

Groton Daily Independent

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UpComing Events

Tuesday, March 29

Indoor Track Meet at Northern State University

Friday, April 1

FFA CDE at SDSU, Brookings

School Breakfast: Stuffed Bagels

School Lunch: Fish Sandwich, Puzzle Tots

Senior Menu: Lemon baked fish, rice pilaf, California blend veggies, fruit crisp, whole wheat bread.

Saturday, April 2

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

Sunday, April 3

2 p.m. and 5 p.m., POPS Concert

3:30 p.m.: GHS FCA Meeting: "The Chosen" Watch Party at Kim Weber's house, 501 E 16th Ave

Emmanuel: 9 a.m. Worship with communion, 10:15 a.m. Sunday school, 10:15 a.m. 1st Communion Class, 7 p.m., Choir

St. John's: 8 a.m. Bible Study, Worship with communion at 9 a.m. at St. John's and 11 a.m. at Zion, 10 a.m. Sunday School

Monday, April 4

Emmanuel: 6:30 a.m.. Bible Study

School Breakfast: Breakfast pizza.

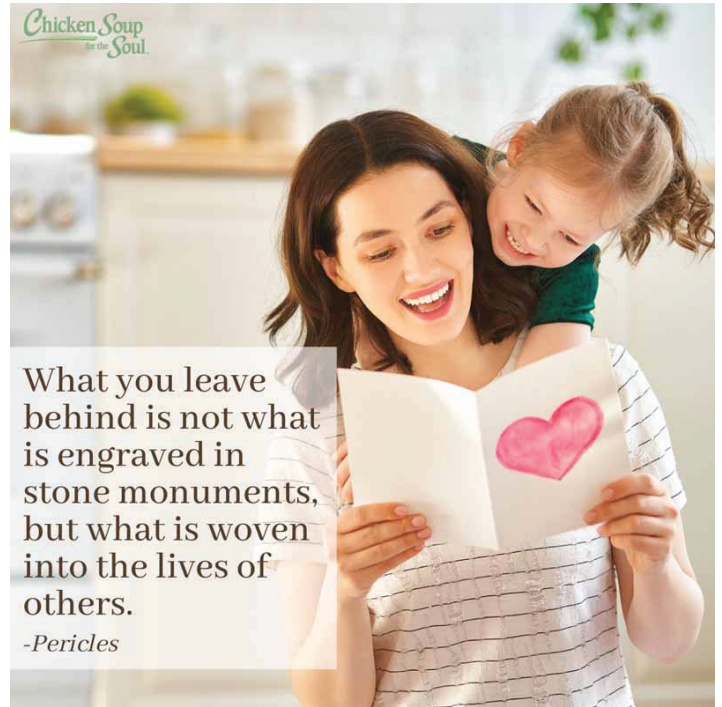
School Lunch: Cheese sticks, marinara sauce, corn.

Senior Menu: Ranch chicken breast, boiled potato, squash, fruit, whole wheat bread.

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

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

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Tuesday, April 5

7 p.m.: City Council Meeting

St. John's: 1 p.m.: Ladies Aid LWML

School Breakfast: French toast sticks.

School Lunch: Tangereine chicken, rice.

Senior Menu: Hamburger with bun, oven roasted potatoes, mixed vegetables, fruit, ice cream sundae.

Wednesday, April 6

Emmanuel: 6 p.m. Soup Supper (Nigeria Circle is host), 7 p.m. Lenten Service

St. John's: Lenten Service, 7 p.m.

School Breakfast: Egg omelets.

School Lunch: Hamburgers, fries.

Senior Menu: Scalloped potatoes with ham, peas, sunset salad, cookie, whole wheat bread.

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.uslbn.com/careers and search for jobs in Britton, SD.

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!!!



Dolan presents activities report to school board

Athletic Director Brian Dolan talked about several things that are in the works in the Northeast Conference at the school board meeting held Monday night.

Florence-Henry had submitted a request to join the Northeast Conference; however, they have now been moved to Region 2 so that request was withdrawn for now. Waubay-Summit is also considering going the conference. Dolan said it would help secure Class A games without having to travel.

Another thing in the works is more double headers. Dolan said he was not thrilled this past year with only six C games for the boys and four or five for the girls. "We need more games." He is anticipating that the C division may have play their own schedule with more double headers in the works.

There will be a meeting Thursday to decide if there is enough interest in fielding a boys varsity soccer team. He said right now, it's right on the borderline.

Board member Marty Weismantel also mentioned that the Huron athletic director has expressed an interest in forming a junior varsity football schedule for this part of the state. Dolan said he was also aware of that and will follow up. On the varsity level, homecoming has been set for September 23 with Sisseton.

Dolan said it's a hard balance with girls soccer and volleyball since so many of the girls play both. Soccer takes its toll on the girls legs and then they have to play volleyball. He said that you can tell the difference in volleyball in October after soccer is over.

Reports were also given by the health curriculum and the music department. Desiree Yeigh reported that the high school band numbers are "scary low." She said it may be questionable if there will be a pep band or marching band next year. An idea being floated around is to include eighth graders in the high school band to help bolster numbers. She said that the sixth grade band numbers are the highest they have been since she has been in Groton. It was suggested to bring in a lesson teacher from NSU to help in the department.

Janene Harry gave a tour of the art department.

Superintendent Joe Schwan reported on the State A Tournament. He said that he was very impressed with the fans and players at the state tournament. "Our community was represented well at the State A. It was very impressive and our kids were fantastic."

Schwan said he was very impressed with the fans and players at the state tournament. Our community was represented well at the State A. It was impressive. Our kids were fantastic.

Elementary track and field day is set for May 13th at 12:30 p.m. Elementary numbers are up one in each kindergarten and fifth grade.

The work comp fee is about \$2,000 lower than last year. There is a 4% Increase in the health insurance premium.

The board accepted the resignation of Becky Erickson as a special education teacher, JH VB coach and JH GBB coach at the end of the school year. She has accepted the director position of the North Central Special Education Cooperation.

The board accepted the resignation of Ray Adams as high school math teacher. There are currently 11 openings in the Groton Area School.

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Superintendent's Report to the Groton Area School District 06-6 Board of Education

March 28, 2022

State Basketball. Congratulations to our team on a fantastic season and a 7th place finish in the State A Tournament. I was very proud of our kids – on and off the court – and all our spectators for representing Groton well.

2022-2023 School Calendar – Homecoming. The football schedules for the next two years have been released by SDHSAA thereby allowing us to determine the date for Homecoming 2022. Our homecoming date will be Friday, September 23 vs. Sisseton.

2021-2022 School Calendar – Snow Days. At our April meeting, I'll ask you to adopt changes to the end of the 2021-2022 school calendar due to snow days. We've missed three full days due to weather-related closures this year.

SASD Leadership Academy. At the end of this week, I'll be traveling back to Rapid City for the fourth and final session of the SASD Leadership Academy. The final session is entitled "Leading with Purpose."

Teaching Position Vacancies. We currently have the following open positions posted online via our website and the South Dakota Teacher Placement site operated by ASBSD:

HS Math Teacher – *Closes April 14*

MS/HS Special Education Teacher – *Closes April 14*

K-12 Vocal Music w/ Show Choir – *Closes April 1*

Debate/Oral Interp

Show Choir

All-School Play

Head Boys Soccer

Junior High Volleyball

Junior High Girls Basketball

Bus Drivers

Food Service Staff

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Principal's Report

MS/HS Building

Mrs. Sombke

March 28, 2022

1) Enrollment

March 2021

6- 45

7- 49

8- 51

MS= 145

9- 45

10- 48

11- 46

12- 51

HS= 190

Total= 335

March 2022

6- 53

7- 40

8- 47

MS= 140

9- 51

10- 42

11- 42

12- 46

HS= 181

Total= 321

2) Spring Assessments

-Smarter Balance Assessment: Students in grades 6-8, and 11 will complete the ELA, Math, and Science Assessment

Schedule for MS/HS Spring Testing 2022:

Date	M (April 4)	T (5)	W (6)	Th (7)	F (8)
Notes	Grade 6/8: Math			Grade 6/8: ELA	
AM (hrs 1-4)	Grade 7/11: ELA			Grade 7/11: Math	
PM (hrs 5-7)		Grade 6/8: Math	Grade 6/8: ELA		
		Grade 7/11: ELA	Grade 7/11: Math		

Date	M (April 11)	T (12)	W (13)	Th (14)	F (15)
AM (hrs 1-4)	Grade 8 Science (during class periods) - all week		Grade 11 Science (hrs 1-3)		
PM (hrs 5-7)					

3) NWEA MAPS

-MAPS Assessment: Students in grades 6-11 will complete the 3rd assessment in English, Math, and Science during 4/25-5/6 during regular classes

4) Dual Credit Registration

-March 30th: Students interested in taking Dual Credit Courses for 2-year programs will register during study hall

-April 1st: Students interested in taking Dual Credit Courses for 4-year programs will register during study hall

Dates to Know:

March 30: 2-year Dual Credit Registration

April 1: 4-year Dual Credit Registration

April 2: ACT at Groton Area 8am-12:00noon

April 3: Pops Concert, GHS Gym at 2pm and 5pm

April 4-13: Smarter Balance Assessments Grades 6-8, and 11

April 7: FFA CDE @ Groton Area

April 7: FFA Banquet

April 11: School Board Meeting

April 15 & 18: No School Easter Break

April 23: Groton Area Prom

April 24: State FFA Convention Begins

April 25-May 6: NWEA MAPS- 3rd Assessment Grades 6-11

April 25: School Board Meeting

April 28: Middle School Spring Music Concert

May 5: High School Spring Music Concert

May 9: School Board Meeting

May 15: Groton Area Graduation, Class of 2022

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2022-2023 Groton Area School District

Approved 2/14/2022

August 2022						
Su	M	Tu	W	Th	F	Sa
	1	2	3	4	5	6
7	8	9	10	11	12	13
14	15	16	17	18	19	20
21	22	23	24	25	26	27
28	29	30	31			

August
22 - Faculty Inservice
23 - Faculty Inservice
24 - 1st Day of School
Student Contact: 6; Inservice: 2

January 2023						
Su	M	Tu	W	Th	F	Sa
1	2	3	4	5	6	7
8	9	10	11	12	13	14
15	16	17	18	19	20	21
22	23	24	25	26	27	28
29	30	31				

January
4 - School Resumes
Student Contact: 20; Inservice: 0

September 2022						
Su	M	Tu	W	Th	F	Sa
				1	2	3
4	5	6	7	8	9	10
11	12	13	14	15	16	17
18	19	20	21	22	23	24
25	26	27	28	29	30	

September
2 - NO SCHOOL
5 - Labor Day - NO SCHOOL
23 - Homecoming
29 - Parent/Teacher Conferences (1:30-8:00)
30 - Faculty Inservice - NO SCHOOL
Student Contact: 19; Inservice: 2

February 2023						
Su	M	Tu	W	Th	F	Sa
			1	2	3	4
5	6	7	8	9	10	11
12	13	14	15	16	17	18
19	20	21	22	23	24	25
26	27	28				

February
16 - Parent/Teacher Conferences (1:30-8:00)
17 - Faculty Inservice - NO SCHOOL
20 - President's Day - NO SCHOOL
Student Contact: 18; Inservice: 2

October 2022						
Su	M	Tu	W	Th	F	Sa
						1
2	3	4	5	6	7	8
9	10	11	12	13	14	15
16	17	18	19	20	21	22
23	24	25	26	27	28	29
30	31					

October
7 - Lake Region Marching Festival
10 - Native American Day - NO SCHOOL
21 - End of 1st Quarter (39)
Student Contact: 20; Inservice: 0

March 2023						
Su	M	Tu	W	Th	F	Sa
			1	2	3	4
5	6	7	8	9	10	11
12	13	14	15	16	17	18
19	20	21	22	23	24	25
26	27	28	29	30	31	

March
10 - End of 3rd Quarter (46)
16-17 - Spring Break - NO SCHOOL
Student Contact: 21; Inservice: 0

November 2022						
Su	M	Tu	W	Th	F	Sa
						1
6	7	8	9	10	11	12
13	14	15	16	17	18	19
20	21	22	23	24	25	26
27	28	29	30			

November
11 - Veterans Day Program
23-25 - Thanksgiving - NO SCHOOL
Student Contact: 19 ; Inservice: 0

April 2023						
Su	M	Tu	W	Th	F	Sa
						1
2	3	4	5	6	7	8
9	10	11	12	13	14	15
16	17	18	19	20	21	22
23	24	25	26	27	28	29
30						

April
2 - Pops Concert (2:00 & 5:00)
7 - Good Friday - NO SCHOOL
10 - Easter Monday - NO SCHOOL
22 - PROM
27 - Middle School Spring Concert (7:00)
Student Contact: 18; Inservice: 0

December 2022						
Su	M	Tu	W	Th	F	Sa
						1
4	5	6	7	8	9	10
11	12	13	14	15	16	17
18	19	20	21	22	23	24
25	26	27	28	29	30	31

December
8 - MS/HS Christmas Concert (7:00)
22 - Elementary Christmas Concert (1:00)
22 - Early Dismissal (2:00)
22 - End of 1st Semester (41/80)
22-31 Christmas Break - NO SCHOOL
Student Contact: 16 ; Inservice: 0

May 2023						
Su	M	Tu	W	Th	F	Sa
	1	2	3	4	5	6
7	8	9	10	11	12	13
14	15	16	17	18	19	20
21	22	23	24	25	26	27
28	29	30	31			

May
2 - Elementary Spring Concert (7:00)
4 - High School Concert/Awards Night (7:00)
14 - Graduation (2:00)
17 - End of 2nd Semester (44/90)
Student Contact: 13; Inservice: 1

- Faculty Inservice
- No School
- Important Dates
- End of Quarter/Semester
- Early Dismissal

All make-up days will be added to the end of the school calendar.



11 Tuff Tigers place at state

The Groton Tuff Tigers participated the SDWCA State Wrestling Tournament this past weekend in Sioux Falls at the T Denny Sanford Premier Center. It was a fun, exciting, and rewarding experience had by all of the wrestlers! 11 Tigers placed at the tournament! All the kids wrestled hard and we couldn't be more proud!

