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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

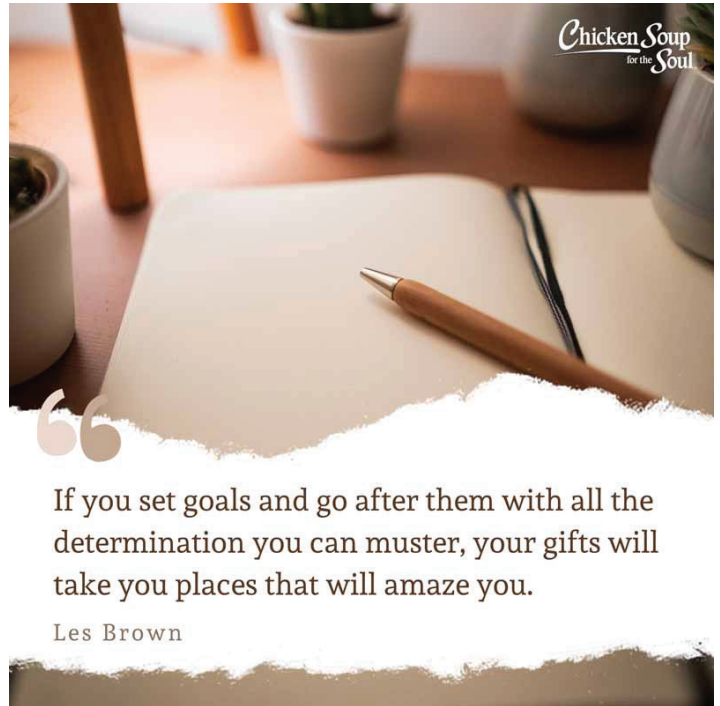
Friday, April 1

FFA CDE at SDSU, Brookings

Saturday, April 2

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

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



“

If you set goals and go after them with all the determination you can muster, your gifts will take you places that will amaze you.

Les Brown

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

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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What Do You Think About?

By Bryan Golden

"Change your thoughts and you change your world." -- Norman Vincent Peale

Your mind is constantly filled with thoughts. Are you aware of what you are thinking about? Are your thoughts random or are they directed by you? Do you think about what you can do or what you can't do? Are your thoughts positive or negative?

The only thing you have total control over is what you think about. Successful people think about their goals and how to accomplish them. When faced with problems, they think about solutions. Their minds are constantly thinking about where they are going and how to get there.

Your mind works 24 hours a day processing your thoughts. Although your mind doesn't care whether your thoughts are positive or negative, the resulting impact on your life is striking. Your mind is a magnet that attracts whatever you think about. Positive thoughts attract positive situations and people, while negative thoughts attract just the opposite.

Your thoughts may be much more negative than you realize. You are influenced by your past experiences as well as by the people around you. It's common to accept negative thinking as normal. Over the years, your thoughts may have become more negative than you realize. You accept your progressively negative thoughts as ordinary because this process happens so gradually.

Although your mood is directly affected by what you think about, you are rarely taught to direct, monitor, and be aware of your thoughts. Instead, you see all the wrong examples of people around you thinking negatively.

A change in thinking always precedes a change in results. In order to make any changes in your life, you must first alter what you think about. Before you can change your thoughts, you must first be aware of what they are.

Start making a conscious effort to monitor what you are thinking about. You want to establish a link between your thoughts and your mood. What are you thinking about when you feel good? What are you thinking about when you feel down?

Next, decide how you would like to feel and what goals you would like to attain. What do you need to think about in order to accomplish this? Now you are in a position to change your thoughts as needed.

Your thought patterns are well engrained. Persistent effort is required to change them. Don't worry if at times you revert to your old negative ways of thinking. When you catch yourself regressing, immediately adjust your thoughts to get you back on track.

This system isn't magic. It's proven and time tested to work. Unfortunately, you won't be able to readily get support because not enough people understand this process and how it works. However, you may receive a fair amount of criticism from those you share this with.

People become comfortable with their negative thinking and don't believe there is any reason to change. Furthermore, they don't recognize any cause and effect relationship between their thoughts and what is happening in their lives. It's difficult, if not impossible to convince these people otherwise.

You don't have to prove anything to anyone. All you need to do is apply this concept to your life and you will see results. Don't get frustrated. Changing any habit takes time and effort. You control your life through your thoughts.

Get started today thinking about what you want to achieve rather than reasons you can't do it. Your mind works on whatever you think about. Be vigilant to ensure your thoughts are positive. Keep at it in order to reach any destination you desire.

Bryan is the author of "Dare to Live Without Limits." Contact Bryan at Bryan@columnist.com or visit www.DareToLiveWithoutLimits.com Copyright 2022 Bryan Golden

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Flihs Earns Top State Honors in National Corn Yield Contest

ST. LOUIS (March 23, 2022) – A commitment to continuous improvement in environmental and economic sustainability. A contribution to the body of agronomic research that pushes the needle forward on efficiency. An innate call to be one's personal best.

These are the hallmarks of the American farmer. It is this steadfast spirit that the National Corn Growers Association tips its hat to every year as we salute farmers from across the country for their efforts and exceptional results in the National Corn Yield Contest. Through their efforts, NCGA members contributed valuable data that will help all growers overcome incredible obstacles as they continue to drive efficient and sustainable agricultural production. We are proud of the dedicated families and individuals who make up our rural communities and we earnestly salute this year's winners.

Jeffery Flihs of Groton, SD, placed Third in the state A:Conventional Non-Irrigated Class with a yield of 262.2127 bushels per acre. The hybrid used in the winning field was Hefty Seed H4933. The winning field was located in SD.

Jeffery Flihs was one of 530 state winners nationwide. The 2021 contest participation included 7,213 entries from 47 states. Of the state winners, 27 growers – three from each of nine classes – were named national winners, representing 14 states.

The average yield among national winners was more than 376.7593 bushels per acre – more than double the projected 2021 U.S. average of 177 bushels per acre. While there is no overall contest winner, yields from first, second and third place farmers' overall production categories topped out at 269.4164 bushels per acre.

"The National Corn Yield Contest provides a special two-fold opportunity — contribute to the knowledge that will help corn farmers thrive in the future while enjoying good-natured competition and comradery with their peers today," said Lowell Neitzel, chair of NCGA's Member and Consumer Engagement Action Team. "At its core, NCGA shapes dynamic, change-driven farmers, from the grassroots activists speaking up on policy issues to the dedicated farmer leaders who lead our organization."

"As farmers, we always strive to do more with less. We innovate using data, technology, and hard-won expertise. We work tirelessly to leave our farms better for the next generation, with gratitude to those who cared for it before us. Challenge yourself to be a part of building our tomorrow! I invite new and old faces alike to enter the contest in 2022. I urge you to learn how to start making that positive change today by going to ncga.com."

Farmers are encouraged through the contest to utilize new, efficient production techniques. Agronomic data gleaned from the contest revealed the following:

- Average planting population for the national winners was 38,111 seeds per acre, compared to 34,751 for all entrants.
- National winners applied an average of 276.1851 pounds of nitrogen, 82.5925 pounds of phosphorus and 134.0740 pounds of potassium per acre.
- Average commercial nitrogen use per bushel of yield was 0.88 pounds for the national winners and 0.89 pounds for all entrants.
- 40 percent of the national winners applied trace minerals, compared to 41 percent of all entrants.
- 45 percent of national winners applied manure, compared to 18.35 percent of all entrants.

The National Corn Yield Contest began in 1965 with 20 entries from 3 states. At that time, the highest overall yield was 218.9 bushels per acre, while the national yield average was in the mid-60 bushel-per-acre range.

All 2021 contest winners were invited to attend the 2022 Commodity Classic held March 10-12, 2022, in New Orleans, LA. For a complete list of winners and for more information about NCYC, visit the NCGA website at www.ncga.com.

The National Corn Growers Association represents our nearly 40,000 members, 50 affiliated state corn grower and checkoff organizations, and over 300,000 corn farmers who contribute to state checkoff programs.

Applications for Artists in residence due April 15

PIERRE, S.D. – The South Dakota Arts Council (SDAC) is now accepting sponsor applications for its Artists in Schools and Communities (AISC) program, which provides matching grants to schools, arts councils, and other nonprofit organizations to host artists-in-residence between July 1, 2022-June 30, 2023.

Applications must be received through the AISC online grant form. Organizations will find several new artists and arts groups who have joined the teaching artist roster. Applicant organizations should also note a small increase to the artist fees and grant amounts in the coming fiscal year.

Through the AISC program, students – adults and children alike – will learn about fine arts in a relevant, hands-on environment.

Grantees choose their artist from a roster of professional teaching artists endorsed by the Arts Council. Disciplines include writing, music, theater, visual arts and traditional arts. A theater residency could include classroom workshops or a full-length production featuring local students at the end of the week. In the visual arts, choose from pottery, painting, drawing, sculpting, murals, comic book making and more. There are traditional arts residency opportunities in hoop dancing, ribbon skirt making, flute making and oral traditions. To view the extensive list of roster artists and read about the residencies offered, visit www.artscouncil.sd.gov/aisc/meetartist.aspx.

The deadline for grant applications to be submitted online is April 15. The simple, online form is available at www.artscouncil.sd.gov/aisc. Please review program guidelines before applying and reach out to Rebecca.cruse@state.sd.us with questions.

An office of the South Dakota Department of Tourism, the South Dakota Arts Council provides grants and services to artists, arts and nonprofit organizations, and schools across the state with funding from the National Endowment for the Arts and the state of South Dakota. For more information about SDAC grant programs and artist rosters, visit www.artscouncil.sd.gov.

The South Dakota Department of Tourism is comprised of Tourism and the South Dakota Arts Council. The department is led by Secretary James D. Hagen.

Gov. Noem Signs Dakota State University Cyber Research Bills into law

PIERRE, S.D. – Today, Governor Kristi Noem signed legislation to expand the cyber research industry in South Dakota by enhancing programming and job opportunities at Dakota State University.

“Dakota State University is leading the nation in cyber research, and with the expansion of this program, we will revolutionize our economy,” said Governor Noem. “The project itself will bring hundreds of high-paying jobs to Sioux Falls, and cybersecurity companies will be looking to relocate their operations to Sioux Falls. We already have the strongest economy in America – this industry will make it even stronger.”

The Governor signed SB 54, which provides \$30 million in investments from the state for this project. She also signed SB 130, which authorizes various associated aspects of the project.

Governor Noem has signed 236 bills into law and vetoed one this legislative session.

GROTON AREA SCHOOL DISTRICT #06-6

School Board Meeting

March 28, 2022 – 7:00 PM – GHS Library Conference Room

AGENDA:

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

POTENTIAL CONFLICTS DISCLOSURE PURSUANT SDCL 23-3

OLD/CONTINUING BUSINESS:

1. Open Forum for Public Participation...in accordance with Board Policy & Guidelines.
2. Program Overview Presentations
 - a. K-12 Music...A. Fordham, D. Yeigh, K. Duncan
 - b. Art...J. Harry
 - c. Health/PE, Athletics...K. Gerlach, L. Grieve, B. Dolan
3. Administrative Reports: (a) Superintendent's Report; (b) Principal's Reports; (c) Business Manager Report

NEW BUSINESS:

1. Consider Resolution Approving Amendment to ASBSD Protective Trust Joint Powers Agreement and ByLaws.
2. Consider ASBSD Protective Trust Worker's Compensation Renewal Motion.
3. Consider ASBSD Protective Trust Health Fund Participation Agreement and Plan Options.
4. Approve resignation of Becky Erickson, Special Education Teacher/JH VB Coach/JH GB Coach, at end of 2021-22 school year.
5. Approve resignation of Ray Adams, HS Math Teacher, at end of 2021-22 school year.
6. Executive Session pursuant SDCL1-25-2(4) for negotiations and SDCL1-25-2(1) for personnel.

ADJOURN

Gov. Noem Signs Appropriations Bills into Law

PIERRE, S.D. – Today, Governor Kristi Noem signed 14 appropriations bills into law. These bills provide for the 133rd consecutive year of balanced budgets in South Dakota:

SB 59 revises property tax levies for school districts and revises the state aid to general and special education formulas.

SB 60 revises the General Appropriations Act for fiscal year 2022.

SB 84 makes an appropriation for the design, renovation, and construction of a multi-purpose facility at the Cottonwood Field Station.

SB 97 authorizes the Board of Regents to acquire the incubator building located on the campus of South Dakota School of Mines and Technology and contract for the design and renovation thereof, and makes an appropriation therefor.

SB 103 makes an appropriation to support the teen court program.

SB 155 makes an appropriation for programs that assist victims of domestic violence, abuse, and neglect.

SB 161 makes an appropriation for matching funds to enhance research in manufacturing processes having lunar application and planetary use in tribal housing development.

SB 170 makes an appropriation for costs related to forest resiliency and growth in the state.

SB 174 makes an appropriation to provide a grant for the construction of a facility to provide certain health facilities and services.

SB 196 makes an appropriation to provide grants for certain residential alternative care programs.

HB 1209 makes an appropriation to the Board of Regents for improving the National Music Museum at the University of South Dakota.

HB 1210 makes an appropriation to the Board of Regents to provide grant funding for a new biomedical facility at the research park in Sioux Falls.

HB 1277 makes an appropriation to the State Conservation Commission and transfers moneys thereto.

HB 1340 appropriates money for the ordinary expenses of the legislative, judicial, and executive departments of the state, the current expenses of state institutions, interest on the public debt, and for common schools.

Governor Noem has signed 234 bills into law and vetoed one this legislative session.

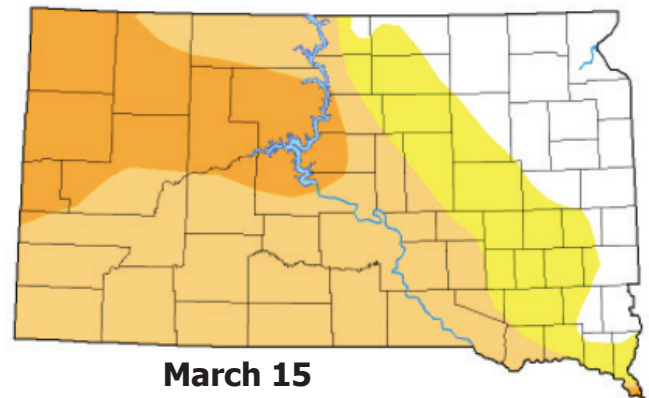
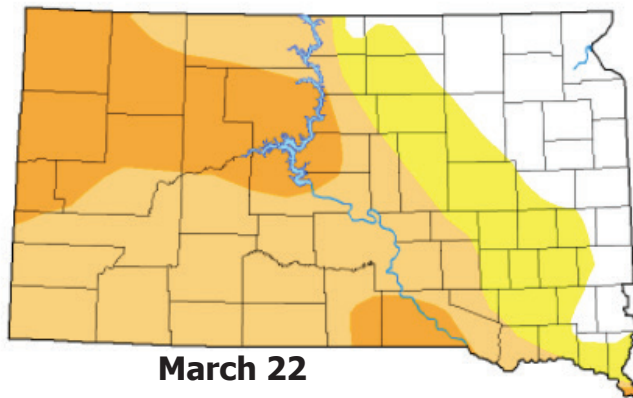
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Drought Classification



Drought Monitor



High Plains

Associated with a storm system intensifying and moving slowly northeastward from the Central Plains March 21-22, heavy rainfall was observed across much of central and eastern Kansas, southeastern Nebraska, and eastern Colorado. Rainfall in excess of 1.5 inches resulted in 1-category improvements across many of these areas. However, improvements were less widespread for some locations in central Kansas and southeastern Nebraska, as longer-term deficits remain intact. Additionally, soil moisture still remains D2-equivalent (indicating severe drought conditions) or worse across many areas, region-wide stream flows are running near and below normal, and standardized precipitation indices (SPIs) are D2-equivalent or worse for all periods between 60 and 120 days. Farther north across western North Dakota and southern South Dakota, the lack of seasonal snow cover, above-normal temperatures this past week (10 °F to 15°F above-normal), and high winds resulted in the expansion of extreme (D3) and severe (D2) drought, respectively. Reports from western North Dakota indicate rangeland conditions are worse than this time last year. Groundwater and root zone soil moisture is very low and watering holes are dried up, supported by NASA GRACE groundwater and NASA SPoRT 0-100 cm soil moisture indicators. In southern North Dakota, shallower soil depths (0-40 cm) have dried out further this past week due to above-normal temperatures and high winds. Additionally, SPIs are at D2-equivalent or worse for all periods going back 120 days. Locals continue to be concerned about the antecedent dryness leading up to the spring. Water availability, forage for feed, and livestock are all at risk if the rains do not come during the spring and summer months, as the Northern Plains begins transitioning into a climatologically wetter time of year in April.

Paint – South Dakota Campaign Seeking Volunteers

PIERRE, SD – “Paint – South Dakota” is underway and South Dakota Housing Development Authority (SDHDA) is seeking volunteer painters and nominations for houses to be painted.

To get involved, an individual or group of people nominate someone in their community whose home is in need of a fresh coat of exterior paint and then pick a Saturday in June to pick up paint brushes and give of their time to help their neighbor.

The nominated home must be a single family, owner-occupied residence whose owner is physically or financially unable to paint their home themselves.

Since starting the program in 1998, nearly 550 homes across South Dakota have been painted, resulting in more than 10,655 gallons of paint and primer being applied by 7,884 local volunteers.

“We continue this campaign of assisting 25 homes per year because of its success in cities and towns of all sizes,” said Executive Director Lorraine Polak. “We appreciate the volunteers who give of their time to assist their neighbors and help beautiful their community.”

Applications are due to SDHDA by 5 p.m. CT, April 22, 2022. Applicants will be able to select a weekend in June to complete the final painting of the home.

Additional information and a link to the poster and application can be found at www.sdhda.org. Questions can be directed to Sheila Olson at 605.773.7603.

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.

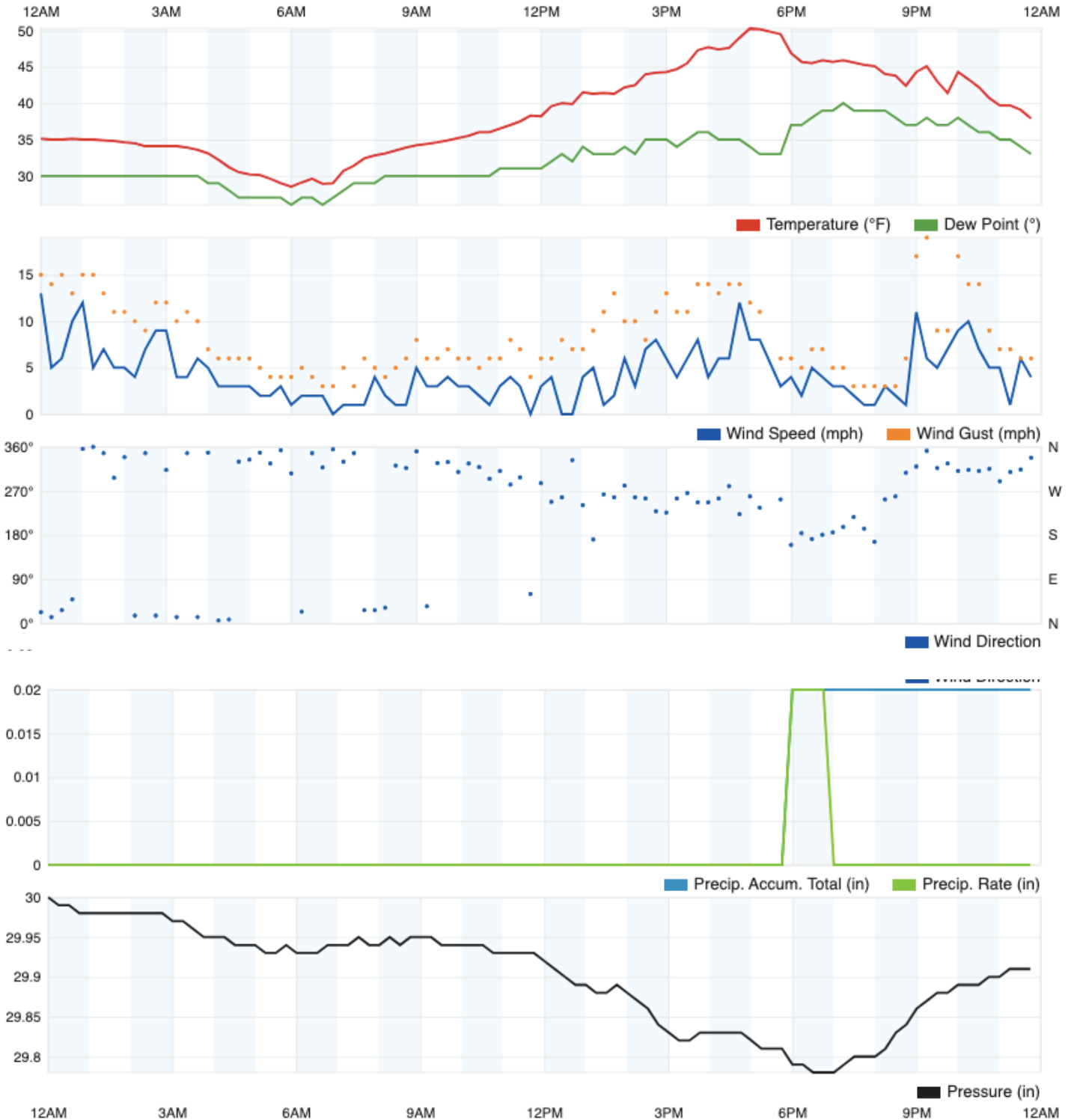
Packets are being sent home this week with information regarding KG Roundup. These would apply to families who have children eligible for KG and JK this coming 2022-2023 school year who are not currently enrolled in our school. Please contact the school if you do not receive a packet. We do not have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



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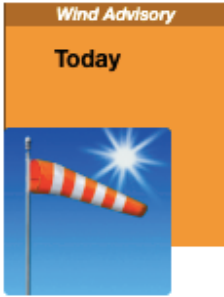
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Yesterday's Groton Weather Graphs



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Today



Sunny and Windy

High: 49 °F

Tonight



Mostly Clear and Blustery then Mostly Clear

Low: 19 °F

Saturday



Mostly Sunny

High: 38 °F

Saturday Night



Mostly Cloudy

Low: 18 °F

Sunday



Mostly Sunny

High: 44 °F

Gusty Winds and Fire Danger For Today

- High temperatures in the 40s and 50s for most of the area.
- Dry fuels.
- Low humidity and gusty northwest winds this afternoon into the early evening hours.

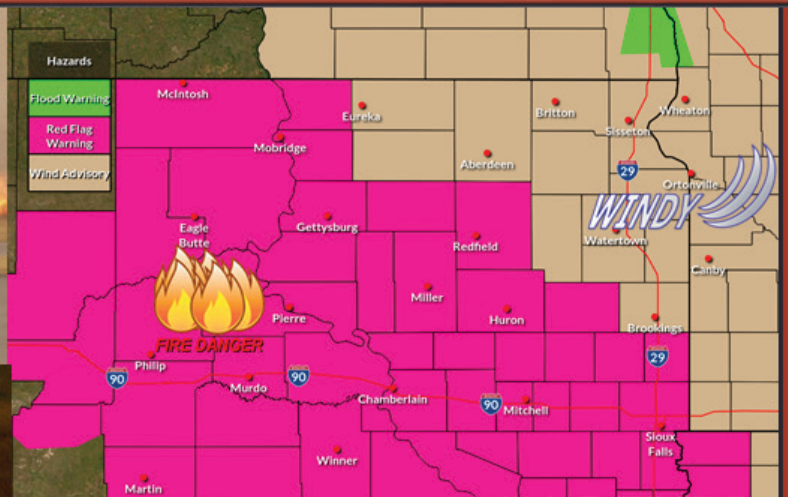
Red Flag Warning

Be extremely careful with open flames.

The NWS issues a Red Flag Warning, in conjunction with land management agencies, to alert land managers to an ongoing or imminent **critical fire weather** pattern.

Critical fire conditions are ongoing/expected to occur within the **next 24 hours**.

Take action.



WILDFIRE SAFETY

- Know your wildfire risk & prepare an emergency plan in advance
- Don't drive your vehicle onto dry grass or brush
- Practice safe towing
- Avoid power equipment that creates sparks
- Properly discard cigarettes
- Obey burn bans
- Evacuate if ordered to do so by local officials

weather.gov/Aberdeen

[f](#) National Weather Service Aberdeen

[t](#) @NWSAberdeen

A Red Flag Warning goes into effect for the counties in pink this afternoon as relative humidity values will decrease through the day, along with gusty winds and continuing dry fuels. A wind advisory has been issued for the counties in tan and continues through this evening. Sustained winds 20-35 mph with gusts up to 55 mph possible, especially in northeastern SD into western MN.

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Today in Weather History

March 25, 2009: Rapid snowmelt and ice jamming caused the Elm River near Westport to rise -above flood stage on March 20th. The Elm River reached an all-time record level of 22.69 feet on March 25th almost 9 feet above flood stage. The previous record was 22.11 feet set on April 10th, 1969. The flood stage for the Elm River at Westport is 14 feet. The city of Westport was evacuated with the flood waters causing damage to many homes and roads in and around Westport. Also, many other roads and agricultural and pastureland along the river were flooded. The Elm River slowly receded and fell below flood stage on March 30th. The flood waters from the Elm River flowed south and into the northern portion of Moccasin Creek. Subsequently, the Moccasin Creek rose as the water flowed south into the city of Aberdeen. Flooding became a concern for Aberdeen and areas along the creek north of Aberdeen. The Governor signed an emergency declaration which allowed the state to help with flood response efforts, including sending 50,000 sandbags to the area. Also, the National Guard was activated to move a variety of heavy equipment. Some sandbagging and a falling Elm River kept the Moccasin Creek from causing any significant flooding in and north of Aberdeen. The creek flooded some township and county roads.

1843 - A second great snowstorm hit the northeastern U.S. The storm produced snow from Maine all the way to the Gulf of Mexico. Natchez MS received three inches of snow, and up to 15 inches buried eastern Tennessee. Coastal Maine received 204 inches of snow that winter. (David Ludlum)

1901: More than 20 people were killed by an estimated F3 tornado that moved across parts of Birmingham, Alabama. The twister cut a 15-mile path from the south side of the city to Avondale and Irondale.

1914 - Society Hill, SC, was buried under 18 inches of snow, establishing a state record. (Sandra and TI Richard Sanders - 1987)

1934 - A spring storm produced 21 inches of snow at Amarillo TX in 24 hours. However, much of the snow melted as it fell, and as a result, the snow cover was never any deeper than 4.5 inches. (David Ludlum)

1935: Suffocating dust storms frequently occurred in southeast Colorado between the 12th and the 25th of the month. Six people died, and many livestock starved or suffocated. Up to six feet of dust covered the ground. Schools were closed, and tenants deserted many rural homes.

