Minneapolis, where negotiations often have been acrimonious. The talks have yielded incremental progress on the big issues of pay, class sizes and better mental health supports for the district’s 29,000 students, but no breakthroughs.

“We’re sticking this out till we get it done,” Shaun Laden, a leader of the Minneapolis Federation of Teachers, said in a video Tuesday.

Union leaders have insisted that the Minneapolis district is flush with cash, thanks in part to pandemic relief funds, while administrators say they aren’t. The district says the “last, best and final offer” it made this week would require at least \$10 million in budget cuts.

In a video message Tuesday, School Board Chair Kim Ellison called it “a robust offer” that significantly raises pay and should be more than sufficient “to figure out an agreement that works for both parties and gets our children back in school as soon as possible.”

Marianno said that the influx of federal funds is making school district budgets across the country look better, but administrators are hesitant to allocate those short-term funds for long-term raises.

Minneapolis administrators have pointed out that the approximately \$70 million in federal aid in their budget is one-time money that would force painful cuts when it runs out if it’s used for long-term obligations.

Sacramento Mayor Darrell Steinberg, who helped break a stalemate between teachers and the district in 2017, urged both sides there to do everything possible to end the strike immediately.

“Kids have missed enough school. Their education and mental health are at stake. They will continue to suffer if the adults continue to fight among themselves,” Steinberg said in a statement Wednesday.

Takeaways: Joy, tears, culture wars dominate Jackson hearing

By LISA MASCARO AP Congressional Correspondent

WASHINGTON (AP) — It's not just Supreme Court nominee Judge Ketanji Brown Jackson who is being scrutinized. Senators are also being watched at this milestone moment in history considering the first Black woman for the high court.

Some senators have been overcome with "joy," as Cory Booker of New Jersey described the swell of emotion he felt over the potential to confirm a judge who would help the court look more like America.

Others, led by Sens. Josh Hawley and Ted Cruz, quizzed the federal judge about her views on issues of race and crime, amplifying election year grievances and a backlash over changing culture.

Jackson endured a third day at the Senate Judiciary Committee on Wednesday, a tense, 10-plus hour session providing a vivid portrait of the nation's promise, but also its enduring racial challenges.

At one point, Jackson listened, tears rolling down her cheek, as Booker spoke of all that brought her to this: "You're here."

Here are some takeaways from Day Three of the weeklong confirmation hearings.

IN DEFENSE OF PUBLIC DEFENDERS

Jackson is the first federal public defender to be nominated to the Supreme Court and her efforts representing those accused of crimes, alongside her work as a federal judge, have provided a lengthy record of difficult cases for senators to review.

Republicans have particularly focused on the emotional and disputed debate over the judge's sentences for child pornography offenders to portray her as soft on crime. Critics say she brings too much "empathy" to the law.

Under questions from Democratic Sen. Jon Ossoff of Georgia, Jackson explained that prior to the court's 1963 ruling in *Gideon v. Wainwright*, people who were accused of crimes but couldn't afford lawyers were not guaranteed the right to legal representation.

"Everybody who is accused of criminal behavior now has the right to an attorney," she said.

"And that's very important."

Jackson's record is being scrutinized much the way the work of the first Black nominee to the court, Thurgood Marshall, the storied civil rights attorney, was probed for representing criminal defendants a half a century ago.

Democrats argue that Jackson, who described her own family's work in public service as police officers, is backed by the Fraternal Order of Police, the large law enforcement organization.

'JUDGES CAN'T MAKE LAW'

Jackson has presented herself a judge who relies on method, not judicial philosophy, to remain neutral as she works to "stay in my lane" as a judge rather than a public policy-maker.

She expanded on that view Wednesday reminding senators that the Constitution gives Congress the power to make laws and the courts the power to interpret them.

"Judges can't make law; judges shouldn't be policy makers," she told the senators.

Republicans have tried to portray Jackson as a potentially activist justice, a judge who has shown "empathy" for defendants and cases that they argue goes too far for a position on the high court, which is now tilted 6-3 toward conservatives.

Sen. Thom Tillis, R-N.C., said, "It seems as though you're a very kind person, and that there's at least a level of empathy that enters into your treatment of a defendant that some could view as maybe beyond what some of us would be comfortable with."

In a nod to her views, Jackson disclosed that, if confirmed, she would recuse herself from hearing an affirmative action case at Harvard University, her alma mater, where she now serves on Harvard's Board of Overseers.

"That's my plan," she told senators.

REVIEWING THE RECORD

Senators on the Republican side are repeatedly returning to issues of race and crime, focusing on the

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child pornography cases that the judge herself has said are among "the most difficult" of her career — some that still give her nightmares.

Sen. Lindsey Graham, R-S.C., picked up the arguments anew, arguing that Jackson as a judge should have imposed tougher sentences on child porn defendants rather than applying other deterrents, despite fact checkers and other experts who have said the terms Jackson handed down are within norms of federal guidelines.

"Put their a— in jail," Graham said.

Cruz in one tense moment demanded to know why Jackson handed down lighter sentences in a series of cases he had displayed on a chart than the government prosecutors or guidelines recommended.

The chairman Sen. Dick Durbin, D-Ill., gaveled, saying the senator's time had expired.

"You can bang it as long as you want," Cruz said to the chairman.

Jackson had said that no single one sentence could stand in for all the sentences she has handed down in nearly a decade on the bench, and that she weighs all aspects of the case before her.

"I've said what I'm going to say about these cases," she said.

Senators on the Republican side have signed onto a letter demanding files of her cases, some confidential, insisting the panel probes deeper into Jackson's decision making. Durbin dismissed the request as unprecedented, a "fishing expedition" he will not allow.

JOY AND BITTERSWEET TEARS

Jackson is making history as the first Black woman nominated for the court, which once upheld racial segregation in America and for 233 years has been filled mainly with white men.

Democrats have the potential with their slim majority in the 50-50 Senate to confirm Jackson as President Joe Biden's choice to replace retiring Justice Stephen Breyer even if all Republicans line up opposed. Her nomination is on track for a vote by Easter.

Late in the day, Booker marked a moment saying he refused to let detractors take away his "joy."

"You have sat with grit and grace," he told her, as opponents hit a "new low" twisting her record.

Jackson's face scrunched up as the senator talked about her family, her work, her accomplishments. As he spoke, she pulled out a tissue, and wiped her eye.

"You," Booker said, "are a great American."

If confirmed, Jackson would also become the sixth female justice in the court's history and the fourth among the nine members of the current court.

Biden seeks new sanctions, help for Ukrainians in Europe

By CHRIS MEGERIAN and AAMER MADHANI Associated Press

BRUSSELS (AP) — As war rages on in Ukraine, President Joe Biden will huddle with key allies in Brussels and Warsaw this week to talk through plans for imposing punishing new sanctions on Russia and dealing with an extraordinary humanitarian crisis, while developing a consensus on how they would respond if Russia were to launch a cyber, chemical or even nuclear attack.

Biden arrived in Brussels on Wednesday for a four-day trip that will test his ability to navigate Europe's worst crisis since World War II 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.