Back Row: Bentley Ehresmann (4th Place), Liza Krueger (5th Place), Xzavier Klebsch (7th Place), Hank Flihs, Hank Hill, Keenan Moody (6th Place), Parker Zoellner (6th Place)

Front Row: Huntley Overacker (2nd Place), Brooks Sombke, Preston Hinkelman (5th Place), Rosalyn Block, Henry Pharis (2nd Place), Kroy Kahli (7th Place)

Not Pictured: Lane Krueger (2nd Place), Christian Ehresmann (3rd Place) (Courtesy Photo)

Groton Senior Citizens

February 14 Groton Seniors met and nine members were present. President Sarge Likness opened the meeting with the flag pledge. Minutes and treasure reports were read and accepted. There was no old or new business. A get well card was given to Dick Donovan. He sliced on the ice and cracked some ribs and hurt his shoulder. Meeting was adjourned, Cards were played. The winners of each game. Pinochle- Sarge Likness, Canasta- Eunice McColister, Tony Goldade brought a birthday cake and ice cream for his birthday. The birthday song was sung to him. Paper Paul gave each a stuffed animal for Valentine day. Door prizes, Bev Sombke, Elda Stange and David Kliensassor. February 21 Senior citizens met for their pot luck dinner. Ten members attended. President had the flag pledge and table prayer. After dinner Bingo was played Pat Larson won black out. Cards were played after bingo. Door prizes went to Pat Larson, Dick Donovan, and Sarge Likness.

Weekly Vikings Recap

By Jack & Duane Kolsrud

Breaking down the Za'Darius Smith signing

The Vikings made headlines this week with the signing of former Green Bay Packer, Za'Darius Smith. Smith was a dominant edge rusher in 2019 and 2020, amassing a total of 26 sacks in those two years. However, last year Smith struggled with injuries early and did not achieve one single sack until the Packers' playoff loss to San Francisco in January. To many Vikings' fans, Smith's injury history might be a major concern. However, if you break down Smith's contract with the Vikings, there is little to no risk for the Vikings with this signing.

On the surface, Smith's contract with the Vikings reads as a 3-year, \$42,000,000 deal, with \$11,500,000 guaranteed. That might seem like a lot for a 30-year-old edge rusher coming off a season where he played only 2 games. Yet, if you look at the details of the contract, this contract does not affect the Vikings salary cap in any significant way.

For starters, Smith's cap hit for the 2022 season will only be \$3,343,137. To put that into perspective, the salary cap for every NFL team this year will be \$208.2 million. Thus, Smith will only take up 1.6% of the Vikings' entire salary cap this year. For an edge rusher with the potential to have twelve or more sacks this year, that is an enormous bargain for the Vikings.

However, it does appear that Smith's contract will become significantly more expensive for the Vikings in 2023. For the 2023 season, Smith will carry a \$14,166,666 cap hit for the Vikings. Not only would this make Smith's contract take around 6.3% of the entire Vikings' salary cap, but it would also give Smith the second highest cap hit for the Vikings behind Kirk Cousins. For the 2024 season, Smith's cap hit would increase even further to \$21,666,668, an astronomical amount for a 32-year-old edge rusher.

Given that the two final years of Smith's three-year contract would be too much for the Vikings to pay, the Vikings created an easy way out of Smith's contract after the 2022 season with low dead cap numbers. To clarify, dead cap is salary cap space that is taken up by a player no longer on a team. This usually stems from guaranteed money paid to a player who has been released or traded. If the Vikings cut Smith after the 2022 season, they would only have a dead cap of \$3,333,334 on their salary cap. If they cut him after the 2023 season, they would only have a dead cap of \$1,666,668 on their salary cap. Both these dead cap amounts would be very manageable for the Vikings team.

Thus, looking at all the details of the Za'Darius Smith signing, I think he only plays one year with the Vikings. Not only does Smith come with injury concern, but he is also on the wrong side of the 30. Could Smith perform extremely well alongside Hunter, and force the Vikings to keep him? Sure. However, I don't think the Vikings would play out Smith's contract as the money just gets too steep. Therefore, all I can say is enjoy this year with Za'Darius Smith as it likely will be his only season with the Vikings.

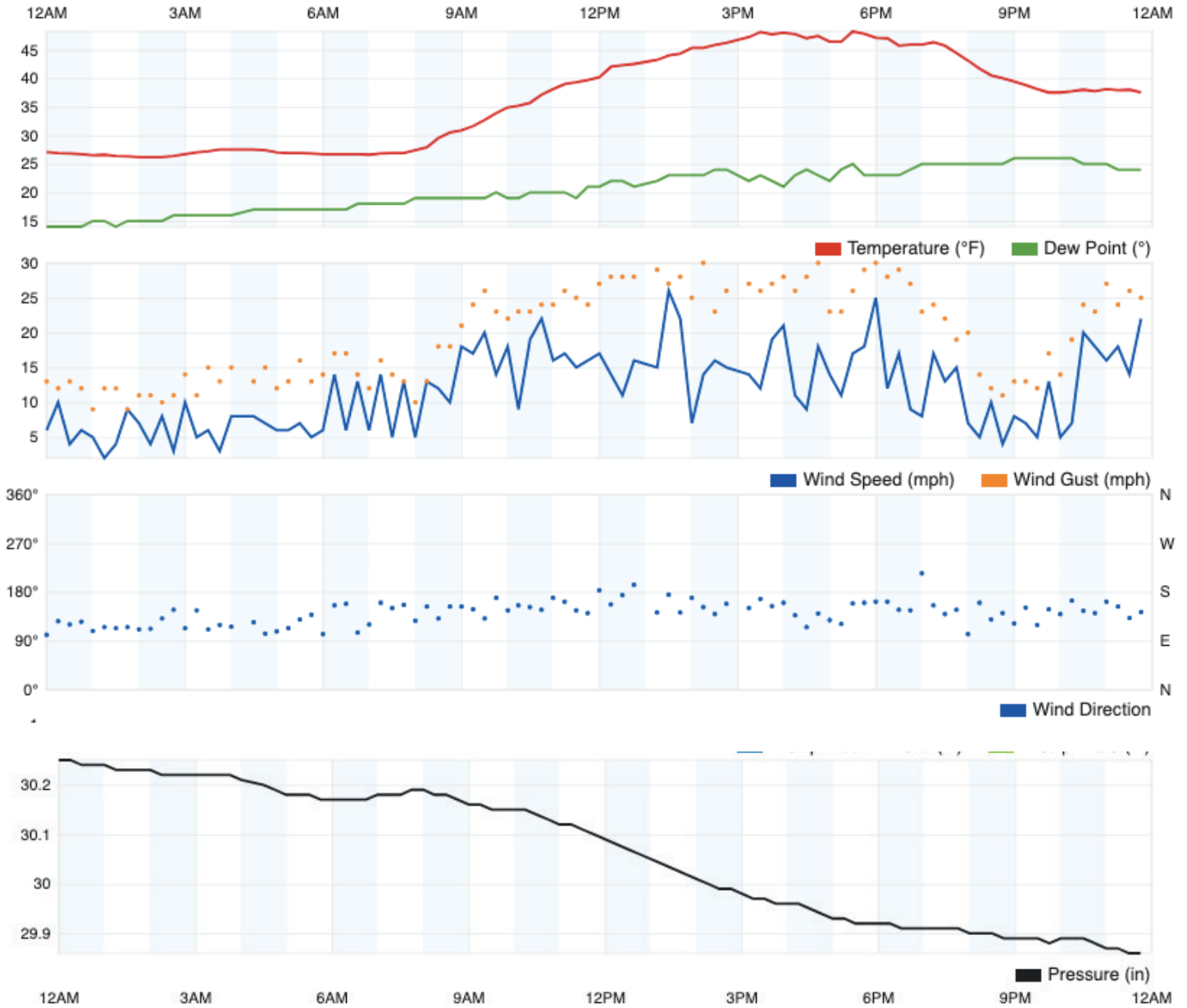
Looking Ahead

The Vikings will begin their offseason workout programs on April 4. It will be the first time that Vikings' head coach, Kevin O'Connell, will be able to get his hands on the Vikings players. It will be interesting to see if O'Connell's coaching philosophy when it comes to practice is vastly different than former Vikings' head coach, Mike Zimmer.

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Yesterday's Groton Weather Graphs



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Today	Tonight	Wednesday	Wednesday Night	Thursday
				
Breezy. Mostly Cloudy then Chance Showers	Showers then Rain/Snow and Blustery	Snow Likely and Breezy	Partly Cloudy and Blustery then Partly Cloudy	Mostly Sunny
High: 51 °F	Low: 29 °F	High: 38 °F	Low: 22 °F	High: 44 °F

Today

45 to 60°



Dry morning.
Light afternoon Rain.
Rumble of thunder
mainly e of a line from
Pierre to Aberdeen.

Tonight

near 30°



Rain mixing with &
transitioning to light Snow
late this evening into the early
morning hours Wednesday.
Increasing Winds.

Wednesday: Snow ending from nw to se during the day.

NWS Aberdeen, SD





light afternoon Rain → light Snow
late this evening,
continuing Wednesday

Light rain will begin this afternoon, with the potential for a few rumbles of thunder mainly east of a line from Pierre to Aberdeen by mid afternoon. Expect the light rain to slowly mix with and transition to light snow late this evening into the early morning hours Wednesday as winds increase out of the north. Snow will end northwest to southeast during the day Wednesday.

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Light Rain mixing with & changing to Light Snow late this evening into early Wednesday morning.

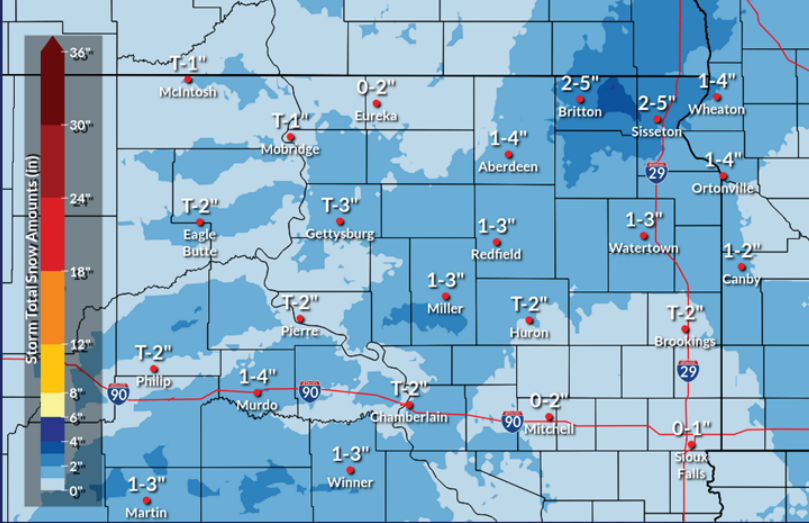
Most snow accumulating Wednesday morning.
Snow ending northwest to southeast during the day Wednesday.



Expected Snowfall - Official NWS Forecast

Weather Forecast Office
Aberdeen, SD
Issued Mar 29, 2022 2:56 AM CDT

Valid Tue 1:00PM through Thu 1:00AM CDT



Breezy Winds Continue

	Tue			Wed				
	6am	12pm	6pm	12am	6am	12pm	6pm	12am
Aberdeen	39	33	22	37	39	39	35	26
Britton	36	31	23	35	40	41	35	26
Eagle Butte	25	36	43	41	39	37	33	21
Eureka	33	24	33	38	38	39	36	21
Gettysburg	38	28	40	41	41	41	38	23
Kennebec	33	29	39	43	39	40	39	22
McIntosh	23	43	43	43	41	44	38	17
Milbank	30	30	24	26	35	38	35	28
Miller	38	33	26	37	38	38	33	22
Mobridge	26	31	37	38	37	36	32	17
Murdo	26	31	47	44	40	40	38	21
Pierre	30	25	41	43	38	37	35	16
Redfield	41	38	21	38	41	40	37	25
Sisseton	32	31	23	30	37	39	35	29
Watertown	37	35	23	32	37	38	37	29
Wheaton	32	32	24	22	33	35	33	25

Light Rain mixing with and changing to Light Snow late this evening into early Wednesday morning. Most snow accumulating Wednesday morning. Snow will slowly end northwest to southeast during the day Wednesday. Total snowfall is expected to range from a trace to around 5 inches, with the highest amounts over far northeastern South Dakota between Britton and Sisseton. Breezy winds will continue, shifting out of the north tonight.

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Today in Weather History

March 29, 1982: An early season Tornado briefly touched down at Swett, South Dakota (11 miles west of Martin). The tornado overturned and heavily damaged a mobile home. One person was slightly injured, and another barely escaped injury, as he left the trailer just seconds before the storm struck.

March 29, 1998: A supercell thunderstorm produced 13 tornadoes across southern Minnesota. The strongest tornado was an F4. Two people died during this tornado event.

1848: Niagara Falls eased to a trickle during the late afternoon and then became "silent" for 30 hours. Most people noticed the silence on the morning of the 30th. This is the only time in recorded history that both Falls stopped flowing. An ice jam at the neck of Lake Erie and the Niagara River entrance between Fort Erie, Ontario Canada, and Buffalo, NY, was caused by the wind, waves, and lake currents. People even ventured into the gorge, discovering relics like weapons from War of 1812.

1886: Rainfall amounts of 6-12 inches occurred over northwest Georgia in a 3-day period from March 29 through April 2. This caused record flooding on the Oostanaula and Etowah Rivers that merge to form the Coosa River. Floodwaters, up to 11 feet deep covered portions of Broad Street in Rome with extensive record flooding. The stage height reached 40.3 feet. Flood stage is 25 feet. This record flood and another major flood in 1892 prompted the citizens of Rome to raise the town by 12 feet. This feat was accomplished by bringing in thousands of wagon loads of dirt. An official rainfall amount of 7.36 inches was recorded on this day in Atlanta. The 7.36 inches is the most Atlanta has seen in one day since record-keeping began in 1878.

1920 - Clear Spring, MD, received 31 inches of snow in 24 hours to establish a state record. (Sandra and TI Richard Sanders - 1987)

1921 - The temperature in Washington D.C. dropped from 82 degrees to 26 degrees thus ending an early spring. (David Ludlum)

1935 - A severe duststorm blanketed Amarillo, TX, for 84 hours. During one six hour period the visibility was near zero. (28th-31st) (The Weather Channel)

1942: A slow-moving low-pressure system brought 11.5 inches of snow to the nation's capital on March 29, 1942. It still stands as the highest March snowfall on record in Washington, D.C. on a single calendar day. Also, Baltimore, Maryland recorded an imposing total of 21.9 inches of snow on the same day. On the flip side, eight days later, the temperature in D.C. soared to 92 degrees on April 6, 1942, and it remains the highest temperature on record for April 6.