1948 - For the second time in less than a week airplanes were destroyed by a tornado at Tinker AFB in Oklahoma City OK. A March 20th tornado destroyed fifty planes at Tinker AFB causing more than ten million dollars damage, and the March 25th tornado destroyed another thirty-five planes causing six million dollars damage. The first tornado struck without warning, and caused more damage than any previous tornado in the state of Oklahoma. The second tornado was predicted by Fawbush and Miller of the United States Air Force, and their accurate tornado forecast ushered in the modern era of severe weather forecasting. (The Weather Channel) (Storm Data) (The National Severe Storms Forecast Center)

1975 - The town of Sandberg reported a wind gust to 101 mph, a record for the state of California. (The Weather Channel)

1987 - Heavy rain left rivers and streams swollen in Kansas and Nebraska, causing considerable crop damage due to flooding of agricultural areas. The Saline River near Wilson Reservoir in central Kansas reached its highest level since 1951. March rainfall at Grand Island NE exceeded their previous record of 5.57 inches. (The National Weather Summary) (Storm Data)

1988 - An early season heat wave prevailed in the southwestern U.S. The high of 93 degrees at Tucson, AZ, was a new record for March. Windy conditions prevailed across the central and eastern U.S. Winds gusted to 60 mph at Minneapolis MN, and reached 120 mph atop Rendezvous Peak WY. (The National Weather Summary) (Storm Data)

1989 - A Pacific storm brought wet weather to much of the western third of the country, with heavy snow in some of the higher elevations. La Porte CA was drenched with 3.56 inches of rain in 24 hours. Up to 24 inches of snow blanketed the Sierra Nevada Range. (The National Weather Summary) (Storm Data)

1990 - Temperatures dipped below zero in the Northern Rocky Mountain Region. Hardin MT was the cold spot in the nation with a morning low of 10 degrees below zero. Freezing drizzle was reported in the Southern Plains Region, with afternoon highs only in the 30s from the Southern High Plains to Missouri and Arkansas. (The National Weather Summary)

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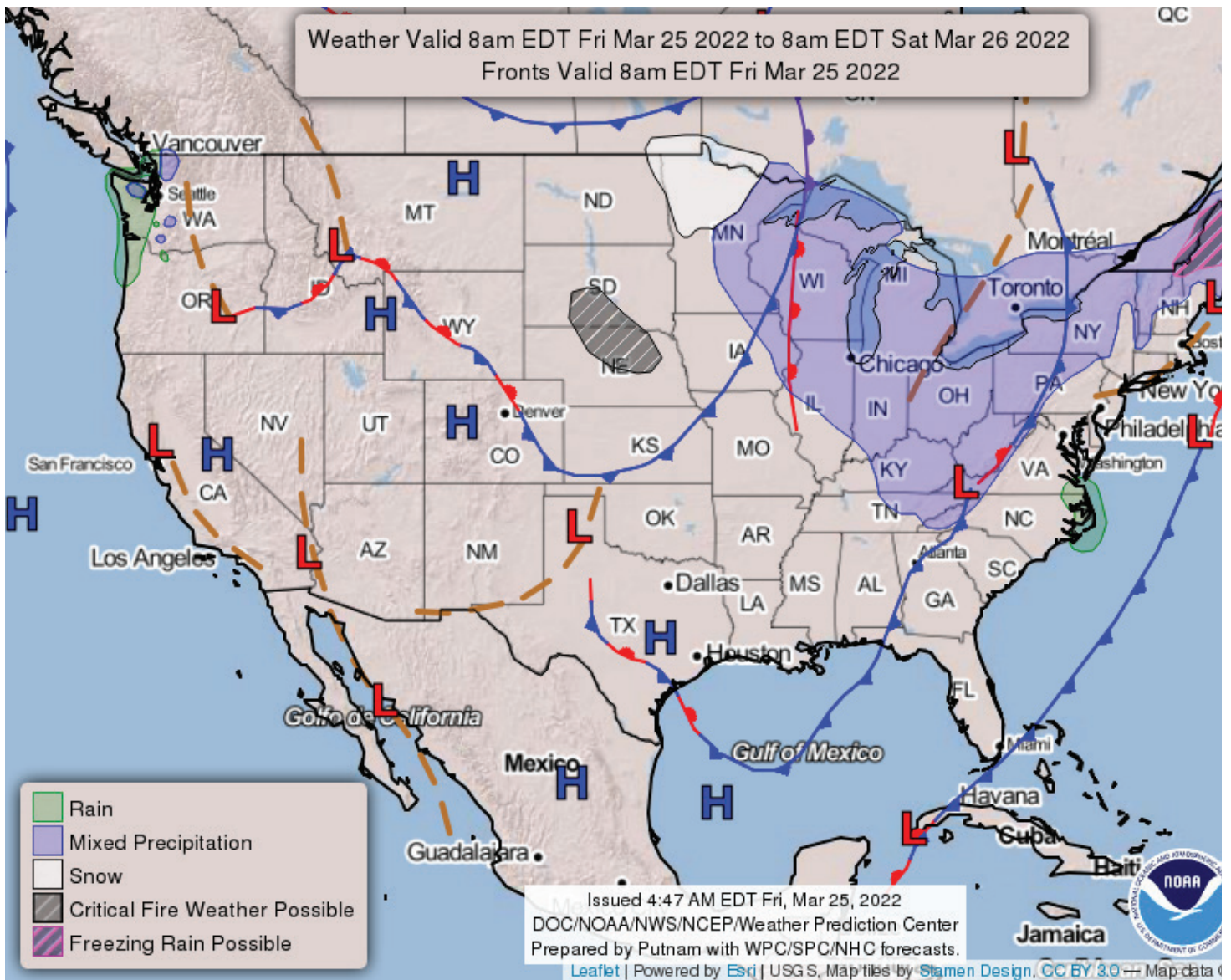
Yesterday's Groton Weather

High Temp: 50.3 °F at 5:00 PM
Low Temp: 28.5 °F at 6:00 AM
Wind: 19 mph at 9:15 PM
Precip: 0.02

Day length: 12 hours, 29 minutes

Today's Info

Record High: 81 in 1925
Record Low: -10 in 1894
Average High: 47°F
Average Low: 23°F
Average Precip in Mar.: 0.67
Precip to date in Mar.: 0.02
Average Precip to date: 1.84
Precip Year to Date: 0.99
Sunset Tonight: 7:52:48 PM
Sunrise Tomorrow: 7:21:51 AM



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HAVE MERCY!

When we are offended by another person, we have four options: we can pout, pity ourselves, take it out on someone else or pray.

When we pout, we pollute ourselves with the poison of displeasure. It's like pouring a teaspoonful of black dye into a glass of pure water and watching the darkness take over. It ruins the beauty that light brings to life. Pouting brings distress into our lives - not deliverance.

When we pity ourselves, we are simply poisoning ourselves. Self-pity distorts our thinking, disrupts our work, disturbs our body and even disfigures our face with wrinkles. It depresses our friends, demoralizes our life and above all, dishonors our Lord.

When we take our hurt out on others, it not only pains them, but will come right back to pain us as well - and eventually punish us. Revenge is like a boomerang: Although it flies into the path of the other person, it will eventually come back to attack us in the process. It can hit the one who threw it with the heaviest blow.

When we pray, we protect ourselves and place the responsibility for "settling the score" with God. We are God's children and what offends us offends Him; what hurts us will hurt Him, and what affects us has already affected Him. He understands our pain and our sorrow.

The Psalmist expressed this in a beautiful way: "I cried unto the Lord, and He heard me." God will always take care of us, remove the sadness from our hearts and bring His healing. When we pray, He makes things right!

Prayer: Father, when we have been injured by the ways and words of others, we look to You for Your healing. We know that You answer in Your time. In Jesus' Name, Amen.

Scripture For Today: I cried unto the Lord, and He heard me. Psalm 120:1

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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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News from the Associated Press

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. Arizona lawmakers voted Thursday to join 11 other states with bans.

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

"Rarely has so much fear and anger been directed at so few. I don't understand what they are going through or why they feel the way they do. But I want them to live," Cox wrote in his veto letter.

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 originally sponsored the ban that applies to kindergarten through 12th grade athletes.

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 collegiate 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

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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, including Arizona, which also passed a ban on gender-reassignment surgery for minors Thursday. Republican Arizona Gov. Doug Ducey hasn't said whether he'll sign either bill.

DeSantis, for his part, 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."

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. Re-

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publicans wouldn't support them, and Democratic Sens. Joe Manchin of West Virginia and Kyrsten Sinema of Arizona have been unwilling to override the filibuster to allow the legislation to pass.

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 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 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, Yup'ik, 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.

"It is a strong first step in ensuring that Native American voters have equal access to the vote," the Native American Rights Fund said Thursday.

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.

Planned Parenthood North Central receives \$20 million gift

PIERRE, S.D. (AP) — Planned Parenthood North Central States has received an unexpected donation of \$20 million from billionaire philanthropist MacKenzie Scott.

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It's the largest donation in the organization's history. Scott is the former wife of Amazon founder and CEO Jeff Bezos.

North Central States operates 28 facilities in the Dakotas, Minnesota, Iowa and Nebraska.

Scott revealed Wednesday that she has donated nearly \$4 billion to 465 nonprofits, including \$275 million to Planned Parenthood Federation of America.

Sarah Stoesz, president and CEO of Planned Parenthood North Central States, said she's still in shock.

"I was speechless. I can sort of talk about it. Now, I'm beginning to get my feet back. But it was the sort of thing that just never happened. It never happens," she said. "And the fact that we show up, day in and day out for people who otherwise would have nowhere to go was very meaningful to MacKenzie Scott and that was why she was making this gift to us."

Stoesz said the money bring tremendous relief, South Dakota Public Broadcasting reported.

"We are facing significantly escalating costs related to inflation, and also there is a shortage of healthcare workers in our country, and so our costs of providing care are going up," she said. "So knowing that we now have \$20 million, I'm very grateful."

The donation comes as South Dakota's governor, Kristi Noem, signed a bill Wednesday 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.

Minneapolis teachers reach tentative agreement to end strike

By STEVE KARNOWSKI Associated Press

MINNEAPOLIS (AP) — Teachers in Minneapolis reached a tentative agreement early Friday to end a more than two-week strike over pay and other issues that idled some 29,000 students and around 4,500 educators and staff in one of Minnesota's largest school districts.

The union for teachers and support staff planned to announce details later in the day, but the union said it achieved what it sought when its members walked off the job March 8 after they were unable to agree on a contract with district leaders. Ratification votes were expected over the weekend, and the district said it "looks forward to welcoming students and staff back to school on Monday."

"These historic agreements contain important wins for our students and the safe and stable schools they deserve," the Minneapolis Federation of Teachers and Education Support Professionals said in a statement, adding that "major gains were made on pay for Education Support Professionals, protections for educators of color, class size caps and mental health supports."

The walkout sent families who had endured the most chaotic days of the coronavirus pandemic fretting anew about lost academic progress and scrambling to arrange child care.

Minneapolis Public Schools administrators and school board members insisted throughout the talks that they didn't have enough money to meet teachers' demands, especially for large permanent salary increases.

"We walked out united to change the trajectory of MPS and ensure that educators have a greater say in how we do our work," the union said. "This too has been achieved and will have impacts that improve our district for years to come."

Teachers in neighboring St. Paul reached a tentative agreement the night before the Minneapolis teachers walked out, getting a deal that had some similarities to what their Minneapolis counterparts were seeking. Union leaders cited that as evidence that Minneapolis administrators had room to compromise, too.

Ben Polk, a special education aide, said he was relieved at the settlement but wanted to see terms before he commented further. Polk said earlier in the strike that understaffing meant aides like him were having to attend to too many higher-need children at once, making it more difficult for both teachers and students.

Live updates: Finland to suspend trains to St Petersburg

By The Associated Press undefined

COPENHAGEN, Denmark — Finland's national railway company says it will suspend services between Helsinki and the Russian city of St. Petersburg from this weekend, closing one of the last public transport routes

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for Russians who want to reach the European Union.

Citing the sanctions imposed on Russia, the head of passenger traffic with state-owned VR, Topi Simola, said that "people who wanted to depart from Russia have had adequate time to leave."

Only the morning train from Helsinki to St Petersburg will be operated on Sunday while the afternoon train will be cancelled. Both services from St Petersburg will be operated. After that, trains will be suspended until further notice.

VR said customers can cancel their tickets at no cost.

KEY DEVELOPMENTS IN THE RUSSIA-UKRAINE WAR:

- Officials say 300 dead in airstrike on theater in Mariupol
- Biden to visit Poland, a complex ally on Ukraine's doorstep
- Some prominent Russians quit jobs, refuse to support war.
- Go to <https://apnews.com/hub/russia-ukraine> for more coverage

OTHER DEVELOPMENTS:

GENEVA — The U.N. human rights office says its strict methodology in counting casualties in Ukraine's conflict has yielded "very few" confirmed casualties in Mariupol, largely because of difficulties getting access in and information out of the besieged port city.

Matilda Bogner, who heads the rights office's Ukraine branch, noted that council leaders in Mariupol have estimated more than 2,000 civilian deaths in the city following Russia's military invasion on Feb. 24.

Overall, the rights office has counted at least 1,035 civilians killed in Ukraine and 1,650 injured but Bogner said it doesn't have a "the full picture of locations that have seen intense fighting, in particular Mariupol and Volnovakha." The office has acknowledged that its tally is likely to underestimate the actual toll.

MOSCOW — Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov says Russia is facing total war declared by the West. Lavrov said at a meeting on Friday that "a real hybrid war, total war was declared on us." He said the goal was "to destroy, break, annihilate, strangle the Russian economy, and Russia on the whole."

During the first month of what Russia describes as a "special military operation" in Ukraine, the West imposed tough measures targeting Russia's economy and financial system as well as President Vladimir Putin and Russian oligarchs.

Despite that, Lavrov said Russia was not isolated.

"We have many friends, allies, partners in the world, a huge number of associations in which Russia is working with countries of all continents, and we will continue to do so," Lavrov said. He added that the vast majority of states won't join the Western sanctions policy against Russia.

KYIV, Ukraine — Mariupol's city government says the Kremlin's main political party has opened a political office in a shopping mall on the outskirts of the besieged city.

According to the post on the city's Telegram channel, the United Russia office is distributing promotional materials as well as mobile phone cards for an operator that functions in the nearby Russia-backed separatist regions.

Mariupol's communication links have been all but severed since the siege began in early March. Cell phone, television and radio towers have been targeted in Russian airstrikes and artillery barrages.

COPENHAGEN, Denmark — NATO Secretary-General Jens Stoltenberg says that any use of chemical or nuclear weapons "will totally change the nature of the war in Ukraine. It will be absolutely unacceptable."

Stoltenberg spoke during a visit to the long-planned Cold Response drill in his native Norway and called Russia's war in Ukraine "a watershed moment." He also regretted that Moscow had declined to observe the drill, saying that NATO "always invite other countries to observe."

The drill taking place in southeastern, central and northern Norway includes around 30,000 troops from

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27 countries. Non-NATO members Finland and Sweden are also participating. The exercise started March 14 and ends April 1.

The first Cold Response exercise was held in 2006. It is conducted every two years.

KYIV, Ukraine — The government of the Ukrainian city of Mariupol says 300 people died in a Russian airstrike on March 16 on a theater being used as a bomb shelter.

The post Friday on the city government Telegram channel cited eyewitnesses for the toll of “about 300.” It was not immediately clear whether emergency workers had finished excavating the site or how the eyewitnesses arrived at the horrific death toll.

When the theater was struck, an enormous inscription reading “CHILDREN” was posted outside in Russian, intended to be visible from the skies above.

Soon after the airstrike, Ludmyla Denisova, the Ukrainian Parliament’s human rights commissioner, said more than 1,300 people had been sheltering in the building.

BRUSSELS — The United States and the European Union have announced a new partnership to reduce Europe’s reliance on Russian energy. Top officials characterized the step as the start of a years-long initiative to further isolate Moscow after its invasion of Ukraine.

U.S. President Joe Biden asserted Friday that Russian President Vladimir Putin uses energy to “coerce and manipulate his neighbors” and uses the profits from its sale to “drive his war machine.”

Biden said the partnership he announced jointly with a top European Union official will turn that dynamic on its head by reducing Europe’s dependence on Russian energy sources, as well as the continent’s demand for gas overall.

Under the plan, the U.S. and other nations will increase liquified natural gas exports to Europe by 15 billion cubic meters this year. Even larger shipments would be delivered in the future.

At the same time, they will try to keep their climate goals on track by powering gas infrastructure with clean energy and reducing methane leaks that can worsen global warming.

ANKARA, Turkey — Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan says Ukraine and Russia appear to be making progress on four issues being negotiated for an end of the fighting but differences remain on two other key issues.

Speaking to reporters on his return from a NATO summit late Thursday, Erdogan said Kyiv has expressed readiness to give up on its wish to join NATO, is ready to accept Russian as an official language, and can also accept “certain concessions” concerning disarmament and “collective security.”

But Erdogan said Ukraine “is not so comfortable” regarding Russian demands on Crimea, which Moscow annexed in 2014, and the eastern Donbas region, where it has recognized separatist entities as independent. His comments were reported by Hurriyet newspaper and other Turkish media on Friday.

NATO member Turkey has been trying to balance its relations with both Ukraine and Russia, positioning itself as a mediator between the two. It has hosted a meeting between the two countries’ foreign ministers earlier this month.

BERLIN — Germany’s economy minister says his country has forged contracts with new suppliers that will allow it to significantly reduce its reliance on Russian coal, gas and oil in the coming weeks.

Robert Habeck told reporters in Berlin on Friday that Russian oil will account for about 25% of Germany’s imports in the coming weeks, from currently about 35%.

Habeck said imports of Russian coal will be halved from about 50% of Germany’s total to 25% in the coming weeks.

He said Germany also expects to be able to become almost entirely independent of Russian gas by mid-2024. To do this the government has secured the use of three “floating” terminals capable of regasifying LNG brought in by ship and is working hard to build permanent LNG terminals for long-term imports.

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JERUSALEM — A Ukrainian who fled the country with her daughter has finished first among women in this year's Jerusalem marathon.

Valentyna Veretska, 31, competed in Friday's race after fleeing with her 11-year-old daughter shortly after Russia invaded Ukraine on Feb. 24. Her husband stayed behind.

Organizers say Veretska finished the 26.2-mile (42.2-kilometer) race in two hours, 45 minutes and 54 seconds. Ageze Guadie, 33, from Israel, finished first in the men's category with a time of 2:37:17.

Veretska, 31, is ranked 444th worldwide among female marathon runners and most recently finished first in the October 2021 Tirana Marathon, according to World Athletics. Ahead of the Jerusalem race, she told reporters that she would "run for peace."

She and her daughter fled from the southern city of Mykolaiv with only their travel documents, making their way to neighboring Poland. She was invited to take part in the Jerusalem marathon earlier this month.

Marathon organizers say around 40 Ukrainian immigrants and refugees competed among thousands of runners.

BUDAPEST, Hungary — Hungary's prime minister on Friday rejected an emotional appeal from Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy to supply Ukraine with weapons and support sanctions on Russia's energy sector.

Prime Minister Viktor Orban said in a video posted to social media that Zelenskyy's requests were "against Hungary's interests," and that sanctions on Russian energy "would mean that the Hungarian economy would slow down and then stop within moments."

The rejection came after Zelenskyy on Thursday addressed a meeting of European Union leaders in Brussels where he specifically addressed Orban, who is widely considered Russian President Vladimir Putin's closest ally in the EU.

"Listen, Viktor, do you know what is happening in Mariupol?" Zelenskyy said. "I want to be open once and for all — you should decide for yourself, who you are for."

Hungary, alone among EU countries bordering Ukraine, has declined to supply its neighbor with weapons and refused to allow weapons shipments to cross its border into Ukraine.

On Friday, Orban said that 85% of Hungary's gas and more than 60% of its oil comes from Russia, and that blocking Russian energy exports would force Hungarians to "pay the price of the war."

KHARKIV, Ukraine — About half the population of the eastern city of Kharkiv has left, and food and other essentials are dwindling for those who stay behind. A line formed Thursday at an apartment block as neighbors waited for aid from the Red Cross.

"Among those who stayed, there are people who can walk on their own, but many who cannot walk, the elderly," said Hanna Spitsyna, who distributed the food to the sound of explosions behind her.

Kharkiv has been under siege by Russian forces since the start of the invasion, with relentless shelling that has forced people to sleep in metro stations and in basements.

Ukraine's government said shelling on a group of people awaiting aid elsewhere in the city killed six people on Thursday. It was not immediately possible to verify the allegation.

DUBAI, United Arab Emirates — Satellite photos from Planet Labs PBC analyzed by The Associated Press show thick black smoke rising Thursday over the port in the Ukrainian city of Berdyansk, with a large ship on fire.

The timing of the photos correspond with what the Ukrainian navy described as a successful attack that saw a Russian landing craft ferrying armored vehicles to the city sink off the port.

The image also corresponds to online videos purportedly showing the attack at the port in the city held by Russia on the Sea of Azov.

LVIV, Ukraine — Russian forces fired two missiles late Thursday at a Ukrainian military unit on the outskirts

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of Dnipro, the fourth-largest city in the country, regional emergency services said.

The strikes destroyed buildings and set off two fires, it said, while the number of those killed and wounded was still being established.

Dnipro is west of the regions along the Russian border that have been controlled by Russian-backed separatists since 2014.

LVIV, Ukraine — With the war headed into its second month, Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy spoke of hope and determination in his nighttime video address to the nation late Thursday.

"It is already night. But we are working," he said in a quiet voice. "The country must move toward peace, move forward. With every day of our defense, we are getting closer to the peace that we need so much. We are getting closer to victory. ... We can't stop even for a minute. For every minute determines our fate, our future, whether we will live."

He reported on his conversations that day with leaders of NATO and European Union countries gathered in Brussels, and their promises of even more sanctions on Russia.

"We need to look for peace," he said. "Russia also needs to look for peace."

LVIV, Ukraine — Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy thanked EU leaders for working together to support Ukraine and impose sanctions on Russia, including Germany's decision to block Russia from delivering natural gas to Europe through the new Nord Stream 2 pipeline.

But he lamented that these steps weren't taken earlier, saying there was a chance Russia would have thought twice about invading.

He then appealed to the EU leaders, who had gathered Thursday in Brussels, to move quickly on Ukraine's application to join the bloc. "Here I ask you, do not delay. Please," Zelenskyy said by video from Kyiv. "For us this is a chance."

He then listed the 27 member countries, noting those he said were "for us." He appealed to Germany and particularly to Hungary not to block Ukraine's bid.

"Listen, Viktor, do you know what is happening in Mariupol?" Zelenskyy said, addressing Hungarian President Viktor Orban. "I want to be open once and for all — you should decide for yourself, who you are for."

Orban is widely considered to be Russian President Vladimir Putin's closest ally among EU leaders.

Zelenskyy said Ukraine is certain that "in the decisive moment, Germany also will be with us."

BRUSSELS — President Vladimir Putin's threat to have "unfriendly" countries pay for Russian natural gas exports only in rubles from now on has got the not-so-friendly treatment from European Union nations.

Several EU leaders have come out saying it would be a gross violation of their contracts. From German Chancellor Olaf Scholz to Italian Prime Minister Mario Draghi, they said they would not meet such demands.

The Russian threat is potent since 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.

Economists say such a move seems designed to try to support the ruble, which has collapsed against other currencies since Russia invaded Ukraine and Western countries responded with far-reaching sanctions against Moscow.

Making such demands though, would fundamentally change contracts and render them null and void, several European leaders said during the first day of their EU summit.

Ukraine reports 300 died in Russian strike on theater

By NEBI QENA and ANDREA ROSA Associated Press

KYIV, Ukraine (AP) — Ukrainian authorities in the besieged ruins of Mariupol said Friday that about 300 people died when a Russian airstrike blew up a theater where hundreds of civilians were sheltering — a catastrophic loss of civilian life that, if confirmed, is likely to further crank up pressure on Western nations to step up military aid.

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In a vain attempt to protect those inside the grand, columned theater from missile and airstrikes that Russia has rained down on cities, an enormous inscription reading "CHILDREN" in Russian was posted outside the building and was visible from the air.

For days, the government in the battered port city was unable to give a casualty count for the March 16 attack. The post on its Telegram channel Friday cited eyewitnesses. It was not immediately clear whether emergency workers had finished excavating the theater ruins or how witnesses arrived at the horrific figure of lives lost.

Still, the emerging picture of gruesome casualties could refocus attention on the refusal thus far of countries from the NATO alliance to supply warplanes or fly patrols over Ukraine's airspace. The country's embattled president has repeatedly pleaded for those measures to protect against such strikes.

Soon after the attack, Ludmyla Denisova, the Ukrainian Parliament's human rights commissioner, said more than 1,300 people had been inside, many whose homes were destroyed in Russia's siege of the city. The building had a relatively modern basement bomb shelter, and some survivors did emerge from the rubble after the attack.

The new reported death toll came a day after U.S. President Joe Biden and other leaders promised after meeting in Brussels that more military aid for Ukraine is coming. But they stopped short of providing heavy weaponry that Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy wants. NATO nations fear that providing planes, tanks and other hardware that Zelenskyy says is urgently needed could increase the risk of them being drawn into direct conflict with Russia.

But the U.S. and the European Union did announce a move to further squeeze Russia: a new partnership to reduce Europe's reliance on Russian energy and slowly squeeze off the billions of dollars the Kremlin gets from sales of fossil fuels.

Despite the efforts to target Russia's economy to push the Kremlin to change course, the misery for civilians grows ever more acute in cities that, day-by-day, increasingly resemble the ruins that Russian forces left behind in previous campaigns in Syria and Chechnya.

Those who can are trying to flee, emptying out their cities. In relentlessly shelled Kharkiv, mostly elderly women came to collect food and other urgent supplies. In the capital of Kyiv, ashes of the dead are piling up at the main crematorium because so many relatives have left, leaving urns unclaimed.

Meanwhile, the vulnerable — the elderly, children and others unable to join millions of refugees heading westward — face food shortages in a country once known as the breadbasket for the world.

Fidgeting with anticipation, a young girl in Kharkiv watched intently this week as a volunteer's knife cut through a giant slab of cheese, carving out thick slices — one for each hungry person waiting stoically in line.

Hanna Spitsyna took charge of divvying up the delivery of food aid from the Ukrainian Red Cross, handing it out to her neighbors. Each got a lump of the cheese that was cut under the child's watchful gaze, dropped chunk by chunk into plastic bags that people in line held open like hungry mouths.

"They brought us aid, brought us aid for the elderly women that stayed here," Spitsyna said. "All these people need diapers, swaddle blankets and food."

Unable to sweep with lightning-quick speed into Kyiv, their apparent aim on Feb. 24 when the Kremlin launched the war, Russian forces are instead raining down shells and missiles on cities from afar. Kyiv, like other cities, has seen its population dramatically reduced in the vast refugee crisis that has seen more than 10 million displaced and at least 3.5 million fleeing the country entirely.

Russia's military claimed Friday that it destroyed a massive Ukrainian fuel base used to supply the Kyiv region's defenses, with ships firing a salvo of cruise missiles, according to the Interfax news agency. Videos on social media showed an enormous fireball explosion near the capital.

The outskirts of Kharkiv were shrouded by foggy smoke Friday, with shelling constant since early in the morning. In a city hospital, several wounded soldiers arrived, with bullet and shrapnel wounds, a day after doctors treated a dozen civilians. Even as doctors stabilized the direst case, the sound of shelling could be heard in the surgery ward.

At an emergency NATO summit in Brussels on Thursday, Zelenskyy pleaded with the Western allies via

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video for planes, tanks, rockets, air defense systems and other weapons, saying his country is “defending our common values.”

The invasion has sharpened an energy and moral dilemma for European nations that heat homes and power industries with Russian fossil fuels. Alarmed that the billions they pay can be channeled by the Kremlin toward its war effort, they’re speeding up hunts for alternatives.

Germany said Friday that it has forged contracts with new suppliers that will significantly reduce its reliance on Russian coal, gas and oil in coming weeks. Biden said the new U.S.-EU gas-supply partnership will help undercut Russian President Vladimir Putin’s use of energy sales to “coerce and manipulate his neighbors” and “drive his war machine.” Under the plan, the U.S. and other nations will increase liquified natural gas exports to Europe by 15 billion cubic meters this year.

While millions of Ukrainians have fled west, Ukraine accused Moscow of forcibly removing hundreds of thousands of civilians from shattered cities to Russia to pressure Kyiv to give up. Lyudmyla Denisova, Ukraine’s ombudsperson, said 402,000 people, including 84,000 children, had been taken against their will into Russia, where some may be used as “hostages” to pressure Kyiv to surrender.

The Kremlin gave nearly identical numbers for those who have been relocated, but said they were from predominantly Russian-speaking regions of Donetsk and Luhansk in eastern Ukraine and wanted to go to Russia. Pro-Moscow separatists have been fighting for control for nearly eight years in those regions, where many people have supported close ties to Russia.

In other developments:

—In Chernihiv, where an airstrike this week destroyed a crucial bridge, a city official, Olexander Lomako, said a “humanitarian catastrophe” is unfolding as Russian forces target food storage places. He said about 130,000 people are left in the besieged city, about half its prewar population.