"I think it's a real threat," Biden said of the possibility of Russia deploying chemical weapons. He spoke during a brief exchange with reporters at the White House before his departure.

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.

As Biden made his way to Brussels, his top diplomat announced he had made a formal determination that Russian troops have committed war crimes in Ukraine.

Secretary of State Antony Blinken, traveling with Biden, said in a statement the assessment was made

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on a "careful review" of public and intelligence sources since Russia launched its invasion of Ukraine a month ago. He said the U.S. would share that information with allies, partners and international institutions tasked with investigating allegations of war crimes and crimes against humanity.

"We've seen numerous credible reports of indiscriminate attacks and attacks deliberately targeting civilians, as well as other atrocities. Russia's forces have destroyed apartment buildings, schools, hospitals, critical infrastructure, civilian vehicles, shopping centers and ambulances, leaving thousands of innocent civilians killed or wounded," Blinken said.

Jake Sullivan, Biden's national security adviser, said the president would coordinate with allies on military assistance for Ukraine and new sanctions on Russia during meetings Thursday with NATO officials, Group of Seven leaders and European Union allies.

At NATO, Biden and fellow leaders will "set out a longer term game plan" for what forces and capabilities are going to be required for the alliance's eastern flank countries, Sullivan said. Leaders of several Eastern European NATO members have pressed for a greater U.S. and NATO presence in their backyards in the aftermath of the Ukraine invasion.

NATO Secretary-General Jens Stoltenberg said four new battlegroups, which usually number between 1,000 and 1,500 troops, are being temporarily set up in Hungary, Slovakia, Romania and Bulgaria. A permanent force posture is expected to be formally announced at the next NATO summit in Madrid in June, Sullivan said.

European Union nations on Wednesday also signed off on another 500 million euros in military aid for Ukraine. EU foreign affairs chief Josep Borrell called the doubling of the EU's military aid since the Feb. 24 beginning of the war "another sign of the EU's support to the Ukrainian armed forces to defend their territory and their population."

At the meeting of the Group of Seven, leaders from the bloc of wealthy, industrialized nations are expected to unveil a new initiative to coordinate sanctions enforcement and unveil additional sanctions against Russian officials.

One new sanctions option that Biden is looking at is to target hundreds of members of the Russian State Duma, the lower house of parliament, according to a U.S. official who spoke on the condition of anonymity to discuss the potential move. The official added that a final decision hasn't been made and that the new sanctions would be rolled out in coordination with Western allies.

Sullivan said additional Russian oligarchs and political figures would be among those designated in the sanctions unveiled Thursday.

Earlier this week, Biden warned that Russia could be planning cyberattacks that would affect U.S. companies. The U.S. president also spoke to Chinese President Xi Jinping on Friday to warn him against backing Russia with military or financial assistance.

U.S. concerns about China are expected to be on the agenda when Biden attends a meeting of the European Council, where he will also discuss the worsening refugee and humanitarian crises that have developed over the past month. The European Union is scheduled to hold a summit with China on April 1.

Central to the president's agenda during his time in Europe is making certain that the U.S. and its allies remain on the same page.

"What we would like to hear is that the resolve and unity that we've seen for the past month will endure for as long as it takes," Sullivan told reporters on Air Force One en route to Brussels.

Sullivan also said the United States is looking for ways to "surge" supplies of liquified natural gas to Europe to help make up for supply disruptions. The European Union imports nearly all of the natural gas needed to generate electricity, heat homes and supply industry, with Russia supplying nearly half of EU gas and a quarter of its oil.

Before the trip, Sullivan said 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.

"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.

Americans also are increasingly viewing the crisis as one that will require economic sacrifice.

A new poll from The Associated Press-NORC Center for Public Affairs Research finds a majority of Americans say they're willing to accept damage to the economy if it helps to stop Putin's invasion. Forty percent now say the U.S. should have a "major role," up from 26% in an AP-NORC poll conducted just before the invasion began.

Forty-six percent say the U.S. should have a "minor role." The percentage who think the U.S. shouldn't be involved at all ticked down from 20% to 13%.

Biden departed for Europe as public health officials took note of a global uptick in COVID-19 cases. Confirmed cases of the virus had been falling steadily worldwide since January but rose again last week, due to the more infectious omicron variant and the suspension of COVID protocols in numerous countries in Europe, North America and elsewhere, the World Health Organization reported on Tuesday.

Biden's press secretary, Jen Psaki, announced on Tuesday that she would not travel with Biden after testing positive for the virus for the second time in five months. Biden was last tested on Tuesday, according to the White House. Psaki 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.

Biden travels 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.

Idaho governor signs abortion ban modeled on Texas law

By KEITH RIDLER Associated Press

BOISE, Idaho (AP) — Idaho on Wednesday became the first state to enact a law modeled after a Texas statute banning abortions after about six weeks of pregnancy and allowing it to be enforced through lawsuits to avoid constitutional court challenges.

Republican Gov. Brad Little signed into law the measure that allows people who would have been family members to sue a doctor who performs an abortion after cardiac activity is detected in an embryo. Still he said he had concerns about whether the law was constitutional.

"I stand in solidarity with all Idahoans who seek to protect the lives of preborn babies," Little wrote in a letter to Lt. Gov. Janice McGeachin, who is also president of the Senate.

Yet he also noted: "While I support the pro-life policy in this legislation, I fear the novel civil enforcement mechanism will in short order be proven both unconstitutional and unwise."

The law in the conservative state is scheduled to take effect 30 days after the signing, but court challenges are expected. Opponents call it unconstitutional, and note that six weeks is before many women know they're pregnant.

Advanced technology can detect a first flutter of electric activity within cells in an embryo as early as six weeks. This flutter isn't a beating heart; it's cardiac activity that will eventually become a heart. An embryo is termed a fetus after the eighth week of pregnancy, and the actual heart begins to form between the ninth and 12th weeks of pregnancy.

The law allows the father, grandparents, siblings, aunts and uncles of a "preborn child" to each sue an abortion provider for a minimum of \$20,000 in damages within four years after the abortion. Rapists can't file a lawsuit under the law, but a rapist's relatives could.

"The vigilante aspect of this bill is absurd," said Idaho Democratic Rep. Lauren Necochea. "Its impacts are cruel, and it is blatantly unconstitutional."

A Planned Parenthood official called the law unconstitutional and said the group was "committed to go-

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ing to every length and exploring all our options to restore Idahoans' right to abortion."

"I want to emphasize to everyone in Idaho that our doors remain open. We remain committed to helping our patients access the health care they need, including abortion," said Rebecca Gibron of Planned Parenthood Great Northwest, Hawaii, Alaska, Indiana and Kentucky, which operates Idaho's three abortion clinics.

Backers have said the law is Idaho's best opportunity to severely restrict abortions in the state after years of trying. Most recently, the state last year passed a six-week abortion ban law, but it required a favorable federal court ruling in a similar case to take effect, and that hasn't happened.

The law is modeled after a Texas law that the U.S. Supreme Court has allowed to remain in place until a court challenge is decided on its merits. The Texas law allows people to enforce the law in place of state officials who normally would do so. The Texas law authorizes lawsuits against clinics, doctors and anyone who "aids or abets" an abortion that is not permitted by law.