1945 - Providence, RI, hit 90 degrees to establish a March record for the New England area. (The Weather Channel)

1987 - Thunderstorms spawned tornadoes in Mississippi, and produced high winds and heavy rain in Louisiana. Thunderstorm winds gusted to 92 mph at Houma LA, and caused a million dollars damage in Terrebonne Parish. Avondale LA was deluged with 4.52 inches of rain. (The National Weather Summary) (Storm Data)

1988 - Severe thunderstorms in the Lower Mississippi Valley spawned a tornado which injured two persons at Bunkie LA, and produced high winds which down a large tree onto a trailer at Bastrop LA claiming the life of one child and injuring another. (Storm Data) (The National Weather Summary)

1989 - Thunderstorms produced torrential rains in northeastern Texas and southwestern Arkansas. Longview TX reported 14.16 inches of rain. More than eleven inches of rain at Henderson TX caused a dam to give way, and people left stranded in trees had to be rescued by boat. Total damage in northeastern Texas was estimated at 10 to 16 million dollars. (The National Weather Summary) (Storm Data)

1990 - Thunderstorms developing ahead of a cold front produced severe weather in southeastern Texas and southern Louisiana. Thunderstorms spawned seven tornadoes, including one which injured seven persons at Gray LA. Thunderstorms also produced golf ball size hail and wind gusts to 70 mph at Port O'Conner TX, and produced up to six inches of rain in Beauregard Parish LA. (Storm Data)

2007 - Eighteen year old Corey Williams is killed by a lightning bolt in Carbondale, IL, at the Community High School's first home track meet of the season.

2011 - A record 766 inches of snowfall at Boreal Ski Resort and nearly 59 feet at Squaw Valley in California's Sierra Nevadas are just two areas where snowfall records have been broke.

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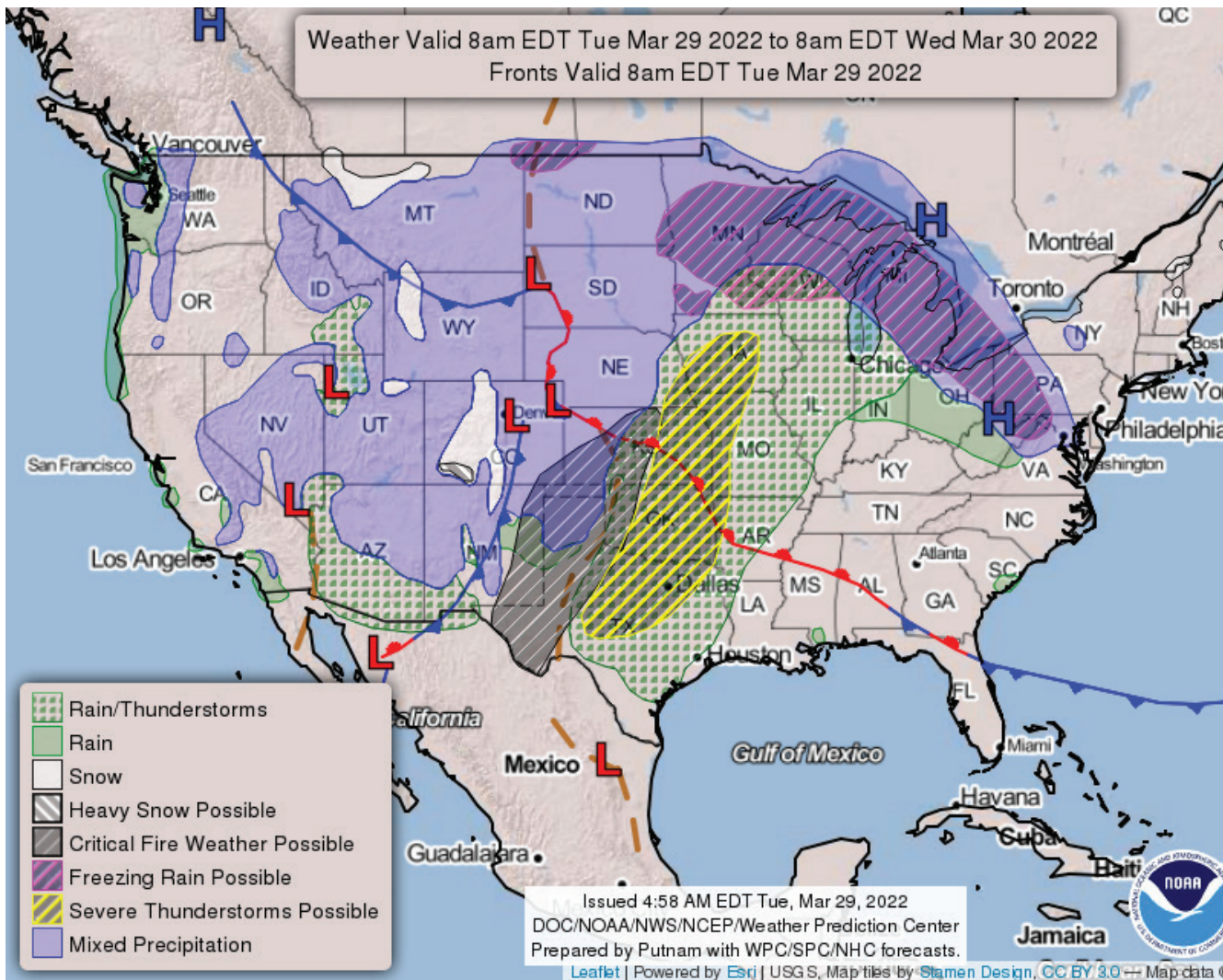
Yesterday's Groton Weather

High Temp: 48 °F at 4:04 PM
Low Temp: 26 °F at 2:03 AM
Wind: 30 mph at 11:50 AM
Precip: 0.00

Day length: 12 hours, 41 minutes

Today's Info

Record High: 81 in 2021
Record Low: -9 in 1969
Average High: 49°F
Average Low: 25°F
Average Precip in Mar.: 0.81
Precip to date in Mar.: 0.02
Average Precip to date: 1.98
Precip Year to Date: 0.99
Sunset Tonight: 7:57:59 PM
Sunrise Tomorrow: 7:14:16 AM



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AWAKE AND ALERT!

Every living creature sleeps.

No matter who or what or where, every living thing sleeps. Consider the following:

Some humans sleep on their backs, their sides or their stomachs. Some sleep with their knees drawn up to their chest. Others sleep with one leg drawn up and an arm under their head. Some of us sleep one way while others sleep another way. The fact is, however, that all of us sleep.

Consider the animal kingdom for a moment: long-legged birds sleep standing on one leg. Ducks always sleep in the open water. To avoid drifting to the shore, they keep paddling with one foot, moving in a circle. Fish and snakes sleep with their eyes open.

Every living thing sleeps.

Except for God.

The Psalmist wisely brings this to our attention: "He will not let your foot slip - He who watches over you will not slumber...nor sleep."

When days are dark and the stars hidden behind the clouds, God is awake and watching over us. When our dearest friends deny and abandon us, God is there to put His arm around us and comfort us. When our hearts are broken, He will wipe away our tears. When the enemy attacks us, He will defend us.

He Who is all powerful and ever present always protects us. He Who loves us will always strengthen, steady, support, sustain and save us from slipping.

Prayer: Thank You, Lord, for the promise that You are always with us and will protect us from danger and defeat. Thank You for always being "on watch" for us. In Jesus' Name, Amen.

Scripture For Today: He will not let your foot slip - he who watches over you will not slumber. Psalm 121:3

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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

SD Lottery

By The Associated Press

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

Mega Millions

Estimated jackpot: \$60 million

Powerball

11-18-39-58-62, Powerball: 3, Power Play: 2

(eleven, eighteen, thirty-nine, fifty-eight, sixty-two; Powerball: three; Power Play: two)

Estimated jackpot: \$195 million

South Dakota House committee recommends no AG impeachment

BY STEPHEN GROVES Associated Press

PIERRE, S.D. (AP) — A South Dakota House committee recommended on Monday that the state's attorney general face no impeachment charges for his actions surrounding a 2020 fatal car crash.

Gov. Kristi Noem had pushed for Attorney General Jason Ravnsborg, a fellow Republican, to be removed from office. But a Republican-controlled House committee voted on party lines to issue a report that found his actions did not merit impeachment. Individual House lawmakers may still bring impeachment charges against Ravnsborg, but the committee's decision was a major setback for those trying to remove him from office.

The two Democrats on the nine-member committee issued a minority report that recommended he be impeached.

The committee's announcement prompted tears from the widow of the pedestrian Ravnsborg struck and killed near a rural highway in September 2020. As the committee met behind closed doors for over four hours Friday, Jennifer Boever, the widow of Joseph Boever, watched lawmakers through a window into the conference room, expressing anger at times at lawmakers' demeanor as they appeared to discuss the report.

The attorney general has cast Joseph Boever's death as a tragic accident and pleaded no contest last year to a pair of traffic misdemeanors in the crash.

"It's just really frustrating, and I'm disappointed that Attorney General Ravnsborg can kill a man and get away with it," said Nick Nemec, Boever's cousin who has publicly pushed for his impeachment.

Ravnsborg initially reported the crash as a collision with an animal and has said he did not realize he struck a man until he returned to the scene the next day and discovered his body. Criminal investigators doubted that account, but prosecutors said they were unable to prove that Ravnsborg realized he killed a man the night of the crash.

The committee's 22-page report lays out an argument for why Ravnsborg's conduct surrounding the crash did not meet grounds for impeachment, which are listed in the state constitution as "drunkenness, crimes, corrupt conduct, malfeasance or misdemeanors in office."

House Speaker Spencer Gosch, a Republican, argued that the committee's job was to keep its focus strictly on Ravnsborg's actions in the crash and whether they were impeachable.

When he was asked by reporters whether he thought Ravnsborg deserved to stay in office, he said: "Deserves has nothing to do with it. We've got to be clear and concise and the factual basis upon what the Constitution says that we can do."

Other Republicans said they were still left with uncertainty after reviewing the crash investigation.

"I felt that there weren't enough facts that were clear and convincing, which is the burden of proof that we had to follow," said Republican Rep. Mike Stevens.

However, Noem, who has positioned herself for a run for higher office, quickly pushed for the House to

impeach Ravensborg when it convenes in two weeks. She took to Twitter to accuse Ravensborg of lying to investigators and attempting to "cover it up."

"The question before this committee was, should the Attorney General continue to be the top law enforcement officer in the state of South Dakota. It is clear that he should not be," she said, adding that she hoped House lawmakers "will do the right thing."

The committee's lawmakers have pushed back on Noem's pressure and listed in their report the ways she has tried to influence their work. The committee "unequivocally condemns" Noem's attempts to influence the committee, the report states.

Since falling out with the governor after the crash, Ravensborg has pushed a pair of ethics complaints against Noem to the state's Government Accountability Board. If Ravensborg is removed from office, Noem would get to name his replacement.

A spokesman for Ravensborg did not immediately respond to a request for comment.

Democratic Rep. Jamie Smith, who was on the committee, defended its work, but said he believed the attorney general had committed "malfeasance." The minority report argues that Ravensborg was not forthcoming to law enforcement officers investigating the crash and "misrepresented" his cell phone use before the crash.

Democratic Rep. Ryan Cwach, another member of the committee, said: "The attorney general hasn't been able to say what he was distracted by."

South Dakota lawmakers fail to override Noem's 3 vetoes

By STEPHEN GROVES Associated Press

PIERRE, S.D. (AP) — The South Dakota Legislature failed to override three vetoes from Gov. Kristi Noem on Monday, killing multiple proposals.

The three bills on Monday all failed to garner the two-thirds majority necessary to override a veto, sending defeats to legislation that would have given lawmakers more control over spending federal aid, allowed pregnant minors to consent to medical care without their parents' permission and removed old marijuana charges from South Dakotans' criminal background checks.

The success of the Republican governor's vetoes on the final day of the legislative session came amid a power struggle between Noem and the GOP-controlled Legislature. Each of the bills lost support from lawmakers after Noem vetoed them last week, showing her sway in the Statehouse.

Noem's veto of the bill on simple marijuana charges comes ahead of a campaign to legalize recreational marijuana for adults on the November ballot. The bill would have automatically removed simple marijuana charges and convictions from public background records if the violation was more than five years old. The person also would have had to fulfill sentencing and probation requirements and have no subsequent arrests.

Noem objected to the bill, saying it would have allowed someone convicted of marijuana charges to hide their criminal history.

Republican Sen. Michael Rohl, who sponsored the bill, argued that old marijuana possession charges on peoples' records held them back from finding jobs, getting promotions and joining the military.

"It's holding these people's lives back," he said before the unsuccessful override vote.

Noem also killed a bill that would have required a legislative budgeting committee to approve federal fund spending if it requires a policy change. The governor argued in her veto message that it would have created a complicated process that would be hard to understand and track.

The bipartisan bill was spurred by House Republicans who sparred with the governor this year over who had the authority to spend federal funds as the state deals with a historic influx of money from Congress.

Republican Rep. Rhonda Milstead argued the legislation was "common sense transparency," but the effort to gain the same two-thirds House majority that passed the bill earlier this month was unsuccessful.

After the vote Monday, nearly a dozen House Republican lawmakers, including several top legislative leaders, signed a letter to Attorney General Jason Ravensborg calling on him to initiate legal action to get a court to decide whether the governor violated the state's constitution earlier this year by sending millions

of dollars in grants to day care providers despite lawmakers' objections.

The House also declined to override Noem's veto on the bill to allow pregnant minors to choose to get prenatal care or pain management medicine. Democratic Rep. Erin Healy, who brought the proposal, said it would have ensured pregnant minors get the care they need, but Noem rejected the idea, arguing the bill "erodes parental rights."

3 Sioux Falls men arrested on possible drug and gun charges

SIOUX FALLS, S.D. (AP) — Police say three Sioux Falls men are in custody after fleeing on foot from a traffic stop during which drugs and guns were found in their vehicle.

Police spokesman Sam Clemens said Monday a street crimes officer was working on an investigation Sunday night and was looking for a specific vehicle. When the vehicle showed up in the area, the officer tried to talk to the three people in the vehicle, but they took off on foot.

Clemens says handguns and marijuana were found in the car.

The suspects were arrested nearby and face several possible charges, including possessing a gun by a former violent offender, fleeing, possession with intent to distribute marijuana and possessing a firearm while committing a felony.

The suspects are 18, 19 and 31 years old, KELO-TV reported.

Shanghai lockdown tests 'zero-COVID' limits, shakes markets

By KEN MORITSUGU Associated Press

BEIJING (AP) — A two-phase lockdown of Shanghai's 26 million people is testing the limits of China's hard-line "zero-COVID" strategy, which is shaking markets far beyond the country's borders.

China's largest city on Tuesday entered the second day of the lockdown's first phase, which includes the Pudong financial district and adjacent areas on the east side of the Huangpu River that divides the center of finance, manufacturing and trade.

The measures confining Pudong residents to their homes, closing nonessential businesses and requiring mass testing are to be lifted Friday. At that time, the vast Puxi area on the opposite side of the river will go under lockdown.

With public transport suspended and bridges and tunnels connecting the two sides of the city closed, usually bustling city streets — including the fabled riverside Bund in Puxi with its century-old historic buildings — were unusually quiet.