—Russia said it will offer safe passage starting Friday to 67 ships from 15 foreign countries that are stranded in Ukrainian ports because of the danger of shelling and mines.

—The International Atomic Energy Agency said it has been told by Ukrainian authorities that Russian shelling is preventing worker rotations in and out of the Chernobyl nuclear plant. It said Russian forces have shelled Ukrainian checkpoints in the city of Slavutych, home to many Chernobyl nuclear workers, “putting them at risk and preventing further rotation of personnel to and from the site.”

Biden to visit Poland, a complex ally on Ukraine’s doorstep

By VANESSA GERA Associated Press

WARSAW, Poland (AP) — President Joe Biden’s visit to Poland as his final stop in Europe this week offers a chance to underscore the U.S. commitment to protect a key NATO member on Ukraine’s doorstep and to thank Poles for their generous welcome to refugees fleeing Russia’s invasion.

But Poland is also a complicated ally whose populist leaders are accused by some European partners of riding roughshod over democratic norms, and many liberal Poles will be seeking a sign that the U.S. remembers its role in promoting democracy.

The two-day visit starting Friday follows a trio of emergency war summits in Brussels. It brings Biden to a country that has accepted the lion’s share of the more than 3.5 million Ukrainians who have fled the month-old war. More than 2.2 million have entered Poland and many propose to stay there.

Poland also hosts thousands of additional U.S. troops, beyond the thousands deployed on a rotational basis since Russia first invaded Ukraine in 2014. Many find their presence reassuring: Russia’s March 13 strikes on the Yavoriv military base in western Ukraine were so close that they shook Poles in border regions.

Polish assistance to Ukrainians has won praise near and far. Not only have shelters and schools opened their doors to refugees, with 90,000 children registering to attend classes, but many regular Poles have welcomed Ukrainians into their homes. In some cases, they’re taking in friends and in others, complete strangers.

President Andrzej Duda, who is allied with a right-wing political party accused of eroding democratic norms, and who clearly preferred former U.S. President Donald Trump to Biden, is set to welcome his American counterpart to Rzeszow, a city some 70 kilometers (45 miles) from the border with Ukraine

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Biden plans to be briefed there on the humanitarian efforts to help Ukrainians and to meet with U.S. troops. Many Poles will be hoping for a sign from Biden that Washington will continue to urge the Polish government's adherence to democratic values, hoping that won't be forgotten amid the need for wartime NATO unity.

During his election campaign, Biden mentioned Poland along with Belarus and Hungary in warning about "the rise of totalitarian regimes in the world." The comment caused offense to leaders in Poland, which has become a refuge for dissidents from authoritarian Belarus.

The European Union has accused Poland of eroding judicial independence since the Law and Justice party started governing in 2015. The EU sees political interference in the judiciary as an attack on the 27-member bloc's fundamental democratic values, and particularly objects to a Supreme Court body with powers to suspend judges whose rulings displease government authorities.

Recently, the EU withheld millions of euros from a pandemic recovery fund from Warsaw, seeking to use the money as leverage for change.

Poland's government has also incurred international criticism for eroding media independence, for anti-LGBT rhetoric by Duda and others, and over the use of Pegasus spyware against government critics.

The Justice Defense Committee, an umbrella group in Poland that includes independent judges, prosecutors and civil groups, alleged in a March 13 letter to EU institutions that since the war in Ukraine began, Polish authorities have "taken a number of measures to further destroy the rule of law."

The government denies its behavior has been undemocratic, noting that it keeps winning elections and arguing that it is trying to reform a corrupt, inefficient court system.

Duda late last year moved to ease one key U.S. concern, vetoing legislation that threatened to silence an independent broadcaster, TVN. The legislation would have forced Discovery Inc., a American company that owns TVN, to give up its majority stake in the broadcaster — the largest ever U.S. investment in Poland.

Biden, however, will likely not have forgotten that Duda and other Polish officials were ardent supporters and ideological brethren of Trump, particularly in their opposition to accepting Middle Eastern refugees and migrants.

Duda was among a handful of leaders, including Russian President Vladimir Putin, who waited weeks before congratulating Biden after he won the 2020 election, taking a wait-and-see approach as Trump refused to accept his defeat.

In 2018, while asking the U.S. to establish a permanent military base in Poland, Duda proposed calling it "Fort Trump."

The proposal sparked some mockery in Europe and was quickly dropped. Poles continue to want a permanent base and a greater U.S. military presence as safeguards against Russian aggression. They hope Biden's visit to Poland will bring stronger military commitments.

Duda, speaking after a NATO meeting on Thursday in Brussels, said Biden's scheduled stop in Poland underlined the importance of the U.S.-Polish strategic alliance. Top officials in Biden's administration also have visited the country recently.

"These ties are independent of all political relations. We are democratic countries. The authorities change and strategic interests remain," Duda said.

Before Biden returns to Washington on Saturday, he is expected to address the Polish people.

The White House said he would "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."

US, EU announce new partnership to undercut Russian energy

By CHRIS MEGERIAN and CATHY BUSSEWITZ Associated Press

BRUSSELS (AP) — The United States and European Union on Friday announced a new partnership to reduce the continent's reliance on Russian energy, a step top officials characterized as the start of a years-long initiative to further isolate Moscow after its invasion of Ukraine.

U.S. President Joe Biden asserted that Russian President Vladimir Putin uses energy to "coerce and manipu-

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late his neighbors" and uses the profits from its sale to "drive his war machine."

Biden said the partnership he announced jointly with a top European Union official will turn that dynamic on its head by reducing Europe's dependence on Russian energy sources, as well reducing the continent's demand for gas overall.

The president said such a step is not "only the right thing to do from a moral standpoint" but "it's going to put us on a stronger strategic footing."

Under the plan, the U.S. and other nations will increase liquified natural gas exports to Europe by 15 billion cubic meters this year, though U.S. officials were unable to say exactly which countries will provide the extra energy this year. Even larger shipments would be delivered in the future. .

At the same time, they will try to keep their climate goals on track by powering gas infrastructure with clean energy and reducing methane leaks that can worsen global warming.

Although the initiative will likely require new facilities for importing liquified natural gas, the partnership is also geared toward reducing reliance on fossil fuels in the long run through energy efficiency and alternative sources of energy, according to the White House.

Ursula von der Leyen, head of the EU's executive arm, said it is important for Europe to shift away from Russia and toward energy suppliers that are trustworthy, friendly and reliable.

"We aim to reduce this dependence on Russian fossil fuels and get rid of it," she said.

Russian energy is a key source of income and political leverage for Moscow. Almost 40% of the European Union's natural gas comes from Russia to heat homes, generate electricity and power industry.

Biden was leaving Brussels after the announcement and heading to Rzeszów in Poland, where U.S. troops are based roughly an hour's drive from the Ukrainian border.

He will be briefed on the humanitarian response to the refugees streaming out of Ukraine and those still suffering inside the country. He also will meet with U.S. service members from the 82nd Airborne Division, who serve alongside Polish troops.

Biden is then expected to fly to Warsaw for talks Saturday with Polish President Andrzej Duda and an address to the Polish people before he departs for Washington.

While in Brussels, Biden participated in a trio of summits hosted by NATO, the Group of Seven industrialized nations and the European Union, all on Thursday. The extraordinary series of meetings reflects heightened concerns about the war in Ukraine, which has entered its second month.

Although Ukraine has resisted the Russian invasion much more successfully than initially expected, the conflict has become a grueling and bloody affair, with thousands of casualties on each side and millions of refugees fleeing the country.

Western leaders are also concerned that Russian President Vladimir Putin could use chemical or even nuclear weapons to regain momentum in the war.

Getting more liquefied natural gas to Europe could be difficult, even though the U.S. has been dramatically increasing its exports in recent years. Many export facilities are already operating at capacity, and most new terminals are still only in the planning stages.

Most U.S. shipments already go to Europe, according to the Center for Liquefied Natural Gas, an industry lobbying group. Although much of the supply is already contracted out to buyers, there are still opportunities to shift its destination.

"The U.S. is in a unique position because it has flexible LNG that can be rerouted to Europe or to Asia, depending on who's willing to pay that price," said Emily McClain, gas markets analyst at Rystad.

Even if the U.S. can ship more gas to Europe, the continent may struggle to receive it. Import terminals are located in coastal areas, where there are fewer pipeline connections for distributing it.

And if all Europe's facilities were operating at capacity, the amount of gas would likely be only about two-thirds of what Russia delivers through pipelines.

EXPLAINER: What made North Korea test giant new ICBM?

By KIM TONG-HYUNG Associated Press

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SEOUL, South Korea (AP) — In firing an almost cartoonishly massive intercontinental ballistic missile into space, North Korean leader Kim Jong Un has turned back the clock to the “fire and fury” days of 2017 as he revives nuclear brinkmanship aimed at pressuring the United States to accept his country as a nuclear power and remove crippling sanctions.

Thursday’s launch of the Hwasong-17 was North Korea’s most provocative weapons test since U.S. President Joe Biden took office and underscores Kim’s determination to continue building his military while diplomacy remains frozen.

This experimental launch is worrying because the weapon is being developed to be armed with nuclear bombs and to threaten Washington, D.C., New York and much of the rest of the world. The North, however, may need more tests — including of nuclear bombs — in coming months as Kim tries to both perfect his technology and get a response from the Biden administration, which is distracted by Russia’s invasion of Ukraine and an intensifying rivalry with China.

Here’s a closer look at Kim’s new missile and what he may be up to next:

DOES SIZE MATTER?

At around 25 meters (82 feet) long, the Hwasong-17 is by some estimates the world’s largest road-mobile ballistic missile system. North Korea revealed the missile during a military parade in October 2020, and Thursday’s launch from an airport near the capital Pyongyang was its first full-range test.

Kim could be seen in images released by his state media relishing the test’s success as he walks past the missile wearing sunglasses and a black leather motorcycle jacket. He leads military officials along the airport’s runway in a scene reminiscent of a Hollywood action movie, at one point whipping his shades off to stare at the camera.

North Korea last flew an ICBM in November 2017 when it tested the Hwasong-15. That was during a run of nuclear and missile tests that led to an exchange of insults and threats between Kim and then-U.S. President Donald Trump, who said the North’s threats against the United States would be “met with fire and fury like the world has never seen.”

While Hwasong-15 demonstrated the potential to reach targets in the American homeland, the latest test displayed a missile that could possibly travel even farther.

The Hwasong-17, which was fired at a high angle to avoid the territorial waters of neighbors, reached a maximum altitude of 6,248 kilometers (3,880 miles) and traveled 1,090 kilometers (680 miles) during a 67-minute flight before landing in waters between North Korea and Japan, according to North Korea’s state media.

The flight details were similar to assessments by the South Korean and Japanese militaries and suggested that the missile could reach 15,000 kilometers (9,320 miles) when fired on a normal trajectory. That would effectively place the entire U.S. mainland within striking distance.

Extending its ICBM range is crucial for North Korea as it tries to build a more credible nuclear threat to target the United States, said Lee Choon Geun, an honorary research fellow at South Korea’s Science and Technology Policy Institute.

To strike the U.S. mainland, North Korea’s previous ICBMs would have had to pass Alaska, where the United States deploys a larger number of missile interception systems. Hwasong-17’s extra range could theoretically allow the North to avoid Alaska by traveling westward so that it reaches the U.S. mainland by way of the Atlantic Ocean, Lee said.

WILL THE WARHEAD SURVIVE?

Analyst Shin Jong-woo at South Korea’s Defense and Security Forum says the North’s development of a larger ICBM likely has much less to do with range than an ambition to eventually arm the missile with multiple warheads. That would improve the weapon’s chances of defeating missile defenses, regardless of whether it goes through Alaska.

While North Korea could be years and major technology advancements away from building a multiwarhead ICBM, it’s becoming more difficult for Washington to ignore Pyongyang’s pursuit of an arsenal that poses a vi-

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able threat to the U.S. mainland, Shin said.

It remains unclear after Thursday's launch whether the North has solved the problem of ensuring that its ICBM warheads can withstand the harsh conditions of atmospheric reentry. While extensively reporting other details of the launch, the North's state media made no mention of whether any warhead survived.

Japan's Chief Cabinet Secretary Hirokazu Matsuno said that Japan may try to retrieve missile debris to analyze the North's technology.

Both Shin and Lee expect North Korea to conduct more Hwasong-17 tests, including launches over Japan to put further pressure on Washington and allow North Korean scientists to see how the missile operates at a more normal trajectory.

The North in 2017 conducted two launches over Japan of an intermediate range missile potentially capable of reaching Guam, a major U.S. military hub in the Pacific.

IS A NUKE TEST COMING?

North Korea is showing signs that it may be restoring tunnels at its nuclear testing ground that it detonated in 2018, as Kim tried to leverage his nukes for badly needed economic benefits from the United States.

Kim held his first summit with Trump weeks later. The diplomacy derailed after their second meeting in February 2019, when the Americans rejected the North's demands for major sanctions relief in exchange for a limited surrender of its nuclear capabilities.

The site in Punggye-ri in the country's northeast was used for its sixth and most recent nuclear test in 2017. After declaring the site's closure, Kim invited foreign journalists to observe the destruction of tunnels in May 2018. But North Korea didn't invite outside experts to certify what had been destroyed.

Some South Korean analysts say the North may feel the need to resume nuclear tests in coming months to get the attention of the Biden administration, which has offered open-ended talks but showed no willingness to concede on sanctions.

The missiles the North tested this year included a purported hypersonic weapon and short-range solid-fuel missiles targeting South Korea. Analysts say the North may use another nuclear test to claim it has acquired the ability to produce a nuclear warhead small enough to fit on those missiles.

N. Korea says it test-fired biggest ICBM, US adds sanctions

By KIM TONG-HYUNG Associated Press

SEOUL, South Korea (AP) — North Korea said Friday it test-fired its biggest-yet intercontinental ballistic missile under the orders of leader Kim Jong Un, who vowed to expand the North's "nuclear war deterrent" while preparing for a "long-standing confrontation" with the United States.

The report by North Korean state media came a day after the militaries of South Korea and Japan said they detected the North launching an ICBM in its first long-range test since 2017.

The launch extended a barrage of weapons demonstrations this year that analysts say are aimed at forcing the United States to accept the idea of North Korea as a nuclear power and remove crippling sanctions against its broken economy that has been further damaged by pandemic-related difficulties.

State TV dramatized the testing process like a Hollywood movie, showing Kim walking in slow motion in front of his giant missile in sunglasses and a black leather motorcycle jacket. It edited quick cuts that alternately show Kim and other officials staring at their watches before Kim takes off his shades and nods, with the video then showing the missile being rolled out of the hangar.

The Hwasong-17, which was fired at a high angle to avoid the territorial waters of neighbors, reached a maximum altitude of 6,248 kilometers (3,880 miles) and traveled 1,090 kilometers (680 miles) during a 67-minute flight before landing in waters between North Korea and Japan, Pyongyang's official Korean Central News Agency said.

KCNA claimed the launch met its technical objectives and proved the ICBM could be operated quickly during wartime conditions.

The South Korean and Japanese militaries had announced similar flight details, which analysts say suggested

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that the missile could reach targets 15,000 kilometers (9,320 miles) away when fired on normal trajectory with a warhead weighing less than a ton. That would place the entire U.S. mainland within striking distance.

Believed to be about 25 meters (82 feet) long, the Hwasong-17 is the North's longest-range weapon and, by some estimates, the world's biggest road-mobile ballistic missile system. North Korea revealed the missile in a military parade in October 2020 and Thursday's launch was its first full-range test.

KCNA paraphrased Kim as saying that his new weapon would make the "whole world clearly aware" of the North's bolstered nuclear forces. He vowed for his military to acquire "formidable military and technical capabilities unperturbed by any military threat and blackmail and keep themselves fully ready for long-standing confrontation with the U.S. imperialists."

The agency published photos of the missile leaving a trail of orange flames as it soared from a launcher truck on an airport runway near the capital, Pyongyang, and Kim smiling and clapping as he celebrated with military officials from an observation deck.

Other images showed Kim penning a memo ordering the Hwasong-17 test flight and approving the launch. Kim has issued handwritten orders for some of the most significant weapons demonstrations of his rule over North Korea, including its previous most recent ICBM test-flight in November 2017, which capped a highly provocative run in nuclear and missile tests that triggered a verbal exchange of war threats with then-President Donald Trump.

South Korea's military responded to Thursday's launch with live-fire drills of its own missiles launched from land, a fighter jet and a ship, underscoring a revival of tensions as diplomacy remains frozen. It said it confirmed readiness to execute precision strikes against North Korea's missile launch points as well as command and support facilities.

U.S. Secretary of Defense Lloyd J. Austin held separate telephone conversations with his counterparts in South Korea and Japan where they discussed response measures to North Korean missile activities and vowed to strengthen defense cooperation, according to U.S. Defense Department statements.

Japanese Foreign Minister Yoshimasa Hayashi said he talked with South Korean counterpart Chung Eui-yong over the phone and agreed to strengthen bilateral cooperation against the North Korean threat and seek further U.N. Security Council actions against Pyongyang. Seoul's Unification Ministry, which handles inter-Korean affairs, criticized the North for breaking its self-imposed moratorium on ICBM tests.

"Whatever North Korea's intent may be, the North must immediately suspend action that create tensions on the Korean Peninsula and destabilizes the regional security situation and return to the table for dialogue and negotiations," ministry spokesperson Cha Deok-cheol said in a briefing.

The United States requested an open Security Council meeting on the launch and anticipates it on Friday, Linda Thomas-Greenfield, the U.S. ambassador to the United Nations, told reporters.

The United States also imposed fresh sanctions against five entities and individuals in Russia and North Korea over transferring sensitive items to the North's missile program, State Department spokesperson Ned Price said.

Thursday's test was North Korea's 12th round of launches this year and the most provocative since President Joe Biden took office.

North Korea's resumption of nuclear brinkmanship reflects a determination to cement its status as a nuclear power and wrest economic concessions from Washington and others from a position of strength, analysts say. Kim may also feel a need to trumpet his military accomplishments and drum up internal loyalty while the country faces economic difficulties.

The other recent tests included a purported hypersonic weapon, a long-range cruise missile and an intermediate-range missile that could reach Guam, a major U.S. military hub in the Pacific. The U.S. and South Korean militaries had expected a full-range test of the Hwasong-17 after concluding two of the recent midrange launches included components of the new ICBM.

Following its streak of nuclear and ICBM tests in 2017, Kim suspended such testing ahead of his first meeting with Trump. But the diplomacy derailed in 2019 when the Americans rejected North Korean demands for a major release of U.S.-led sanctions against the North in exchange for a limited surrender of its nuclear

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capabilities.

The ICBMs launched in three 2017 test flights demonstrated they could reach into the U.S. mainland. The larger Hwasong-17 may be intended to be armed with multiple warheads to overwhelm missile defenses.

North Korea's ruling party in January had issued a veiled threat to end Kim's moratorium on ICBM and nuclear tests, citing U.S. hostility.

South Korea's military has also detected signs North Korea may be restoring some of the nuclear-testing tunnels it detonated just before Kim's first meeting with Trump in 2018. Some experts say the North may resume nuclear testing in coming months.

Putin's war in Ukraine nearing possibly more dangerous phase

By ROBERT BURNS AP National Security Writer

WASHINGTON (AP) — President Vladimir Putin's war in Ukraine is approaching a new, potentially more dangerous phase after a month of fighting has left Russian forces stalled by an outnumbered foe. He is left with stark choices — how and where to replenish his spent ground forces, whether to attack the flow of Western arms to Ukrainian defenders, and at what cost he might escalate or widen the war.

Despite failing to score a quick victory, Putin is not relenting in the face of mounting international pressure, including sanctions that have battered his economy. The Western world is aligned largely against Putin, but there have been no indications he is losing support from the majority of the Russian public that relies predominantly on state-controlled TV for information.

Ukrainian defenders, outgunned but benefitting from years of American and NATO training and an accelerating influx of foreign arms and moral support, are showing new signs of confidence as the invading force struggles to regroup.

Russian shortcomings in Ukraine might be the biggest shock of the war so far. After two decades of modernization and professionalization, Putin's forces have proved to be ill-prepared, poorly coordinated and surprisingly stoppable. The extent of Russian troop losses is not known in detail, although NATO estimates that between 7,000 and 15,000 have died in the first four weeks — potentially as many as Russia lost in a decade of war in Afghanistan.

Robert Gates, the former CIA director and defense secretary, said Putin "has got to be stunningly disappointed" in his military's performance.

"Here we are in Ukraine seeing conscripts not knowing why they're there, not being very well trained, and just huge problems with command and control, and incredibly lousy tactics," Gates said at a forum sponsored by The OSS Society, a group honoring the World War II-era intelligence agency known as the Office of Strategic Services.

Battlefield trends are difficult to reliably discern from the outside, but some Western officials say they see potentially significant shifts. Air Vice-Marshal Mick Smeath, London's defense attaché in Washington, says British intelligence assesses that Ukrainian forces probably have retaken two towns west of Kyiv, the capital.

"It is likely that successful counterattacks by Ukraine will disrupt the ability of Russian forces to reorganize and resume their own offensive towards Kyiv," Smeath said in a brief statement Wednesday.

Ukraine's navy said Thursday it sank a large Russian landing ship near the port city of Berdyansk.

Faced with stout Ukrainian resistance, Russian forces have resorted to bombardment of urban areas but made little progress capturing the main prize — Kyiv. The Pentagon said Wednesday that some Russian troops were digging in at defensive positions outside of Kyiv rather than attempting to advance on the capital, and that in some cases the Russians have lost ground in recent days.

In an assessment published Thursday, the Atlantic Council said a major Russian breakthrough is highly unlikely.

Not long before Putin kicked off his war Feb. 24, some U.S. military officials believed he could capture Kyiv in short order — perhaps just a few days — and that he might break the Ukrainian military within a couple of weeks. Putin, too, might have expected a quick victory, given that he did not throw the bulk of his pre-staged forces, estimated at more than 150,000, into the fight in the opening days. Nor did his air force assert

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itself. He has made only limited use of electronic warfare and cyberattacks.

Putin is resorting to siege tactics against key Ukrainian cities, bombing from afar with his ground troops largely stagnant.

Stephen Biddle, a professor of international affairs at Columbia University, says Putin's shift is likely based on a hope that President Volodymyr Zelenskyy will give up rather than allow the killing and destruction to continue.

"This plan is very unlikely to work. Slaughtering innocent civilians and destroying their homes and communities is mostly just stiffening Ukrainian resistance and resolve," Biddle said in an email exchange.

Ukrainian units have begun counterattacking in some areas, according to John Kirby, the Pentagon press secretary. But the Ukrainians face an uphill battle even as the United States and its allies accelerate and widen a flow of critical weapons and supplies, including anti-aircraft missiles and armed drones. Biden has vowed to seek longer-range air defense systems for Ukraine as well as anti-ship missiles. Last week he approved a new \$800 million package of arms for Ukraine.

Philip Breedlove, a retired Air Force general who served as the top NATO commander in Europe from 2013 to 2016 and is now a Europe specialist with the Middle East Institute, said Ukraine may not win the war outright, but the outcome will be determined by what Zelenskyy is willing to accept in a negotiated settlement.

"I think it's highly unlikely that Russia is going to be defeated in detail on the battlefield," Breedlove said, because Russia has a large reserve of forces it could call on. But Ukraine might see winning as forcing Russia to pay such a high price that it is willing to strike a deal and withdraw.

"I think there is a chance of that," Breedlove said.

With the war's outcome in doubt, so too is Putin's wider goal of overturning the security order that has existed in Europe since the end of the Cold War and the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991. Putin demands that NATO refuse membership to Ukraine and other former Soviet states like Georgia, and that the alliance roll back its military presence to positions held prior to expanding into Eastern Europe.

NATO leaders have rejected Putin's demands, and with uncharacteristic speed are bolstering the allied force presence in Romania, Slovakia and Hungary, which border Ukraine, and in Bulgaria, which like Ukraine sits on the Black Sea.

"We are united in our resolve to counter Russia's attempts to destroy the foundations of international security and stability," leaders of the 30 allied nations said in a joint statement after meeting in Brussels on Thursday.

The human tragedy unfolding in Ukraine has overshadowed a worry across Europe that Putin could, by miscalculation if not by intent, escalate the conflict by using chemical or nuclear weapons in Ukraine or attempt to punish neighboring NATO nations for their support for Ukraine by attacking them militarily.

"Unfortunately there is now not a single country that can live with the illusion that they are safe and secure," Bulgarian Prime Minister Kiril Petkov said, referring to his fellow European members of NATO.

With that threat in mind, the United States and other allied countries have begun assembling combat forces in Bulgaria and other Eastern European NATO countries — not to enter the war directly but to send Putin the message that if he were to widen his war he would face allied resistance.

Speaking at a windswept training range in Bulgaria last week, U.S. Army Maj. Ryan Mannina of the 2nd Cavalry Regiment said the tension is palpable.

"We're very aware that there's a war going on only a few hundred miles from us," he said.

Some prominent Russians quit jobs, refuse to support war

NEW YORK (AP) — The resignation of a senior Russian government official and his reported move abroad wasn't the first voluntary departure of a person from a state job since the start of Russia's war with Ukraine, but it certainly was one of the most striking.

Anatoly Chubais, who was President Vladimir Putin's envoy to international organizations on sustainable development, is well known in Russia. He held high profile posts for nearly three decades, beginning under Boris Yeltsin, the first post-Soviet leader.

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A number of public figures have condemned the invasion of Ukraine and left their posts at state-run institutions and companies, which could signal divisions in Russia's official ranks over the war. So far there have been no indications that the resignations have reached into Putin's inner circle.

The handful of departures came as Putin blasted those opposing his course as "scum and traitors," which Russian society would spit out "like a gnat."

Some of the high-profile figures who have turned their backs on the Kremlin because of the war:

ANATOLY CHUBAIS

On Wednesday, the Kremlin confirmed media reports about the resignation of Chubais, 66, who was the architect of Yeltsin's privatization campaign. The reports, citing anonymous sources, said he stepped down because of the war. He hasn't publicly commented on his resignation.

Under Yeltsin, Chubais reportedly recommended the administration hire Putin, a move that was widely seen as an important stepping stone in Putin's career. Putin became president of Russia in 2000, when Yeltsin stepped down.

Chubais also was deputy prime minister from 1994 to 1996 and first deputy prime minister from 1997-98.

The Russian business newspaper Kommersant reported Wednesday that Chubais was seen in Istanbul this week and ran a photo of a man resembling him at a Turkish ATM. Since the start of the invasion, Istanbul has taken in many Russians looking to relocate.

ARKADY DVORKOVICH

Arkady Dvorkovich once served as Russia's deputy prime minister and is currently chairman of the International Chess Federation, or FIDE. He criticized the war with Ukraine in comments made to Mother Jones magazine on March 14 and came under fire from the Kremlin's ruling party.

"Wars are the worst things one might face in life. Any war. Anywhere. Wars do not just kill priceless lives. Wars kill hopes and aspirations, freeze or destroy relationships and connections. Including this war," he said.

Dvorkovich added that FIDE was "making sure there are no official chess activities in Russia or Belarus, and that players are not allowed to represent Russia or Belarus in official or rated events until the war is over and Ukrainian players are back in chess."

FIDE banned a top Russian player for six months for his vocal support of Putin and the invasion.

Two days after Dvorkovich's comments, a top official in the United Russia party demanded that he be fired as chair of the state-backed Skolkovo Foundation. Last week, the foundation reported that Dvorkovich decided to step down.

LILIA GILDEYEVA

Lilia Gildeyeva was a longtime anchor at the state-funded NTV channel, which for two decades has carefully toed the Kremlin line. She quit the job and left Russia shortly after the invasion.

She told the independent news site The Insider this week that she decided "to stop all this" on the first day of the Feb. 24 invasion.

"It was an immediate nervous breakdown," she said. "For several days I couldn't pull myself together. The decision was probably obvious right away. There won't be any more work."

Gildeyeva said news coverage on state TV channels was tightly controlled by the authorities, with channels getting orders from officials. She admitted to going along with it since 2014, when Russia annexed Crimea and began supporting a separatist insurgency in Ukraine.