A number of other states are pursuing similar laws, including Tennessee, which introduced a Texas-styled abortion bill last week.

White House press secretary Jen Psaki said the Biden administration knew the Texas law would lead to other states passing similar laws, and called on Congress to send the president a bill to "shut down these radical steps."

"This development is devastating for women in Idaho, as it will further impede women's access to health care, especially those on low incomes and living in rural communities," Psaki said in a statement Wednesday.

Republicans in Idaho have super-majorities in both the House and Senate. The measure passed the Senate 28-6 and the House 51-14 with no Democratic support. Three House Republicans voted against the measure.

Little on Wednesday noted his concerns with the legislation.

"Deputizing private citizens to levy hefty monetary fines on the exercise of a disfavored but judicially recognized constitutional right for the purpose of evading court review undermines our constitutional form of government and weakens our collective liberties," he wrote.

He said that he worried some states might use the same approach to limit gun rights.

He also noted his concern with the part of the law allowing a rapist's relatives to sue.

"Ultimately, this legislation risks retraumatizing victims by affording monetary incentives to wrongdoers and family members of rapists," he wrote.

He concluded the letter by encouraging lawmakers to fix those problems to avoid unintended consequences "to ensure the state sufficiently protects the interests of victims of sexual assault."

Little is facing a primary challenge from the far-right in McGeachin, the lieutenant governor, who has been endorsed by former President Donald Trump.

Republican Rep. Steven Harris, the bill's sponsor, said in a statement after the vote on March 14: "This bill makes sure that the people of Idaho can stand up for our values and do everything in our power to prevent the wanton destruction of innocent human life." _____

This story has been corrected to show that the abortion bill in Tennessee was introduced last week, not this week.

Pandemic relief money spent on hotel, ballpark, ski slopes

By BRIAN SLODYSKO Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — Thanks to a sudden \$140 million cash infusion, officials in Broward County, Florida, recently broke ground on a high-end hotel that will have views of the Atlantic Ocean and an 11,000-square-foot spa.

In New York, Dutchess County pledged \$12 million for renovations of a minor league baseball stadium to meet requirements the New York Yankees set for their farm teams.

And in Massachusetts, lawmakers delivered \$5 million to pay off debts of the Edward M. Kennedy Institute for the U.S. Senate in Boston, a nonprofit established to honor the late senator that has struggled financially.

The three distinctly different outlays have one thing in common: Each is among the scores of projects

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that state and local governments across the United States are funding with federal coronavirus relief money despite having little to do with combating the pandemic, a review by The Associated Press has found.

The expenditures amount to a fraction of the \$350 billion made available through last year's American Rescue Plan to help state and local governments weather the crisis. But they are examples of uses of the aid that are inconsistent with the rationale that Democrats offered for the record \$1.9 trillion bill: The cash was desperately needed to save jobs, help those in distress, open schools and increase vaccinations.

Republicans are already balking at additional money for pandemic relief that President Joe Biden has requested, and programs that seem far removed from ones that directly combat the virus will probably add to the resistance in the GOP.

"They need to give us an accounting," said Sen. Mitt Romney, R-Utah, who tried unsuccessfully to amend the Democrats' bill last year to add more limits on how the money could be spent. "Show us how you've already spent the money Congress gave you," he said, adding, "It's hard to imagine how a four-star hotel is helping to solve the pain of COVID."

Many of the projects identified by the AP echo pork-barrel spending disasters such as Alaska's \$398 million "Bridge to Nowhere," which was canceled in 2007 after a public uproar.

But with permissive Treasury Department rules governing how the pandemic money can be spent, state and local governments face few limitations. New Jersey allocated \$15 million for upgrades to sweeten the state's bid to host the 2026 World Cup. In Woonsocket, Rhode Island, officials allocated \$53,000 for a remodeling of City Hall.

"Outrageous" and "just nuts" is how Rep. Abigail Spanberger, D-Va., described some of the expenditures, which she said were an affront to responsible local governments.

"Our hospitals were overwhelmed because of the pandemic and somebody now has a hotel somewhere?" she added.

Included among the projects and expenditures identified by the AP:

—\$400 million to build new prisons in Alabama, accounting for nearly one-quarter of the total aid the state will receive through the program.

—tens of millions of dollars for tourism marketing campaigns in Puerto Rico (\$70 million), Washington, D.C. (\$8 million) and Tucson, Arizona (\$2 million). The city of Alexandria, Virginia, also announced it would spend \$120,000 to give its tourism website a makeover.

—\$6.6 million to replace irrigation systems at two golf courses in Colorado Springs.

—\$5 million approved by Birmingham, Alabama, to support the 2022 World Games. The event features niche sporting contests such as DanceSport, korfbal and flying disc.

—\$2.5 million to hire new parking enforcement officers in Washington, D.C.

—\$2 million to help Pottawattamie County, Iowa, purchase a privately owned ski area.

—\$1 million to pay off overdue child support in St. Louis. A city memo states that owing child support stops some people from looking for work because the overdue payments are garnished from paychecks; the program would "empower individuals" by paying down a portion.

—\$300,000 to establish a museum in Worcester, Massachusetts, honoring Major Taylor, a famed Black bicycle rider from the turn of the 20th century known as the "Worcester Whirlwind" who died in 1932.

Liz Bourgeois, a spokeswoman for the Treasury Department, called the program a success that allowed state and local governments to "recover from financial distress" and "achieve their own strategies for restoring jobs and industries hit by the pandemic."

"Ultimately local governments are accountable to their communities on their decisions on how best to use their funds," Bourgeois said in a statement.

In Broward County, officials defended their planned 29-story, 800-room hotel, which will be owned by the county but operated by a private management group.

They also contest whether federal money is technically being used for the project. Broward County initially routed \$140 million in federal coronavirus aid to the project, which ran against Treasury Department rules that generally bar spending the money on large capital projects.

To get around the prohibition, the county adopted a common workaround.

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The agenda from a Feb. 22 county board meeting details how: In a back-to-back series of unopposed votes, commissioners clawed back the federal money they had given to the hotel. They then transferred it to the county's general fund, describing it as a federal payment to cover lost tax revenue, which is an acceptable use. Then the cash was transferred from the general fund right back to the project.

County Administrator Monica Cepero insisted "no federal funds will be used to pay any of the cost of developing the Hotel Project."

"The County has reviewed the Treasury guidance and modified its use of (the) funds," she said in a statement.

Some lawmakers in Congress, however, are nonplussed.

"They are basically money laundering funding that is meant to help communities that are suffering," said Spanberger, who called for more oversight.

Local officials in New York's Dutchess County, home to the \$12 million minor league stadium project, said in a statement that the expenditure was "completely and absolutely consistent" with Congress' intent for the money.

"It's ironic that this criticism emanates from the same congressional members who have brought back pork barrel earmarks," said Dutchess County Executive Marcus Molinaro.

The Edward Kennedy Institute did not respond to messages seeking comment on the \$5 million in coronavirus aid received from Massachusetts. The institute operated at a \$27 million loss between 2015 and 2019, according to tax filings from those years, the most recent that are publicly available.