Zhang Meisha, a 39-year-old freelancer taking a morning jog along the Bund, said she was trying to get as much sunshine as possible before Puxi goes under lockdown.

"I hope the Shanghai spring can wait for us," Zhang said.

Shops along the nearby Nanjing Road pedestrian shopping street were mostly closed, with few people out and about. Restaurants were offering only takeaway service and a long line formed outside a McDonalds of people awaiting their orders.

The shutdown adds to anxiety in financial markets over Russia's war on Ukraine, the U.S. Federal Reserve's effort to cool surging inflation by raising interest rates and other economic challenges.

Market reactions including Monday's 7% drop in oil prices in London don't reflect the "true reality of the situation," but investors already were uneasy about China and the global economy, said Michael Every of Rabobank.

"We have a whole mountain of problems to worry about, and this is just one foothill among many," he said. "If that's all it is, a COVID lockdown, it's not difficult to look in recent history books and see how it plays out. But this interfaces with a lot of other issues."

The new omicron BA.2 subvariant is widely blamed for bringing a new surge in cases to Shanghai, which had suffered relatively little effect from the pandemic that was first detected in the central Chinese city of Wuhan in late 2019.

Elsewhere in China, new cases have continued to decline in Hong Kong following a recent wave that has

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led to more than 7,000 deaths. The semi-autonomous city recorded 7,680 new cases, with no immediate word on whether authorities plan to proceed with mass testing of all of its 7.4 million people.

The northeastern province of Jilin accounted for 1,055 of the 1,228 new confirmed cases and 812 of the 5,658 asymptomatic cases reported on the mainland Tuesday.

In Shanghai, panic buying struck markets and some residents have reported shortages of meat and vegetables, including on online platforms. Authorities are working to ensure food supplies and have converted gymnasiums and exhibition centers to house patients, most of whom show no symptoms.

Government workers in hazmat suits, joined by about 68,000 volunteers, have fanned out and are stationed at checkpoints around residential compounds walled off with traffic dividers and improvised barriers.

Shanghai recorded 4,477 new cases on Monday, all but 95 of them asymptomatic. Despite a nationwide surge, numbers of new COVID-19 deaths have remained low, with two more added on March 20 for a total of 4,638. The low number of deaths and total of 145,808 cases since the start of the pandemic are a fraction of the toll in the U.S. and other countries, and are touted by China as evidence of the wisdom of its approach.

The Shanghai lockdown stands to become the largest of any city in China's campaign against the virus, in which millions have been confined to their homes for weeks at a time in cities across much of the country.

Despite calls for a more targeted approach and some tweaking of the system, conditions in Shanghai show the government's continuing reliance on extreme measures, regardless of the social and economic costs.

Authorities say the two-phase approach was designed to reduce disruptions, and unlike in past situations, definite end dates have been given for the lockdown in Shanghai. Asymptomatic patients are being quarantined in facilities outside hospitals to free up limited medical resources.

"China should be able to contain the virus in the next few weeks, as lockdown is effective," global financial services firm Macquarie Group said in a report.

"But COVID does pose substantial growth downside risk in the rest of this year, as lockdown is also very costly," the report said, adding that consumer businesses and the property sector were set to take the biggest hits.

The Shanghai lockdown indicates China will stick with its hard-line COVID-19 strategy at least until the ruling Communist Party holds its once-every-five-year congress this fall or winter, the report said.

Xi Jinping is expected to be granted an unprecedented third five-year term as party leader at the congress. Authorities have promoted the need for stability above all in the runup to the event.

"Zero-COVID" has been credited with preventing mass nationwide outbreaks and China boasts a vaccination rate of around 87%. However, that percentage is much lower among seniors who are the most likely to be sickened by the virus.

Wang Hui, who runs a shop near the Bund, said high rents and a lack of customers could cost him his business.

"I don't know how much longer we can last," Wang said.

Senior royals gather to honor Prince Philip at memorial

By DANICA KIRKA Associated Press

LONDON (AP) — Queen Elizabeth II walked into Westminster Abbey through a side door Tuesday, making good on her wish to attend a service of thanksgiving for her beloved husband Prince Philip.

The monarch entered the church on the arm of her second son, Prince Andrew, then separated from him to walk to her seat alone, easing concerns about her health that had raised questions about whether she would attend. It was her first major public event in months, since unspecified mobility issues hampered her ability to get around.

Elizabeth, who recently recovered from COVID-19, didn't go to a Commonwealth Day service at Westminster Abbey earlier this month, but she continued with other scheduled engagements, including in-person audiences.

The 95-year-old monarch was deeply involved in planning the service, which included hymns and trib-

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utes from his charities. Such touches weren't possible during his funeral last year because of strictures surrounding the COVID-19 pandemic.

About 1,800 family members and guests attended the memorial. Only 30 people attended last year's funeral, conducted under the strict COVID-19 lockdown rules then in place that forced the queen to sit alone wearing a black mask as she mourned the loss of her husband, who she called her rock.

Philip died on April 9 at age 99.

Tuesday's service will feature the hymn "Guide Me, O Thou Great Redeemer," fulfilling one of Philip's wishes for his funeral that wasn't carried out because of restrictions that banned singing.

Young people participating in programs run by the prince's Duke of Edinburgh charity and youth cadet associations lined the steps of the abbey to greet guests for the service.

Britain's royal family attended, together with about 30 foreign royals, including Prince Albert of Monaco, Denmark's Queen Margrethe, King Harald and Queen Sonja of Norway, and King Felipe VI and Queen Letizia of Spain.

Philip's wider family and friends were also there, along with 500 representatives charities and other groups he supported.

Andrew has stepped back from royal duties, but his presence at his father's memorial had been widely expected after he settled a lawsuit connected to his association with convicted sex offender Jeffrey Epstein.

Ukraine, Russia hold new talks aimed at ending the fighting

By NEBI QENA and YURAS KARMANAU Associated Press

KYIV, Ukraine (AP) — The first face-to-face talks in two weeks between Russia and Ukraine began Tuesday in Turkey, raising flickering hopes there could be progress toward ending a war that has ground into a bloody campaign of attrition.

An adviser to the Ukrainian president said the meeting in Istanbul was focused on securing a cease-fire and guarantees for Ukraine's security — issues that have been the focus of previous unsuccessful negotiations.

Ahead of the talks, the Ukrainian president said his country was prepared to declare its neutrality, as Moscow has demanded, and was open to compromise over the contested eastern region of Donbas — comments that might lend momentum to negotiations. But he warned the "ruthless war" continued, and even the negotiators assembled, Russian forces hit an oil depot in western Ukraine and a government building in the south.

Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan told the two sides that they had a "historic responsibility" to stop the fighting.

"We believe that there will be no losers in a just peace. Prolonging the conflict is not in anyone's interest," Erdogan said, as he greeted the two delegations seated on opposite sides of a long table.

Putin's aim of a quick military victory has been thwarted by stiff Ukrainian resistance — but still hopes were not high for a breakthrough. Reflecting skepticism among Ukraine's Western allies, British Foreign Secretary Liz Truss said she thought the Russian president was "not serious about talks."

In fighting that has devolved into a back-and-forth stalemate, Ukrainian forces retook Irpin, a key suburb northwest of the capital, Kyiv, President Volodymyr Zelenskyy said late Monday. But he warned that Russian troops were regrouping to take the area back.

"We still have to fight, we have to endure," Zelenskyy said in his nighttime video address to the nation. "This is a ruthless war against our nation, against our people, against our children."

He also lashed out at Western countries, which he has repeatedly accused of not going far enough in either sanctioning Moscow or supporting Ukraine with weapons. As a result, Ukrainians were paying with their lives, he said.

"If someone is afraid of Russia, if he or she is afraid to make the necessary decisions that are important to us, in particular for us to get planes, tanks, necessary artillery, shells, it makes these people responsible for the catastrophe created by Russian troops in our cities, too," he said. "Fear always makes you an accomplice."

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A missile struck an oil depot in western Ukraine late Monday, the second attack on oil facilities in a region that has been spared the worst of the fighting. On Tuesday morning, an explosion blasted a hole in a nine-story administration building in Mykolaiv, a southern port city that Russia has unsuccessfully tried to capture.

A gaping hole could be seen in the center of the building in a photo posted on the Telegram channel of the regional governor, Vitaliy Kim. He said most people escaped the building and rescuers were searching for a handful of missing people.

"It's terrible. They waited for people to go to work" before striking the building, he said. "I overslept. I'm lucky."

Earlier Russia-Ukraine talks, held in person in Belarus or by video, failed to make progress on ending a more than month-long war that has killed thousands and driven more than 10 million Ukrainians from their homes — including almost 4 million from their country.

Russia has long demanded that Ukraine drop any hope of joining the western NATO alliance, which Moscow sees as a threat. Zelenskyy indicated over the weekend he was open to that, saying Ukraine was ready to declare its neutrality, but he has stressed that the country needs security guarantees of its own as part of any deal. Zelenskyy adviser Mykhailo Podolyak said ending the war was contingent on "international security guarantees for Ukraine."

Also in the room at the Istanbul talks was Roman Abramovich, a longtime ally of Russian President Vladimir Putin who has been sanctioned by Britain and the EU. Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov said the Chelsea Football Club owner has been serving as an unofficial mediator approved by both countries — but mystery about his role has been deepened by reports that he may have been poisoned during an earlier round of talks.

The investigative news outlet Bellingcat reported Monday that Abramovich and two Ukrainian delegates suffered eye pain and skin irritation consistent with chemical weapons poisoning after attending peace talks on March 3. The British government said the allegations were "very concerning," but Peskov said the reports "do not correspond to reality."

As well as Irpin, Ukrainian forces also seized back control of Trostyanets, south of Sumy in the northeast, after weeks of Russian occupation that has left a landscape devastated by war.

Arriving in the town Monday shortly afterward, The Associated Press saw the bodies of two Russian soldiers lay abandoned in the woods and Russian tanks lay burned and twisted. A red "Z" marked a Russian truck, its windshield fractured, near stacked boxes of ammunition. Ukrainian forces piled atop a tank flashed victory signs. Dazed residents lined up amid charred buildings seeking aid.

It was unclear where the Russian troops went, under what circumstances they fled and whether the town will remain free of them.

Ukraine, meanwhile, said it would try to evacuate civilians from three southern cities on Tuesday. Deputy Prime Minister Iryna Vereshchuk said humanitarian corridors would run from heavily bombed Mariupol as well as Enerhodar and Melitopol. The latter two cities are under Russian control, but Vereshchuk didn't address to what extent Moscow had agreed to the corridors, except for saying 880 people fled Mariupol a day earlier without an agreement in place.

In other developments:

— The head of the United Nations' nuclear watchdog arrived in Ukraine to try to ensure the safety of the country's nuclear facilities. Russian forces have taken control of the decommissioned Chernobyl plant, site in 1986 of the world's worst nuclear accident, and of the active Zaporizhzhia plant, where a building was damaged in fighting. International Atomic Energy Agency chief Rafael Mariano Grossi said the war "is putting Ukraine's nuclear power plants and other facilities with radioactive material in unprecedented danger."

— Russia has destroyed more than 60 religious buildings across the country in just over a month of war, with most of the damage concentrated near Kyiv and in the east, Ukraine's military said in a post Tuesday.

— Bloomberg News said it has suspended its operations in Russia and Belarus. Customers in both countries won't be able to access any Bloomberg financial products and trading functions for Russian securities were disabled in line with international sanctions, it said. Bloomberg Philanthropies pledged \$40 million,

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meanwhile, in support for Ukrainians and refugees.

Putin's ground forces have become bogged down because of the stronger-than-expected Ukrainian resistance, combined with what Western officials say are Russian tactical missteps, poor morale, shortages of food, fuel and cold weather gear, and other problems.

In response, Russia appeared to be concentrating more on Donbas, the predominantly Russian-speaking region where Moscow-backed rebels have been waging a separatist war for eight years, the official said.

While that raised a possible face-saving exit strategy for Putin, it has also raised Ukrainian fears the Kremlin aims to split the country, forcing it to surrender a swath of its territory. Still, Zelenskyy's comments that he was open to compromise on the region indicated a possible path for negotiations.

After Russian forces pull back, a shattered town breathes

By ANDREA ROSA and FELIPE DANA Associated Press

TROSTYANETS, Ukraine (AP) — The bodies of two Russian soldiers lie abandoned in the woods. Ukrainian forces piled atop a tank flash victory signs. Dazed people line up amid charred buildings to reach for aid. These are the sights in a Ukrainian town that has seized back control from Russian forces, at least for now.

Arriving in Trostyanets shortly after Ukrainian forces announced the northeastern town near the Russian border had been retaken following weeks of Russian occupation, The Associated Press on Monday saw a civilian landscape that has seen some of the worst of war.

The hospital was damaged, its windows jagged with broken glass. The train station had been shot up. Residents stepped carefully, wary of mines. They rode their bicycles past craters in the road and past the ruins of homes. It is not yet clear how many civilians have been killed.

Russian tanks lay burned, twisted, left behind like the soldiers in the woods. One of the soldiers had a red band around his leg. The other had an arm flung over his head as if napping on the leaves in the late afternoon light. A Ukrainian soldier nudged him with his toe.

A red "Z" marked a Russian truck, its windshield fractured, near stacked boxes of ammunition. Hundreds of the boxes, including ones with artillery shells, had been stacked around the town. Curious residents peered into an open box of shells.

It is not clear where the Russian forces went, under what circumstances they fled or whether the town will remain free of them in the days ahead. President Volodymyr Zelenskyy in his overnight address emphasized that the situation remains tense in Ukraine's northeast around Kharkiv, the nearest large city, and other areas.

But the returned presence of Ukrainian forces in Trostyanets is a relief to a country that hopes some Russian forces, under fierce resistance, are pulling back.

A senior U.S. defense official said Washington believes the Ukrainians have retaken Trostyanets. The official, who spoke on condition of anonymity to discuss U.S. intelligence assessments, said Russian forces largely remained in defensive positions near the capital, Kyiv, and were making little forward progress elsewhere in the country.

Late last week, with its forces stalled in parts of the country, Russia seemed to scale back its war aims, saying its main goal was gaining control of the Donbas in the east.

In Trostyanets, after weeks of occupation and intense fighting, some residents appeared to have lost all sense of normal.

"Personally, I have not seen much," said one resident, Vitali Butski. And yet three missiles struck his home. Many buildings beyond the railway station are damaged, he said.

Bundled up against the freezing wind, he and others ventured out to see what had been left behind.

Unexploded ordnance littered the square in front of the train station. Trenches and berms lined the square in a sign that Russian forces tried to defend their position. In a bunker under the station, with thick walls and door, rooms were full of army uniforms and boots.