"When you gradually give in to yourself, you don't notice the depth of the fall. And at some point, you find yourself face to face with the picture that leads to Feb. 24," she said.

ZHANNA AGALAKOVA

Zhanna Agalakova was a journalist for another state-run TV channel, Channel One, spending more than 20 years there and working as an anchor and then a correspondent in Paris, New York and other Western countries.

News reports about Agalakova quitting her job began emerging three weeks after the invasion. This week, she gave a news conference in Paris confirming the reports and explaining her decision.

"We have come to a point when on TV, on the news, we're seeing the story of only one person — or the group of people around him. All we see are those in power. In our news, we don't have the country. In our

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news, we don't have Russia," Agalakova said.

Referring to the 2014 annexation of Crimea and the support of the separatists in Ukraine, she said that she "could not hide from the propaganda anymore," even as a foreign correspondent. Agalakova said she had to "only talk about the bad things happening in the U.S."

"My reports didn't contain lies, but that's exactly how propaganda works: You take reliable facts, mix them up, and a big lie comes together. Facts are true, but their mix is propaganda," she said.

TIPPING OFF: Peacocks looking to strut their stuff vs Purdue

By The Associated Press undefined

A look at what's happening in the NCAA Tournament today:

GAME OF THE DAY

SAINT PETER'S VS. PURDUE

This is where the Saint Peter's storybook run should end, right? Powerful Purdue with 7-foot-4 Zach Edey is favored by 12 1/2 points, according to FanDuel Sportsbook. But this is March, and anything can happen.

Count on fans all around the country, plus a packed arena in Philadelphia, to be rooting for an upset in this East semifinal. No doubt plenty will drive down the New Jersey Turnpike to pull for the Peacocks to become the first 15 seed to make the Elite Eight. As it is, they're only the third team seeded so low to go so far.

Saint Peter's plays great defense, but will have to get creative to keep third-seeded Purdue in check. The Big Ten Boilermakers have weapons all over the court in likely NBA lottery pick Jaden Ivey, 6-10 Trevion Williams, deadeye 3-point shooter Sasha Stefanovic and Edey.

For the little team from Jersey City, New Jersey, a lot of eyes will be on plucky point guard Doug Edert. Especially his mustache, which has attracted so much attention it now has its own Twitter account.

A BREWIN' INJURY

UCLA's Jaime Jaquez Jr., who sprained his right ankle in the second round against Saint Mary's, is hopeful he'll be able to play in the fourth-seeded Bruins' East semifinal against No. 8 seed North Carolina.

"He's going to want to try to play," UCLA coach Mick Cronin said. "The question is can he be effective? Playing is one thing. Can he play well?"

Jaquez is averaging 14 points per game for the season, but is averaging 20.5 over the last eight games.

LET'S PLAY AT MY HOUSE

Providence coach Ed Cooley says the Friars' game against No. 1 seed Kansas in a Midwest semifinal is a great chance to show their stuff. He also wishes his team could play more of the sport's biggest brands.

Asked Thursday why the Friars don't schedule more high-profile programs, Cooley said, "The reason we don't play the bluebloods is because they don't want to come to the Dunkin' Donuts Center. Let's call it exactly what it is. We'd love that opportunity and embrace that opportunity."

Among the all-time winningest programs, excluding those that currently or previously played in the same conference as Providence, only North Carolina has played on the Friars' home court. That was in 1978.

JUST CALL ME 'GENERAL'

You've got to admire Tyrese Hunter's confidence — and courage.

The freshman did the unthinkable upon his arrival at Iowa State last summer. He told his teammates to call him "General."

Oh, the audacity.

"I was like, 'Who is this kid coming in and giving himself a nickname? I ain't never heard of that,'" teammate Izaiah Brockington said.

Hunter, whose 11th-seeded team plays No. 10 seed Miami in Chicago, said he started calling himself the "General" at a young age and that the reason is self-explanatory.

"As a point guard, you've got to demand the game, control the game," he said. "These guys, they took it on and they took it serious, like you're the 'General,' you're the one that keeps everybody under control throughout the game. So it was big. It started as a joke, but now I feel like that's something people see me as."

Hunter is third in the Big 12 in both assists and steals and was chosen the conference's freshman of the

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year. His teammates say his nickname has stuck.

"Tyrese has done a great job taking control of the game on offense and defense and bringing everybody together," guard Gabe Kalscheur said. "He's the one -- he's the general on the floor, like his name is."

SWEET HOME CHICAGO

Miami's Charlie Moore has come full circle a couple times in his college career.

The Chicago native started out at California, transferred to Kansas and then back to the Windy City to play at DePaul to help his family care for his dad, Curtis, who had a stroke in 2015. Then, with his father's encouragement, it was on to Miami for his final year.

Now he's back in his hometown to play Iowa State. The point guard played one of his best games of the season in the second round with 15 points, eight assists and nine rebounds in an upset of Auburn.

"It's been a unique experience with me," he said. "But going through what I went through, going from college to college, I've learned a lot. I don't regret anything. It made me who I am today as a person and I'm pretty happy with who I am."

Notae, Arkansas muscle top overall seed Gonzaga out of NCAAs

By JANIE McCAULEY AP Sports Writer

SAN FRANCISCO (AP) — For 40 frenzied minutes, JD Notae, Jaylin Williams and Arkansas played a maddening, muscular style on both ends that took Gonzaga out of its game — and right out of the NCAA Tournament far earlier than these Zags expected.

Notae scored 21 points despite missing 20 shots and the determined, fourth-seeded Razorbacks dashed the No. 1 overall seed Bulldogs' title hopes with a 74-68 win in the Sweet 16 on Thursday night.

"We've been disrespected the whole year, so it's just another thing for us," Williams said. "We saw everything they were saying, we felt like they were dancing before the game. That was disrespect for us. We just came into the game playing hard and we had a chip on our shoulder. Every game we do."

When the final buzzer sounded, Notae tossed the game ball into the air in triumph, while Williams flexed and roared near midcourt. Coach Eric Musselman made his way into the stands to find his mother, Kris, for a celebratory embrace after she watched her son in person for the first time coaching the Razorbacks.

After a throwback performance from the program that once promised "40 Minutes of Hell," these Hogs relished in pure bliss.

Notae finished with six rebounds, six assists, three steals and even swatted a pair of shots for the Razorbacks (28-8), who reached the Elite Eight for a second straight year and will face second-seeded Duke on Saturday, hoping to deny retiring coach Mike Krzyzewski one last trip to the Final Four.

Drew Timme scored 25 points but couldn't rally the normally high-scoring Bulldogs (28-4), who for the second straight season were favored to win that elusive national title but couldn't keep up with Arkansas' athleticism and fight. Gonzaga had been undefeated last year before losing to Baylor in the national title game.

"We just wanted to be physical, plain and simple," Musselman said. "We wanted them to feel bodies. Obviously they played a really tough schedule early in the season, but it's been a long time in conference play since they faced a team like us."

An emotional Timme addressed his teammates afterward, then fought tears during a postgame news conference.

"It was a hell of a ride," Timme said. "It didn't end up the way we wanted but we came to play hard. It was their night."

Arkansas continually challenged 7-foot freshman Chet Holmgren in the paint, and the lanky NBA prospect fouled out with 3:29 remaining. Holmgren scored all 11 of his points after halftime and had 14 rebounds in what might have been his final college game.

Notae shot 9 of 29 overall and 2 for 12 from 3-point range yet still did a little bit of everything for Arkansas. The senior guard's 3 with 6:38 left made it 59-50, and the Razorbacks held on from there.

Au'Diese Toney's one-handed slam with 1 second left punctuated the victory.

Toney converted a three-point play with 8:36 left by going right at Holmgren to draw his fourth foul and send

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him to the bench. The big man returned at the 6:46 mark but Notae drove at him three minutes later and drew the freshman's fifth foul. Holmgren raised his arms in protest.

During one key sequence, Notae scored, then sneaked in from behind Timme for a steal as Williams held his ground on the block. Notae swatted an early shot and made a steal to get his team going. He hit the floor repeatedly to corral loose balls.

"He kept the momentum our way," Trey Wade said.

Gonzaga trailed at the break for just the fifth time this season and never found the shooting touch that made the Zags the top scoring team in the nation at 87.8 points per game. The Zags shot 37.5% and went 5 of 21 from 3-point range. Andrew Nembhard was a non-factor with seven points on 2-of-11 shooting.

"It's always so tough when it finally ends, especially short of the goal we all had," coach Mark Few said. "First time we lost in this round in quite a while. All the credit goes to Arkansas. Their defense was tough to get any rhythm against. To me that was the difference in the game."

Williams took a charge late in the first half — his 45th of the season — and drove through the lane for an emphatic dunk during a 9-0 run by Arkansas in which the Zags were 0 for 5 with three turnovers.

Williams had 15 points and 12 rebounds while Wade also scored 15.

BAY AREA MEMORY

Gonzaga's last two visits to the Bay Area have been forgettable. The Bulldogs' previous visit was still plenty fresh before Thursday — a 67-57 loss at rival Saint Mary's on Feb. 26 for their first defeat since Dec. 4.

FACING NO. 1

The Hogs earned their first ever win against a No. 1 team in the NCAA Tournament.

Arkansas had been 0-5 all-time against the nation's top-ranked team and 2-11 overall, with one of those wins coming this season. The Razorbacks beat then-No. 1 Auburn 76-73 in overtime on Feb. 8.

BIG PICTURE

Arkansas: Musselman coached both the NBA's Golden State Warriors and Sacramento Kings in the 2000s, so this was a homecoming of sorts. His mother flew in from San Diego. ... Hogs assistant Keith Smart also coached with both franchises. ... Arkansas missed its initial four 3-point tries before Wade hit from deep at the 10:36 mark of the first half. ... The Razorbacks lost to eventual champion Baylor in last year's Elite Eight. ... Arkansas improved to 8-5 in Sweet 16 games.

Gonzaga: The Zags committed 15 turnovers, resulting in 10 Arkansas points. ... Gonzaga's seven straight Sweet 16s is the longest active run to this round. ... The Zags won the only previous meeting between the schools, 91-81 at the Maui Invitational in November 2013.

Duke beats Texas Tech 78-73 to send Coach K to Elite 8

By JOSH DUBOW AP Sports Writer

SAN FRANCISCO (AP) — Mike Krzyzewski has spent more than four decades at Duke telling his players what to do, with championship-level results.

With his Hall of Fame career in danger of coming to an end, Krzyzewski let his players dictate the game-closing defensive strategy of switching from an uncharacteristic zone defense into Duke's famous man-to-man.

The key defensive stops and two late baskets by Jeremy Roach moved Krzyzewski within one win of his record-setting 13th trip to the Final Four in his farewell season with a 78-73 win over Texas Tech on Thursday night.

Krzyzewski said the players came to him during a late timeout like a "Catholic boys' choir," asking in unison for the switch to man that led to three straight stops and turned the game in Duke's favor.

"With this team they're so young and they're still growing," Krzyzewski said. "Whenever they can own something, they're going to do it better than if we just run it. When they said that, I felt they're going to own it. They'll make it work, and that's probably more important than strategy during that time. So that's the way I looked at it."

Roach did the rest with two jumpers during a 7-0 run as the steady sophomore came through in the clutch for a second straight game to send second-seeded Duke (31-6) into an Elite Eight matchup against fourth-

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seeded Arkansas.

Paolo Banchemo led Duke with 22 points, Mark Williams scored 16 and Roach added 15 as the Blue Devils made their final eight shots from the field to hold off third-seeded Texas Tech (27-10) and give Coach K his record 100th NCAA Tournament victory.

"I would say all year in the biggest moments we've always stepped up, and there's no bigger moment than this," Banchemo said. "I don't know about these guys, but I've never played in a basketball game like that."

As compelling as the action on the court was in this taut West Region semifinal, the story of this Blue Devils run has surrounded the farewell tour of their Hall of Fame coach.

Krzyzewski announced last June he would retire after this season. After missing the tournament last year, Duke was back with a roster filled with NBA prospects and capable of delivering Krzyzewski his sixth title.

Duke played from behind for much of the first half but was much sharper offensively in the second half. Williams got free for three easy baskets early in the half to get the Blue Devils rolling.

Then the vocal Duke contingent on hand for the first NCAA Tournament games in San Francisco since 1939 made its presence known midway through the half when A.J. Griffin tied the game at 47 with his third 3-pointer and Banchemo followed with a jumper that gave Duke the lead.

But a Red Raiders team featuring four super seniors and five players with more than 120 career games didn't go away and the game stayed tight as Duke used the zone to negate Texas Tech's strength advantage.

"They have a Hall of Fame coach in Coach K over there and he was trying to find a way to slow us down because we were scoring," guard Adonis Arms said. "I just think if we would have just recognized it a little quicker, it would have been fine. But it was a great adjustment from Coach K."

Kevin McCullar and Banchemo traded 3s with Banchemo's long-range shot putting Duke up 69-68 with less than three minutes to play.

That's when Duke made the switch back to man defense. Roach made two jumpers and the defense did the rest with Krzyzewski even throwing in a patented Duke floor slap for good measure. Bryson Williams had a shot blocked by Mark Williams, committed a turnover and shot an airball.

"The slapping the floor, what the hell? Why not?" Krzyzewski said. "Our guys really wanted that because it's kind of like a cross the bridge to the brotherhood. They can now say they did that."

Griffin's two free throws with 12.9 seconds to play gave Duke a 77-73 lead. Arms then missed a 3-pointer and Krzyzewski gave an emphatic fist pump to celebrate his 17th trip to the Elite Eight.

Bryson Williams scored 21 points to lead Texas Tech and McCullar added 17. Kevin Obanor had 10 points and 10 rebounds for his sixth double-double in six career tournament games.

BIG PICTURE

Texas Tech: Coach Mark Adams' first season has been a remarkable one as he brought in four senior transfers after taking over what had been a thinned-out roster following Chris Beard's departure for Texas. The Red Raiders made it to their third Sweet 16 in the past four tournaments.

"I thought it was an unbelievable year," Adams said. "It's just a team that just reached all kinds of heights no one ever thought was possible."

Duke: The Blue Devils have been carrying a heavy responsibility trying to cap Krzyzewski's final season with a championship. The young players showed some nerves early, missing four of five shots and committing three turnovers, leading to a quick timeout by Krzyzewski. They quickly steadied things and got right back into the game but struggled to generate any consistent offense until the second half.

BLOCK OR CHARGE?

There was a lighthearted moment in the first half when Roach came up with a loose ball and was trying to take it up court in transition. Roach stepped on the sideline and then ran into an official before falling down right next to Duke's bench.

The official ruled for the ball to go back to Texas Tech but Krzyzewski jokingly signaled for a block on the referee instead.

UP NEXT

Duke will play Arkansas on Saturday for a spot in the Final Four. The only previous tournament meeting between the schools came in the 1994 title game that Arkansas won 76-72.

Experts worry about how US will see next COVID surge coming

By MIKE STOBBE AP Medical Writer

NEW YORK (AP) — As coronavirus infections rise in some parts of the world, experts are watching for a potential new COVID-19 surge in the U.S. — and wondering how long it will take to detect.

Despite disease monitoring improvements over the last two years, they say, some recent developments don't bode well:

—As more people take rapid COVID-19 tests at home, fewer people are getting the gold-standard tests that the government relies on for case counts.

—The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention will soon use fewer labs to look for new variants.

—Health officials are increasingly focusing on hospital admissions, which rise only after a surge has arrived.

—A wastewater surveillance program remains a patchwork that cannot yet be counted on for the data needed to understand coming surges.

—White House officials say the government is running out of funds for vaccines, treatments and testing.

"We're not in a great situation," said Jennifer Nuzzo, a Brown University pandemic researcher.

Scientists acknowledge that the wide availability of vaccines and treatments puts the nation in a better place than when the pandemic began, and that monitoring has come a long way.

For example, scientists this week touted a 6-month-old program that tests international travelers flying into four U.S. airports. Genetic testing of a sample on Dec. 14 turned up a coronavirus variant — the descendant of omicron known as BA.2 — seven days earlier than any other reported detection in the U.S.

More good news: U.S. cases, hospitalizations and deaths have been falling for weeks.

But it's different elsewhere. The World Health Organization this week reported that the number of new coronavirus cases increased two weeks in a row globally, likely because COVID-19 prevention measures have been halted in numerous countries and because BA.2 spreads more easily.

Some public health experts aren't certain what that means for the U.S.

BA.2 accounts for a growing share of U.S. cases, the CDC said — more than one-third nationally and more than half in the Northeast. Small increases in overall case rates have been noted in New York, and in hospital admissions in New England.

Some of the northern U.S. states with the highest rates of BA.2, however, have some of the lowest case rates, noted Katriona Shea of Penn State University.

Dr. James Musser, an infectious disease specialist at Houston Methodist, called the national case data on BA.2 "murky." He added: "What we really need is as much real-time data as possible ... to inform decisions."

Here's what COVID-19 trackers are looking at and what worries scientists about them.

TEST RESULTS

Tallies of test results have been at the core of understanding coronavirus spread from the start, but they have always been flawed.

Initially, only sick people got tested, meaning case counts missed people who had no symptoms or were unable to get swabbed.

Home test kits became widely available last year, and demand took off when the omicron wave hit. But many people who take home tests don't report results to anyone. Nor do health agencies attempt to gather them.

Mara Aspinall is managing director of an Arizona-based consulting company that tracks COVID-19 testing trends. She estimates that in January and February, about 8 million to 9 million rapid home tests were being done each day on average — four to six times the number of PCR tests.

Nuzzo said: "The case numbers are not as much a reflection of reality as they once were."

HUNTING FOR VARIANTS

In early 2021, the U.S. was far behind other countries in using genetic tests to look for worrisome virus mutations.

A year ago, the agency signed deals with 10 large labs to do that genomic sequencing. The CDC will be reducing that program to three labs over the next two months.

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The weekly volume of sequences performed through the contracts was much higher during the omicron wave in December and January, when more people were getting tested, and already has fallen to about 35,000. By late spring, it will be down to 10,000, although CDC officials say the contracts allow the volume to increase to more than 20,000 if necessary.

The agency also says turnaround time and quality standards have been improved in the new contracts, and that it does not expect the change will hurt its ability to find new variants.

Outside experts expressed concern.

"It's really quite a substantial reduction in our baseline surveillance and intelligence system for tracking what's out there," said Bronwyn MacInnis, director of pathogen genomic surveillance at the Broad Institute of MIT and Harvard.

SEWAGE SURVEILLANCE

An evolving monitoring system is looking for signs of coronavirus in sewage, which could potentially capture brewing infections.

Researchers have linked wastewater samples to the number of positive COVID-19 tests a week later, suggesting health officials could get an early glimpse at infection trends.

Some health departments also have used sewage to look for variants. New York City, for example, detected signals of the omicron variant in a sample taken on Nov. 21 — about 10 days before the first case was reported in the U.S.

But experts note the system doesn't cover the entire country. It also doesn't distinguish who is infected.

"It's a really important and promising strategy, no doubt. But the ultimate value is still probably yet to be understood," said Dr. Jeff Duchin, the health officer for Seattle/King County, Washington.

HOSPITAL DATA

Last month, the CDC outlined a new set of measures for deciding whether to lift mask-wearing rules, focusing less on positive test results and more on hospitals.

Hospital admissions are a lagging indicator, given that a week or more can pass between infection and hospitalization. But a number of researchers believe the change is appropriate. They say hospital data is more reliable and more easily interpreted than case counts.

The lag also is not as long as one might think. Some studies have suggested many people wait to get tested. And when they finally do, the results aren't always immediate.

Spencer Fox, a University of Texas data scientist who is part of a group that uses hospital and cellphone data to forecast COVID-19 for Austin, said "hospital admissions were the better signal" for a surge than test results.

There are concerns, however, about future hospital data.

If the federal government lifts its public health emergency declaration, officials will lose the ability to compel hospitals to report COVID-19 data, a group of former CDC directors recently wrote. They urged Congress to pass a law that will provide enduring authorities "so we will not risk flying blind as health threats emerge."

Supreme Court nominee's 'empathy' is flashpoint for Senate

By LISA MASCARO AP Congressional Correspondent

WASHINGTON (AP) — Empathy is not a quality many Republican senators want to see in the next Supreme Court justice.

Traditionally considered an admirable attribute, the ability to empathize with another's plight has become a touchstone for GOP opposition to Judge Ketanji Brown Jackson.

The first Black woman nominated to become a justice, Jackson brings a lifetime of experience never seen before on the high court, which has been filled almost exclusively by white men for most of its 233-year history.

Democrats praise President Joe Biden's choice of the Harvard-educated lawyer and appellate court judge as long overdue, making the judicial branch begin to look more like America.

Perhaps nothing more dramatically captured Jackson's landmark moment than the image of the 51-year-old Black judge, tears streaming down her cheek, as the only Black member of the Senate Judiciary Committee spoke of the "joy" her nomination brings to him and so many others.

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But on the other side of the Senate, Republicans lining up to oppose the historic nomination are warning that Jackson carries too much empathy to the job.

Jackson, Republicans have argued, shows compassion for criminal defendants she represented as a lawyer, and they have questioned whether that compassion extends to victims. They say she sentences criminals — in particular, child pornography defendants — too leniently as a judge, despite fact checks of her record that show she's largely in line with protocol in most cases. They worry Jackson's empathy will cloud her judgment on the high court.

"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," said Sen. Thom Tillis, R-N.C.

Sen. Tom Cotton, R-Ark., said he was looking for a justice "who will make decisions based on the law, not based on personal experiences or preferences, not on empathy."

It's not the first time the concept of empathy has been wielded as a disqualifying weapon against a nominee for the high court. Nor is it the only time the empathy standard was applied to the women tapped for the bench, rather than the much longer list of men.

More than a decade ago, Republicans lodged similar arguments against another trailblazing minority woman nominated by a Democrat to the Supreme Court — Sonia Sotomayor, the first Latina justice, a Puerto Rican-American who grew up in the Bronx.

Barack Obama popularized the idea of making empathy among the core criteria he was looking for when the newly elected president was seeking a nominee to replace the retiring Justice David Souter, himself among the more empathetic thinkers on the court.

At the time, Obama said he would seek "someone who understands that justice isn't about some abstract legal theory or footnote in a case book. It is also about how our laws affect the daily realities of people's lives."

"I view that quality of empathy, of understanding and identifying with people's hopes and struggles, as an essential ingredient for arriving at just decisions and outcomes," Obama said.

It was May 2009, and Obama's young White House was just taking shape. Soon the qualities the first Black president sought for a Supreme Court justice became what's now referred to as the "empathy standard."

In nominating the Yale-educated Sotomayor, Obama said her mastery of the law and ability to render impartial justice were not enough. "We need something more," he said.

For this, Obama drew from the former Supreme Court Justice Oliver Wendell Holmes, who he quoted as saying, "The life of the law has not been logic; it has been experience."

What started as lofty goals and a nod to history, the "empathy standard" swiftly transformed into conservative legal catchphrase for liberal judges.

Months later at Sotomayor's confirmation hearing, the top Republican on the Senate Judiciary Committee, the conservative Sen. Jeff Sessions of Alabama, warned of the slippery slope of confirming justices based on the empathy standard.

"I am afraid our system will only be further corrupted, I have to say, as a result of President Obama's views that, in tough cases, the critical ingredient for a judge is the 'depth and breadth of one's empathy,'" said Sessions, who would go on to become former President Donald Trump's first attorney general.

"I fear that this 'empathy standard' is another step down the road to a liberal activist," he said.

This past week, Jackson testified at her Senate Judiciary Committee hearing, fielding more than 20 hours of questions from senators about her views, her record and approach to the law.

The mother of two told senators she doesn't hold to a particular judicial philosophy but rather a method for scrutinizing cases, striving to keep a neutral approach and "stay in my lane" as a judge rather than veering into policy making.

Democratic Sen. Dianne Feinstein of California said she has "a real sense of empathy."

The American Bar Association's standing committee on the federal judiciary gave her its highest rating, "well qualified." The Fraternal Order of Police, the large law enforcement group, said she has "earned this."

Since its founding in 1789, the Supreme Court has had just two Black justices — the late Thurgood Marshall, the storied civil rights leader, confirmed in 1967, and Clarence Thomas, who joined in 1991.

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Inside the Senate committee room was a tense if sometimes celebratory atmosphere, with civil rights leaders in attendance marking the milestone.

At one point, after Jackson had wiped away her tears, the youngest senator, Jon Ossoff, D-Ga., told Jackson there are "millions and millions of people who are watching and cheering you on right at this very moment." Around the world, he said, people are "seeing what is possible in America."

Jackson has worked in public and private practice, and has been confirmed by the Senate three times before — as a federal judge, on the U.S. sentencing commission and in her current job on the appellate court.

In the 50-50 Senate, it is no longer necessary to muster broad support for Supreme Court nominees, after a Trump-era rules change that allows for confirmation with 51 votes.

Democrats have the slim majority with Vice President Kamala Harris able to break a tie, and are on track to confirm Biden's pick by time senators leave for a scheduled spring recess April 8, even if all Republicans are opposed.

Senate Republican leader Mitch McConnell announced after the hearings he would oppose Jackson's nomination, setting the tone for the other GOP senators to follow.

McConnell had laid out his concerns days earlier: "If any judicial nominee really does have special empathy for some parties over others, that's not an asset. It's a problem."

Russian officials charged in years-old energy sector hacks

By ERIC TUCKER Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — Four Russian officials, including hackers with a government intelligence agency, have been charged with the malicious hacking of critical infrastructure around the globe including the U.S. energy and aviation sectors between 2012 and 2018, the U.S. Justice Department and British Foreign Office announced Thursday.

Among the thousands of computers targeted in some 135 countries were machines at a Kansas nuclear power plant - whose business network was compromised - and at a Saudi petro-chemical plant in 2017 where the hackers overrode safety controls, officials said.

Though the intrusions date back years, the indictments were unsealed as the FBI has raised fresh alarms about efforts by Russian hackers to scan the networks of U.S. energy firms for vulnerabilities that could be exploited during Russia's war against Ukraine.

The Foreign Office suggested in an announcement on its website that the timing — exposing "the global scope" of hacking by the KGB's successor spy agency — was directly related to Russian President Vladimir Putin's "unprovoked and illegal war in Ukraine."

Additionally, multiple U.S. federal agencies on Thursday published a joint advisory on the hacking campaign, alerting energy executives to take steps to protect their systems from Russian operatives.

"The DOJ is firing warning shots at people who run Russia's cyberattack capability," tweeted threat intelligence analyst John Hultquist at the cybersecurity firm Mandiant.

"Russian state-sponsored hackers pose a serious and persistent threat to critical infrastructure both in the United States and around the world," Deputy Attorney General Lisa Monaco said in a statement. "Although the criminal charges unsealed today reflect past activity, they make crystal clear the urgent ongoing need for American businesses to harden their defenses and remain vigilant."

None of the four defendants is in custody, though a Justice Department official who briefed reporters said officials deemed it better to make the investigation public rather than wait for the "distant possibility" of arrests. The State Department on Thursday announced rewards of up to \$10 million for information leading to the "identification or location" of any of the four defendants.

The indicted Russians include an employee at a Russian military research institute accused of working with co-conspirators in 2017 to hack the systems of a foreign refinery and to install malicious software, twice resulting in emergency shutdowns of operations. The British Foreign Office identified the target as Saudi and said the military research institute was being sanctioned. The so-called "Triton" case — affecting the Petro Rabigh complex on the Red Sea — has been well-documented by cybersecurity researchers as one of the

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most dangerous on record. The malware was designed with a goal of inflicting physical damage by disabling a safety shutdown function that would normally stop a refinery from "catastrophic failure," a Justice Department official said.

The employee, Evgeny Viktorovich Gladkikh, also tried to break into the computers of an unidentified U.S. company that operates multiple oil refineries, according to an indictment that was filed in June 2021 and was unsealed Thursday.

The three other defendants are alleged hackers with Russia's Federal Security Service, or FSB — which conducts domestic intelligence and counterintelligence — and members of a hacking unit known to cybersecurity researchers as Dragonfly.