Even in cases where local and state officials may have violated the spending rules, the sheer volume of money pumped out presents a challenge for government oversight offices that are often understaffed and poorly funded.

"The amount of money that went out was so massive and so far beyond anything that has ever been spent in our country before, that our capacity to audit every dollar spent is clearly stretched," Romney said.

But groups that lobby on behalf of local governments in Washington say the spending rules were written permissively in order to give as much flexibility as possible.

"Counties should be able to determine what's best for them," said Mark Ritacco, director of government affairs for the National Association of Counties. "Their residents will decide whether that was appropriate or not at the ballot box."

The new findings track closely with AP's previous reporting, which found in October that states and large cities had spent just a tiny fraction of their relief funding six months after it was approved. That was despite their pleas for the emergency cash when Congress was still debating it.

Some school districts also had so much extra federal pandemic cash that they spent it on new sports stadiums, arenas and football turf. In other instances, states used discretionary funding to further school choice initiatives that they had failed to get through their legislatures.

Rich Delmar, the deputy inspector general for the Treasury Department, declined to say whether the office had any active investigations into uses of the state and local pot of money.

"All projects are potentially subject to audit and investigation," Delmar said in an email, adding that "we are actively engaging in oversight."

Biden, meanwhile, has said his administration urgently needs more money to pay for things that are directly related to the pandemic.

Without it, the White House says, the administration won't be able to replenish depleted stockpiles of vaccines and therapeutics. Republican say winning their support will hinge on it being paid for with money that was already appropriated.

A deal that leaders struck this month would have been paid for by recouping some aid intended for states. But the agreement fell apart after several governors objected and rank-and-file House Democrats rebelled.

At least one Democrat sought to raise campaign cash off her opposition to clawing local money back.

"We had a bit of a fight when they tried to take money away from Michigan," reads a fundraising email from Michigan Rep. Debbie Dingell. "I was not going to let the Midwest get harmed. We won."

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EXPLAINER: Why South gets more killer tornadoes at night

By SETH BORENSTEIN AP Science Writer

Forget "The Wizard of Oz." Tornadoes are causing far more deaths and destruction east and south of Kansas these days. And they're often doing it in the dark of night.

Tuesday night's deadly tornado that struck the New Orleans area is the ideal example of what experts say is the 21st century problem with twisters: Killer tornadoes have shifted a bit out of the vast emptiness of the Great Plains, more into the Southeast where there are more people to hit, poorer populations and more trees to obscure twisters from view.

And if that's not enough, these Southeast twisters are more likely to strike at night when they are more dangerous.

Here's a closer look at what's behind the shift:

WHY ARE TORNADOES KILLING MORE PEOPLE OUTSIDE THE GREAT PLAINS?

Since 2000, nearly 89% of the 1,653 Americans killed by tornadoes — not counting this week's victims — lived east of the Dakotas, Nebraska, Kansas, Oklahoma and Texas, according to an Associated Press analysis of National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration data.

Last year, 100 people were killed by tornadoes in Kentucky, Alabama, Illinois, Tennessee, North Carolina, Arkansas, Missouri, Louisiana, Mississippi and Pennsylvania. One person was killed in Texas.

It's not so much a meteorology problem but a people one, tornado experts said.

"It's a function of the human-built environment," said Victor Gensini, a professor of meteorology at Northern Illinois University who specializes in severe storms. "The Mid-South does get a lot of tornadoes, but in the Mid-South we have more things to hit. We have more bull's eyes on the dartboard. We have more cities. We have more weak frame housing stock. Tornadoes happen more often there at night, which is exactly what we saw last night."

Harold Brooks, a senior scientist at NOAA's National Severe Storms Laboratory, said traditional 20th century tornadoes, the type that make Oklahoma and Kansas famous, are less deadly because they go for miles without anything in the way. In 1991, he and his wife chased for 66 miles a tornado in Oklahoma that had winds hit 286 mph. It hit two barns; no one but a few cows were hurt.

Put that storm near New Orleans at night and dozens of people would be killed, probably many more. In the Southeast "all it takes is a weather event to occur and you'll have people in the way," Brooks said.

DOES CLIMATE CHANGE HAVE A ROLE?

In 2018, Brooks and Gensini published a scientific study showing deadly tornadoes were happening less frequently in the tornado alley of Oklahoma, Kansas and Texas and more frequently in "tornado fatality alley, which is the Mid-South," Gensini said.

What's likely happening is that the West is getting drier because of human-caused climate change, which makes it harder for the air to become moist and unstable, which is crucial for tornado formation, they said. The Southeast is getting warmer air, which holds more water vapor, which creates that important instability, Gensini said.

Climate models predict this type shift 50 years in the future or so, yet it appears to be happening now, Gensini said.

But Gensini, Brooks and University of Ohio meteorology professor Jana Houser emphasized that they don't see a climate change signal in Tuesday's deadly Louisiana tornado.

There's a La Nina, a natural periodic cooling of parts of the Pacific that shifts global weather patterns, and that usually means more tornadoes in the Southeast because of changes in the jet stream and moisture, they said.

WHAT'S DIFFERENT ABOUT NIGHT TORNADOES ?

Tuesday's nighttime tornado illustrated a problem because when twisters hit at night, people can't see them coming as easily and often don't react as well, the tornado experts said.

About three-quarters of the tornadoes that hit Oklahoma and other Great Plains states occur between 5 and 9 p.m. so people know when to expect them and its more daylight, Brooks said. But in the Southeast they can hit any time, which means more often at night than in Oklahoma, making them more dangerous.

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Another reason they happen more at night in the Southeast is because they happen more in the springtime and there are just fewer daylight hours, Gensini said. Spring storms are juicier and stronger than summer ones so they don't need the sun's daytime heat to add that extra kick of energy to spur tornadoes, he said.

WHAT ABOUT THE LANDSCAPE?

The Southeast is also hurt by having more trees, hills and buildings that block people's views of incoming storms.

When there's a tornado warning in the Southeast, often people are "out to their front porch and they don't really see anything, and it just kind of looks like, you know, a dark sky," Houser said. "They may be less likely to actually heed those warnings than if they are walking out their door and they see a tornado on the horizon, even if it's far away. So there's a little bit of geography that plays a role there."

ANY GOOD NEWS FOR THE REGION?

The one advantage tornadoes in the Southeast have is that they are easier for meteorologists to forecast the conditions ripe for bad outbreaks much earlier. Tuesday's severe storm was warned about eight days in advance by NOAA's Storm Prediction Center, which is unusual, Brooks said.

European atom-smashers ponder response to Russia's invasion

By JAMEY KEATEN Associated Press

GENEVA (AP) — The Geneva-area research center that houses the world's largest atom smasher is grappling with ways to punish Russia's government while protecting Russian researchers who work to help solve the deepest mysteries of the universe.

CERN, the historic acronym for what is now the European Organization for Nuclear Research, has a mission to facilitate collaboration among its 23 member countries and beyond. The war in Ukraine, an associate member state, has the organization trying to calibrate its response to join international action against Russia, which was an official CERN observer before the invasion, without sacrificing science.