On the walls were patriotic messages including drawings signed by children in Russian reading "Thanks for the peace, soldier." Another room had been used as a clinic, with unused drips ready and desks turned

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into beds, although there was no sign of blood.

Packets of Russian food rations were seen amid the debris. But residents indicated that the soldiers were still hungry.

"In the evenings they came to us, to our houses and our basements, and stole our pickles, potatoes, lard and cucumbers," said one resident who didn't give her name.

She called the Russians "orcs," or goblin-like creatures. Militias from the Donetsk and Luhansk regions were there as well, she said. The entire town had been occupied.

Now, for residents, there is some space to breathe. In line for aid, they waved to passing Ukrainian tanks.

"As you can see, there were battles here over the past month. Projectiles were flying over, and people were saying they were frightened," said Evgeni Kosin with the emergency services. "They were left without food and water. There was a horrible humanitarian situation. Now that there are no flyovers or shelling in the last three days, perhaps it is getting better."

EXPLAINER: What would paying for natural gas in rubles mean?

BERLIN (AP) — Europe's already high gas prices have gyrated since Russian President Vladimir Putin announced plans to have importers pay for Russian natural gas in rubles instead of dollars and euros.

Here's a look at some of the implications of such a move:

WHAT IS PUTIN PROPOSING?

Europe imports large amounts of Russian natural gas to heat homes, generate electricity and fuel industry, and those imports have continued despite the war in Ukraine.

Around 60% of imports are paid in euros, and the rest in dollars. Putin wants to change that by requiring foreign gas importers to purchase rubles and use them to pay state-owned supplier Gazprom.

Putin told the Russian central bank last Wednesday to come up with a workable system.

WHAT EFFECTS COULD THAT PLAN HAVE?

Importers would have to find a bank that would exchange euros and dollars for rubles. That could be cumbersome because some Russian banks have been either blocked or cut off from the SWIFT messaging system that facilitates international payments.

Still, there are some banks that haven't been cut off, and for now, sanctions imposed by the U.S. Treasury barring bank transactions contain exceptions for energy payments. That's a concession to European allies that are much more reliant on Russian oil and gas and fear a total cutoff could throw their economy into recession.

Russia getting paid for gas in their currency would at best help marginally in getting around financial sanctions, propping up the ruble's value or protecting the Russian economy, said Eswar Prasad, professor of trade policy at Cornell University and a former official at the International Monetary Fund.

"Either Putin is getting terrible economic advice or he is going further off the rails in his hatred for the West," Prasad said. "It would be cheaper for foreign importers to pay for Russia's exports in a currency that is collapsing in value, but it is difficult to acquire rubles and make payments in a manner that avoids the sanctions."

He warned that the move "could further roil global energy markets by exacerbating current supply disruptions and adding to uncertainty about future supplies, which could all add up to more price spikes."

HOW IS PUTIN'S DEMAND BEING RECEIVED IN EUROPE?

European governments and energy companies are rejecting the idea, saying gas import contracts specify the currency and that one side can't change it overnight. They say they intend to keep paying in euros and dollars.

More broadly, the Group of Seven major economies including Japan, the U.S. and Canada as well as Germany, France, Italy and Britain have agreed to reject Moscow's demand. The European Union's energy commissioner also agreed, a G-7 statement said.

German Vice Chancellor Robert Habeck told reporters Monday that "all G-7 ministers agreed completely" that such a step would be "a one-sided and clear breach of the existing contracts."

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WHAT'S PUTIN'S MOTIVE?

In theory, requiring ruble payments could support demand for the currency and its exchange rate. But not by much, Prasad says. As it stands, euros and dollars are already being used to purchase rubles when Gazprom exchanges its foreign earnings.

The Center for Eastern Studies in Warsaw has suggested that by moving the flow of foreign currency from Gazprom to the largely state-controlled banking system, the Kremlin will gain added control over foreign currency that has become scarcer since Western countries froze much of Russia's reserves abroad.

However, that would leave Gazprom without hard currency to make foreign debt payments or purchase supplies abroad. As it stands, the gas supplier already has to sell 80% of its foreign currency to Russia's central bank.

The ruble dispute has raised concerns it could lead to an interruption in natural gas supply. That could open Russia to charges of not adhering to long-term energy contracts, which it has done so far.

Europe's pipeline system is highly connected, so any attempt to restrict flows to some countries would affect the others, according to analysts at Rystad Energy. Beyond that, energy sales are a key source of revenue for Russia.

Asked by reporters if Russia could cut gas supplies to European customers if they reject the demand to pay in rubles, Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov said in a conference call Monday that "we clearly aren't going to supply gas for free."

"In our situation, it's hardly possible and feasible to engage in charity for Europe," Peskov said.

HOW REAL IS THAT THREAT?

The ruble proposal led Germany's utilities association, the BDEW, to call on the government to declare an "early warning" of a severe energy shortage.

That's the first of three stages of energy emergency in EU and German law, the highest being a shortage so severe that the government must shut off gas to industry to protect households.

The German government does not see the need for such a declaration, a spokeswoman said Monday.

It's possible Putin is bluffing. This month, Russia threatened to use rubles to pay foreign investors who hold government bonds dominated in dollars. It went through with a dollar payment after ratings agencies said paying in rubles would put Russia in default.

When it comes to gas payments, "Putin may demand rubles, but the contracts are clear," said Carl Weinberg, chief economist and managing director at High Frequency Economics in White Plains, New York. "His only option to force change is to refuse to deliver products, and that cannot happen: He can't keep oil and gas from coming out of the ground without capping wells, and storage capacity will get filled very fast if shipments stop cold."

"So let's call it a bluff," Weinberg said. "Russia cannot stop shipping product any more than Germany and the EU can stop buying it."

WHY IS ENERGY AN IMPORTANT FACTOR IN THE WAR?

The European economy remains heavily dependent on Russia for 40% of its gas imports and 25% of its oil.

While the U.S. and the United Kingdom have said they will stop buying Russian oil, European leaders have shied away from a total boycott of Russian oil and gas. Instead, they have focused on reducing their imports over the next several years through conservation, other sources and switching to wind and solar as fast as they can.

Estimates vary of the impact of a total gas shutoff in Europe, but they generally involve a substantial loss of economic output.

UK police fine 20 people over 'partygate' political scandal

LONDON (AP) — British police said Tuesday that they were fining 20 people over parties held by Prime Minister Boris Johnson and his staff during coronavirus lockdowns, and that more people could face pen-

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alties.

The Metropolitan Police force said it wouldn't identify recipients of the fixed penalty notices, though Johnson's office has said it will reveal it if he gets one.

The force said officers were working through a "significant amount of investigative material" and more people could face fines later.

Opponents, and some members of the governing Conservative Party, have said Johnson should resign if he is issued a fine for breaking rules he imposed on the rest of the country during the pandemic.

Dozens of politicians and officials have been investigated over allegations that the government flouted its own pandemic restrictions.

Police sent questionnaires to more than 100 people, including the prime minister, and interviewed witnesses as part of the investigation.

The "partygate" scandal had left Johnson's tenure precarious before Russia launched a war in Ukraine more than a month ago that gave Britain's politicians more urgent priorities.

Johnson's grip on power was shaken by public anger over revelations that his staff held "bring your own booze" office parties, birthday celebrations and "wine time Fridays" in 2020 and 2021 while millions in Britain were barred from meeting with friends and family because of his government's COVID-19 restrictions.

Johnson has denied any wrongdoing, but he is alleged to have been at several of the dozen events in his 10 Downing St. office and other government buildings that are being investigated by the police.

He has acknowledged attending a "bring your own booze" party in the Downing Street garden in May 2020 during the first lockdown, but insisted he believed it would be a work event.

Women of Lesotho's garment industry lose jobs, hope in COVID

By MAJIRATA LATELA and RYAN LENORA BROWN Associated Press

MASERU, Lesotho (AP) — Vekile Sesha stood outside the rusted gates of a garment factory in the industrial district of Lesotho's capital, Maseru, willing her luck to change. Four months earlier, the blue jeans factory where she worked nearby abruptly shut, blaming plummeting demand from the Western brands it supplied amid the pandemic.

She had loved the job fiercely: "I was talented, and I was doing something that was needed by the world." Her monthly paycheck of 2,400 loti (about \$150) supported a constellation of family members in her rural village. "Because of me, they never slept on an empty stomach," she said.

Every day since, Sesha, 32, has been fighting to get that life back. On this morning, with a furious sun overhead, she joined a line of about 100 job-seekers outside the blue aluminum shell of a factory that supplies pants and athletic shirts to American chain stores.

As gates swung open, Sesha and the other women surged forward. A manager called out skills he needed: "Cutting. Sewing. Marking." But a few minutes later, the gates slammed shut and Sesha fell back — she did not get one of the temporary jobs.

When the coronavirus pandemic hit the world two years ago, the global fashion industry crumpled. Faced with collapsing demand, brands canceled orders worth billions of dollars and factories across Africa and Asia went belly up. Few felt the effects as harshly as the tens of millions of workers, most of them women, who stitched the world's clothes.

In Lesotho, a mountainous speck of a country nestled entirely inside South Africa, the pain was especially widespread. Although small in comparison with global garment-making giants such as Bangladesh and China, Lesotho's clothing industry is the country's largest private employer, and more than 80% of its workers are women, according to government officials. Most, like Sesha, are the first women in their families to earn a paycheck, a quiet gender revolution built on T-shirts and tracksuits.

This story is part of a yearlong series on how the pandemic is impacting women in Africa, most acutely in the least developed countries. The Associated Press series is funded by the European Journalism Centre's European Development Journalism Grants program, which is supported by the Bill & Melinda Gates

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Foundation. The AP is responsible for all content.

"This industry made the women of our country much less vulnerable," said Sam Mokhele, the general secretary of the National Union of Clothing and Textile Allied Workers Union, which represents garment workers in Lesotho. "But the pandemic devastated that."

More than 11,000 of Lesotho's 50,000 garment workers have lost their jobs since March 2020, according to government figures. The job losses were catastrophic in one of the world's least developed countries, with 2.1 million people and few formal employers.

The cutbacks highlighted the precarious nature of the gains made by the country's women factory workers and the industry's reliance on the whims of consumers on the other side of the world, where clothing is bought and disposed of at a blistering pace.

Mabuta Irene Kheoane still works in a Lesotho factory, and she knows jobs like hers have become increasingly rare. Each morning, she eyes the crowds of women outside seeking employment. The line that separates her from them is razor-thin.

"I know those ladies are hungry, I know they have kids," she said. "What if maybe my factory will close, too?"

Like most of the women in jobs like hers, Kheoane grew up at a time when Lesotho had a different export: the labor of its men. For decades, they left the country by the tens of thousands to work in the gold, diamond and platinum mines of South Africa. The paychecks they sent to their families back home were Lesotho's largest source of foreign income.

Kheoane's father left each January for the mines near the South African city of Rustenburg, where nearly three-quarters of the world's platinum is mined. Often, the family didn't see him again until December. After a while, he stopped coming home at all. Then, he stopped sending money.

News filtered back — he'd started another family. Kheoane said she learned to never rely on a man.

By the time Kheoane turned 18 and went looking for work in Maseru's factories, many of South Africa's mines were empty or had cut their operations, as mineral deposits became more expensive to extract. Women like Kheoane were on their way to becoming key to her country's economy.

In 2001, Lesotho signed on to an American trade deal: the African Growth and Opportunities Act, which guaranteed it duty-free imports to the U.S. of clothing manufactured in the country. Chinese and Taiwanese companies built sprawling factories on the industrial edges of Maseru. Today, textile products account for nearly half of Lesotho's exports, about \$415 million annually, mostly bound for the United States.

The rapid industrial growth had a profound ripple effect across the city's economy. Tin shacks sprouted like weeds outside the factory gates, selling garment workers everything from apples and beers to mobile phone airtime and secondhand clothing. Every morning, taxi vans full of commuters wheezed in from the city's fringes. Landlords built rows of simple cinderblock rooms with outdoor toilets on the edges of the industrial districts, where the city slackened into farmland and herders grazed their sheep beside tiny corner stores and informal taverns.

"When you speak about this industry being devastated by the pandemic, it isn't just the workers themselves," said Mokhele, the union leader. "It's everyone around them, too."

In Lesotho's factories, the first whispers of the global crisis that became the pandemic came early in 2020, when the Chinese companies that supply most of the fabric here abruptly canceled deliveries.

In early March, the first coronavirus cases were confirmed in neighboring South Africa. Soon after, Lesotho went into hard lockdown.

For two months, its entire garment industry shut down, save a few factories that pivoted to producing masks and other protective gear. To stave off total crisis, the government issued emergency payments of 800 loti (\$52) a month to permanently employed garment workers. But it was barely enough to pay rent. And employees on temporary contracts, such as Kheoane at the time, didn't receive anything.

In May 2020 the factories reopened, but the crisis continued. Nien Hsing, a Taiwanese company that employed more than 10,000 people to stitch jeans for American brands such as Levi's and Wrangler, began

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shedding workers by the thousands and closing factories. Others followed suit.

By the following year, workers were desperate. In May 2021, local unions organized a strike to try to raise the garment sector's monthly minimum wage — then 2,100 loti (about \$140). The demonstrations turned violent, with security forces fatally shooting a garment worker.

Factories eventually agreed to raise wages by 14% but complained the results would devastate their businesses. They warned that factory closures would follow.

One August morning, Sesha arrived at work to an announcement that the factory was shutting down. She was stunned. Factory work had been a ticket to a life far more independent than any her mother or grandmother could have imagined. She spent some of her last few dollars buying sleeping pills to quiet the thoughts that raced through her head late into the night: Would her son have to drop out of school? How would she cover rent?

"I didn't know where to start, thinking about my future," she said.

Kheoane clung to her own job, trying to work harder and faster to avoid being the next worker let go. Each day, as she marked T-shirt seams thousands of times, she thought of her family at home in Ha Ramokhele, a mountain village a two-hour drive from the city.

It was the kind of place she and childhood friends had scrambled up steep mountainsides to pick wild watermelons. Life's soundtrack was the tinkling of bells on cows herded by local shepherds. The only way to town was a four-hour hike.

As Kheoane worked, her son, Bokang, stayed in Ha Ramokhele with her mother. At 11, he'd spent months out of school during the pandemic, and Kheoane worried he'd fall behind.

Her biggest wish for Bokang: "I don't want him to work in a factory," she said. "No one wants their kids to have the life they had."

Experts are uncertain about the garment industry's future — both in Lesotho and globally. It's unclear whether the industry will find ways to better cushion workers or will continue its race to the cheapest possible production.

Amid the uncertainty, Kheoane is grateful for the work. On her monthly payday in February, she walked out of the factory gates with a crisp stack of bills in her pocket. A man fried pink rounds of baloney in a vat of oil outside, tempting the throngs of workers. Kheoane bought two chicken necks from another vendor and headed into town.