The hackers are accused of installing malware into legitimate software updates on more than 17,000 devices in the U.S. and other countries. Their supply chain attacks between 2012 and 2014 targeted oil and gas firms, nuclear power plants and utility and power transmission companies, prosecutors said.

The goal, according to the indictment, was to "establish and maintain surreptitious unauthorized access to networks, computers, and devices of companies and other entities in the energy sector." That access would enable the Russian government to alter and damage systems if it wanted to, the indictment said.

A second phase of the attack, officials said, involved spear-phishing attacks targeting more than 500 U.S. and international companies, as well as U.S. government agencies including the Nuclear Regulatory Commission.

The hackers also successfully compromised the business network — though not the control systems — of the Wolf Creek Nuclear Operating Corporation in Burlington, Kansas, which operates a nuclear power plant.

The British Foreign Office said the FSB hackers had also targeted U.K. energy companies and stolen data from the U.S. aviation sector and other key U.S. targets.

AP-NORC poll: Low marks for Biden on economy as prices rise

By JOSH BOAK and EMILY SWANSON Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — A majority of Americans say they don't blame President Joe Biden for high gasoline prices, but they're giving his economic leadership low marks amid fears of inflation and deep pessimism about economic conditions.

About 7 in 10 Americans say the nation's economy is in bad shape, and close to two-thirds disapprove of Biden's handling of the economy, according to a new poll from The Associated Press-NORC Center for Public Affairs Research. In addition, Americans are more likely to say his policies have hurt the economy than helped it.

Yet less than half say the jump in gas prices is Biden's fault, a reflection of how the country is processing Russian President Vladimir Putin's invasion of Ukraine and the resulting increase in oil costs.

The polls hints at a paradox in which the public views Biden as being in power without necessarily being in control. His hopes for a lasting economic renaissance have faded as Americans cope with higher food and energy costs. And the promise of a country no longer under the pandemic's sway has been supplanted by the uncertainty of war in Europe.

"It's going to get worse before it gets better," said Adam Newago, 53, a truck driver from Eau Claire, Wisconsin. He sees inflation as spiraling outward with higher fuel prices increasing the costs of shipping and ultimately raising prices across the broader economy.

Newago said he reluctantly voted for President Donald Trump in 2020, while his wife cast her ballot for Biden. He feels that inflation at a 40-year high and the withdrawal of U.S. troops from Afghanistan have led to a "mess."

Overall, 65% of Americans disapprove of Biden's handling of the nation's economy, including 96% of Republicans and 36% of Democrats. The overall share saying they disapprove is up from 57% in December of 2021 and from 47% last July.

Gas prices stand above other types of inflation when it comes to the worries ordinary Americans have about price increases impacting their bottom lines. A hefty 68% said they're very concerned about gas prices, while 59% expressed the same degree of worry about rising grocery prices.

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Gas prices were high before Putin began amassing forces at the Ukrainian border, but they've risen since the start of the war without producing a slew of additional oil to come onto the market.

Tammy Baca, 52, who works in education in Fort Worth, Texas, said that prices at the pump are a function of the geopolitics.

"You're going to have to suffer, you know?" said Baca, a Democrat. "It's almost like we're pitching in for wartime effort, without even being at war."

Many Americans agree, with 55% saying it's a bigger priority for the U.S. to effectively sanction Russia than to limit damage to the U.S. economy.

Shelter is the dominant expenditure in the government's measure of inflation, but less than half of Americans — 40% — say they're very concerned about higher than usual housing costs impacting their household finances. Another 24% are somewhat concerned.

Fifty-three percent of Americans also say they're very concerned about higher prices for other goods and services.

Overall, Americans are more likely to say that higher than usual gas prices are more because of factors outside of Biden's control than because of Biden's policies, 55% to 44%.

Still, more think Biden's policies are hurting the economy than helping it, 48% to 24%. Another 28% say they haven't made much difference. The rejection comes after Biden steered a \$1.9 trillion coronavirus relief package and \$1 trillion infrastructure package through Congress, though his agenda on economic equity and clean energy stalled in Congress last December.

For Jennifer Smith, the relief package was a financial lifeline. The 50-year-old lives off disability and lives with her daughter in Zanesville, Ohio. Smith voted for Trump in 2020, but she disliked the Jan. 6, 2020, assault on the U.S. Capitol. She not only received a direct payment from the government but \$250 monthly in the expanded child tax credit — both of which have disappeared while the inflation has stayed.

"I know this sounds crazy, but I'm thrilled to be able to pay bills," Smith said. "With the way it is right now, I can't without borrowing, robbing Peter to pay Paul."

Eighty-eight percent of Democrats say high gas prices are outside Biden's control, while 79% of Republicans specifically blame his policies, which many said in follow-up interviews limited U.S. energy production. Most Republicans say Biden's policies are hurting the economy, but among Democrats, 45% say they're helping and 39% say they're not making much difference.

The poll suggests support among Democrats for Biden's economic leadership is decidedly lukewarm, especially among those under 45. That's a meaningful difference from the loyalty that the GOP expressed for Trump — who in March 2018 enjoyed an 84% approval on the economy from his fellow Republicans.

In yet another sign of how partisanship is shaping views of the economy and inflation, Republicans are more likely than Democrats to say they're very concerned about the impact on their households from higher prices for gas, groceries, housing, and other goods and services.

Overall, 69% of Americans say that the nation's economy is in poor shape, compared with 31% who say it's good. The share saying the economy is poor has ticked up slightly from 64% in December. Still, 63% call their personal financial situation good, a number that has stayed remarkably steady since before the COVID-19 pandemic.

As for Biden, his supporters say he's been held back by Congress and the challenges created by the disruptions and crises that are part of the U.S. presidency.

Mary Payne, 75, a nurse in California, said she wouldn't say Biden's performance has been "excellent," though it's been "good" and "probably fair." She said she opposed Trump in 2020 and views the Republicans right now as obstructive.

"I don't know how many roadblocks are put up for him doing what he wants to do," Payne said. "I think the heart is there. I think that he cares."

EXPLAINER: How US is expanding aid to Ukrainian refugees

By BEN FOX Associated Press

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WASHINGTON (AP) — The United States is expanding efforts to help Ukrainian refugees. It has agreed to accept up to 100,000 people escaping from the war and to increase support for Eastern European nations that have taken in most of the people fleeing Russian forces. It's a modest number relative to the need, with an estimated 3.6 million refugees and millions more displaced within Ukraine. It's also modest by historical standards, far less than the number who came from Southeast Asia decades ago.

A look at the situation:

WHAT WAS ANNOUNCED?

While in Brussels to meet with European allies, President Joe Biden said the United States would admit up to 100,000 Ukrainian refugees and provide \$1 billion in humanitarian assistance to countries affected by Russia's invasion of Ukraine.

The financial support is important because most of the approximately 3.6 million refugees who have fled Ukraine are in neighboring countries such as Poland, Moldova, and Romania and are posing a substantial burden.

"This is not something that Poland or Romania or Germany should carry on their own," said Biden, who said he hopes to meet with refugees on his European trip. "This is an international responsibility."

The White House has said for weeks that the U.S. would welcome Ukrainian refugees at some point, so the announcement wasn't a surprise. Officials have said, and continue to maintain, that most of the refugees want to remain in Europe because they have family there and can more easily return home once it's safe.

WHO IS COMING, WHEN AND WHERE WILL THEY GO?

Among the first Ukrainians refugee coming to the U.S. will be those who have family already in the United States, Biden said at a news conference.

U.S. refugee efforts will also focus on helping refugees who are considered particularly vulnerable following the Russian invasion, groups that include LGBTQ people, those with medical needs as well as journalists and dissidents, according to administration officials, who spoke to journalists on condition of anonymity to discuss the plan before the public announcement.

The administration did not provide a timeline but it's typically a lengthy process and the officials said all 100,000 may not necessarily arrive this year. Most of the refugees probably will settle in parts of the U.S. that already have large concentrations of Ukrainians. Such areas include the New York City area, Pennsylvania, Chicago and Northern California.

IS THAT A LARGE NUMBER OF REFUGEES?

Not relative to the need, considering the number who have already fled Ukraine and the millions more who are displaced within the country.

It's also not large by historic standards. The U.S. took in more than 200,000 refugees, mostly from Southeast Asia, in 1980 alone. The total between 1975-1981 was more than 735,000, according to State Department figures. Since August, when the U.S. withdrew from Afghanistan, the U.S. has admitted more than 76,000 Afghans, including large numbers of former military interpreters and their families.

The administration, in consultation with Congress, set the annual cap of refugees for the 2022 budget year at 125,000, a total that does not include the evacuated Afghans. The administration says it does not immediately plan to seek to raise the cap because many of the Ukrainians can be brought to the U.S. under humanitarian parole or family reunification programs that are not counted against this cap.

WHAT HAS BEEN THE REACTION?

Refugee advocates had been urging the administration to expedite admissions following Russia's invasion of Ukraine. That's even as refugee resettlement agencies were struggling because of program cuts under President Donald Trump, whose administration slashed the refugee admissions cap to a historic low of 15,000.

Advocates welcomed Thursday's announcement, as did members of members of Congress with large Ukrainian populations in their districts, such as New Jersey Democratic Rep. Bill Pascrell.

"Until today, the rate of Ukraine refugee acceptance by our nation has lacked urgency," he said. "But this

morning's announcement by the Biden administration to accept 100,000 refugees from Ukraine has the urgency that is essential for this dark moment."

There seems to be public support as well.

The vast majority of Americans -- 82% -- say they favor providing humanitarian support to refugees from Ukraine, according to a poll from The Associated Press-NORC Center for Public Affairs Research. A smaller but still wide majority, 67%, say they favor accepting refugees from Ukraine into the U.S. Just 13% are opposed while another 21% say they hold neither opinion.

Nebraska US Rep. Fortenberry found guilty in campaign probe

By BRIAN MELLE and GRANT SCHULTE Associated Press

LOS ANGELES (AP) — U.S. Rep. Jeff Fortenberry of Nebraska was convicted on charges that he lied to federal authorities about an illegal \$30,000 contribution to his campaign from a foreign billionaire at a 2016 Los Angeles fundraiser.

A federal jury in LA deliberated about two hours Thursday before finding the nine-term Republican guilty of concealing information and two counts of making false statements to authorities. Fortenberry was charged after denying to the FBI that he was aware he had received illicit funds from Gilbert Chagoury, a Nigerian billionaire of Lebanese descent.

Fortenberry showed no emotion as the verdict was read but his youngest daughter began sobbing uncontrollably in the front of the gallery as her mother tried to console her. After the jury left the courtroom, Fortenberry walked over to his wife and the two of his five daughters who were present and clasped them in a hug.

Outside the courthouse, Fortenberry said the process had been unfair and he would appeal immediately. He would not say if he would suspend his campaign for reelection, saying he was going to spend time with his family.

"I'm getting so many beautiful messages from people literally all around the world, who've been praying for us and pulling for us," he said.

The judge set sentencing for June 28. Each count carries a potential five-year prison sentence and fines.

It was the first trial of a sitting congressman since Rep. Jim Traficant, D-Ohio, was convicted of bribery and other felony charges in 2002.

Fortenberry, 61, did not testify but his lawyers argued at trial that he wasn't aware of the contribution and that agents directed an informant to feed him the information in a 10-minute call to set him up.

Assistant U.S. Attorney Mack Jenkins said there was ample recorded evidence in the case and the jury's swift verdict vindicated the prosecution's efforts.

"Our view is that it was a simple story," Jenkins said. "A politician caught up in the cycle of money and power. And like I said, he lost his way."

The trial could all but end the political career of a congressman seen as a reliable conservative who coasted to easy wins but isn't a familiar name outside of Nebraska. Felons are eligible to run for and serve in Congress, but the vast majority choose to resign under threat of expulsion.

Fortenberry took a big political hit when prosecutors announced the charges, and his indictment already divided Nebraska Republicans who backed him for years in the conservative district. Many prominent Republicans have endorsed state Sen. Mike Flood, a conservative state lawmaker and former speaker of the Nebraska Legislature, for the congressional seat.

Prosecutors argued Fortenberry lied about what he knew about the illicit donation during an interview at his Lincoln home in March 2019 and a follow-up meeting four months later in Washington about the contribution received at a Los Angeles fundraiser.

Defense lawyers said Fortenberry's flaw was voluntarily meeting with agents and prosecutors to help their probe and having a faulty memory.

Celeste Fortenberry, the lawmaker's wife, was the final witness in the case and testified that her husband didn't even remember the day they met. She said he loathed making fundraising calls and was often on "au-

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topilot" when he conducted them.

Lawyers on both sides of the trial focused their closing arguments on one such call with Dr. Elias Ayoub, who held the fundraiser for Fortenberry at his Los Angeles home in 2016.

Ayoub, who was cooperating with the FBI, told Fortenberry during the secretly recorded call in June 2018 that he distributed \$30,000 to friends and relatives who attended the fundraiser so they could write checks to Fortenberry's campaign.

The doctor said the money had been provided by an associate of theirs and probably came from Chagoury, who lives in Paris. Chagoury admitted in 2019 to funneling \$180,000 in illegal campaign contributions to four campaigns and agreed to pay a \$1.8 million fine.

The three men in the alleged scheme to funnel the money to Fortenberry were all of Lebanese descent and had ties to In Defense of Christians, a nonprofit Fortenberry supported that was devoted to fighting religious persecution in the Middle East.

Fortenberry asked Ayoub on the phone call to organize another fundraiser with supporters of their cause. In 2019, Fortenberry denied to FBI agents that he received any funds from a foreign national or through so-called conduit contributions, where the money was distributed to straw donors.

Fortenberry, who was unaware agents had recorded his call with Ayoub, said it would be "horrifying" if the doctor had made such a claim about the source of the funds.

Defense attorney John Littrell said the recording of the call only depicted what was heard on Ayoub's end and not what Fortenberry, who had poor cellphone reception, heard.

If Fortenberry had not heard as few as three crucial words, he may have missed what Ayoub was trying to tell him about where the money came from, Littrell said. The fact that Fortenberry didn't remember the call more than a year later was understandable, he said.

"This is a memory test every one of us would fail," Littrell said.

Littrell said the \$36,000 his client raised in Los Angeles — most of it illegally — was a drop in the bucket for a congressman in an uncompetitive district with a healthy war chest. He said jurors should believe what most witnesses said about Fortenberry: he was an honest man of integrity.

"Do you think he would put his reputation on the line for \$30,000 when he had \$1.5 million?" Littrell said. "That's not possible."

Jenkins countered that Fortenberry's squeaky clean reputation was at the root of his lies.

"You build up that much of a reputation, you have a lot to lose," he said. "That's not a justification for lying; that's a motive for lying."

Patty Pansing Brooks, a former legislator who is seeking the Democratic nomination for the congressional seat, thanked the jury and offered "thoughts and prayers" for Fortenberry and his family.

"It's time for Nebraska to elect new leadership. I will serve with integrity and fight for all Nebraskans," she said in a statement.

COVID-19 rates plunge as decision nears on US asylum limits

By ELLIOT SPAGAT and CAROLINE GHISOLFI Associated Press

SOMERTON, Ariz. (AP) — One by one, a voice called out the names of 169 people just released by U.S. Border Patrol. Migrants rose from folding chairs in a clinic warehouse and walked to a table of blue-robed workers, who swabbed their mouths.

All but two Cuban women tested negative for COVID-19 that February morning. They were quarantined to motel rooms, while other migrants boarded chartered buses to Phoenix's Sky Harbor International Airport for flights across the U.S.

Theirs were among just seven of 5,301 tests the Regional Center for Border Health near Yuma, Arizona, did last month for released migrants that were positive — a rate of 0.1%

COVID-19 rates are plunging among migrants crossing the border from Mexico as the Biden administration faces a Tuesday deadline to end or extend sweeping restrictions on asylum that are aimed at limiting the virus' spread. Lower rates raise more questions about scientific grounds for a public health order that has

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caused migrants to be expelled from the United States more than 1.7 million times since March 2020 without a chance to request asylum.

While there is no aggregate rate for migrants, test results from several major corridors for illegal border crossings suggest it is well below levels that have triggered concerns among U.S. officials.

In California, 54 of 2,877 migrants tested positive the first two weeks of March, according to the state Department of Social Services. That's a rate of just 1.9%, down from a peak of 28.2% on Jan. 8.

In Pima County, Arizona, which includes Tucson, the seven-day positivity rate among migrants didn't exceed 1.3% in early March and dropped to 0.9% on March 10. The seven-day rate topped 5% on only two days during the final three months of last year. Then, as the omicron variant spread, it surged to double-digits for most of January, peaking at 19.2% on Jan. 12 and falling below 5% on Feb. 12.

McAllen, Texas, the largest city in the busiest corridor for illegal crossings, has a higher rate among migrants — 9.2% on March 2 — but it is also falling and is consistently lower than the general population. Only two of 24 border counties have had high rates in the general population: Hidalgo, which includes McAllen, and Yuma in Arizona.

The rate among migrants in McAllen peaked at 20.8% the last week of January, when it was double that in the general population. It bottomed at 1.4% the last week of November, when the general population was at 6.2%.

As mask mandates have lifted, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention is under mounting pressure to fully restore asylum by ending Title 42, named for a 1944 public health law. Critics say it has been an excuse to wriggle out of asylum obligations under U.S. law and international treaty.

Justin Walker, a federal appeals court judge in Washington, wrote this month that it was "far from clear that the CDC order serves any purpose" for public health. Walker, who was appointed by President Donald Trump, noted that the Biden administration hasn't provided detailed evidence to support the restrictions.

"The CDC's order looks in certain respects like a relic from an era with no vaccines, scarce testing, few therapeutics, and little certainty," Walker wrote for a three-judge panel.

CDC Director Dr. Rochelle Walensky noted falling rates when she ended asylum limits on unaccompanied child migrants on March 11, while keeping them for adults and families with kids. In August, U.S. border authorities began testing children traveling alone in their busiest areas: positives fell to 6% in the first week of March from a high of nearly 20% in early February.

The White House and Homeland Security Department have said decisions on Title 42 rest with the CDC. Walensky told reporters Wednesday that the CDC was reviewing data ahead of next week's deadline, noting that its two-month renewal in late January came near the peak of the omicron variant.

Scientific arguments for Title 42 have met with skepticism from the start.

The Associated Press reported in 2020 that Vice President Mike Pence directed the CDC to use its emergency powers, overruling agency scientists who said there was no evidence it would slow the coronavirus.

Anne Schuchat, the second-highest ranking CDC until last May, told members of Congress after her departure that the asylum limits lacked foundation as a public health measure when introduced.

"The bulk of the evidence at that time did not support this policy proposal," she said.

Title 42 also has supporters. In a ruling this month in a lawsuit over the order, U.S. District Judge Mark Pitman in Fort Worth, Texas, said: "There should be no disagreement that the current immigration policies should be focused on stopping the spread of COVID-19."

Even while large-scale expulsions were carried out under Title 42, the U.S. processed more than 2.8 million cases under normal immigration laws, which allow people to seek asylum.

With costs and strained diplomatic relations limiting expulsions to many countries, migrants are often released to nongovernmental groups and ordered to appear later in immigration court. The groups test for COVID-19.

In El Paso, Annunciation House saw positives plunge to around 2% among the roughly 175 migrants it tested daily in early March, said director Ruben Garcia. Positives were close to 40% at the height of the omicron variant, he said.

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In Arizona, at the Regional Center for Binational Health, monthly rates peaked at 3% last year. Still, Amanda Aguirre, its president, is wary about lifting Title 42.

"My concern is that at any time we're going to see new variants coming into this area," she said.

The Val Verde Border Humanitarian Coalition, which tests migrants in the busy Del Rio, Texas, area, said it went several weeks without a single positive.

"Yesterday there was one positive and today there was one positive — that's out of hundreds tested," the group wrote last week in response to questions.

Man in Gov. Whitmer kidnap plot says group was armed, ready

By ED WHITE Associated Press

A second insider in a plot to kidnap Michigan Gov. Gretchen Whitmer told jurors that the group was prepared to use a grenade launcher and machine gun to fight security officers at her vacation home.

Kaleb Franks, who pleaded guilty in February, on Thursday backed up many points offered a day earlier by Ty Garbin, another man who admitted a role in a wild scheme to abduct Whitmer and somehow take her by boat out to Lake Michigan. Franks is expected back on the witness stand Friday for cross-examination by defense lawyers.

Franks, 27, said an alleged leader, Adam Fox, believed Whitmer's COVID-19 restrictions were "tyrannical" and that the U.S. Constitution gave the men a right to strike back. He said no one was forced to stick with the plan and many people had dropped away by late summer 2020.

"I was going to be an operator," Franks replied when asked by a prosecutor to describe his role in a kidnapping. "I would be one of the people on the front line, so to speak, using my gun."

He said Fox talked about snatching the governor "every time I saw him."

Fox, Barry Croft Jr., Daniel Harris and Brandon Caserta are on trial in federal court in Grand Rapids, Michigan. Along with Franks and Garbin, the four were arrested in October 2020, a month before the national election.

Garbin, 26, testified Wednesday that Whitmer's kidnapping could serve as the "ignition" for a U.S. civil war involving antigovernment groups and possibly prevent the election of Joe Biden.

Authorities said the men were armed extremists who, after weeks of training, were trying to come up with \$4,000 for an explosive. They practiced that summer by dashing in and out of crude structures built to resemble a house or office.

Traveling at night, they scouted Whitmer's second home in Elk Rapids in September 2020 and inspected a bridge that could be blown up to frustrate any police response, according to trial testimony and conversations that were secretly recorded.

Croft "discussed attacking her security detail," Franks told the jury. "He said he would use the grenade launcher that he had, and he was discussing mounting a machine gun on top of the truck."

Franks, a drug rehabilitation coach, said he joined a militia, the Wolverine Watchmen, to work on his gun skills. He eventually met Fox and Croft, who were not members of the militia, and found himself in the middle of a conspiracy.

Franks said he stuck with the group because he hoped he would be killed in a shootout with police during the kidnapping but kept it from others.

"I no longer wanted to live," he said, moments after settling into the witness chair. "A large portion of my family had died. I was struggling financially. Just wasn't happy."

Defense attorneys are trying to show the jury that there was no credible plot, just a lot of profane, violent and crazy talk about Whitmer and other politicians trampling their rights during the COVID-19 pandemic. They also claim informants and undercover agents who infiltrated the group entrapped the men.

Garbin, an airplane mechanic, began cooperating with prosecutors soon after the group was arrested. He was rewarded with a relatively light six-year prison sentence, a term that could be reduced after the trial. Franks hasn't been sentenced yet but is also hoping for a break.

Whitmer, a Democrat, 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.

Nebraska US Rep. Fortenberry found guilty in campaign probe

By BRIAN MELLEY and GRANT SCHULTE Associated Press

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Jenkins countered that Fortenberry's squeaky clean reputation was at the root of his lies.

"You build up that much of a reputation, you have a lot to lose," he said. "That's not a justification for lying; that's a motive for lying."

Patty Pansing Brooks, a former legislator who is seeking the Democratic nomination for the congressional seat, thanked the jury and offered "thoughts and prayers" for Fortenberry and his family.

"It's time for Nebraska to elect new leadership. I will serve with integrity and fight for all Nebraskans," she said in a statement.

Biden pledges new Ukraine aid, warns Russia on chem weapons

By CHRIS MEGERIAN, LORNE COOK and AAMER MADHANI Associated Press

BRUSSELS (AP) — President Joe Biden and Western allies pledged new sanctions and humanitarian aid on Thursday in response to Vladimir Putin's assault on Ukraine, but their offers fell short of the more robust military assistance that President Volodymyr Zelenskyy pleaded for in a pair of live-video appearances.

Biden also announced the U.S. would welcome up to 100,000 Ukrainian refugees — though he said many probably prefer to stay closer to home — and provide an additional \$1 billion in food, medicine, water and other supplies.

The Western leaders spent Thursday crafting next steps to counter Russia's month-old invasion — and huddling over how they might respond should Putin deploy chemical, biological or even a nuclear weapon. They met in a trio of emergency summits that had them shuttling across Brussels for back-to-back-to-back meetings of NATO, the Group of Seven industrialized nations and the 27-member European Council.

Biden, in an early evening news conference after the meetings, warned that a chemical attack by Russia "would trigger a response in kind."

"You're asking whether NATO would cross. We'd make that decision at the time," Biden said.

However, a White House official said later that did not imply any shift in the U.S. position against direct military action in Ukraine. Biden and NATO allies have stressed that the U.S. and NATO would not put troops

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on the ground in Ukraine.

The official was not authorized to comment publicly by name and spoke only on condition of anonymity.

Zelenskyy, while thankful for the newly promised help, made clear to the Western allies he needed far more than they're currently willing to give.

"One percent of all your planes, one percent of all your tanks," Zelenskyy asked members of the NATO alliance. "We can't just buy those. When we will have all this, it will give us, just like you, 100% security."

Biden said more aid was on its way. But the Western leaders were treading carefully so as not to further escalate the conflict beyond the borders of Ukraine.

"NATO has made a choice to support Ukraine in this war without going to war with Russia," said French President Emmanuel Macron. "Therefore we have decided to intensify our ongoing work to prevent any escalation and to get organized in case there is an escalation."

Poland and other eastern flank NATO countries are seeking clarity on how the U.S. and European nations can assist in dealing with their growing concerns about Russian aggression as well as the refugee crisis. More than 3.5 million refugees have fled Ukraine in recent weeks, including more than 2 million to Poland.

Biden is to visit Rzeszów, Poland, on Friday, where energy and refugee issues are expected to be at the center of talks with President Andrzej Duda. He'll get a briefing on humanitarian aid efforts to assist fleeing refugees and he'll meet with U.S. troops from the 82nd Airborne Division who have been deployed in recent weeks to bolster NATO's eastern flank.

Billions of dollars of military hardware have already been provided to Ukraine. A U.S. official, who requested anonymity to discuss internal deliberations, said Western nations were discussing the possibility of providing anti-ship weapons amid concerns that Russia will launch amphibious assaults along the Black Sea coast.

Biden said his top priority at Thursday's meetings was to make certain that the West stayed on the same page in its response to Russian aggression against Ukraine.

"The single most important thing is for us to stay unified," he said.

Finland announced Thursday it would send more military equipment to Ukraine, its second shipment in about three weeks. And Belgium announced it will add one billion euros to its defense budget in response to Russia's invasion.

At the same time, Washington will expand its sanctions on Russia, targeting members of the country's parliament along with defense contractors. The U.S. said it will also work with other Western nations to ensure gold reserves held by Russia's central bank are subject to existing sanctions.

With Russia facing increasing international isolation, NATO Secretary-General Jens Stoltenberg also warned China against coming to Moscow's rescue. He called on Beijing "to join the rest of the world and clearly condemn the brutal war against Ukraine and not support Russia."

But Stoltenberg, too, made clear that the West had a "responsibility to prevent this conflict from becoming a full-fledged war in Europe."

The possibility that Russia will use chemical or even nuclear weapons has been a grim topic of conversation in Brussels.

Stoltenberg said that NATO leaders agreed Thursday to send equipment to Ukraine to help protect it against a chemical weapons attack.

White House officials said that both the U.S. and NATO have been working on contingency planning should Russia deploy nonconventional weaponry. NATO has specially trained and equipped forces if there should be such an attack against a member nation's population, territory or forces. Ukraine is not a member.

Stoltenberg said in an NBC News interview that if Russia deployed chemical weapons, that would make "an unpredictable, dangerous situation even more dangerous and even more unpredictable." He declined to comment about how the alliance might respond.

The White House National Security Council launched efforts days after the invasion through its "Tiger Team," which is tasked with planning three months out, and a second strategy group working on a longer term review of any geopolitical shift that may come, according to a senior administration official. The official was not authorized to comment publicly and spoke on the condition of anonymity.

Both teams are conducting contingency planning for scenarios including Russia's potential use of chemical or

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biological weapons, targeting of U.S. security convoys in the region, disruptions to global food supply chains and the growing refugee crisis.

Biden before departing for Europe on Wednesday said that the possibility of a chemical attack was a "real threat." In addition, Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov told CNN this week that Russia could consider using its nuclear weapons if it felt there were "an existential threat for our country."