Some 1,000 scientists, or nearly 7% of the 18,000 researchers involved with CERN, are affiliated with Russian institutions — most, though not all, are Russian. If they are cut off from participating in experiments and other research, it could slow or complicate upcoming projects involving the center's Large Hadron Collider, the world's largest and most powerful particle accelerator.

A crucial decision for CERN's governing council looms this week because the collider is set to start operating again in April after a hiatus of more than three years that partly resulted from the coronavirus pandemic. The collider requires regular pauses, and its next run is expected to generate huge amounts of new data.

"What kind of projects are the Russians involved here at CERN? It's essentially in everything that we are doing," Joachim Mnich, the director for research and computing. "We're in discussions with the council to find a solution for that: Punish — as much as possible, as we can do — the Russian government. But not punishing our colleagues."

The next operation of the accelerator, which is set to churn out new data starting this summer, will be only the third round of experiments in the collider: A first run took place from 2010 to 2012, and a second from 2015 to 2018. The one starting in April is expected to last until 2026.

On March 8, the CERN Council, its governing body, joined international condemnation of the invasion of Ukraine and suspended new collaborations with Russia and its institutions indefinitely. It also expressed support for Russian scientists who "reject this invasion" and stripped Russia of its observer status.

CERN is run by 22 European countries and Israel as member states. The United States, Japan and the European Union have observer status. Ukraine is among seven countries with associate member status.

Russian researchers are involved in a project for the "high-luminosity" phase of the collider, which should crank up its performance by 2027 and generate vast new amounts of data, CERN says.

The Russians are working on physics analysis, computing, and the operation, construction and design of new detectors that catch protons after they are smashed together, Mnich said.

Fully two-thirds of the staffers are Russian on an experiment known as NA64, which involves blasting a

high-powered electron beam onto a fixed target and searching for unknown particles from a hypothetical dark-sector, he said.

Another experiment related to CERN's accelerator, which propels particles through an underground, 27-kilometer (17-mile) ring of superconducting magnets in and around Geneva, uses synthetic crystals to split and deflect beams. Nearly half of the staff working on the research are from Russia, Mnich said.

Yet another project, to study the internal structure of protons and neutrons, has components "delivered by Russian colleagues," he said.

"They are here. They arrived already last year. They're installed. But we might have problems to operate the detectors if our Russian colleagues will not be able to come to CERN as planned in the future," Mnich said.

"We are not sending anyone home," he added. "We try to continue to keep them here, but it's a very difficult situation for us."

US finds Russian troops have committed war crimes in Ukraine

By MATTHEW LEE AP Diplomatic Writer

WASHINGTON (AP) — The Biden administration on Wednesday made a formal determination that Russian troops have committed war crimes in Ukraine and said it would work with others to prosecute offenders, Secretary of State Antony Blinken said.

"Today, I can announce that, based on information currently available, the U.S. government assesses that members of Russia's forces have committed war crimes in Ukraine," Blinken said in a statement released as he was traveling to Brussels with President Joe Biden for an emergency summit of NATO leaders.

The assessment was based on a "careful review" of public and intelligence sources since Russia launched its invasion of Ukraine last month, he said.

America's top diplomat said the United States would share that information with allies, partners and international institutions tasked with investigating allegations of war crimes and crimes against humanity.

"We've seen numerous credible reports of indiscriminate attacks and attacks deliberately targeting civilians, as well as other atrocities. Russia's forces have destroyed apartment buildings, schools, hospitals, critical infrastructure, civilian vehicles, shopping centers, and ambulances, leaving thousands of innocent civilians killed or wounded," Blinken said.

He cited attacks on the civilian population in the besieged city of Mariupol and elsewhere.

Neither Russia nor the U.S. recognizes the authority of the International Criminal Court at The Hague, presenting obvious difficulties for seeking accountability for war crimes committed in Ukraine.

The U.S. could still assist a prosecution before the court, which earlier opened an investigation into atrocities committed in Ukraine, by helping to gather evidence against Russian forces in Ukraine, using some of the vast abilities it has deployed to track and monitor what has been happening in the conflict.

The U.S. could also provide support and backing to a commission of inquiry established by the U.N. Human Rights Council.

War crimes experts have suggested that Russian forces and government officials could also be prosecuted in countries such as Spain and Germany, where legal codes recognize universal jurisdiction, or that the U.S. could bring criminal charges.

Under U.S. law, an American citizen would have to be among the victims for charges to be brought under existing statutes.

Two Democratic members of Congress urged Attorney General Merrick Garland on Wednesday to open an investigation into war crimes for the deaths of two Americans in Ukraine — journalist Brent Renaud and Jimmy Hill, who was killed while waiting in a bread line.

"Both Mr. Renaud and Mr. Hill were non-combatants who were not taking any active part in the hostilities, wrote Reps. Ted Lieu and Rep. Eric Swalwell, both from California.

The Department of Justice did not immediately comment on the letter.

Moderna says its low-dose COVID shots work for kids under 6

By LAURAN NEERGAARD AP Medical Writer

Moderna's COVID-19 vaccine works in babies, toddlers and preschoolers, the company announced Wednesday — a development that could pave the way for the littlest kids to be vaccinated by summer if regulators agree.

Moderna said that in the coming weeks it would ask regulators in the U.S. and Europe to authorize two small-dose shots for youngsters under 6. The company also is seeking to have larger doses cleared for older children and teens in the U.S.

The announcement is positive news for parents who have anxiously awaited protection for younger tots and been continuously disappointed by setbacks and confusion over which shots might work and when. The nation's 18 million children under 5 are the only age group not yet eligible for vaccination.

Moderna says early study results show tots develop high levels of virus-fighting antibodies from shots containing a quarter of the dose given to adults. Once Moderna submits its full data, the U.S. Food and Drug Administration will have to determine if that important marker means the youngsters are as protected against severe illness as adults.

"The vaccine provides the same level of protection against COVID in young kids as it does in adults. We think that's good news," Dr. Stephen Hoge, Moderna's president, told The Associated Press.

But that key antibody finding isn't the whole story. COVID-19 vaccines aren't as effective against the super-contagious omicron mutant — in people of any age — and Moderna's study found the same trend. There were no severe illnesses during the trial but the vaccine was only about 44% effective at preventing milder infections in babies up to age 2, and nearly 38% effective in the preschoolers.

"Not a home run" but the shots still could be helpful for the youngest children, said Dr. Jesse Goodman of Georgetown University, a former FDA vaccine chief. Goodman said the high antibody levels seen in the study "should translate into higher efficacy against severe infections."

Some parents say even a little protection would be better than leaving their youngest children unvaccinated.

"I don't care if it's even 15 or 20%," said Lauren Felitti of Gaithersburg, Maryland. Her 4-year-old son Aiden, who's at extra risk because of a heart condition, was hospitalized for eight days with COVID-19 and she's anxious to vaccinate him to lessen the chance of a reinfection.

"It was very scary," Felitti said. "If there's a chance that I'm able to keep him protected, even if it's a small chance, then I'm all for it."