Kheoane learned long ago that wherever there is money in Lesotho, many hands reach out to claim it. Each garment worker's salary supports half a dozen people, according to development experts. For this paycheck, Kheoane's son needed new school shoes, and her mother had asked for groceries. Kheoane visited two stores for the purchases, using the calculator on her cracked smartphone to tally food items.

Around her, downtown Maseru was alive with the energy of factory money. Lines stretched at banks and ATMs. Couples emerged from corner bars clutching quarts of beer. Grocery stores set up loudspeakers outside their doors, bleating payday specials.

On the other side of town, Sesha was home doing laundry. She didn't have a paycheck to spend anymore. In a few days, rent would be due, and she still wasn't sure how she'd pay. Lately, her boyfriend had been chipping in to pay expenses, and she was beginning to feel beholden to him.

"I hate it," she said, plainly.

So on Monday morning, she would wake early, and put on the jeans and Converse high-tops she bought at the mall back when her salary allowed such luxuries. She'd be in position at 7 a.m., when a horn wails from inside the factory gate, signaling the start of the workday.

And as the regular employees disappeared inside, Sesha would wait, holding an umbrella to block the sun. And she'll wait every day, in hopes of work.

"It doesn't seem like a job is coming for us, but we have to stay optimistic," she said. "If not this week, maybe the one after. Or the one after that."

Ukraine's other fight: Growing food for itself and the world

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By CARA ANNA and AYA BATRAWY Associated Press

HORDYNIA, Ukraine (AP) — Planting season has arrived in Ukraine. Boot marks stamped in the frozen earth have thawed. But the Pavlovykh family's fields remain untouched in a lonely landscape of checkpoints and churches.

Over a week ago, the family learned their 25-year-old soldier son, Roman, had been killed near the besieged city of Mariupol. On Tuesday, the father, also named Roman, will leave for the war himself.

"The front line is full of our best people. And now they are dying," said the mother, Maria. In tears, she sat in her son's bedroom in their warm brick home, his medals and photos spread before her.

The Pavlovykh family knows a second front line in Russia's war runs through the farmland here in western Ukraine, far from the daily resistance against the invasion. It is an uphill battle for farmers to feed not only their country but the world.

Ukraine and Russia account for a third of global wheat and barley exports, leaving millions across North Africa, the Middle East and parts of Asia facing the potential loss of access to the affordable supplies they need for bread and noodles. The war has raised the specter of food shortages and political instability in countries reliant on Ukrainian wheat, including Indonesia, Egypt, Yemen and Lebanon.

It is unclear how many farmers will be able to plant or tend to their harvests with the war raging, forcing those like Pavlovykh to the front lines. And the challenges keep growing.

Infrastructure — from ports and roads to farm equipment — is snarled and damaged, meaning critical supplies like fuel are difficult to get and routes for export almost impossible to reach. Fertilizer producers are paralyzed by nearby fighting, and a prolonged winter may disrupt spring yields.

"How can we sow under the blows of Russian artillery? How can we sow when the enemy deliberately mines the fields, destroys fuel bases?" Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy said in a recent address. "We do not know what harvest we will have and whether we'll be able to export."

An airport not far from the Pavlovykh home was bombed in the early days of the war, sending unexploded ordnance into nearby fields now planted with warning signs instead of corn.

The thudding sounds of efforts to safely dispose of the ordnance could be heard last week beside the younger Pavlovykh's flower-strewn grave.

There is no time to lose, even as families mourn. The northwestern Lviv region near the border with Poland, far from the heart of what is known as Ukraine's breadbasket in the south, is being asked to plant all the available fields it can, said Ivan Kilgan, head of the regional agricultural association.

Still, the region won't be able to reach its pre-war levels.

"We are expecting to produce more than 50 million tons of cereals. Previously, we produced more than 80 million tons. It's logical. Less land, less harvest," Kilgan said.

Standing in a frigid barn containing more than 1,000 tons of wheat and soy, Kilgan vowed to send tons of flour to feed Ukraine's army. He's planting 2,000 hectares (nearly 5,000 acres) this year, up from 1,200 hectares (around 3,000 acres).

And yet he's short on fertilizer. For the extra production he plans, he needs more than double the 300 tons of fertilizer he has.

"If the world wants Ukrainian bread, it needs to help with this," Kilgan said. In his office, he showed blueprints for more grain elevators and put them aside with frustration: "Now, these are just paper."

U.N. Secretary-General Antonio Guterres has urged the world to avert "a hurricane of hunger" from the disruption to Ukrainian grains, which the World Food Program relies on for about half of its wheat supplies.

Alternative wheat supplies will be more expensive and hit poor households elsewhere in the world, said Megan Konar, an associate professor at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign whose research focuses on the intersection of food, water and trade.

"Winter wheat is the biggest wheat crop in Ukraine and Russia, which was planted last fall and due to be harvested early this summer," she said. "This crop would be impacted if people are not available to work in the fields to harvest."

Corn, which is planted in the spring, also will be affected if fighting impedes farmers, she added.

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That's true of those whose fields have been mined or bombed in parts of the heavily hit southern and central key growing areas, said Tetyana Hetman, head of the agriculture department in the Lviv region.

"We have already been approached by farmers from other regions to find land plots that they can cultivate" in the Lviv region to try to ensure the country's food security, she said.

Concerned about feeding its own people, Ukraine's government has limited exports of oats, millet, buckwheat, sugar, salt, rye, cattle and meat. Under specific licensing, wheat, corn, chicken meat and eggs, and sunflower oil can be shipped.

Ukraine does have sufficient food reserves, deputy minister of agrarian policy and food Taras Vysotsky told local media.

He said Ukraine consumes 8 million tons of wheat per year and has about 6 million tons on hand. It also has a two-year supply of corn, a five-year supply of sunflower oil and enough sugar for 1½ years.

Many Ukrainians have more immediate worries than harvests, with their country at stake.

An estimated 500 residents have gone to war out of 14,500 in the largely agricultural villages in this part of the Lviv region, said Bogdan Yusviak, who leads the local territorial council.

In his village, Pavlovysh was the first to die.

His parents don't know how it happened. The first hint that something had gone terribly wrong was the arrival of their son's belongings by mail. Thirty minutes later, someone called about his death, his mother said.

Roman loved farming, his parents said, the way he loved to take in stray animals. Even at the front, he would advise his parents on questions like whether to plant potatoes this year. He told his father, in training for battle, that he'd be more useful at home and in the fields.

Now, those fields lay empty. "We have no time," his father said, his hands clasped before him.

Standing outside near the gate of their home, his mother looked up at the evergreen trees nearby.

"Those trees grew up with him," Maria Pavlovysh said of her son. Now, she said, she and his girlfriend go to the cemetery and take turns crying.

Volunteer vote-counters push for Hungary election integrity

By JUSTIN SPIKE Associated Press

BUDAPEST, Hungary (AP) — A grassroots civic initiative in Hungary, concerned over the integrity of an upcoming general election, has recruited more than 20,000 ballot counters to observe the high-stakes contest in which nationalist Prime Minister Viktor Orban will seek a fourth consecutive term.

The effort to place at least two volunteer ballot counters in each of Hungary's more than 10,000 polling places came from a belief among many supporters of Hungarian opposition parties that without observers from their side, vote tally irregularities could affect the outcome of the April 3 ballot.

"It is not right that in Hungary in a large number of electoral districts ... there are no ballot counters representing the opposition," said Judit Szanto, a volunteer with Szamoljuk Egyutt (Let's Count Together), one of several civic organizations recruiting and training ballot counters.

"This thing was devised to organize people to oversee the cleanliness of the election on the suspicion that if they don't, there will be fraud," said Szanto, who provides training for the volunteers.

Recent polls show that Orban, whose Fidesz party has held a nearly uninterrupted two-thirds parliamentary majority since 2010, is likely to face his closest election since taking power.

United For Hungary, a coalition of six opposition parties spanning the political spectrum from liberal to centrist to right wing, has joined together in an effort to overcome what they see as a political, economic, media and electoral system dominated by the right-wing Fidesz and designed to give it an unfair advantage.

Yet while the coalition's strategy of coordinating its candidates across the country and running a single joint candidate for prime minister is likely to boost its performance on election day, the outcome of the contest in many districts could come down to only a few votes.

Such a tight race makes accurate and transparent tallying critical, said Adam Sanyo, a data analyst assisting Let's Count Together in training the ballot counters.

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"The counting process is actually quite important because even in those elections where the general public thought that it wasn't a close election ... in some of the constituencies we had very small margins between the candidates," Sanyo said, adding that several of Hungary's 106 districts are likely to be decided by fewer than 1,500 votes.

On election day, the volunteers, each of which will be officially delegated by one of the six opposition parties, will operate alongside other ballot counters delegated by Fidesz.

But in addition to counting ballots once polls are closed, they'll also monitor the voting process throughout the day in each polling place, and have received training on how to recognize and report irregularities.

"It's not enough just to get people into the polling stations, it's important that they know what's going to happen there," Szanto said. "They must be familiar with the laws and the electoral legislation to do their job properly."

Hungarians with sympathies for the opposition parties aren't the only ones that will have their eyes on the election.

The Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe has said it will send a full-scale election observation mission to Hungary, including 18 long-term observers and 200 others on election day — only the second time it has done so in a European Union country.

In 2014, the OSCE called Hungary's parliamentary election "free but not fair," and noted that the 2018 vote was characterized by a "pervasive overlap between state and ruling party resources, undermining contestants' ability to compete on an equal basis."

Orban's critics have also pointed to alleged cases of vote buying and clientelism which they say have distorted the outcome of previous elections.

A change to electoral law passed by the ruling party last year allows for Hungarians to vote in districts where they have a registered address even if they don't reside there. This led the opposition and civic organizations to warn of "voter tourism," where voters may register addresses in particularly competitive districts with the aim of tipping the result.

An interim report by the OSCE released last week drew attention to such amendments to electoral law, which it said were adopted by the ruling party "without a genuine consultative process."

"Most previous ... recommendations remain largely unaddressed, including those related to the misuse of administrative resources and the blurring of state and political party roles, and campaign finance transparency," the OSCE noted in its report.

Hungary's government has insisted that its elections are free and fair, and rejected concerns that the ruling party was at an advantage.

A government spokesperson said in an email that the OSCE observers were "very welcome any time," and that "the procedural management of elections in Hungary has always been considered as one of the best within the EU, and we hope that it will remain so."

According to Sanyo, the data analyst, the election result is likely to be decided by 10 to 15 districts where the vote is expected to be tight, and that even a few misallocated votes can have an effect on the outcome of the election.

"That's basically the message to (the ballot counters)," he said. "Your job is really important because this time, really every vote counts."

Many in Mideast see hypocrisy in Western embrace of Ukraine

By JOSEPH KRAUSS Associated Press

JERUSALEM (AP) — Within days of the Russian invasion, Western countries invoked international law, imposed crippling sanctions, began welcoming refugees with open arms and cheered on Ukraine's armed resistance.

The response has elicited outrage across the Middle East, where many see a glaring double standard in how the West responds to international conflicts.

"We have seen every means we were told could not be activated for over 70 years deployed in less than

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seven days," Palestinian Foreign Minister Riad Malki told a security forum in Turkey earlier this month.

"Amazing hypocrisy," he added.

The U.S.-led war in Iraq, which began 19 years ago this month, was widely seen as an unlawful invasion of one state by another. But Iraqis who fought the Americans were branded terrorists, and refugees fleeing to the West were often turned away, treated as potential security threats.

The Biden administration said Wednesday the United States has assessed that Russian forces committed war crimes in Ukraine and would work with others to prosecute offenders. But the U.S. is not a member of the International Criminal Court and staunchly opposes any international probe of its own conduct or of its ally, Israel.

When Russia intervened in Syria's civil war on behalf of President Bashar Assad in 2015, helping his forces to pummel and starve entire cities into submission, there was international outrage but little action. Syrian refugees fleeing to Europe died on perilous sea voyages or were turned back as many branded them a threat to Western culture.

In Yemen, a grinding yearslong war between a Saudi-led coalition and Iran-backed Houthi rebels has left 13 million people at risk of starvation. But even searing accounts of infants starving to death have not brought sustained international attention.

Bruce Riedel, formerly of the CIA and National Security Council, and now a senior fellow at the Brookings Institution, said it was "understandable" that many in the Middle East see a double standard by the West.

"The United States and the United Kingdom have supported Saudi Arabia's seven-years-old war in Yemen, which created the world's worst humanitarian catastrophe in decades," he said.

Israel's occupation of lands the Palestinians want for a future state is well into its sixth decade, and millions of Palestinians live under military rule with no end in sight. The U.S., Israel and Germany have passed legislation aimed at suppressing the Palestinian-led boycott movement, while major firms like McDonald's, Exxon Mobil and Apple have won praise by suspending business in Russia.

On social media, the world has cheered Ukrainians as they stockpile Molotov cocktails and take up arms against an occupying army. When Palestinians and Iraqis do the same thing, they are branded terrorists and legitimate targets.

"We resisted the occupiers, even when the world was with the Americans, including the Ukrainians, who were part of their coalition," said Sheikh Jabbar al-Rubai, 51, who fought in the 2003-2011 Iraqi insurgency against U.S. forces.

"Because the world was with the Americans, they didn't give us this glory and call us a patriotic resistance," instead emphasizing the insurgency's religious character, he said. "This is of course a double standard, as if we are subhuman."

Abdulameer Khalid, a 41-year-old Baghdad delivery driver, sees "no difference" between the Iraqi and Ukrainian resistance.

"If anything, the resistance to the Americans in Iraq was more justified, given that the Americans traveled thousands of kilometers to come to our country, while the Russians are going after a supposed threat next door to them," he said.

To be sure, there are important differences between the war in Ukraine — a clear case of one U.N.-member state invading another — and the conflicts in the Middle East, which often involve civil war and Islamic extremism.

"By and large, Middle East conflicts are incredibly complicated. They are not morality plays," said Aaron David Miller, a senior fellow at the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace and former Mideast adviser to Republican and Democratic administrations.

He said the Ukraine conflict is unique in its degree of moral clarity, with Russia widely seen as launching an aggressive, devastating war against its neighbor. The closest Mideast analogy might be Iraq's invasion of Kuwait in 1990, when Washington responded by assembling a military coalition including Arab states that drove out the Iraqi forces.

Still, Miller acknowledges that U.S. foreign policy "is filled with anomalies, inconsistencies, contradictions

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and yes, hypocrisy.”

The U.S. invasion of Afghanistan was a response to the 9/11 attacks, which Osama bin Laden planned while being sheltered by the Taliban there. The U.S. justified its war in Iraq with false claims about weapons of mass destruction, but the invasion also toppled a brutal dictator who had himself flouted international law and committed crimes against humanity.