Finland's Prime Minister Sanna Marin on Thursday warned, "Russia is capable of anything."
"They don't respect any rules," Marin told reporters. "They don't respect any international laws that they are actually committed to."

The Russian invasion has spurred European nations to reconsider their military spending, and Stoltenberg opened the NATO summit by saying the alliance must "respond to a new security reality in Europe."

The bolstering of forces along NATO's eastern flank will put pressure on national budgets.
The energy crisis exacerbated by the war is a particularly hot topic for 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.

Ursula von der Leyen, head of the European Union's executive arm, said before Biden's visit that she wanted 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 hoping to reduce its dependence on Russian gas by diversifying suppliers.

The U.S. is looking for ways to "surge" LNG supplies to Europe to help, said Jake Sullivan, Biden's national security adviser.

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

Ukraine says Moscow is forcibly taking civilians to Russia

By NEBI QENA and CARA ANNA Associated Press

KYIV, Ukraine (AP) — Ukraine accused Moscow on Thursday of forcibly taking hundreds of thousands of civilians from shattered Ukrainian cities to Russia, where some may be used as "hostages" to pressure Kyiv to give up.

Lyudmyla Denisova, Ukraine's ombudsperson, said 402,000 people, including 84,000 children, had been taken to Russia.

The Kremlin gave nearly identical numbers for those who have been relocated, but said they wanted to go to Russia. Ukraine's rebel-controlled eastern regions are predominantly Russian-speaking, and many people there have supported close ties to Moscow.

A month into the invasion, the two sides traded heavy blows in what has become a devastating war of attrition. Ukraine's navy said it sank a large Russian landing ship near the port city of Berdyansk that had been used to bring in armored vehicles. Russia claimed to have taken the eastern town of Izyum after fierce fighting.

At an emergency NATO summit in Brussels, Ukraine President Volodymyr Zelenskyy pleaded with the Western allies via video for planes, tanks, rockets, air defense systems and other weapons, saying his country is "defending our common values."

U.S. President Joe Biden, in Europe for the summit and other high-level meetings, gave assurances more aid is on its way, though it appeared unlikely the West would give Zelenskyy everything he wanted, for fear

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of triggering a much wider war.

Around the capital, Kyiv, and other areas, Ukrainian defenders have fought Moscow's ground troops to a near-stalemate, raising fears that a frustrated Russian President Vladimir Putin will resort to chemical, biological or nuclear weapons.

In other developments Thursday:

—Ukraine and Russia exchanged a total of 50 military and civilian prisoners, the largest swap reported yet, Ukrainian Deputy Prime Minister Iryna Vereshchuk said.

—The pro-Moscow leader of Belarus, Alexander Lukashenko, warned that Poland's proposal to deploy a Western peacekeeping force in Ukraine "will mean World War III."

—In Chernihiv, where an airstrike this week destroyed a crucial bridge, a city official, Olexander Lomako, said a "humanitarian catastrophe" is unfolding as Russian forces target food storage places. He said about 130,000 people are left in the besieged city, about half its prewar population.

—Russia said it will offer safe passage starting Friday to 67 ships from 15 foreign countries that are stranded in Ukrainian ports because of the danger of shelling and mines.

Kyiv and Moscow gave conflicting accounts, meanwhile, about the people being relocated to Russia and whether they were going willingly — as Russia claimed — or were being coerced or lied to.

Russian Col. Gen. Mikhail Mizintsev said the roughly 400,000 people evacuated to Russia since the start of the military action were from the Donetsk and Luhansk regions in eastern Ukraine, where pro-Moscow separatists have been fighting for control for nearly eight years.

Russian authorities said they are providing accommodations and dispensing payments to the evacuees.

But Donetsk Region Gov. Pavlo Kyrylenko said that "people are being forcibly moved into the territory of the aggressor state." Denisova said those removed by Russian troops included a 92-year-old woman in Mariupol who was forced to go to Taganrog in southern Russia.

Ukrainian officials said that the Russians are taking people's passports and moving them to "filtration camps" in Ukraine's separatist-controlled east before sending them to various distant, economically depressed areas in Russia.

Among those taken, Ukraine's Foreign Ministry charged, were 6,000 residents of Mariupol, the devastated port city in the country's east. Moscow's troops are confiscating identity documents from an additional 15,000 people in a section of Mariupol under Russian control, the ministry said.

Some could be sent as far as the Pacific island of Sakhalin, Ukrainian intelligence said, and are being offered jobs on condition they don't leave for two years. The ministry said the Russians intend to "use them as hostages and put more political pressure on Ukraine."

Kyrylenko said that Mariupol's residents have been long deprived of information and that the Russians feed them false claims about Ukraine's defeats to persuade them to move to Russia.

"Russian lies may influence those who have been under the siege," he said.

As for the naval attack in Berdyansk, Ukraine claimed two more ships were damaged and a 3,000-ton fuel tank was destroyed when the Russian ship Orsk was sunk, causing a fire that spread to ammunition supplies.

Zelenskyy rallied the country to keep up its military defense in hopes it would lead to peace.

"With every day of our defense, we are getting closer to the peace that we need so much. We are getting closer to victory. ... We can't stop even for a minute, for every minute determines our fate, our future, whether we will live," he said late Thursday in his nightly video address to the nation.

Zelenskyy said thousands of people, including 128 children, have died in the first month of the war. Across the country, 230 schools and 155 kindergartens have been destroyed. Cities and villages "lie in ashes," he said.

Sending a signal that Western sanctions have not brought it to its knees, Russia reopened its stock market but allowed only limited trading to prevent mass sell-offs. Foreigners were barred from selling, and traders were prohibited from short selling, or betting prices would fall.

Millions of people in Ukraine have made their way out of the country, some pushed to the limit after trying to stay and cope.

At the central station in the western city of Lviv, a teenage girl stood in the doorway of a waiting train, a

white pet rabbit shivering in her arms. She was on her way to join her mother and then go on to Poland or Germany. She had been traveling alone, leaving other family members behind in Dnipro.

"At the beginning I didn't want to leave," she said. "Now I'm scared for my life."

Jan. 6 committee sets contempt vote for 2 former Trump aides

By ERIC TUCKER Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — The House committee investigating the Capitol riot said Thursday that it had set a vote for next week to consider contempt of Congress charges for two aides of former President Donald Trump.

The committee will meet Monday to discuss whether to recommend referring for potential prosecution Trump's former trade adviser, Peter Navarro, and former White House communications aide Dan Scavino.

The meeting marks the panel's latest effort to hold witnesses accountable whom it sees as uncooperative in its investigation into the Jan. 6, 2021 insurrection, when pro-Trump rioters stormed the Capitol in hopes of blocking Congress from certifying the results of the presidential election won by Democrat Joe Biden.

The committee subpoenaed Navarro for his testimony in early February, seeking to question the Trump ally who promoted false claims of voter fraud in the 2020 election. Though Navarro sought to use executive privilege to avoid cooperation, the Biden administration this month denied claims from him and another onetime Trump aide, former national security adviser Michael Flynn, saying an assertion of executive privilege was not justified or in the national interest.

In a statement Thursday, Navarro called the committee vote "an unprecedented partisan assault on executive privilege. The committee knows full well that President Trump has invoked executive privilege and it is not my privilege to waive."

Navarro said it was "premature for the committee to pursue criminal charges against an individual of the highest rank within the White House for whom executive privilege undeniably applies." He said the dispute seemed "inevitably headed" to the Supreme Court, and until there was a resolution, the House committee "should cease its tactics of harassment and intimidation."

A lawyer for Scavino, who was subpoenaed last September, did not immediately return messages seeking comment. In laying out last fall the need for Scavino's cooperation with the investigation, committee chairman Rep. Bennie Thompson, a Mississippi Democrat, said it appeared Scavino was with Trump on Jan. 6 and may have "materials relevant to his videotaping and tweeting" messages that day.

The committee previously voted to recommend contempt charges against longtime Trump ally Steve Bannon after he defied a congressional subpoena, as well as against Trump chief of staff Mark Meadows after he ceased cooperating with the panel. The full House then approved both contempt referrals.

Bannon was later indicted by a federal grand jury and is awaiting prosecution by the Justice Department. The Justice Department has not taken any action against Meadows.

Report: Justice Thomas' wife urged overturning 2020 election

WASHINGTON (AP) — Virginia Thomas, wife of Supreme Court Justice Clarence Thomas, sent weeks of text messages imploring White House Chief of Staff Mark Meadows to act to overturn the 2020 presidential election — furthering then-President Donald Trump's lies that the free and fair vote was marred by nonexistent fraud, according to copies of the messages obtained by The Washington Post and CBS News.

The 29 messages the pair exchanged came in the weeks after the vote in November 2020, when Trump and his top allies were still saying they planned to go to the Supreme Court to have its results voided.

The Post reported that on Nov. 10, three days after the election and after The Associated Press and other news outlets declared Democrat Joe Biden the winner, Virginia Thomas, a conservative activist, texted to Meadows: "Help This Great President stand firm, Mark!!! ... You are the leader, with him, who is standing for America's constitutional governance at the precipice. The majority knows Biden and the Left is attempting the greatest Heist of our History."

Copies of the texts — 21 sent by her, eight sent in reply by Meadows — were provided to the House se-

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lect committee investigating the deadly insurrection that saw a mob of mostly Trump supporters overrun the U.S. Capitol on Jan. 6, 2021. The AP attempted to get the same information from the committee, but it declined to comment.

The texts do not directly reference Thomas' husband or the Supreme Court. But she has previously admitted to attending the Trump's "Stop the Steal" rally that preceded the Capitol riot. Virginia Thomas also has previously denied conflicts of interest between her activism and her husband's place on the high court.

Still, the messages show she was urging the top levels of the Trump administration to try to throw out the 2020 election results, and even offering coaching to Meadows on how best to do so. Thomas urged lawyer Sidney Powell, who promoted false claims about the election, to be "the lead and the face" of the Trump legal team.

Meadows' attorney, George Terwilliger III, told the Post and CBS that neither he nor Meadows would comment on individual texts, adding, "nothing about the text messages presents any legal issues."

Justice Thomas, 73, has been hospitalized for treatment from an infection. He and his wife did not respond to the outlets' request for comment.

In February 2021, the Supreme Court rejected challenges to the election. Justice Thomas dissented, calling the ruling not to hear arguments in the case "befuddling" and "inexplicable."

In a Nov. 5 message to Meadows, Virginia Thomas quoted material that had appeared on right-wing fringe websites: "Biden crime family & ballot fraud co-conspirators (elected officials, bureaucrats, social media censorship mongers, fake stream media reporters, etc) are being arrested & detained for ballot fraud right now & over coming days, & will be living in barges off GITMO to face military tribunals for sedition."

In a subsequent text the next day, Thomas wrote to Meadows, "Do not concede."

The messages also suggest that Meadows was willing to continue pursuing ways to overturn the election. He replied to one message from Thomas: "I will stand firm. We will fight until there is no fight left. Our country is too precious to give up on. Thanks for all you do."

The texts between Thomas and Meadows stop after November 24, 2020. But the committee received another message sent on Jan. 10, 2021, four days after the mob attack on the Capitol, according to the Post and CBS.

"We are living through what feels like the end of America," Thomas wrote to Meadows in it.

Italy to miss World Cup again after loss to North Macedonia

PALERMO, Sicily (AP) — European champion Italy will miss the World Cup. Again.

The unthinkable happened in Palermo on Thursday as the Azzurri were beaten 1-0 by North Macedonia following a last-gasp goal by Aleksandar Trajkovski in their playoff semifinal.

Italy had 32 shots on goal, compared to just four for its opponent. But it was Trajkovski's effort from outside the area as defenders closed in around him that made the difference.

It was North Macedonia's only real opportunity after a completely dominant performance by Italy, which missed a number of chances and had several others saved by visiting goalkeeper Stole Dimitrievski.

But, just like five years ago, at the final whistle the Italy players fell to the ground in disbelief and disappointment — with several of them in tears — as the opposition celebrated wildly.

Italy also failed to qualify for the 2018 World Cup after losing to Sweden in a two-legged playoff the previous November. Missing two straight World Cups is an unprecedented low point for the four-time champion, especially just months after winning Euro 2020.

"I'm proud of my teammates, we are all destroyed and broken but we have to start again," Italy captain Giorgio Chiellini said. "At the moment it's difficult to talk about it, it will remain a great hole.

"I hope that the coach will stay because he is essential for this team. Now we have to return to winning, go to the Euros and in four years time return to this blessed World Cup."

But Roberto Mancini, who took over as Italy coach after the last qualifying failure, said on Thursday that the disappointment "was too great to talk about the future."

"I feel that just as last July was the best thing I experienced at a professional level, this is the greatest

disappointment," Mancini added.

"Soccer is like that, sometimes incredible things happen."

North Macedonia will play Portugal on Tuesday for a spot in the tournament in Qatar after Cristiano Ronaldo's side beat Turkey 3-1. Euro 2020 is the only major tournament North Macedonia has qualified for.

Mancini was missing a number of players that helped Italy win the European Championship last summer and had to field a makeshift defence, but it was barely troubled by North Macedonia until the very end.

Italy got off to an aggressive start but struggled to find a way past the wall of red shirts.

The Azzurri were gifted a great chance in the 30th minute after a horrendous kick from the North Macedonia goalkeeper left Domenico Berardi with an open goal but he scuffed his shot and Dimitrievski got back in time to make the save.

Dimitrievski did better moments later when he fingertipped Ciro Immobile's angled shot over the bar.

Italy was getting closer and Dimitrievski had to make another save, this time to palm Lorenzo Insigne's effort around the post.

North Macedonia had its first attempt on goal on the stroke of halftime when Enis Bardi threaded a ball through for Trajkovski but his effort was straight at Gianluigi Donnarumma.

Berardi almost atoned for his first-half error early in the second period but saw one attempt well saved by Dimitrievski and curled another just past the left post.

Italy was laying siege to the goal but saw everything charged down by North Macedonia.

And it was made to pay for its profligacy in stoppage time as Trajkovski fired a low shot into the bottom left corner from 25 yards, leaving Mancini looking stunned on the sideline.

EXPLAINER: How US is expanding aid to Ukrainian refugees

By BEN FOX Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — The United States is expanding efforts to help Ukrainian refugees. It has agreed to accept up to 100,000 people escaping from the war and to increase support for Eastern European nations that have taken in most of the people fleeing Russian forces. It's a modest number relative to the need, with an estimated 3.6 million refugees and millions more displaced within Ukraine. It's also modest by historical standards, far less than the number who came from Southeast Asia decades ago.

A look at the situation:

WHAT WAS ANNOUNCED?

While in Brussels to meet with European allies, President Joe Biden said the United States would admit up to 100,000 Ukrainian refugees and provide \$1 billion in humanitarian assistance to countries affected by Russia's invasion of Ukraine.

The financial support is important because most of the approximately 3.6 million refugees who have fled Ukraine are in neighboring countries such as Poland, Moldova, and Romania and are posing a substantial burden.

"This is not something that Poland or Romania or Germany should carry on their own," said Biden, who said he hopes to meet with refugees on his European trip. "This is an international responsibility."

The White House has said for weeks that the U.S. would welcome Ukrainian refugees at some point, so the announcement wasn't a surprise. Officials have said, and continue to maintain, that most of the refugees want to remain in Europe because they have family there and can more easily return home once it's safe.

WHO IS COMING, WHEN AND WHERE WILL THEY GO?

Among the first Ukrainians refugee coming to the U.S. will be those who have family already in the United States, Biden said at a news conference.

U.S. refugee efforts will also focus on helping refugees who are considered particularly vulnerable following the Russian invasion, groups that include LGBTQ people, those with medical needs as well as journalists and dissidents, according to administration officials, who spoke to journalists on condition of anonymity to discuss the plan before the public announcement.

The administration did not provide a timeline but it's typically a lengthy process and the officials said all

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100,000 may not necessarily arrive this year. Most of the refugees probably will settle in parts of the U.S. that already have large concentrations of Ukrainians. Such areas include the New York City area, Pennsylvania, Chicago and Northern California.

IS THAT A LARGE NUMBER OF REFUGEES?

Not relative to the need, considering the number who have already fled Ukraine and the millions more who are displaced within the country.

It's also not large by historic standards. The U.S. took in more than 200,000 refugees, mostly from Southeast Asia, in 1980 alone. The total between 1975-1981 was more than 735,000, according to State Department figures. Since August, when the U.S. withdrew from Afghanistan, the U.S. has admitted more than 76,000 Afghans, including large numbers of former military interpreters and their families.

The administration, in consultation with Congress, set the annual cap of refugees for the 2022 budget year at 125,000, a total that does not include the evacuated Afghans. The administration says it does not immediately plan to seek to raise the cap because many of the Ukrainians can be brought to the U.S. under humanitarian parole or family reunification programs that are not counted against this cap.

WHAT HAS BEEN THE REACTION?

Refugee advocates had been urging the administration to expedite admissions following Russia's invasion of Ukraine. That's even as refugee resettlement agencies were struggling because of program cuts under President Donald Trump, whose administration slashed the refugee admissions cap to a historic low of 15,000.

Advocates welcomed Thursday's announcement, as did members of Congress with large Ukrainian populations in their districts, such as New Jersey Democratic Rep. Bill Pascrell.

"Until today, the rate of Ukraine refugee acceptance by our nation has lacked urgency," he said. "But this morning's announcement by the Biden administration to accept 100,000 refugees from Ukraine has the urgency that is essential for this dark moment."

There seems to be public support as well.

The vast majority of Americans -- 82% -- say they favor providing humanitarian support to refugees from Ukraine, according to a poll from The Associated Press-NORC Center for Public Affairs Research. A smaller but still wide majority, 67%, say they favor accepting refugees from Ukraine into the U.S. Just 13% are opposed while another 21% say they hold neither opinion.

Saint Peter's rides stunning Sweet 16 run behind Doug Edert

By DAN GELSTON AP Sports Writer

PHILADELPHIA (AP) — Doug Edert could use a few wet wipes to keep all his free chicken wing sauce out of a wispy mustache so mythical it has its own Twitter account.

Around tiny Saint Peter's, students wear fake mustaches in honor of the guard who has plucked the Peacocks — yes, the 15th-seeded, who-the-heck-are-the Peacocks? — from out of obscurity and into the Sweet 16 of the NCAA Tournament.

Edert, well, he's earned more fame — and tenders — out of one basketball weekend than most All-Americans have all season. His last two Instagram posts before March showed the guard facial hair-free and writing motivational quotes. Fast forward to this month's madness, and there's Edert clutching a conference championship trophy, hamming it up for the cameras with his tongue wagging, and one finger-licking payoff — Edert about to dig into dozens and dozens of chicken wings and fries, an endorsement perk from an NIL deal signed this week.

There's also a link to buy from his "Dougie Buckets" T-shirt and sweatshirt collection.

Edert has cashed in on the bracket and the bottom line.

"The week has been crazy," Edert said.

Crazy is just one word for the aura around Jersey City and beyond for the 15th-seeded Peacocks (21-11) as they navigate their way through 15 minutes of fame at the same time they game-plan to face Purdue (29-

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7) in an East Region semifinal.

Coach Shaheen Holloway has his own distraction to downplay as he's emerged as a top candidate for the coaching vacancy at his alma mater, Seton Hall. His blueprint for building a winner isn't necessarily found on his resume — it's slapped on a billboard along a New Jersey highway.

The mantra from Holloway: "I got guys from New Jersey and New York City. You think we're scared of anything?"

The Peacocks are putting the "fun, baby, fun" back in the tournament.

"Obviously, with the media attention it's good and bad," Holloway said Thursday. "But this team, they've been good."

So good.

Saint Peter's started with a stunner when it knocked off No. 2 seed Kentucky, where coach John Calipari's roughly \$8-plus million salary dwarfs the Peacocks' entire athletic budget, and then advanced 95 miles south to Philadelphia after a win over seventh-seeded Murray State.

They are the third No. 15 seed ever to reach the Sweet 16. Florida Gulf Coast in 2013 and Oral Roberts last year both failed to reach the regional final.

The bracket-busting from the team in the 3,200-seat gym had it going national. Holloway pitched the Peacocks on "Good Morning America" and the upset earned laughs on late-night TV talk shows.

"Of course, people have already started their spring cleaning," Jimmy Fallon joked the day of the UK win. "For example, today everyone threw out their March Madness brackets."

Fallon cracked that even Saint Peter's players had busted their own brackets: "We had Kentucky."

Hey, not everyone is a #StrutUp believer. Saint Peter's still hasn't won over the bettors. Third-seeded Purdue is a 12 1/2-point favorite, according to FanDuel Sportsbook, easily the largest spread of the eight semifinal games. The Peacocks' element of surprise is no more.

"It's just basketball. I don't think you should go into any game being intimidated by anybody," forward KC Ndefo said.

The Peacocks punted on the "us against the world" attitude that so many underdogs embrace and invited all new fans to come along for the ride. The team even needed a police escort as it said goodbye to about 400 fans at a campus rally.

"With the last two years with COVID and everything, it's been so down and so dark," Holloway said. "Right now is just a time where, especially in Jersey City and New Jersey, everybody is rallying around us. It's been tremendous. The support has been unbelievable."

And why not? The Peacocks have won nine straight games, kind of unbelievable for a team that was 7-7 at one point this season and had a 27-day COVID break. They didn't play from Dec. 18 to Jan. 14 and have gone 18-5 since, coming out of the hiatus a whole new team.

"We had a chance to have a mini-camp to get ready and get back," Holloway said. "Since the COVID pause this team has been a different team. We've kind of been locked in and followed the goal, and the goal was always be a defensive-first team."

The win streak grew faster than the bushy mop of hair on Edert's head.

Edert and his 'stache have blown up social media, though he's found getting a verified account on Instagram is harder than beating the Wildcats. Saint Peter's demanded Twitter "Verify us" (it got the blue checkmark), then it called ESPN announcer Jay Bilas a "coward" when he re-seeded the bracket and put the Peacocks 16th.

But some questions about the Peacocks remain: Is Edert a traditional wing or boneless guy? Blue Cheese or ranch?

Edert didn't want to talk wings, just wins.

And he's convinced the Peacocks aren't done yet.

"The only thing that matters right now is beating Purdue," he said.

Arizona Legislature approves 15-week abortion ban

By BOB CHRISTIE Associated Press

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PHOENIX (AP) — The Arizona Legislature on Thursday joined the growing list of Republican-led states to pass aggressive anti-abortion legislation as the conservative U.S. Supreme Court is considering ratcheting back abortion rights that have been in place for nearly 50 years.

The House voted on party lines to outlaw abortion after 15 weeks of pregnancy, mirroring a Mississippi law now being considered by the nation's high court.

The bill explicitly says it does not overrule a state law in place for more than 100 years that would ban abortion outright if the Supreme Court overrules *Roe v. Wade*, the 1973 case that enshrined the right to abortion in law.

The bill now goes to Republican Gov. Doug Ducey, an abortion opponent who has signed every piece of anti-abortion legislation that has reached his desk since he took office in 2015.

Florida lawmakers passed a similar 15-week abortion ban early this month that Republican Gov. Ron DeSantis is expected to sign. A bill in West Virginia failed to pass the state Senate by the time its legislative session ended earlier this month after passing the House.

An Arizona proposal that would outlaw abortion after about six weeks has not advanced. A bill enacted in Texas last year allows private citizens to enforce the ban, and the Supreme Court refused to block it. Idaho's governor signed a copycat bill this week. Those measures are unique in that they allow private citizens to file civil lawsuits against anyone who helps someone else get an abortion after six weeks. It has made legal challenges difficult because the government is not involved in enforcement.

The Arizona 15-week abortion ban bill contains no exceptions for rape or incest or for a medical emergency. It would also bar abortions for families that learn in pregnancy later on that a fetus is not viable.

The measure was pushed by the Center for Arizona Policy, a prominent social conservative group that pushes religious freedom, anti-abortion and parental rights bills that wields great power among Republican lawmakers.

Democrats criticized what they called GOP lawmakers' disconnect between opposing abortion and refusing to provide more funding for the poor and uninsured.

Rep. Lorenzo Sierra, a Catholic from Cashion, said he was strongly in favor of abortion rights and called the abortion ban politically motivated and "dangerous to the women in our lives."

"I wish we had the same fervency for the living as we do for issues like this. That we would offer the loving dignity, education, shelter, nourishment," Sierra said. "Instead we're doing this, and we're getting in between a woman, her doctor and her God."

Republican backers said little during the floor debate.

Minority Democrats have said the measure is unconstitutional and that any ban would disproportionately impact poor and minority women who won't be able to travel to states without strict abortion laws.

But Sen. Nancy Barto, the Republican sponsor of the bill, has said she hopes the high court upholds Mississippi's law banning abortion after 15 weeks.

"The state has an obligation to protect life, and that is what this bill is about," Barto said during Senate debate last month.

The debate and vote on the 15-week abortion ban came the same morning that the House also passed a ban on transgender girls from playing on the high school or college sports team that aligns with their gender identity. The House voted Thursday to approved a bill banning gender reassignment surgery for anyone younger than 18. Both passed with no Democratic support.

Arizona already has some of the nation's most restrictive abortion laws, including one that would automatically outlaw it if the high court fully overturns *Roe*.

Republicans hope to put the 15-week ban in place so it takes effect quickly if the Supreme Court further limits abortion rights but stops short of fully overturning *Roe*. The measure closely mirrors the Mississippi law.

Under current abortion rulings, abortion is legal until the point a fetus can survive outside the womb, which is usually around 24 weeks.

Barto's bill would make it a crime for a doctor to perform an abortion after 15 weeks but would prohibit the prosecution of pregnant people for receiving one. Doctors could face felony charges and lose their license to practice medicine. There is an exception for cases when the mother is at risk of death or serious permanent

injury, but not for instances of rape or incest.

Of the 13,186 abortions performed in Arizona in 2020, 636 were after 15 weeks of pregnancy, according to the latest data from the Arizona Department of Health Services.

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.

A quarter-million doses from the company were supposed to be available to the vaccine-sharing initiative, called COVAX, 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. The company, Novavax, got \$388 million from one of the organizations leading COVAX to fast-track the vaccine's development and help make the shot available in poorer countries.

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 Bjorg Dystvold Nilsson, spokesman for COVAX co-founder CEPI.

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.

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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."

Takeaways: Civil rights, Trump close out Jackson hearing

By LISA MASCARO AP Congressional Correspondent

WASHINGTON (AP) — The historic Senate hearings for Judge Ketanji Brown Jackson, the first Black woman nominated for the Supreme Court, have been joyful, combative and clarifying, putting on display the breadth of the nation's partisan divide and the unresolved problems of its past.

The fourth and final day of the Senate Judiciary Committee's consideration of Jackson wrapped up Thursday with several hours of testimony from outside experts.

The American Bar Association's standing committee on the federal judiciary has afforded its highest rating, "well qualified," to the Harvard-educated Jackson. A junior high school friend gushed over the "supernova" debate team champion. Skeptics, including the Alabama's attorney general, warned that her views on crime and policing are "outside the mainstream."

Yet in the 50-50 Senate, where a Trump-era rules change means it is no longer necessary to muster broad support to confirm Supreme Court nominees, the hearings have become less about the vote ahead and more about framing the politics of the eventual outcome.

Democrats are on track to confirm President Joe Biden's pick, with a vote expected by time senators leave for a scheduled spring recess April 8.

Some takeaways from Day Four of the weeklong hearing:

REVIEWING THE RECORD

"Outstanding, excellent, superior, superb."

The ABA committee gave Jackson the same highest rating that has been bestowed on most recent Supreme Court nominees, with the exception of Justice Amy Coney Barrett.

The committee's chair, Ann Claire Williams, testified on the review of some 250-legal professionals on Jackson's record. Asked how Jackson's integrity was viewed, Williams said: "Those are the comments."

Republican senators are focusing on a narrow slice of the judge's work, the child pornography cases that Jackson herself has said are among "the most difficult" of her career — some of which still give her nightmares.

Much the way senators opposed to the first Black nominee to the court, Thurgood Marshall, a half-century ago portrayed the storied civil rights lawyer as soft on crime in his work defending Black people, Republicans have spotlighted Jackson's sentencings in criminal cases, they show too much "empathy" for defendants.