Competitor Pfizer currently offers kid-size doses for school-age children and full-strength shots for those 12 and older. And the company is testing even smaller doses for children under 5 but had to add a third shot to its study when two didn't prove strong enough. Those results are expected by early April.

If the FDA eventually authorizes vaccinations for little kids from either company, there still would be another hurdle. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention recommends who should get them — and Goodman said there may be debate about shots for higher-risk children or everyone under 5.

Vaccinating the littlest "has been somewhat of a moving target over the last couple of months," Dr. Bill Muller of Northwestern University, who is helping study Moderna's pediatric doses, said in an interview before the company released its findings. "There's still, I think, a lingering urgency to try to get that done as soon as possible."

While COVID-19 generally isn't as dangerous to youngsters as to adults, some do become severely ill. The CDC says about 400 children younger than 5 have died from COVID-19 since the pandemic's start. The omicron variant hit children especially hard, with those under 5 hospitalized at higher rates than at the peak of the previous delta surge.

The younger the child, the smaller the dose being tested. Moderna enrolled about 6,900 kids under 6 — including babies as young as 6 months — in a study of the 25-microgram doses.

While the study wasn't large enough to detect very rare side effects, Moderna said the small doses were safe and that mild fevers, like those associated with other common pediatric vaccines, were the main

reaction.

Hudson Diener, 3, only briefly cried when getting test doses at Stony Brook Medicine in Commack, New York. His parents welcomed the study results and hope to learn that Hudson received the vaccine and not dummy shots.

"We are really hoping to get the answer we're looking for soon so we can take a deep breath," said Hudson's mom, Ilana Diener. Wednesday's news should "hopefully be a step closer for his age group to be eligible for the vaccine very soon."

Boosters have proved crucial for adults to fight omicron and Moderna currently is testing those doses for children as well — either a third shot of the original vaccine or an extra dose that combines protection against the original virus and the omicron variant.

Parents may find it confusing that Moderna is seeking to vaccinate the youngest children before it's cleared to vaccinate teens. While other countries already have allowed Moderna's shots to be used in children as young as 6, the U.S. has limited its vaccine to adults.

The FDA hasn't ruled on Moderna's earlier request to expand its shots to 12- to 17-year-olds because of concern about a very rare side effect. Heart inflammation sometimes occurs in teens and young adults, mostly males, after receiving either the Pfizer or Moderna vaccines. Moderna is getting extra scrutiny because its shots are a far higher dose than Pfizer's.

The company said Wednesday that, armed with additional evidence, it is updating its FDA application for teen shots and requesting a green light for 6- to 11-year-olds, too. Hoge said he's optimistic the company will be able to offer its vaccine "across all age groups in the United States by the summer."

Moderna says its original adult dose — two 100-microgram shots — is safe and effective in 12- to 17-year-olds. For elementary school-age kids, it's using half the adult dose.

About 1.5 million adolescents have used the Moderna vaccine in other countries, "and so far we've seen very reassuring safety from that experience," Hoge said.

The heart risk also seems linked to puberty, and regulators in Canada, Europe and elsewhere recently expanded Moderna vaccinations to kids as young as 6.

"That concern has not been seen in the younger children," said Northwestern's Muller.

Simba the lion, wolf safely evacuated from war-torn Ukraine

By STEPHEN McGRATH AND ELDAR EMRIC Associated Press

RADAUTI, Romania (AP) — Simba the lion and a wolf named Akyla have been evacuated from a zoo in war-torn Ukraine and brought to safety in Romania in what an animal rights group involved in the operation says was a four-day mission "full of dangers" further hampered by border entry bureaucracy.

The adult male lion and the gray wolf, who were fully awake during the dangerous journey due to lack of tranquilizers in Ukraine, arrived Monday at a zoo in Radauti, from a zoo in Zaporizhzhia in southeast Ukraine.

Now at a safe distance from the conflict and after spending four days in cages in the back of a van, the two animals were recovering from the journey in their new enclosure Wednesday, regaining their strength as they lounged in the shade.

"If there is something this war brought on is incredible cooperation between organizations," said Sebastian Taralunga of the animal rights group Animals International, one of several that was involved in planning the animals' extraction.

"Everybody agreed that in extreme times we have to have extreme measures and we decided to do whatever possible to bring those animals out of war."

The evacuation of the large animals was made possible due to the efforts and cooperation of several animal rights groups and private citizens, including two men from the U.K. who volunteered to enter Ukraine to rescue the animals and drive them to safety.

"I couldn't find a driver from Romania to go and help, also not from Ukraine, so these guys were absolutely fabulous — they put their lives in danger," said Roxana Ciornei, president of the Romania-based animal rights group Patrocle's House. "But they arrived safely here."

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The long journey from conflict-hit Ukraine, a mission fraught with the dangers of entering a war zone, was far from simple.

The van carrying the animals could not secure permission by the authorities to cross through Romania's Siret border point. This left the drivers no choice but to twice traverse the towering Carpathian Mountains — which arch across the countries' common border — from west to east adding nearly 1,000 kilometers (620 miles) to their journey.

"It was a central-level decision that Romania and Ukraine will only have a single border crossing for large animals," said Gabriel Paun, the EU director at Animals International.

"It was a team of people acting in good faith to do everything they could to rescue those animals," he said.

"It's difficult to get people out of Ukraine if they're in very dangerous areas, but to bring out a lion and a wolf ... was mission impossible. I was fifty-fifty on whether those animals and those people would make it out alive."

Paun said that they couldn't find a vet to help with their evacuation mission and that no tranquilizers were available, which meant that the animals were "fully aware and awake" through their journey to safety.

"You can imagine what it means to drive with a lion and a wolf in the back of your van with cages that are not very stable and could have opened at any moment," said Taralunga of Animals International.

He said Simba the lion suffered an injury during the transport after hitting himself against the cage but veterinarians said it was not serious and would heal on its own.

The animals will now spend time in quarantine at their new enclosure and children and other visitors can see them at the zoo, after which they'll eventually be relocated to sanctuaries.

"My NGO here runs a shelter of 300 dogs, we have cows, we have horses, but I have never thought in my life that I'd come to rescue a lion and a wolf," said Ciornei. "We gathered a lot of people and everybody did something together ... and we succeeded to do this."

"There is a good part in this war in Ukraine, that these animals will go to a better life."

EXPLAINER: What to know about COVID vaccines for little kids

By LAURAN NEERGAARD AP Medical Writer

COVID-19 vaccinations for the youngest children just might be a step closer.

Moderna intends to seek U.S. authorization for kid-sized shots, releasing early study results Wednesday that suggest the two small doses work in tots younger than 6. Within weeks, competitor Pfizer hopes to learn if three of its even lower-dose shots do, too.

Here's what is known so far, and what's next before the nation's 18 million children under 5 can become eligible for vaccination.

MODERNA'S RESULTS

Moderna says tots as young as 6 months developed high levels of virus-fighting antibodies from shots containing a quarter of the dose given to adults. Full study results are yet to come but the early findings suggest the vaccine may protect against severe illness in kids just like it does in adults.

One complication: Moderna's study was conducted during the omicron surge, and none of the COVID-19 vaccines protect as well against infection with that super-contagious mutant — at any age — as they do against earlier variants.