Still, the invasion is regarded by most Iraqis and other Arabs as an unprovoked disaster that set the stage for years of sectarian strife and bloodletting.

Elliott Abrams, a senior fellow at the Council on Foreign Relations and a White House adviser when the U.S. invaded Iraq, said there was a difference between Ukrainians battling Russian invaders and insurgents in Iraq who fought Americans.

“Iraqis who fought U.S. troops on behalf of Iran or ISIS were not freedom fighters,” he said, referring to the Islamic State group. “Making these moral distinctions is not an act of hypocrisy.”

The Israeli-Palestinian conflict dates back more than a century — long before the 1967 war in which Israel seized east Jerusalem, the West Bank and Gaza. Most of the world considers those areas to be occupied Palestinian territory and Israel’s ongoing settlement construction to be a violation of international law. Israel portrays the conflict as a territorial dispute, accusing the Palestinians of refusing to accept its right to exist as a Jewish state.

“Only the severely context-challenged could compare Israel’s wars of defense to Russia’s invasion of its neighbor,” the Jerusalem Post said in a March 1 editorial on the topic.

Russia’s intervention in Syria was part of a complex civil war in which several factions — including the Islamic State group — committed atrocities. As IS seized large parts of Syria and Iraq, many feared extremists would slip into Europe amid waves of refugees.

Still, many in the Middle East saw harsh treatment of Arab and Muslim migrants as proof that Western nations still harbor cultural biases despite espousing universal rights and values.

Many feel their suffering is taken less seriously because of pervasive views that the Middle East has always been mired in violence — never mind the West’s role in creating and perpetuating many of its intractable conflicts.

“There’s this expectation, drawn from colonialism, that it’s more normal for us to be killed, to grieve our families, than it is for the West,” said Ines Abdel Razek, advocacy director for the Palestine Institute for Public Diplomacy.

From Hollywood’s illusion factory, some unexpected reality

By TED ANTHONY AP National Writer

In the minutes and hours after Will Smith accosted and slapped Chris Rock before a live audience of millions, social media platforms lit up with a breathless and emphatic hot take: Surely, multitudes insisted, the whole thing was staged.

They talked of the specifics of the altercation (“Rock barely moved”). Of its apparent artifice (“It just looks like Chris arched his back the way they do in stage combat”). Of the participants (“Was this just amazing acting?”). Some who watched were just stunned (“Wait that wasn’t staged??”), others openly critical (“a pathetic attempt to get some viewers to tune in”).

Hollywood, the illusion factory, had churned out some unexpected reality at the Oscars. And — surprise! — a lot of people thought it was another illusion.

This is America in 2022 — tantalized by immersive special effects, mesmerized by reality TV, upended by misinformation spread by both the malevolent and the sloppy. And constantly asking, albeit about a constantly evolving set of circumstances: What around here is real?

“It’s not at all surprising to me that the first response is, ‘Oh, this must be a bit, right? This must be scripted,’” says Danielle J. Lindemann, author of “True Story: What Reality TV Says About Us.”

“We are always looking for these authentic moments. ... We feel kind of a triumph when we see something that was actually real,” says Lindemann, a sociologist at Lehigh University in Pennsylvania. “But when

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we encounter what is really an authentic moment, we have the skepticism about it.”

Is it any wonder? After all, we exist in a culture where clothing factories pre-rip blue jeans to make them look “distressed” — like they’ve been worn and frayed through years of actual life experiences. Where followers on Twitter — or faces appearing in your LinkedIn feed — might not be actual people at all. Where lip-syncing in “live” performances — not too long ago a major faux pas — now passes with barely a second look.

“Life has become art, so that the two are now indistinguishable from each other,” cultural critic Neal Gabler wrote in “Life: the Movie.” That was 1998, a generation ago. Since then, the “mockumentary” format pioneered by 1984’s “This Is Spinal Tap” has become its own genre, begetting the likes of TV’s “The Office,” “Parks and Recreation” and “Modern Family,” which featured documentary-style interviews embedded in their storylines.

Next month heralds a new Nicolas Cage movie starring Nicolas Cage playing Nicolas Cage — or, more accurately rendered, “Nicolas Cage.” It’s the latest in a long tradition of stars portraying themselves (the actual director Cecil B. DeMille appearing in the fictional 1950 movie “Sunset Boulevard,” John Malkovich playing “John Malkovich” in 1999’s “Being John Malkovich,” Bill Murray playing “Bill Murray” in 2009’s “Zombieland”).

Each asks, in short: Where does actor end and performance begin? Or is the line a blurred and muddy one?

That’s what produced some of the confusion Sunday night in media both social and professional: Was this a scripted skit, embedded in a nonfiction show that itself is designed to reward the pinnacles of artistic artifice? One in which Will Smith and Chris Rock played “Will Smith” and “Chris Rock”? Or was it what it actually (apparently) turned out to be — real anger and violence, both genuine and unscripted, playing itself out on stage?

For every person who frame-grabbed in service of proving fraud, another made an equally intense case for the opposite — sometimes using the same evidence.

“We are so used to things being scripted,” says Marty Kaplan, director of the Norman Lear Center at the USC Annenberg School for Communication and Journalism, which studies the impact of entertainment on society. “And we’re kind of hip and savvy about these things, except we’re not.”

“This one pierced the veil,” Kaplan says. “It was like a rent in the fabric of reality.”

Part of it is that awards shows are different. In the wilds of entertainment, they’ve long been a unique beast — a moment when stars convene under their own names, but still performing for the cameras and the crowds.

They’re not documentary, exactly (though they have elements of it). They’re not mockumentary (though they can certainly veer in that direction). Like Hollywood itself, they’re a stew of their own myths and realities, a high-end variety show where the identities of the winners, the fabulous outfits and the remarks are the planned and generally mannered narrative engines. Until Sunday night, when they weren’t.

“Awards shows have a certain kind of organization and protocol. You’re supposed to act in a certain kind of way,” says Shilpa Davé, a media studies scholar at the University of Virginia. “We’re not used to seeing this in real time on these kinds of shows. We always see them in movies — we see them performing this, but not really doing it.”

Live events, particularly sports, are generally still perceived as trustworthy, Davé says, because they’re happening in real time and “you can make your own assumptions about what you’re seeing.” But Sunday’s events — particularly since the profane audio was bleeped out for U.S. audiences — challenged that.

“The fact that there’s skepticism about whether this was real is people bringing that cynicism to live events,” she says.

For those of a certain generation, the incident brought to mind another notorious on-air slap — when pro wrestler Jerry Lawler struck comic actor Andy Kaufman on David Letterman’s show in 1982. Lawler and Kaufman had maintained a feud over Kaufman’s performances related to wrestling, and Kaufman had ended up in a neck brace after a wrestling match between the two.

A few months later, in the course of a joint appearance on Letterman, the wrestler stood up and whacked

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Kaufman across the face, knocking him out of his chair, neck brace and all. "It was not clear if the altercation was staged," said one newspaper. NBC said at the time it received dozens of calls from viewers asking if the fight was real. (It wasn't, though that wasn't revealed until Kaufman was 10 years dead.)

And now we have Twitter (where Lawler posted Monday about the similarities), and instantaneous opinions, and a cacophony of declarative statements rather than phone calls to the network asking questions. As TV scholar Robert Thompson of Syracuse University's Bleier Center for Television and Popular Culture says, the skepticism is double-edged.

"Believing everything you see — especially in the technology era — is naive. But not believing anything ever, no matter how much evidence comes out — that's equally unhealthy and debilitating," Thompson says.

Yet in a nation where the "real" often proves to be fake, the "fake" can turn out to be real and we all join the masses in mass assumption along the way, how do you ever sort it all out? Particularly because, in the end, all of what happened Sunday night felt distinctly of a piece, whether real or fake or somewhere in between: There was a stage, there was an audience, and there were players.

EXPLAINER: What is law critics have dubbed 'Don't Say Gay'?

TALLAHASSEE, Fla. (AP) — Florida has come under intense national scrutiny over legislation that critics have labeled the "Don't Say Gay" law.

The GOP legislation, which Republican Gov. Ron DeSantis signed into law Monday, bars instruction on sexual orientation and gender identity in kindergarten through the third grade. Republicans argue that parents should broach these subjects with children. Democrats have said the law demonizes LGBTQ people by excluding them from classroom lessons.

WHAT DOES THE LAW DO?

The law's central language reads: "Classroom instruction by school personnel or third parties on sexual orientation or gender identity may not occur in kindergarten through grade 3 or in a manner that is not age appropriate or developmentally appropriate for students in accordance with state standards."

Parents would be able to sue districts over violations.

During his bill signing ceremony, DeSantis presented an example of what he considers inappropriate teaching material for the young students: A poster containing a drawing of "The Genderbread Person," developed to help students learn about and distinguish between anatomical sex, gender expression, gender identity, sexual attraction and romantic attraction.

The graphic has been included in various anti-bullying training programs and offered as a resource by the Washington-based LGBTQ rights advocacy group Human Rights Campaign and others.

"This is trying to sow doubt in kids about their gender identity," DeSantis said. "It's trying to say that they can be whatever they want to be. This is inappropriate for kindergarteners and first graders and second graders. Parents do not want this going on in their schools."

DeSantis said the graphic was being used in Florida and other states.

WHAT ARE THE CRITICISMS?

Opponents of the law say banning lessons about gender identity and sexual orientation marginalizes LGBTQ people and their presence in society.

In that vein, they have labeled the measure the "Don't Say Gay" bill. Republicans have chafed at that phrasing, chiding advocacy groups and news outlets that have used it.

Critics of the law say its language — "classroom instruction," "age appropriate" and "developmentally appropriate" — is overly broad and subject to interpretation. Consequently, teachers might opt to avoid the subjects entirely at all grade levels for fear of being sued, they say.

DeSantis and Florida Education Commissioner Richard Corcoran have waved off those concerns. Corcoran points to a section of the legislation that requires his agency to draw up additional guidelines.

"Now we can go and ... work it out so people have that clear understanding," Corcoran said. He said what passing the law did was to "set clear guardrails."

Andrew Spar, president of the Florida Education Association, said the law is nothing more than a political

wedge issue for Republicans. He notes that elementary schools, especially in kindergarten through third grade, do not teach these subjects.

DOES THE LAW DO ANYTHING ELSE?

A less-talked-about aspect of the law requires districts to notify parents of health care services offered in schools and give them the option to decline them.

Districts will also be required to notify parents if there is any change in a student's mental, emotional or physical health monitoring.

Republicans have said the law is intended to keep parents informed of what children learn and are exposed to in schools. Under a similar rationale, DeSantis last week signed a bill that gives parents a say in what books schools can and can't have in their libraries and requires elementary schools to provide a searchable list of every book available or used in instruction.

WHAT'S NEXT?

LGBTQ advocacy groups and Democrats have hinted at taking legal action but nothing has yet materialized.

U.S. Secretary of Education Miguel Cardona on Monday said his agency "will be monitoring this law upon implementation to evaluate whether it violates federal civil rights law." He said students or parents who believe they are experiencing discrimination in school can file complaints with federal officials.

Peru's president survives 2nd impeachment effort in 8 months

By FRANKLIN BRICEÑO and REGINA GARCIA CANO Associated Press

LIMA, Peru (AP) — Pedro Castillo, Peru's embattled president, avoided joining the South American nation's list of impeached leaders as opposition lawmakers Monday night failed to get enough votes to remove him from office eight months into his term.

Castillo, a political neophyte who shook the country when he defeated the political elite to become president, survived his second impeachment attempt. He characterized the accusations against him as speculation and argued that none could be substantiated.

The votes of at least 87 of the 130 lawmakers were needed to remove the president. Fifty-five voted in favor, 54 against and 19 abstained.

"I salute that common sense, responsibility and democracy prevailed," Castillo tweeted after the vote. "I recognize the lawmakers who voted against the vacancy, and I respect the decision of those who did. I call everyone to turn this page and work together for the great challenges of the country."

The lawmakers seeking to remove Castillo had noted he is the subject of three preliminary investigations into possible corruption, which under Peruvian law cannot proceed until he is out of office. There is also a separate accusation from a would-be collaborator who alleged he is part of a criminal group that receives money in exchange for public works.

The lawmakers accused Castillo of "permanent moral incapacity," a term incorporated into Peruvian constitutional laws that experts say lacks an objective definition and that Congress has used six times since 2017 to try to remove presidents.

"We only found comments without any corroboration, speculation, imaginary links," Castillo said of the accusations while reading a speech before lawmakers hours before the vote.

While Castillo remains in office, the latest move against him will add to Peru's political turmoil and weaken the president, who won office with just 44,000 more votes than his opponent in a runoff election. He was an underdog when he entered the race last year and initially campaigned on promises to nationalize Peru's crucial mining industry and rewrite the constitution.

From the start, Castillo, a rural schoolteacher in a poor Andean district, has been handicapped by his Cabinet choices, a number of whom have been accused of wrongdoing. So has his former private secretary, whose corruption investigation led the prosecutor's office to find \$20,000 in a bathroom of the presidential palace.

"Recent developments have confirmed Peru's dysfunctionality, regardless of who is in power," said Claudia

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Navas, an analyst with the global firm Control Risks. "These events will certainly exacerbate Peruvian's frustration towards the political system, which represents a risk because they will be willing to support an authoritarian leader as a desperate measure to overcome protracted political instability."

The debate in Congress lasted several hours.

Peru's unicameral Congress is deeply fragmented among 10 political parties and rarely can come to any consensus on passing legislation. Castillo's party is the biggest faction, but it has only 37 seats, and opposition members lead key committees.

The government invited three officials from the Organization of American States to witness the debate. Lawmakers allowed them to watch it from a nearby building.

Castillo succeeded Francisco Sagasti, who was appointed president by Congress in November 2020 as the country cycled through three heads of state in one week amid confrontations that left two people dead and more than 200 injured.

"Vacating presidents has become a sport," said centrist lawmaker Wilmar Elera, who recalled that President Martín Vizcarra was dismissed by Congress in 2020 for permanent moral incapacity but has not faced any charges since.

Congress and Castillo are both unpopular in Peru, although the disapproval of legislators is greater. A survey by the Institute of Peruvian Studies published in March by the newspaper "La República" said Congress' disapproval rate was 79%, while 68% had negative views of Castillo.

The debate over Castillo's future came just as the country awaited the release from prison of former President Alberto Fujimori, who was ordered freed earlier this month in a controversial decision by Peru's highest court. He was serving a 25-year sentence for his role in more than 20 murders during his administration between 1990 and 2000.

Peru has also been seeing demonstrations across the country in recent days to protest prices for food, fuel and fertilizer.