A witness for the Republican side, Attorney General Steven T. Marshall of Alabama, said he believes Jackson shows more deference to criminals appearing in her courtroom than she does victims. He said her views of law enforcement reforms are "outside the mainstream."

Republicans are trying to link Jackson to the left-leaning "defund the police" movements, but it's unclear if the approach is working. The judge has backing from the nation's largest law enforcement organization, the Fraternal Order of Police, and she has spoken emotionally about her brother and uncle who worked as police officers.

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TRUMP'S INFLUENCE HOVERS

Donald Trump is gone from the White House, but his influence over Republicans endures.

One witness called by Republicans was Alessandra Serano, the chief legal officer of Operation Underground Railroad, a Utah based anti-trafficking nonprofit group. It is under criminal investigation in the state for exaggerating its role in law enforcement arrests involving child predators, in order to fundraise.

The organization has become popular online and found success raising money off of conspiracy theories that have are popular among suburban mothers and groups that arose out of the QAnon conspiracy theory, which casts Trump as a hero fighting a cabal of Satan-worshipping cannibals operating a child sex trafficking ring.

As Republicans focus on Jackson's rulings in the child pornography cases, they are tapping into this strain of the GOP and its popularity among backers of the former president, drumming up voter interest before the November elections that will determine control of Congress.

From retirement in Florida, Trump has insisted, falsely, that he won the 2020 election, a belief shared by many Republicans, despite dozens of court cases and independent reviews that have rejected GOP claims of a rigged election. Trump is considering another run for president in 2024.

At one point Thursday, Sen. Sheldon Whitehouse, D-R.I., tried to air some of these points. He asked Alabama's Marshall whether Biden was the "duly elected president" of the United States.

Marshall replied that Biden was the president.

Pressed if the witness was purposefully omitting the words "duly elected," Marshall simply reiterated: "I'm answering the question. He is the president of the United States."

Alabama, with Marshall, was among other states joining in a lawsuit challenging the results of the 2020 election.

THE NEXT CIVIL RIGHTS ERA

The Senate hearings have been filled each day with some of the leading civil rights leaders celebrating, as Sen. Cory Booker, D-N.J., put it, the "joy" of reaching this milestone in American history.

Testifying Thursday, the chairwoman of the Congressional Black Caucus, Rep. Joyce Beatty, said Booker "spoke not only to Black America, but to America."

Beatty, D-Ohio, put Jackson's moment alongside those of civil rights icon Rosa Parks and other Americans and urged senators to consider what the judge's confirmation to the high court would mean for the country.

"We are no longer looking at 50-65 years ago," she said, of the past era of civil rights battles, "but yet we're still fighting."

COUNTING THE VOTES

Senators no longer need bipartisan cooperation to confirm judicial nominees, after rules changes that allow a simple 51-vote majority for the lifetime appointment to the court.

With Jackson's nomination almost assured by Democrats, who hold a slim majority in the 50-50 chamber with Vice President Kamala Harris able to break a tie, Republicans unable to stop the judge's confirmation at least want sow doubt in the outcome.

Republican Sens. Josh Hawley of Missouri, Ted Cruz of Texas and Marsha Blackburn of Tennessee have led the charge, quizzing the federal judge about her views on issues of race and crime, amplifying election-year grievances and a backlash over changing culture.

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.

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

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.

Arizona lawmakers vote to restrict trans athletes, surgeries

By JONATHAN J. COOPER Associated Press

PHOENIX (AP) — The Arizona Legislature passed bills Thursday to prohibit gender reassignment surgery for minors and ban transgender athletes from playing on girls sports teams, joining a growing list of Republican-controlled states attempting to restrict transgender rights as they gain more visibility in culture and society.

Republican Gov. Doug Ducey has not said whether he will sign either bill. Two GOP governors this week bucked conservatives in their party and vetoed bills in Indiana and Utah requiring trans girls to play on boys sports teams.

Republicans have said blocking transgender athletes from girls sports teams would protect the integrity of women's sports, claiming that trans athletes would have an advantage.

Many point to the transgender collegiate swimmer Lia Thomas, who won an individual title at the NCAA Women's Division I Swimming and Diving Championship last week.

But there are few trans athletes in Arizona schools. Since 2017, about 16 trans athletes have received waivers to play on teams that align with their gender identities out of about 170,000 high school athletes in the state, according to the Arizona Interscholastic Association.

"This bill to me is all about biology," said Republican Rep. Shawna Bolick, who said she played on a coed team in the 1980s but could not have made the high school boys team. "In my opinion, it's unfair to allow biological males to compete with biological girls sports."

Critics said the legislation dehumanizes trans youth to address an issue that hasn't been a problem.

"We're talking about legislating bullying against children who are already struggling just to get by," said Democratic Rep. Kelli Butler, fighting back tears.

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. That law is now blocked in court, along with another in West Virginia.

"This bill is creating a pointless and harmful solution to a non-existent issue," Skyler Morrison, a 13-year-old transgender girl, told lawmakers during a committee hearing earlier this month. "It's obvious this bill is just an excuse to discriminate against transgender girls."

Republicans around the country have leaned into culture war issues including transgender rights. The debate and vote on the transgender sports legislation came the same morning the Arizona House passed a ban on abortions after 15 weeks of pregnancy. Republicans said little during debates on all three bills.

Arizona is one of 20 states that have considered legislation to restrict gender-affirming health care. The bill originally would have banned all such care for minors but was scaled back to restrict only irreversible procedures, such as surgeries related to gender reassignment.

Similar legislation passed the Idaho House earlier this month but it died in the Senate amid concerns from some Republicans about restricting parental rights.

Supporters of the Arizona bill said it would prevent children from making permanent decisions that they might later come to regret. Republican Rep. John Kavanaugh compared the vote to the Legislature's unanimous decision in 2014 to ban genital mutilation.

"We should stand the same way today because this is mutilation of children," Kavanaugh said. "It is irreversible. It is horrific."

Critics said the decision should be left to parents, their children and the health care team caring for them. They said surgeries are only performed after extensive care and therapy.

"We're talking about our kids, who are already going to be taking the proper steps with their parents to be able to be who they are," said Democratic Rep. Andres Cano.

New rules aim to decide US asylum cases in months, not years

By AMY TAXIN and ELLIOT SPAGAT Associated Press

The Biden administration on Thursday unveiled new procedures to handle asylum claims at the U.S. southern border, hoping to decide cases in months instead of years.

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The rules empower asylum officers to grant or deny claims, an authority that has been limited to immigration judges for people arriving at the border with Mexico.

Until now, asylum officers have only done initial screenings for asylum and other forms of humanitarian relief for border arrivals.

The change could have far-reaching impact, but administration officials said they will start slowly and without additional resources. It will take effect 60 days after the rule is published in the Federal Register, which will occur next week.

The administration estimated last year that it would need to hire 800 more employees for asylum officers to handle about 75,000 cases a year. Without more money and new positions, it is unclear how much impact the move will have at first.

The United States has been the world's most popular destination for asylum-seekers since 2017, according to the U.N. refugee agency, putting enormous strain on immigration courts. The court backlog has soared to nearly 1.7 million cases.

"The current system for handling asylum claims at our borders has long needed repair," said Homeland Security Secretary Alejandro Mayorkas, whose department includes asylum officers at U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services.

Attorney General Merrick Garland said the new procedures will ease burdens on immigration courts, which are part of the Justice Department. Asylum claims for people who are not detained take an average of nearly four years to decide.

"This rule advances our efforts to ensure that asylum claims are processed fairly, expeditiously and consistent with due process," Garland said.

Under the new rules, asylum officers expect to decide cases in 90 days. Rejected applicants will be sent to immigration judges, who also expect to issue decisions in 90 days.

Judges will be able to complete cases faster with detailed documentation from asylum officers, officials said.

Some immigration advocates hailed the changes as a way to ensure people fleeing persecution won't have to wait years to receive asylum or other protections in the United States. Others said it's pushing people through a complex immigration far too quickly for them to get lawyers who can assist them in making an asylum claim.

"(It) risks sacrificing accurate decision-making for its narrative of speed," Eleanor Acer, senior director for refugee protection at Human Rights First, said in a statement. "Imposing unrealistic deadlines will lead to mistaken decisions, additional adjudication to correct those mistakes, and the improper return to persecution of people who qualify for asylum."

Those wanting tougher limits on U.S. immigration said they feared asylum officers weren't as prepared to detect fraudulent claims as immigration judges, something agency officials said wasn't the case.

It was also unclear how asylum officers would be able to handle increased responsibilities without more staff. They already have a hefty workload deciding cases of people who are already settled in the United States.

The new procedures, which generated more than 5,300 public comments after they were proposed in August, may face legal obstacles. Many changes to the immigration system during the Trump and Biden administrations have been successfully challenged, delayed or modified in courts.

Key moments in Russia's month-old war in Ukraine

By The Associated Press undefined

Russia's war in Ukraine has killed thousands, extensively damaged some cities 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.

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

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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 forces 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 nonstarters.

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 start 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 in 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 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 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 symbol of civilian suffering.

Thousands have left 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.

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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, 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 raids and ambushes. In the east, Russian troops have faced reinforced Ukrainian positions in the rebel regions and made only incremental gains.

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 west toward Odesa.

Western officials say 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. 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

The war raised concerns about the safety of Ukraine's nuclear power plants.

On the first day of the invasion, Russian forces took control of the decommissioned Chernobyl nuclear power plant, site of the world'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. And on Wednesday, Russian military forces destroyed a new laboratory at Chernobyl, according to the Ukrainian state agency responsible for the Chernobyl exclusion zone.

There also have been other fears over chemical leaks.

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 spread fear and bring Ukraine to its knees.

WHAT'S NEXT

Even as his offensive stalls and the Russian economy shudders under 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 be seeking to gain more ground and negotiate from a position of strength to force Zelenskyy into making concessions. Russian and Ukrainian negotiators say they are still far from drafting a prospective deal that Putin and Zelenskyy could discuss.

Many baffled by Taliban renegeing pledge on girls' education

By KATHY GANNON Associated Press

KABUL, Afghanistan (AP) — A news presenter on Afghanistan's TOLO TV wept as he read the announcement. Images of girls crying after being turned back from school flooded social media. Aid groups and many others remained baffled.

The Taliban have so far refused to explain their sudden decision to renege on the pledge to allow girls to go to school beyond sixth grade. Schools were supposed to reopen to older girls on Wednesday, the start of the new school year.

The ban caught even the Taliban-appointed Education Ministry unprepared. In many places across Afghanistan, some girls in higher grades returned to schools, only to be told to go home.

The move may have been designed to appease the Taliban's hard-line base but it came at the expense of further alienating the international community. The world has been reluctant to officially recognize Afghanistan's new rulers, concerned the Taliban would impose similar harsh measures and restrictions — particularly limiting women's rights to education and work — as when they previously ruled the country in the late 1990s.

The United Nations children's agency told The Associated Press on Thursday they were blindsided by the announcement.

"I think that yesterday was a very confusing day for all of us," said Jeannette Vogelaar, UNICEF's chief of education in Afghanistan.

"We were blindsided," said Sam Mort, UNICEF's communications chief in Afghanistan. "All the messages, all the actions that had been taking place led us to believe that schools were opening, and as we understand it, that's what our counterparts in the Ministry of Education believed as well."

Ahead of the planned reopening, in remote and deeply conservative villages — where women teachers may not have been available to educate girls — arrangements were made for older male teachers, who were considered acceptable, to step in and teach all-girls classes beyond sixth grade.

Coincidentally or not, the Taliban leadership was summoned on Wednesday to southern Kandahar province amid rumors of a Cabinet shuffle, which was later denied. Still, reports have persisted of declining health of the elderly, Taliban-appointed Prime Minister Hasan Akhund, a hard-liner.

Since the Taliban seized power in mid-August during the last weeks of the chaotic withdrawal of U.S. and NATO forces from Afghanistan, there have been reports of divisions among Taliban leaders, with lines drawn between the hard-liners and pragmatists.

It's unclear whether a tussle among the Taliban on how to rule the country could have contributed to Wednesday's ban but Torek Farhadi, an analyst who has advised past Afghan governments, called it a misfire.

"They really messed up by not keeping their word," he said of the Taliban.

Afghanistan's PenPath Volunteers, a group that works to promote education programs for all in rural areas, is planning to launch demonstrations against the Taliban ban, said Matiullah Wesa, the organization's founder.

Started in 2009 by two brothers from the Taliban heartland of southern Kandahar, the organization has secret schools and thousands of volunteers distributing schools supplies across the country.

In Kabul on Wednesday, sisters Raihana Mirzakhail, 18, and Suria Mirzakhail, 17, showed up at their Mawlana Jalaluddin Mohammad Balkhi school. Their teacher started taking down attendance for the eleventh grade, when another teacher came into the classroom and told all the girls to go home.

"We were told this is not our school anymore," said Suria. "We became so hopeless." She and her sister

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had dreams to go to university.

"They broke our hearts ... we have nothing else to do at home," Raihana said. "Other Islamic countries allow their boys and girls to be educated and that is why they are able to progress."

On TOLO TV, announcer Sebghat Sepehr broke down Wednesday as he interviewed Soraya Paikin, a former deputy higher education minister, and rights activist Mahboba Siraj about the ban.

His voice broke, he started to cry and struggled to finish his question.

Memories of Albright: A legacy of bluntness and conviction

By MATTHEW LEE AP Diplomatic Writer

The last full working day of Bill Clinton's presidency ended with a dreary Washington winter afternoon. Wind-swept rain and sleet pounded on the windows of Madeleine Albright's seventh-floor office at the State Department, obscuring her usually clear view of the Lincoln Memorial.

Next door, in the office of her chief of staff, Albright had joined a small group to commemorate the end of her term as America's first female secretary of state and her time as the highest-ranking woman in the history of the U.S. government.

Eyes were only partially on the television in the room that was tuned to a replay of Albright's final television appearance as a government official: on "The Oprah Winfrey Show," which had been taped several days earlier in Chicago.

EDITOR'S NOTE — Former Secretary of State Madeleine Albright died Wednesday of cancer. AP Diplomatic Writer Matthew Lee knew Albright not only as America's top diplomat, but also as a professor of his at Georgetown University.

A bottle of obscure liquor — a gift to her from some foreign leader — was cracked open as stories were told, many about her historic trip to North Korea a few months earlier, some about her epic travel pace, her predilection for exotic shopping, but also the bitter fight over the 2000 presidential election that had just ended in a controversial Supreme Court decision that would bring George W. Bush to the White House in just three days.

Albright was a lifelong Democrat who had famously forsworn partisan politics during her four years as America's top diplomat but had been increasingly frustrated by the nasty tone of the election dispute between Bush and his Democratic opponent, Vice President Al Gore. I mentioned that the weather didn't look great for the upcoming inauguration and she looked out the rain-spattered windows and remarked with a wry smile: "I hope it rains on those f - - - - s' parade."

The remark was jolting because it was so unlike the Albright that I had known. She often said that she had had her "political instincts surgically removed" when she became secretary of state. I had covered her for nearly three years as a State Department reporter for the French news agency AFP, and, while most people including the traveling press corps, knew well her political leanings, she had striven to mask them and was unfailingly polite to Democrats and Republicans alike.

I had certainly never heard her use such coarse language. Not in off-the-record encounters during her frenzied travels to locales that former secretaries of state had never ventured to — Kano in northern Nigeria; Samarkand and Bukhara in Uzbekistan and perhaps most famously Pyongyang, North Korea, to name just a few. And not ever in lectures or other events of hers that I attended a decade earlier at Georgetown University, where she had been a professor of mine at the School of Foreign Service.

The closest anyone could recall was when she castigated the Cuban government at the United Nations for shooting down a civilian Brothers to the Rescue plane by saying it hadn't been "cojones" but rather "cowardice." Or her studied and stern visage of annoyance, anger and aggravation when she learned that Clinton had lied when he swore to her that he had not had an inappropriate relationship with a White House intern.

Her rare political comments were almost always tame in nature. Albright once recalled asking one of her diplomat father's most gifted students at the University of Denver to serve as a foreign policy adviser on a

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Democratic campaign. "But Madeleine, I'm a Republican," she said Condoleezza Rice had replied. Four years after Albright left government, Rice became the second female secretary of state and the first Black woman to hold the office.

Madeleine Albright was a woman of conviction and determination who liked to say she told things like they were and not the way she might like them to be. She often punctuated her otherwise conservative attire with a fancy brooch, often picked to send a message to her interlocutors. They ranged from the mundane to the menacing — including one of a snake.

Having fled eastern Europe from the horrors of the Nazi era and subsequent Soviet suppression, she abhorred dictators and authoritarianism. And yet, she met with some of the worst. Syria's Hafez al-Assad, North Korea's Kim Jong Il, Sierra Leone rebel leader Foday Sankoh and others can all be found in her appointment books. She liked to say that America was "THE indispensable nation" as she lobbied for more support for U.S. diplomacy at home and abroad.

She believed in the promise of the United States and as the glass-ceiling-breaking first woman to run the State Department tried tirelessly to change the "pale, male, Yale" culture of the foreign service. She championed the creation of a U.S.-led "Community of Democracies" to promote greater global respect for human rights and freedom even when some of America's closest allies, notably France, sneered at the idea.

Once, in the middle of a Clinton state visit to India, Albright broke off from the trip in Delhi to fly nearly 12 hours to Geneva, Switzerland, with a refueling stop in Crete, to deliver a 15-minute speech excoriating China's human rights record before what was then known as the U.N. Commission on Human Rights. Having made her case, she turned around and flew back to India, rejoining the presidential visit in Mumbai.

Albright drew criticism in left-wing and humanitarian circles for her support of punishing sanctions imposed on Iraq during Saddam Hussein's rule, telling an interviewer once that the humanitarian suffering that many blamed on the sanctions had been an unfortunate but unavoidable side effect of implementing U.S. policy. "I think this is a very hard choice, but the price — we think the price is worth it," she said in comments that remain anathema.

Yet, her active participation in several Mideast peace attempts — both between Israel and the Palestinians at Camp David and between Israel and Syria in Shepherdstown, West Virginia — and her mission to North Korea led others to believe she might be too willing to negotiate.

From running after Palestinian leader Yasser Arafat in a Parisian driveway to stop him from walking out of peace talks to listening to Assad rant for hours about Syria's rightful place in the region and admiring a surreal mass gymnastics performance beside Kim Jong Il in a packed Pyongyang stadium, Albright was never embarrassed or afraid to take diplomacy to the limits.

None of those efforts would result in success, but Albright was convinced they had value and was determined to keep trying. After the failure of Camp David, for instance, Albright sought until the very end of the Clinton administration to keep Israeli-Palestinian peace talks alive.

And there was Kosovo. She was such a strong advocate for NATO's intervention in the conflict, some called it "Madeleine's War."

She was greeted as a hero by thousands of Kosovars when she visited a refugee camp in neighboring Macedonia during the war. Chants of "Al-bright!" "Al-bright!" sprang up spontaneously when her presence became known.

Later, signs appeared saying "Our future is All Bright."

EDITOR'S NOTE — AP Diplomatic Writer Matthew Lee has been covering U.S. foreign policy and international affairs since 1999.

Feds: Forced-reset triggers are machine guns under US law

By MICHAEL BALSAMO Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — Federal officials are notifying gun dealers that some forced-reset triggers, which allow guns to fire rapidly with a single continuous pull of the trigger, are considered machine guns under federal

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law and subject to strict regulation.

The notification was being made Thursday in an open letter from the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms and Explosives to federally licensed firearms dealers. It spells out how investigators have determined the triggers to be "conversion devices," making the weapons machine guns.

The Biden administration has been working to strengthen gun regulation, step up its fight against gun violence and tackle rising violent crime rates in the country. The Justice Department has already announced it is taking a hardline approach to gun dealers who break federal law and has established several strike forces in cities to help stop firearms trafficking.

In the new letter, the agency said its examination of the devices in question determined that they "allow a firearm to automatically expel more than one shot with a single, continuous pull of the trigger."

The ATF says using the triggers, some of which sell online for around \$400, mean that the weapons are being turned into machine guns under federal law, and as a result would be subject to strict regulation for possession, transportation or transferring the devices.

The determination applies only to forced-reset triggers that allow guns to fire more than one shot with a single trigger-pull and not others on the market that require the trigger to be released before another shot can be fired.

Balkans split over Madeleine Albright's wartime legacy

By DUSAN STOJANOVIC Associated Press

BELGRADE, Serbia (AP) — A monument in Kosovo, a snake named after her in Serbia. Madeleine Albright was either loved or hated in the Balkans for her pivotal role during the southern European region's wars of the 1990s.

Following the former U.S. secretary of state's death on Wednesday at age 84, how her legacy is viewed from the Balkans mostly depends on whether one was on the receiving or triggering end of the bloody breakup of the former Yugoslavia.

Albright quickly emerged as the Clinton administration's chief hawk on the Balkans after she became secretary of state in 1997. She identified herself so strongly with the push for a Western intervention in Kosovo that her critics dubbed the 1998-1999 conflict there "Madeleine's War."

She championed the 78-day bombardment of Serb-led Yugoslavia by NATO — which started exactly 23 years ago Thursday — that halted a bloody Serb crackdown against Kosovo Albanians. Earlier, while serving as U.S. ambassador to the United Nations during President Bill Clinton's first term, she urged tough international response against the nearly 4-year Bosnian Serb shelling of Bosnia's capital, Sarajevo.

Albright also worked on bringing to justice all the individuals responsible for war crimes committed in the Balkans, including former Serbian President Slobodan Milosevic and the wartime Bosnian Serb leader, Radovan Karadzic.

For that, Albright was proclaimed a "Serb hater" in Serbia and a hero in Kosovo and Bosnia.

"She will be remembered in Serbia as a ruthless woman, one of the loudest advocates of the bombing of Yugoslavia and the independence of Kosovo," the pro-government Vecernje Novosti newspaper said Thursday.

Serbian officials remained silent on Albright's death without offering condolences. On Thursday, a few dozen mostly right-wing demonstrators took part in a protest in Belgrade, held almost every year on the anniversary of the start of the NATO bombing. Some displayed banners reading: "Bye, Bye Madeleine."

In Kosovo, the reaction was quite the opposite.

"It is very difficult to find the perfect combination of politics, diplomacy and history, like in the unique figure of Madam Secretary Madeleine Albright," Kosovo Prime Minister Albin Kurti said while paying respects in front of the bronze-colored monument to Albright in Kosovo's capital, Pristina.

"NATO's intervention in Kosovo to stop Serbian genocide in spring 1999 definitely has the seal of Madeleine Albright, and we will be forever grateful and thankful to her," Kurti told The Associated Press.

In Bosnia, Albright is well remembered as the American ambassador who in the summer of 1995 presented to the U.N. Security Council the first evidence of mass atrocities committed in the eastern town of Srebrenica

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in the closing months of the country's brutal 1992-95 war.

Over 8,000 Bosnian Muslims perished in 10 days of slaughter after the town was overrun by Bosnian Serb forces in July 1995. Their bodies were plowed into hastily made mass graves and then later dug up with bulldozers and scattered among other burial sites to hide the evidence. The remains of victims are still being unearthed and identified more than a quarter-century later.

"Because of her own experience, she was a true champion of justice, she could not stomach injustice," former Bosnian Prime Minister Haris Silajdzic said of the Czechoslovakia-born Albright, who as a child was a refugee from Nazi- and then Soviet-dominated Eastern Europe. "She understood that (Bosnia) has suffered injustice and was looking for ways to correct that."

While visiting besieged Sarajevo during the war, she evoked former U.S. President John F. Kennedy's 1963 speech in Berlin, telling a crowd of several hundred: "Ja sam Sarajevka" ("I am a Sarajevan.")

In her native Czech Republic, Albright's legacy is honored, especially in light of the current Russian invasion of Ukraine.

"It's a huge loss," Alexandr Vondra, a former anti-communist dissident and currently a Czech representative in the European Parliament, said.

"Nobody in the United States did so much for us. Let's think about it now when NATO protects us against the arrogant expansionism of Russia," he said.

Albright's ties to the former Yugoslavia go back to her early childhood.

Soon after her birth on May 15, 1937 in Prague as Maria Jan Korbelova, her parents moved to the then-capital of Yugoslavia, Belgrade, where her father, Josef Korbel served as a press attaché at the Czechoslovak Embassy.

He was recalled from Belgrade at the end of 1938. In March 1939, soon after the Nazi occupation of Czechoslovakia, the whole family headed back to Yugoslavia and eventually moved to Britain.

Albright often remembered her days in Belgrade fondly, including when she addressed the Serbs two days after the start of the NATO intervention in the Kosovo conflict 23 years ago.

"As you can see, I remember a little Serbian -- albeit with a Czech accent -- from my days in Belgrade as a child," she said in the address, which is posted on State Department's website. "My father was a Czechoslovak diplomat there before the Second World War. When the Nazis invaded Czechoslovakia, my father escaped to Yugoslavia with his wife and baby -- me. I will never forget how we were warmly welcomed as friends in need of help."

"Americans do not hate Serbs," Albright continued. "Like me, they remember that we were allies against Fascism," she said. "Like you, Americans want to live in peace with their neighbors and the wider world."

"That is why we could not sit idly by while security forces were used to commit atrocities against ethnic Albanians in Kosovo." Albright said.

The speech was not relayed by Serbia's state-run media amid the NATO bombing. Instead, the Belgrade Zoo named one of its pythons after her in a sign of protest for her role in the U.S.- led intervention.

A girl and her hamster: Half of Ukraine's children flee war

By CARA ANNA Associated Press

MOSTYSKA, Ukraine (AP) — Russia's invasion has displaced half of Ukraine's children. On a hospital bed in a town close to the border with Poland, a little girl with a long blonde braid and dressed in pink is one of them.

To get there, Zlata Moiseenko survived a chronic heart condition, daily bombings, days of sheltering in a damp and chilly basement and nights of sleeping in a freezing car. The fragile 10-year-old became so unsettled that her father risked his life to return to their ninth-floor apartment 60 miles (90 kilometers) south of the capital, Kyiv, to rescue her pet hamster, Lola, to comfort her.

The animal now rests in a small cage beside Zlata's bed in a schoolhouse that has been converted into a field hospital operated by Israeli medical workers. The girl and her family hope to join friends in Germany if they can arrange the paperwork that allows her father to cross the border with them.

"I want peace for all Ukraine," the little girl said, shyly.

The United Nations children's agency says half of the country's children, or 4.3 million of an estimated 7.5

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million, have now fled their homes, including about 1.8 million refugees who have left the country.

The children are everywhere, curled up amid suitcases in train stations, humanitarian aid tents, evacuation convoys. It is one of the largest such displacements since World War II.

Zlata's mother, Natalia, folded her hands in prayer and was close to tears. Thursday marks a month of war and already she can hardly take any more.

"I ask for help for our children and the elderly," the mother said.

She recalled the escape from their community of Bila Tserkva that put her daughter's life in peril beyond the ever-present threat of airstrikes.

As Russian planes pounded overhead, aiming for the local military base, the family decided to run. They found shelter for a week in a cold, damp basement in a village. The girl's family struggled to keep her calm and attended, since her heart condition requires constant care.

"We gave her medication to calm her down," her mother said. But it was not enough. Every loud sound was jarring. The family had few options, without friends and family to call on for help along the road west towards Poland and safety. Eventually they tried to shelter with an acquaintance of the girl's grandmother, Nadia, but the sounds of airplanes and air raid sirens followed them.

On the final drive to the border, Zlata and her family slept in their car in freezing weather. At the border, amid confusion over documents and the girl's father, they were turned back. Ukraine is not allowing men between 18 and 60 to leave the country in case they're called to fight, with few exceptions.

It was by chance that the family heard about the Israeli field hospital in the Ukrainian border town of Mostyska. Now they are regrouping in relative comfort, without the scream of sirens.

At times, to fill the silence, Zlata plays the piano at the school. She missed playing while the family was on the run, her mother said. She proudly showed off her daughter's YouTube channel of performances. The most recent video, however, showed their basement hideout instead. As the shaking camera panned to show a bare light bulb and concrete walls, the mother narrated in a whisper.