There were no severe illnesses in the kid study. But sure enough, the vaccine proved just under 44% effective at preventing milder infections in tots up to age 2, and nearly 38% effective in the preschoolers.

PFIZER'S STUDY

The vaccine made by Pfizer and its partner BioNTech is the only one currently available for children in the U.S. Those 12 and older get adult-strength shots and 5- to 11-year-olds receive a third of that dose.

Pfizer is testing even smaller shots, a tenth of the adult dose, for kids under 5. Early results showed two shots produced enough antibodies to protect babies and toddlers but fell short for preschoolers.

Children's immature immune systems often require multiple doses of vaccines to properly protect against

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other diseases. So rather than testing a higher dose, Pfizer gave kids a third shot. Results are expected in early April.

WHAT'S NEXT?

Once the Food and Drug Administration has an application from one or both companies, it's expected to publicly debate the evidence with its scientific advisers. If FDA authorizes shots for the littlest kids, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention then will convene its own experts before recommending if all youngsters need them — or only those at higher risk from COVID-19.

While cases are dropping for now in the U.S., other countries are seeing increases. A lull could be "the best time to get immunized because then you'll be protected by the time the next surge starts," said Dr. Bill Muller of Northwestern University, a researcher for Moderna's pediatric studies.

WHY DO KIDS NEED A VACCINE?

While COVID-19 generally isn't as dangerous in youngsters as adults, some do become severely ill or even die. About 400 children younger than 5 have died from COVID-19 since the pandemic's start, according to the CDC. The omicron variant hit children especially hard, with those under 5 hospitalized at higher rates than at the peak of the previous delta surge, the CDC found.

About 57% of those ages 12 to 17 have gotten two Pfizer doses so far, and 27% of those 5 to 11.

WHAT ABOUT MODERNA SHOTS FOR OLDER KIDS?

The FDA limits Moderna's vaccine to adults although it's used in kids as young as 6 in certain other countries. The FDA is looking into a very rare side effect — heart inflammation — that sometimes occurs in teens and young adults, mostly males.

Moderna is giving the FDA updated safety information that it says backs adult-size doses for 12- to 17-year-olds, and also is seeking authorization to use half that dose in 6- to 11-year-olds. Regulators are expected to consider all three age groups at once.

AP-NORC poll: More support for Ukraine, concern about Russia

By NOMAAN MERCHANT and HANNAH FINGERHUT Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — As Russia escalates its war in Ukraine and stories of civilian casualties and destruction in cities reach the United States, support has risen for a major American role — and so has fear of the threat Russia poses to the U.S.

The new poll from The Associated Press-NORC Center for Public Affairs Research also finds a majority of Americans say they're willing to accept damage to the economy if it helps to stop Russian President Vladimir Putin's invasion. Forty percent now say the U.S. should have a "major role," up from 26% in an AP-NORC poll conducted just before the invasion began.

Another 46% say the U.S. should have a "minor role." The percentage who think the U.S. shouldn't be involved at all ticked down from 20% to 13%.

The poll suggests many Americans want President Joe Biden to do more to counter Russia without suggesting he should reverse his pledge not to send U.S. troops to Ukraine.

Additional U.S. forces have deployed to neighboring countries that are part of NATO. The U.S. and West, meanwhile, have imposed sanctions that have crushed Russia's economy. They are providing anti-tank and anti-missile weapons to Ukraine, which has mounted a robust resistance, killed thousands of Russian troops, and stopped Russia from taking Kyiv or other major cities so far. But the White House has also held back some weapons and intelligence as it seeks to avoid a direct conflict between the U.S. and Russia, which have the world's two largest nuclear arsenals.

A majority of Americans — 56% — think Biden hasn't been tough enough on Russia, according to the poll. Another 36% said his approach has been "about right."

Speaking after the release of the earlier AP-NORC poll, White House press secretary Jen Psaki noted that Americans may have different meanings of what is a "major role" or "minor role" in the conflict. "We make national security decisions based on what's best for our country's national security, not on the latest polling," Psaki said.

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Russia's continued bombardment of Ukraine and Putin's raising the alert level on his country's nuclear weapons has sparked fears around the world. The poll shows the vast majority of Americans are at least somewhat concerned that the U.S. will be drawn into a war with Russia, including nearly half who are very or extremely concerned. Several respondents interviewed after the poll raised the possibility of a third world war.

There's also increasing worry about Russia's influence in the world — with 64% saying they were very or extremely concerned, up from 53% a month ago — and strong support for the U.S. sanctioning Russia and supporting Ukrainian refugees. Two-thirds said they favor accepting people from Ukraine into the U.S., compared to only about 1 in 10 opposed.

Putin's decision to invade reminded Leo Martin, an 85-year-old from Council Bluffs, Iowa, of Nazi Germany entering Poland in 1939, which started World War II in Europe.

"I'm not sure if Putin is bluffing but it seems like we're going to have to push back," he said. "I didn't think he was quite as ruthless as he is. That kind of surprised me."

Americans ages 60 and older were most likely to say the U.S. should play a major role, at 58% compared with 39% of those ages 45 to 59 and 29% of those under age 45. The percentages in all three age groups rose this month from February.

The poll also found a small majority of Americans — 55% — saying the bigger priority for the U.S. in response to Russia's invasion of Ukraine is "sanctioning Russia as effectively as possible, even if it damages the U.S. economy." Still, a sizeable minority — 42% — said the bigger priority is "limiting damage to the U.S. economy, even if it means sanctions on Russia are less effective."

About 7 in 10 Americans approve of economic sanctions imposed by the U.S. on Russia in general and the ban on Russian oil in particular.

"When you look at what the people of Ukraine are going through and all the upheaval over there, it's like, 'Well, we can pay a little more for gas,'" said Anne-Marie Klein, 38, from Longview, Washington.

Klein said she considered Putin a "madman" and said the U.S. had to strike the balance between pushing back against the Russian president without instigating the kind of global conflict that her two sons, ages 8 and 10, may one day have to fight. She said she believed the U.S. should play a "minor role."

"Minor role' to me means our troops aren't fighting," she said. "It can stop there and not become nuclear."

Drake Brandon, a 23-year-old from Sacramento, California, said he was trying to find work and said many people were worried about rising gas prices and economic issues. But while Brandon also said he wanted the U.S. to have a "minor role" focusing on sanctions, he rated his level of concern about the conflict, on a 1 to 10 scale, as an 8 or 9.

"I think about it every day," he said. "Part of me thinks Putin has nothing to really lose at this point."

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.

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

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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 on Wednesday said they would seek U.S. help on a plan to top up natural gas storage facilities for next winter and also want the bloc to jointly purchase gas.

In the meantime, workers are taking to the streets as gasoline across the EU's 27 countries has risen 40% from a year ago, to an average of 2.02 euros per liter — the equivalent of \$8.40 a gallon.

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 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 announced a package of tax cuts and support payments that fell far short of what consumer advocates demanded 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.

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 from the sport's governing body, known as FINA, for attending the event.

"The FINA Executive confirmed that the FINA Disciplinary Panel has opened a procedure against Russian swimmer Evgeny Rylov for a potential violation of the FINA rules following his alleged participation in a pro-war rally at the Luzhniki Stadium in Moscow," the swimming federation said Wednesday in a statement. "The FINA Executive has requested that the panel's proceedings be expedited."

Rylov 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 medalists 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.

Swimming, however, had said it would allow Russians and Belarusians to compete "in a neutral capacity"

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but hardened its stance Wednesday with a full ban from the world championships.

Hours earlier, Rylov had said on Instagram he will boycott the swimming world championships in June and July "as a sign of support" for Russian athletes who were banned from other competitions.

FINA also said Russia has now withdrawn from all international competitions.

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 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.

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.

Since then, Putin has unleashed the harshest crackdown since the era of the Soviet Union: Navalny was imprisoned and his organization outlawed. His associates and other activists were either prosecuted, fled the country or had their hands tied by draconian new laws. Independent news outlets were blocked and social media platforms banned.

And now, Russia has sent its military into Ukraine, the largest invasion in Europe since World War II.

But while the Kremlin has worked hard to crush political dissent and opposition to the war, flickers of defiance have emerged.

Antiwar marches of protesters chanting "No to war!" occurred in Moscow, St. Petersburg and elsewhere after the Feb. 24 invasion, with more than 15,000 people detained, according to the OVD-Info rights group that tracks political arrests.

A silent demonstrator in the city of Nizhny Novgorod displayed a blank sign and was promptly detained by police.

A live evening news broadcast on Russia's state TV was interrupted March 14 by a woman who walked behind the anchor and held up 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.

Navalny remained unbowed at a trial held in the penal colony where he is serving a 2 1/2-year sentence. On Tuesday, he was convicted on fraud and contempt of court charges and given nine years — 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."

Navalny ally Ilya Yashin, who has vowed to remain in Russia, also spoke out against the increased jail time.

"Of course, nine years is a stiff sentence," Yashin said on Facebook. "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, "You're quite the optimist."

Navalny's trial, which began a week before Russian troops rolled into Ukraine, 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

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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 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.

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.

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

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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.

Today in History

By The Associated Press undefined

Today in History

Today is Thursday, March 24, the 83rd day of 2022. There are 282 days left in the year.

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Today's Highlight in History:

On March 24, 1989, the supertanker Exxon Valdez (vahl-DEEZ') ran aground on a reef in Alaska's Prince William Sound and began leaking an estimated 11 million gallons of crude oil.

On this date:

In 1765, Britain enacted the Quartering Act, requiring American colonists to provide temporary housing to British soldiers.

In 1832, a mob in Hiram, Ohio, attacked, tarred and feathered Mormon leaders Joseph Smith Jr. and Sidney Rigdon.

In 1882, German scientist Robert Koch (kohk) announced in Berlin that he had discovered the bacillus responsible for tuberculosis.

In 1934, President Franklin D. Roosevelt signed a bill granting future independence to the Philippines.

In 1976, the president of Argentina, Isabel Peron, was deposed by her country's military.

In 1980, one of El Salvador's most respected Roman Catholic Church leaders, Archbishop Oscar Arnulfo Romero, was shot to death by a sniper as he celebrated Mass in San Salvador.

In 1995, after 20 years, British soldiers stopped routine patrols in Belfast, Northern Ireland.

In 1999, NATO launched airstrikes against Yugoslavia, marking the first time in its 50-year existence that it had ever attacked a sovereign country. Thirty-nine people were killed when fire erupted in the Mont Blanc tunnel in France and burned for two days.

In 2010, keeping a promise he'd made to anti-abortion Democratic lawmakers to assure passage of his historic health care legislation, President Barack Obama signed an executive order against using federal funds to pay for elective abortions covered by private insurance.

In 2015, Germanwings Flight 9525, an Airbus A320, crashed into the French Alps, killing all 150 people on board; investigators said the jetliner was deliberately downed by the 27-year-old co-pilot, Andreas Lubitz.

In 2016, a U.N. war crimes court convicted former Bosnian Serb leader Radovan Karadzic of genocide and nine other charges for orchestrating a campaign of terror that left 100,000 people dead during the 1992-95 war in Bosnia; Karadzic was sentenced to 40 years in prison. (The sentence was later increased to life in prison.)

In 2020, the International Olympic Committee announced that the Summer Olympics in Tokyo would be postponed until 2021 because of the coronavirus.

Ten years ago: Rick Santorum won the Louisiana Republican presidential primary, beating front-runner Mitt Romney in yet another conservative Southern state. Former Vice President Dick Cheney, with a long history of cardiovascular problems, underwent a heart transplant at a Virginia hospital.

Five years ago: President Donald Trump and GOP leaders yanked their bill to repeal "Obamacare" off the House floor when it became clear the measure would fail badly. Former Penn State President Graham Spanier was convicted of hushing up child sexual abuse allegations in 2001 against Jerry Sandusky, whose arrest a decade later blew up into a major scandal for the university. (After losing an appeal, Spanier served nearly two months in jail.)

One year ago: The Senate confirmed former Pennsylvania Health Secretary Rachel Levine to be the nation's assistant secretary of health; Levine was the first openly transgender federal official to win Senate confirmation. Virginia, the state with the second-highest number of executions, became the 23rd state to abolish the death penalty. Jessica Walter, whose roles included a scheming matriarch on TV's "Arrested Development" and a stalker in the film "Play Misty for Me," died at 80. "Nomadland" cemented its Oscar front-runner status, winning the top award at the Producers Guild of America Awards.

Today's Birthdays: Fashion and costume designer Bob Mackie is 83. Former Washington Gov. Christine Gregoire is 75. Rock musician Lee Oskar is 74. Singer Nick Lowe is 73. Rock musician Dougie Thomson (Supertramp) is 71. Fashion designer Tommy Hilfiger is 71. Actor Donna Pescow is 68. Actor Robert Caradine is 68. Sen. Mike Braun, R-Indiana, is 68. Former Microsoft CEO Steve Ballmer is 66. Actor Kelly LeBrock is 62. TV personality Star Jones is 60. Country-rock musician Patterson Hood (Drive-By Truckers) is 58. Actor Peter Jacobson is 57. Rock singer-musician Sharon Corr (The Corrs) is 52. Actor Lauren Bowles

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is 52. Actor Lara Flynn Boyle is 52. Rapper Maceo (AKA P.A. Pasemaster Mase) is 52. Actor Megyn Price is 51. Actor Jim Parsons is 49. Christian rock musician Chad Butler (Switchfoot) is 48. Actor Alyson Hannigan is 48. Former NFL quarterback Peyton Manning is 46. Actor Amanda Brugel (TV: "The Handmaid's Tale") is 45. Actor Olivia Burnette is 45. Actor Jessica Chastain is 45. Actor Amir Arison is 44. Actor Lake Bell is 43. Rock musician Benj Gershman (O.A.R.) is 42. Neo-soul musician Jesse Phillips (St. Paul & the Broken Bones) is 42. Actor Philip Winchester (TV: "Strike Back") is 41. Dancer Val Chmerkovskiy is 36. Actor Keisha Castle-Hughes is 32.