"All we have is potatoes and a few blankets," she said in the recording. "I hope we won't stay here long."

For now, until the family moves again, there is some peace. A drawing by Zlata has been tacked up in the hallway. On a nearby bed, a stuffed panda and a doll have been placed in a toy embrace.

The girl has been transformed. She arrived at the field hospital severely dehydrated, said one of the Israeli physicians, Dr. Michael Segal, who was born in Kyiv and who has been moved by the stories he hears from back home.

"It's very close to my heart," Segal said of Ukraine. People have lost everything "in one brief moment."

Zlata's family "came here crying, not knowing what to do," he added.

The medical staff stepped in and even treated her hamster, her first-ever pet, doctors said.

And reminded of that, the girl's exhausted mother smiled.

"That hamster's the superstar of the clinic," she said. "It had been over-stressed, too."

Ukraine refugees' hopes of return wane after a month of war

By SRDJAN NEDELJKOVIC and DAVID KEYTON Associated Press

MEDYKA, Poland (AP) — As Russia launched its war in Ukraine last month, exhausted and frightened refugees streamed into neighboring countries. They carried whatever they could quickly grab. 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 the biggest movement of people in Europe since World War II. Most believed they would soon be back home. That hope is waning now.

"At the beginning, we thought that this would end pretty soon," said Olha Homienko, a 50-year-old woman from Kharkiv. "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 is among several cities and towns that have been encircled and shelled heavily by

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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 see why Russian President Vladimir Putin wants to make Ukrainians suffer so much. "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 (a) huge number of people appeared in Medyka," Iwasieczko recalled. "They came terribly exhausted, it was still cold, they were freezing."

Though Medyka authorities had prepared some facilities in advance, 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 had believed to the last moment that war could be avoided.

"Everything was prepared, even though we were not sure whether all this would be necessary," 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."

In Przemysl, another Polish town where refugees arrive by train, 66-year-old Nelya Kot from Chernihiv said she remembers waking to the sound of air raid sirens and explosions when the war started on Feb. 24.

"I thought maybe it was a drill, but then realized that ... you wouldn't hear explosions," she said. "At that moment my daughter called and said 'Mom, Russia has attacked us.'"

One month later, Kot added, people in Chernihiv are drinking river water to survive. Her nephew was killed while waiting for bread, and devastation is everywhere, she said.

"Today, there is no water, no gas, no electricity (in Chernihiv)," Kot gasped. "People are in total isolation, they drink water from the Desna river."

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

The measures also aim to 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 aged 18-60 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 school. Some have moved on other nations where they have relatives.

Maria Tykha, a 29-year-old refugee from Kharkiv, still doesn't know what he will do next. After arriving Thursday at Przemysl by train, she said "I just can't believe that it is possible in the 21st century."

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.

Volunteers on Thursday sought to go beyond just offering safety and immediate help — the Dream Doctors organization from Israel brought in clowns for the children, while Humane Society International distributed pet food.

The United Nations children's agency says half of Ukraine's children — 4.3 million from an estimated 7.5 million — have now fled their homes, including 1.8 million who have left the country.

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."

Stephen Wilhite, inventor of the meme-favorite GIF, has died

By TALI ARBEL AP Technology Writer

Stephen Wilhite, the inventor of the internet-popular short-video format, the GIF, has died. He was 74. His wife, Kathaleen, said Thursday in a phone interview that he died of COVID on March 14.

Wilhite, who lived in Milford, Ohio, won a Webby lifetime achievement award in 2013 for inventing the GIF, which decades after its creation became omnipresent in memes and on social media, often used as a cheeky representation of a cultural moment.

Wilhite was working at CompuServe in 1987 when he invented the GIF. "I saw the format I wanted in my head and then I started programming," he told The New York Times in 2013, saying the first image was an airplane and insisting that the file had only one pronunciation - a soft "G," like Jif peanut butter. Those using the hard "G," as in "got" or "given," "are wrong," he said. "End of story."

In that interview, he said the '90s-era dancing baby GIF is a favorite of his.

"There's way more to him than inventing GIF," Kathaleen Wilhite said of her husband, who loved trains, with a room dedicated to them in the basement of their house with "enormous train tracks," as well as taking camping trips. Still, even after he retired in 2001, "he never stopped programming," she said.

Somali female lawmaker among scores killed by suicide bomber

By OMAR FARUK Associated Press

MOGADISHU, Somalia (AP) — A prominent Somali female lawmaker is among at least 48 people killed in a suicide bombing that hit a polling station in rural central Somalia, police and a local official said Thursday.

The attack took place late Wednesday in the town of Beledweyne, the capital of Somalia's Hiran region.

Among its victims was opposition lawmaker Amina Mohamed Abdi, an outspoken government critic who was campaigning to retain her seat in the National Assembly.

The death toll rose dramatically from 15 to 48 as more victims of the attack succumbed to their wounds, Ali Gudlawe, president of Somalia's Hirshabelle state, told reporters. He said 108 others were injured.

Al-Shabab, Somalia's Islamic extremist rebel group, claimed responsibility for the attack. The 15 people killed were "mostly civilians" and the attack wounded "an unspecified number" of people, police officer Ahmed Hassan told AP by phone.

"I was at a walking distance to the polling station when a suicide bomber rushed towards the member of parliament Amina and embraced her and blew himself up," eyewitness Dhaqane Hassan said. "Shots were fired in the air by the soldiers who seemed shocked, but unfortunately she instantly died at the scene."

Abdi, the legislator killed at a polling station, was in Beledweyne campaigning for re-election in a vote expected to take place this week.

"Somalia has lost a promising giant leader, an activist, a fearless advocate who finally paid the ultimate price for seeking justice for Ikram Tahlil," said lawmaker Abdirizak Mohamed, speaking of a female intelligence officer whose killing Abdi had been trying to investigate.

President Mohamed Abdullahi Mohamed and Prime Minister Mohamed Hussein Roble condemned the attack.

Two other extremist attacks occurred in Beledweyne Wednesday, killing former lawmaker Hassan Dhuhul, a traditional elder and civilians sitting outside a busy restaurant, police said. No more details were immediately available on those attacks.

The attacks in Beledweyne came hours after an attack in the capital, Mogadishu, in which two al-Shabab gunmen tried to force their way into the international airport in the capital. Somali forces and African Union peacekeepers said they ended that assault by killing both the attackers. At least six people were killed in that attack, including at least one African Union peacekeeper, according to police. Authorities did not reveal the identities of the victims.

Al-Shabab, which has ties with al-Qaida, frequently stages deadly attacks in Mogadishu and other parts of Somalia. The rebels are fighting to impose strict Shariah law in Somalia. They oppose the federal government in Mogadishu and the presence of foreign peacekeepers in the Horn of Africa nation.

NATO extends Stoltenberg term for a year due to Russia's war

By LORNE COOK Associated Press

BRUSSELS (AP) — With the threat of wider conflict hanging over Europe, NATO opted for stability on Thursday by extending Secretary-General Jens Stoltenberg's term in office for an extra year to help steer the 30-nation military alliance through the security crisis sparked by Russia's war on Ukraine.

Stoltenberg tweeted Thursday that he is "honored" by the decision of NATO leaders to extend his term until Sept. 30, 2023.

"As we face the biggest security crisis in a generation, we stand united to keep our alliance strong and our people safe," he said, after U.S. President Joe Biden and his counterparts agreed to extend his term at a summit in Brussels.

The former Norwegian prime minister was named to NATO's top civilian post in October 2014. It's the second time that his term of office has been extended. His mandate was due to expire in September.

In a tweet, Biden said that Stoltenberg has "done a remarkable job leading and strengthening our Alliance — particularly during this critical moment for international security."

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

In Oslo, Finance Minister Trygve Slagsvold Vedum confirmed that Stoltenberg had resigned from the job. Temporary governor Ida Wolden Bache has been nominated in his place and her appointment is expected to be confirmed later Thursday.

"Of course I would like to see Jens Stoltenberg become our next central bank governor, but we are in the middle of a dramatic situation in Europe and I have great understanding that he prioritizes continuing in the important role he has in NATO," Slagsvold Vedum said.

Stoltenberg, 63, has described Russia's war on Ukraine as "the most serious security situation we have been in for decades."

Stoltenberg has been praised for steering NATO through a difficult and divisive period under the Trump administration, when the U.S. threatened not to come to the aid of member countries that weren't spending enough on defense.

Speaking to reporters on an Air Force One flight to Brussels on Wednesday, U.S. National Security Advisor Jake Sullivan said Biden and Stoltenberg have "developed a relationship of trust."

"Secretary-General Stoltenberg has played an instrumental role in helping secure the powerful unity you've seen at NATO through this crisis," Sullivan said

Stoltenberg was twice prime minister in Norway — from 2000 to 2001 and then again from 2005 to 2013 — and he also served as finance minister, and industry and energy minister.

Norwegian Prime Minister Jonas Gahr Støre told Norwegian news agency NTB that Stoltenberg had done "a solid job" as NATO chief. "Never before has the alliance been stronger, and never before in the alliance's history has unity been more important."

Wolden Bache was due to be formally named the central bank chief later Thursday for a six-year term.

"Norges Bank has great respect for Mr Stoltenberg's decision made in the light of his very important responsibilities as Secretary General of NATO," she said.

Prior to Thursday's announcement, speculation had been rife that a woman would be named at the helm of the world's biggest security organization for the first time.

Pressured by patients, FDA reviews ALS drug with modest data

By MATTHEW PERRONE AP Health Writer

WASHINGTON (AP) — When patients are battling a terminal illness and want access to an experimental drug, how much evidence that it works should regulators require before approval?

That's the question behind many of the Food and Drug Administration's toughest decisions, including last year's controversial approval of Aduhelm. Many experts — including the agency's own outside advisers — say that Alzheimer's drug is unlikely to help patients.

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Less than a year later, the agency may soon approve another drug for a deadly neurodegenerative disease based on partial data that's being debated by experts. The FDA meets next week to publicly review evidence from a small, mid-stage study of Amylyx Pharmaceuticals' drug for ALS, or amyotrophic lateral sclerosis.

Regulators told Amylyx last year it would need to conduct a large, confirmatory study before seeking approval, according to the company. But after months of intense lobbying by ALS patients and their representatives in Congress, the agency said it could submit the drug based on the smaller study.

The change was so abrupt it surprised even some doctors who helped study the treatment, which appears to modestly slow patients' decline.

"The effect is there, but it's not a homerun," said Dr. Jeffrey Rothstein of Johns Hopkins University. "Does it really work? I don't know. That's why I'd like to see a second study."

The FDA traditionally requires two large, late-stage studies for approval. For deadly diseases like cancer, one study showing promising early results is often accepted.

The Amylyx decision comes as government investigators look into Aduhelm's approval, including whether the agency buckled under pressure from Alzheimer's groups and pharmaceutical interests.

Experts who study FDA decision-making see a troubling pattern in which the beleaguered agency is continually pressured to accept weaker evidence, damaging its scientific credibility and opening the door to ineffective treatments.

"This is what many people were concerned about in terms of the precedent for FDA approving Aduhelm," said Dr. Joseph Ross of Yale University. "They essentially capitulated to both industry and patient advocacy pressure, as opposed to abiding by the science."

An FDA spokeswoman declined to discuss the review, citing agency rules, but noted that Amylyx's submission "is not a determination on the merits of the application." FDA will post its initial review of the drug ahead of Wednesday's meeting.

There are important differences between the two drugs. The FDA approved the Alzheimer's drug based on laboratory measures suggesting it helped slow cognitive decline, even though company studies failed to show a significant patient benefit. In the case of Amylyx's drug, ALS patients showed a measurable improvement, but the therapy had no effect on laboratory results.

Given that patient benefit, advocates argue the FDA should approve Amylyx's treatment.

ALS, also known as Lou Gehrig's disease, destroys nerve cells needed to walk, talk, swallow and — eventually — breathe. There is no cure and most people die within three to five years.

Amylyx's drug is a combination of two older drug ingredients: a prescription medication for liver disorders and a dietary supplement associated with ancient Chinese medicine. Cambridge, Mass.-based Amylyx has patented the combination and says the chemicals work together to shield cells from premature death. (Its co-founders declined interview requests for this story.)

Some ALS patients already take both pills. FDA approval would likely compel insurers to cover the treatment.

In a 137-patient study, people taking the drug progressed 25% slower than those taking a placebo, as measured on a 48-point questionnaire that tracks functions like walking, handwriting and swallowing. The difference in scores — 2.3 points — was statistically significant, but experts differ on its meaning for patients.

Dr. Catherine Lomen-Hoerth of the University of California San Francisco said dropping even one point can be significant.

"That's the difference between being able to feed yourself or not feed yourself," said Lomen-Hoerth, who wasn't involved in the research.

A New England Journal of Medicine editorial called the results "incremental" and "modest," and recommended longer, larger studies.

An FDA decision appeared years away, but the results sparked a campaign by patient groups, beginning with a petition calling on the agency to act. Advocates took credit when FDA appeared to reverse its stance on the medication in September.

For people living with ALS, the logic is clear: Any drug that can extend or improve life is worth trying.

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The FDA has approved only two therapies for ALS. The more effective one extends life by several months, and many experts say Amylyx's drug is likely to show a similar benefit.

"When you're faced with a choice of nothing, you certainly want an opportunity to try anything that can help you," said Larry Falivena, who was diagnosed with ALS in 2017. He's scheduled to speak at next week's FDA meeting.

The 53-year-old father of two joined a half-dozen other patients in calling on FDA to approve Amylyx's drug during an online "listening session" last May.

The session was organized by the ALS Association, which invested \$2.2 million in Amylyx's research. The group — a major beneficiary of the 2014 "ice bucket challenge" viral fundraising campaign — could receive up to \$3.3 million in proceeds if the drug is approved.

The association says such arrangements are standard among nonprofits that fund research and that proceeds go toward further studies. Payback clauses are one way of helping to bring "effective treatments to market as quickly as possible," the group said in a statement. It added that it wouldn't advocate for approval if the drug weren't safe and effective.

During the listening session, FDA's Dr. Patrizia Cavazzoni reiterated the agency's longstanding position: If drugmakers developed better biological measures of how their medicines worked, the agency could use them to speed approvals.

The 48-point scale used by Amylyx is the standard for ALS research, but some experts question its reliability. For instance, it's not uncommon for patients to report improving function even as measures like muscle strength decline.

Several weeks later, Cavazzoni was summoned before a House of Representatives subcommittee. During the five-hour hearing, which was requested by patient advocates, lawmakers pressed her on the status of Amylyx's drug.

The co-founders of another patient group, I AM ALS, also testified. Brian Wallach and his wife, Sandra Abrevaya, worked in the Obama White House and formed their group after Wallach's 2017 diagnosis with ALS. The nonprofit has quickly become a political force in Washington, pushing legislation through Congress that, among other things, requires FDA to develop a five-year plan to accelerate drug development for ALS and similar conditions.

In their joint testimony, read by Abrevaya, they called on lawmakers to intervene on patients' behalf: "The answer is abundantly simple: Make the FDA act with the urgency and regulatory flexibility that it promised."

A spokeswoman for I AM ALS rejected the idea that the group is "telling the FDA what to do."

"We are not trying to pressure the FDA," said Theresa Garner. "We're following the standard process and are just making sure that the FDA and its advisory committee hear from people who live with this disease."

The FDA advisory panel of outside experts meeting Wednesday is the same one that voted against Aduhelm. FDA disregarded its advice and approved the drug, prompting three members to resign.

Given that the same FDA scientists and leadership are overseeing Amylyx, approval is widely expected.

Rothstein, the Johns Hopkins researcher, plans to prescribe the drug to his patients. But he'd still like to see more data.

"I would prefer the FDA wait for two trials," he said. "Patients will say, 'You're depriving me of a drug.' And the counter to that is: 'I may be depriving you of a drug that isn't effective.'"

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.

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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 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."

American weekly jobless claims at lowest level since 1969

By MATT OTT AP Business Writer

WASHINGTON (AP) — The number of Americans applying for unemployment benefits last week fell to its

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lowest level in 52 years as the U.S. job market continues to show strength in the midst of rising costs and an ongoing virus pandemic.

Jobless claims fell by 28,000 to 187,000 for the week ending March 19, the lowest since September of 1969, the Labor Department reported Thursday. First-time applications for jobless aid generally track the pace of layoffs.

The four-week average for claims, which compensates for weekly volatility, also fell to levels not seen in five decades. The Labor Department reported that the four week moving average tumbled to 211,750 from the previous week's 223,250.

In total, 1,350,000 Americans were collecting jobless aid the week that ended March 12, another five-decade low.

Earlier this month, the government reported that employers added a robust 678,000 jobs in February, the largest monthly total since July. The unemployment rate dropped to 3.8%, from 4% in January, extending a sharp decline in joblessness to its lowest level since before the pandemic erupted two years ago.

U.S. businesses posted a near-record level of open jobs in January — 11.3 million — a trend has helped pad workers' pay and added to inflationary pressures.

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

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

The central bank's policymakers have projected that inflation will remain elevated, ending 2022 at 4.3%.

Earlier this month, the government reported that consumer inflation jumped 7.9% over the past year, the sharpest spike since 1982.

US states seek to ease inflation burden with direct payments

By PATRICK WHITTLE Associated Press

PORTLAND, Maine (AP) — With inflation raging and state coffers flush with cash, governors and lawmakers across the U.S. are considering a relatively simple solution to help ease the pain people are feeling at the gas pump and grocery store — sending money.

At least a dozen states have proposed giving rebate checks of several hundred dollars directly to taxpayers, among them California, Kansas and Minnesota. Critics, including many Republican lawmakers, say those checks won't go far enough given the pace of inflation and are pushing instead for permanent tax cuts.

A proposal from Maine Gov. Janet Mills is among the most generous in a state where the cost of food and fuel has skyrocketed in recent months. The Democratic governor wants to send \$850 to most residents as part of the state's budget bill.

The rebate "will help Maine people grapple with these increased costs by putting money directly back into their pockets," Mills said.

But Wendell Cressey, a clamdigger in Harpswell, said the soaring cost of fuel for people in his business means the check will provide just temporary relief.

"It might help a little, but it would have to be a lot more because we're paying for gas. Most of us have V-8 trucks," Cressey said. "I just don't think it's going to help as much as they think it is."

In addition to the direct rebates, lawmakers and governors across the country are considering cuts to sales taxes, property tax relief and reducing or suspending state gas taxes.

The proposals come at a time when many states actually have too much money on their hands because of billions of dollars in federal pandemic aid and ballooning tax revenue. It's also happening as the war in Ukraine has compounded soaring prices for fuel and other essentials.

It's also no coincidence that the relief is being floated during an election year, said Mark Brewer, a political science professor at the University of Maine. Maine's governor's race is one of many closely watched contests at the state level this year.

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"There's some real policy reason to do this," Brewer said. "But at the same time, it's also clear that this is an election year, and in an election year there are few things as popular as giving voters what voters see as free money from the state."

The states are moving toward sending people money as consumer inflation has jumped nearly 8% over the past year. That was the sharpest spike since 1982.

Inflation boosted the typical family's food expenses by nearly \$590 last year, according to the Penn Wharton Budget Model, a project of the University of Pennsylvania's Wharton Business School. Overall, the average family had to spend \$3,500 more last year to buy the same amount of goods and services as they purchased in previous years.

In New Mexico, some have questioned whether Democratic Gov. Michelle Lujan Grisham's plan for a \$250 rebate goes far enough given how much consumer prices have risen.

Wayne Holly and his wife, Penny, were among the small business owners in the state who were forced to shut their doors early in the COVID-19 pandemic because of the governor's public health orders.

Their T-shirt and screen-printing business narrowly weathered that storm but is now feeling the pinch again as the cost of materials skyrockets and customers look to keep their own bank accounts from being drained.

"Do we get customers who are angry and irate because things have changed? Yes, we sure do," Wayne Holly said. "Do we get customers who say 'I never used to pay that before?' I say 'Yeah, I've never paid \$4.50 for a gallon of gas.'"

The rebate plan in New Mexico, and concerns about how much it will help, reflects a growing trend among states as they try to find some relief for their residents amid criticism that they could do more.

Many states are awash with record amounts of cash, due partly to federal COVID-19 relief funding. Measures enacted by presidents Donald Trump in 2020 and Joe Biden last year allotted a combined total of more than \$500 billion to state and local governments. Some of that is still sitting in state coffers waiting to be spent.

Those federal pandemic relief laws also provided stimulus checks to U.S. taxpayers, which helped boost consumer spending on goods subject to state and local sales taxes. From April 2021 to January 2022, total state tax revenues, adjusted for inflation, increased more than 19% compared to the same period a year earlier, according to a recent Urban Institute report.

"Overall, the fiscal condition of states is strong, and much better than where we thought states would be at the start of the pandemic," said Erica MacKellar, a fiscal policy analyst at the National Conference of State Legislatures.

That's given state officials greater confidence to consider tax rebates or direct payments to residents. But some financial experts are urging caution, noting that inflation also could drive up state expenses and wages.

"State legislatures should not rush into enacting permanent tax cuts based on what very well might be temporary growth in real revenues," Lucy Dadayan, senior research associate at the Urban Institute, wrote in a recent analysis.

The relief plans vary by state. Minnesota Gov. Tim Walz, a Democrat, released a plan for spending the state's budget surplus that included a proposal for income tax rebate checks of \$1,000 per couple. In California, Democratic lawmakers have released separate proposals to send rebates of \$200 to \$400 to each taxpayer, while Gov. Gavin Newsom said he wants to distribute fuel debit cards of up to \$800 to help ease the burden on residents paying the highest gas prices in the nation.

Democratic governors in other states have proposed other approaches. Pennsylvania Gov. Tom Wolf is seeking a one-time property tax subsidy for lower-income homeowners and renters. In Illinois, Gov. J.B. Pritzker has proposed halting a 2.2-cent increase in the motor fuel tax, suspending a 1% grocery sales tax for a year and providing a property tax rebate of up to \$300.

New Jersey got out front early. Gov. Phil Murphy and the Democrat-led Legislature included cash checks of up to \$500 to about 1 million families as part of a budget deal last year, when the governor and lawmakers were up for election.

The state's rosy financial picture, fueled by healthy tax receipts and federal funds -- as well as higher taxes on people making \$1 million -- has continued this year. But Murphy's fiscal year 2023 budget doesn't call for additional cash rebates.

Proposals for relief haven't gone so smoothly in other states. Vermont Gov. Phil Scott, a Republican, has proposed returning half of a \$90 million surplus in the state Education Fund to the state's property taxpayers with a check of between \$250 and \$275, but the Democrat-controlled Legislature has shown little interest.

"Typically, when you overpay for something, you get some of that money back," Scott said when he made the proposal earlier this month.

Americans want Biden to be tougher on Russia: 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 tightrope 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.

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

Today in History

By The Associated Press undefined

Today in History

Today is Friday, March 25, the 84th day of 2022. There are 281 days left in the year.

Today's Highlight in History:

On March 25, 1931, in the so-called "Scottsboro Boys" case, nine young Black men were taken off a train in Alabama, accused of raping two white women; after years of convictions, death sentences and imprisonment, the nine were eventually vindicated.

On this date:

In 1634, English colonists sent by Lord Baltimore arrived in present-day Maryland.

In 1894, Jacob S. Coxey began leading an "army" of unemployed from Massillon (MA'-suh-luhn), Ohio, to Washington D.C., to demand help from the federal government.

In 1911, 146 people, mostly young female immigrants, were killed when fire broke out at the Triangle Shirtwaist Co. in New York.

In 1915, the U.S. Navy lost its first commissioned submarine as the USS F-4 sank off Hawaii, claiming the lives of all 21 crew members.

In 1947, a coal-dust explosion inside the Centralia Coal Co. Mine No. 5 in Washington County, Illinois, claimed 111 lives; 31 men survived.

In 1954, RCA announced it had begun producing color television sets at its plant in Bloomington, Indiana.

In 1960, Ray Charles recorded "Georgia on My Mind" as part of his "The Genius Hits the Road" album in New York.

In 1965, the Rev. Martin Luther King Jr. led 25,000 people to the Alabama state capitol in Montgomery after a five-day march from Selma to protest the denial of voting rights to Blacks. Later that day, civil rights activist Viola Liuzzo, a white Detroit homemaker, was shot and killed by Ku Klux Klansmen.

In 1987, the Supreme Court, in Johnson v. Transportation Agency, ruled 6-3 that an employer could promote a woman over an arguably more-qualified man to help get women into higher-ranking jobs.

In 1990, 87 people, most of them Honduran and Dominican immigrants, were killed when fire raced through an illegal social club in New York City. (An arsonist set the fire after being thrown out of the club following an argument with his girlfriend; Julio Gonzalez died in prison in 2016.)

In 1996, an 81-day standoff by the anti-government Freemen began at a ranch near Jordan, Montana.

In 2020, the Senate unanimously passed a \$2.2 trillion economic rescue package steering aid to businesses,

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workers and health care systems engulfed by the coronavirus pandemic; the largest economic relief bill in U.S. history included direct payments to most Americans, expanded unemployment benefits and \$367 billion for small businesses to keep making payroll while workers were forced to stay home.

Ten years ago: President Barack Obama arrived in South Korea, where he visited the Demilitarized Zone separating the South from the communist North, telling American troops stationed nearby they were protectors of "freedom's frontier." Pope Benedict XVI, on his first trip to Latin America, urged Mexicans to wield their faith against drug violence, poverty and other ills, celebrating Mass before a sea of worshippers in Silao.

Five years ago: A scuffle broke out at Bolsa Chica State Beach in Southern California where supporters of President Donald Trump were marching when counter-protesters doused organizers with pepper spray. Stars and fans gathered for a public memorial to honor the late mother-daughter film stars Debbie Reynolds and Carrie Fisher.

One year ago: Georgia Republican Gov. Brian Kemp signed into law a Republican-sponsored overhaul of state elections that included restrictions on voting by mail and greater legislative control over how elections are run. A final vote count from Israel's election showed that Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and right-wing allies had fallen short of winning a parliamentary majority; Netanyahu would leave office and become opposition leader. Pulitzer Prize-winning Texas author Larry McMurtry died at 84; he'd won the prize for "Lonesome Dove" and also wrote "The Last Picture Show" and "Terms of Endearment," which became Oscar-winning films. Children's author Beverly Cleary, the writer behind the popular characters Ramona Quimby and Henry Huggins, died at the age of 104 in Carmel Valley, California.

Today's Birthdays: Film critic Gene Shalit is 96. Former astronaut James Lovell is 94. Feminist activist and author Gloria Steinem is 88. Singer Anita Bryant is 82. Actor Paul Michael Glaser is 79. Singer Sir Elton John is 75. Actor Bonnie Bedelia is 74. Actor-comedian Mary Gross is 69. Actor James McDaniel is 64. Movie producer Amy Pascal is 64. Rock musician Steve Norman (Spandau Ballet) is 62. Actor Brenda Strong is 62. Actor Fred Goss is 61. Actor-writer-director John Stockwell is 61. Actor Marcia Cross is 60. Author Kate DiCamillo is 58. Actor Lisa Gay Hamilton is 58. Actor Sarah Jessica Parker is 57. Baseball Hall of Famer Tom Glavine is 56. TV personality Ben Mankiewicz is 55. Olympic bronze medal figure skater Debi Thomas is 55. Actor Laz Alonso is 51. Singer Melanie Blatt (All Saints) is 47. Actor Domenick Lombardozzi is 46. Actor Lee Pace is 43. Actor Sean Faris is 40. Comedian-actor Alex Moffat (TV: "Saturday Night Live") is 40. Former auto racer Danica Patrick is 40. Actor-singer Katharine McPhee is 38. Comedian-actor Chris Redd (TV: "Saturday Night Live") is 37. Singer Jason Castro is 35. Rapper Big Sean is 34. Rap DJ-producer Ryan Lewis is 34. Actor Matthew Beard is 33. Actor-singer Aly (AKA Alyson) Michalka (mish-AL'-kah) is 33. Actor Kiowa Gordon is 32. Actor Seychelle Gabriel is 31.