Navas said Castillo is now likely to try to show any results his administration has achieved in an effort to win support for his administration, but that likely will not affect public opinion.

She said the country is in need of a "comprehensive political reform" that promotes public participation and "strengthens the rules for political parties' internal consultations to elect their candidates."

"Measures to ensure the suitability of those holding political power are also required," Navas said. "A reform is also needed to introduce clear criteria for Congress to impeach a president on the grounds of 'moral incapacity.'"

Trump suit against Clinton part of longtime legal strategy

By JILL COLVIN, ERIC TUCKER and BERNARD CONDON Associated Press

NEW YORK (AP) — When a Pulitzer Prize-winning architecture critic panned Donald Trump's plans for a new Manhattan skyscraper, Trump responded by suing. When the tenants of a building he was trying to clear sued to halt their evictions, Trump slapped back by filing suit against the law firm representing the tenants. And when an author said the former president was worth far less than he'd claimed, Trump again took legal action.

So when Trump last week filed a sprawling suit accusing his 2016 rival Hillary Clinton and the Democratic Party of conspiring to sink his winning presidential campaign by alleging ties to Russia — renewing one of his longest-standing perceived affronts — it wasn't a surprise.

Trump has spent decades repurposing political and personal grievances into causes of legal action. Throughout his business and political career, he has used the courts as a venue to air his complaints and as a tool to intimidate adversaries, sully their reputations and try to garner media attention.

"It's part of his pattern of using the law to punish his enemies, as a weapon, as something it was never intended to be," said James D. Zirin, a former federal prosecutor in Manhattan and the author of the book "Plaintiff in Chief," which details Trump's legal history. "For him, litigation was a way of life."

Trump's latest lawsuit revisits a familiar grievance: that Democrats in 2016 concocted fictitious claims that

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his campaign was colluding with Russia and that the FBI as a result pursued an “unfounded” investigation.

The 108-page suit, as much a political screed as a legal document, names as defendants longstanding targets of his ire from both the political realm — Clinton and her aides — and the law enforcement community, including former FBI Director James Comey and Peter Strzok and Lisa Page, two FBI officials who exchanged critical text messages about Trump during the 2016 campaign.

It also piggybacks off the work of special counsel John Durham, listing as defendants the three people — a cybersecurity attorney, an ex-FBI lawyer and a Russia analyst — who have been charged in that criminal probe.

Trump, in the suit, paints himself as the victim of a vast, racketeering conspiracy in which FBI officials who led the investigation knew that it was “based on a false and contrived premise.”

“Acting in concert, the Defendants maliciously conspired to weave a false narrative that their Republican opponent, Donald J. Trump, was colluding with a hostile foreign sovereignty,” his lawyers wrote, describing the alleged scheme as “so outrageous, subversive and incendiary that even the events of Watergate pale in comparison.”

It’s well-established through a Justice Department inspector general investigation that the FBI made errors and missteps during the Russia probe that Trump could look to seize on if his lawsuit advances. But Russia did meddle in the 2016 election.

U.S. intelligence agencies concluded in January 2017 that Russia mounted a far-ranging influence campaign aimed at helping Trump beat Clinton. And the bipartisan Senate Intelligence Committee, after three years of investigation, affirmed those conclusions, saying intelligence officials had specific information that Russia preferred Trump and that Russian President Vladimir Putin had “approved and directed aspects” of the Kremlin’s influence campaign. It also found clear ties between Trump’s campaign and Russia, concluding that Trump’s campaign chairman had had regular contact with a Russian intelligence officer and that other Trump associates were eager to exploit the Kremlin’s aid.

Former special counsel Robert Mueller, who was charged with further investigating the links between Trump and Russia, did not establish a criminal conspiracy between Russia and the Trump campaign, but concluded that Russian interference was “sweeping and systematic.” His investigation resulted in criminal charges against 34 people and three entities, including 26 Russians, Trump’s former campaign chair and national security adviser.

Representatives for Trump did not respond to requests for comment. But Trump attorney Alina Habba defended his approach on Newsmax, telling the network more suits were coming “soon.”

“We have another suit being filed shortly,” she said. “And anybody that’s going to try and make up malicious stories about him while he was sitting as president, prior to his presidency or now is going to be sued.”

Trump, meanwhile, was already using the filing to rile up his crowds at a rally in Georgia Saturday night.

“To fight back against this corrupt establishment’s relentless hoaxes and lies, this week I filed a historic lawsuit to hold them accountable for the Russia, Russia, Russia hoax,” Trump said to cheers. His mention of Clinton prompted especially loud applause and a revival of the “Lock her up!” chant that was a defining feature of his 2016 campaign.

In addition to serving as a useful political cudgel, Trump’s effort, which comes as he is mulling another run for the White House, could lend the imprimatur of credibility to campaign trail grievances, said Stephen Gillers, a New York University professor of legal ethics.

“To the unaware public, the fact that grievances are repackaged as legal claims adds credibility to the force of those grievances,” Gillers said. “Anyone who pays attention to what goes on in the courts will be able to see through these claims as claims of political victimization in another form. But the public by and large does not pay attention to the validity of the claims.”

Last year, Trump took similar action, filing suits against three of the country’s biggest tech companies, claiming he and other conservatives had been wrongfully censored after his accounts were suspended.

It’s a tactic Trump has used again and again.

In the real estate, casino and other industries where the former president made fortunes and lost them, Trump’s use of lawsuits as a business weapon was legendary. He sued or threatened to sue contractors,

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business partners, tax authorities and the media.

"Trump loved to sue, especially parties that could not afford a legal defense," said Barbara Res, a former longtime Trump Organization executive turned critic. She said one legal tactic he turned to often was the "preventive strike" suit to weaken rivals and create the impression he was the aggrieved party before they acted.

"Trump's perception and that of many people is that the first person to sue has a legitimate complaint," Res said.

Indeed, when Trump defaulted on a giant Deutsche Bank loan for his Chicago hotel and condo tower during the 2008 financial crisis, he didn't wait to be sued. Instead, he filed a complaint accusing the lender of "predatory lending practices" that hurt his reputation and helped trigger the global depression.

Instead of paying the bank, he argued, the bank should be paying him.

It was a novel argument and one that ultimately succeeded. Deutsche Bank ended up forgiving some of his loan, then extending him hundreds of millions of dollars in new loans in the coming years.

As a New York Times columnist was preparing to write about the effort, he received a note from one of Trump's lawyers: "Please be assured that if your article is not factually correct, we will have no choice but to sue you."

To many journalists, it's a familiar threat, delivered with a raised voice and repeated for emphasis.

"We'll sue you! We'll sue you!" yelled a Trump lawyer to Associated Press journalists in a phone interview about Trump University and other defunct Trump ventures in 2016.

Trump learned his attack dog legal tactics from one of his early legal advisers, the late Roy Cohn, the disbarred lawyer who made his name as a prosecutor in the Julius and Ethel Rosenberg communist spying case that sent the husband and wife to the electric chair, then as aide to Sen. Joe McCarthy during the Red Scare hearings.

Under Cohn, Trump countersued the Justice Department after it brought a case against the Trump Organization in the early 1970s for housing discrimination. The Trump Organization eventually settled, admitting no guilt.

In the years that followed, the casework never let up.

A USA Today investigation found Trump had been involved in at least 3,500 court cases over the course of three decades — more than five other top U.S. real estate owners combined. In more than half of the cases, Trump was the one who had sued.

The litigation continued while Trump was in the White House. In a desperate and futile attempt to remain in power, Trump and his allies filed dozens of baseless lawsuits challenging the 2020 election results. Again and again, judges said the plaintiffs had failed to prove fraud or misconduct.

Trump had made clear his intentions even before all the votes had been counted.

"We'll be going to the U.S. Supreme Court," he said during a 2:30 a.m. appearance hours after polls had closed.

"He's exceptionally litigious, much of which is instituted not to win but rather to frustrate the opposing party by causing financial hardship," said Trump's former fixer-turned adversary Michael Cohen, who went to jail for making hush money payments to a porn star who alleged an affair with Trump, as well as lying to Congress about a proposed Trump skyscraper in Moscow.

When Trump wins — as he did last week in a case involving the porn star Stormy Daniels — Cohen said, "It emboldens him to continue this rampage of litigation for alternative purposes."

The suits have proven beneficial in other ways. Trump spent more than a year and a half fighting efforts by then-Manhattan District Attorney Cyrus R. Vance Jr. to obtain copies of his tax returns, taking the case all the way to the Supreme Court. While Trump ultimately failed, his stall tactics dragged the case out so long that Vance, who had appeared on the cusp of seeking an indictment, was replaced by a successor who has allegedly all but closed the case.

Even family is not immune.

In September, Trump sued his estranged niece, Mary Trump, and The New York Times over a 2018 story

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that challenged Trump's claims of self-made wealth by documenting how his father, Fred, had given him at least \$413 million over the decades, including through tax avoidance schemes. Trump's lawsuit, filed in state court in New York, accused Mary Trump of breaching a settlement agreement by disclosing the records to the newspaper's reporters.

Mary Trump's lawyer, Ted Bontros, wrote in a March 11 letter to the court that Trump's lawsuit was "brought to punish Mary Trump and to chill speech in the public interest about the former President."

Biden budget has Manchin priorities: Tax rich, cut deficit

By ALAN FRAM Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — President Joe Biden's \$5.8 trillion budget for next year would trim federal deficits and boost taxes on the wealthiest Americans. Both could appeal to Sen. Joe Manchin amid Democratic hopes of reviving talks with him over the party's derailed social and environment plan.

The question is whether this time, the pivotal West Virginia Democrat can be wooed to craft a scaled-down version of his party's roughly \$2 trillion, 10-year package. Before Christmas, Manchin sank that plan, which had already passed the House, saying it would fuel inflation and deepen deficits.

Biden and his aides touted his budget, unveiled Monday, as focusing on fiscal responsibility, security at home and overseas and investments in social programs to help families afford housing, child care, health care and other costs.

Another highlight: \$2.5 trillion in tax increases over 10 years on the highest-income people and corporations. That included \$361 billion from a minimum 20% tax on families worth \$100 million or more — the top one-hundredth of 1% of earners — though it drew some criticism from Manchin.

"An unprecedented commitment to building an economy where everyone has a chance to succeed. A plan to pay for those investments that we need as a nation," Biden described his budget to reporters.

Republicans rejected Biden's priorities.

Senate Minority Leader Mitch McConnell, R-Ky., said the president's defense proposal would at best "leave our armed forces simply treading water" because of inflation. He said bigger budgets for agencies like the IRS and the Environmental Protection Agency were "bloated liberal nonsense." And he labeled Biden's \$2.5 trillion, 10-year tax boosts, which the president said would only affect the nation's highest earners, a "bomb of tax hikes."

McConnell's critique was no surprise. Presidents' budgets are habitually ignored or reworked by Congress and mocked by the opposition party, a moment that lets both sides draw battle lines useful in upcoming elections.

But Biden's budget can also be viewed as a step toward luring Manchin, probably the Senate's most conservative Democrat, back to the bargaining table. Manchin on Monday downplayed reports that he's resumed talks with top Democrats over a new plan.

"No, there's nothing serious going on there," he told reporters Monday. But he also said any new package should be completed by early summer because the fall congressional campaigns could make progress later too hard.

While much of Biden's budget was similar to last year's, it was also a more centrist repackaging that reshaped some of its emphasis in Manchin's direction.

Its proposed \$795 billion for defense includes an increase for the Pentagon and a plan to help law enforcement hire more officers and improve training. "The answer is not to defund our police departments," Biden told reporters, a pointed rebuke of a rallying cry embraced by some progressives but disavowed by nearly all Democrats.

Its stream of new revenue helps Biden assert that his plan would reduce deficits by over \$1 trillion over the coming decade — a goal that wasn't emphasized last year. Just over two-thirds of the deficit cuts would come in the plan's final five years, though, postponing the most painful reductions and suggesting they might never happen.

The new revenue would also be used to lower costs for families, Biden said, as Democrats confront the nation's bout with inflation that's become a major political liability.

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Reducing budget deficits, battling inflation and raising revenue from the wealthy are also major demands for Manchin.

"He remains seriously concerned about the financial status of our country and believes fighting inflation by restoring fairness to our tax system and paying down our national debt must be our first priority," his spokesperson, Sam Runyon, said Monday.

Manchin, chairman of the Senate Energy and Natural Resources Committee, has repeatedly said he wants any new package to focus on domestic energy independence. He also wants an "all of the above" policy that combats climate change but helps all forms of energy.

Representing a state that relies heavily on coal and energy production, Manchin and his position have gained political clout because of Russia's invasion of Ukraine.

"What Russia has put out has to be replaced," he said, referring to the U.S. cutoff of that country's oil imports.

Of the House-approved \$2 trillion bill, \$555 billion was for tax breaks and other initiatives for encouraging a switch to cleaner energy. At Manchin's insistence, that bill dropped the original plan's biggest effort to do that by offering financial rewards or penalties for energy producers.

Manchin has also voiced support for including provisions lowering the costs of prescription drugs. The earlier bill would have done that by strengthening the government's ability to negotiate the prices it pays for some pharmaceuticals it purchases, which would save the government money.

Nonetheless, the White House kept some details to itself of what it might offer Manchin in talks.

Budget documents said it was including some revenue proposals like prescription drug pricing in a "deficit neutral reserve fund." It was not providing details "because discussions with Congress continue," the documents said in a footnote.

Biden's new proposed minimum tax on the wealthiest Americans likely faces an uphill fight. Manchin has supported higher taxes on the wealthy and big corporations, but he suggested Monday that Biden's plan presented complications.

"There's other ways for people to pay their fair share," he said.

A somewhat similar tax on billionaires last year by Senate Finance Committee Chairman Ron Wyden, D-Ore., never made the final package. And last year's House-passed bill already had around \$2 trillion in savings, suggesting new proposals may not be needed.

Sen. Kyrsten Sinema, D-Ariz., opposed her party's efforts to raise tax rates on individuals and corporations last year and has apparently not changed her view. Spokesperson Hannah Hurley said Monday that Sinema likes proposals that "target tax avoidance and ensure corporations pay taxes, while not increasing costs on small businesses or everyday Americans."

Democrats will need all their votes in the 50-50 Senate because all Republicans seem certain to oppose whatever they produce. Vice President Kamala Harris would cast the tiebreaking vote.

Civilian Army leader led child porn ring, risked US security

By MICHAEL REZENDES Associated Press

SIERRA VISTA, Ariz. (AP) — David Frodsham was a top civilian commander at a U.S. air base in Afghanistan when he "jokingly" asked an IT technician for access to YouPorn, the video-sharing pornographic website.

During his time in the war zone, Frodsham told one woman that he hired her because he "wanted to be surrounded by pretty women," and routinely called others "honey," "babe," and "cougar" before he was ordered home after the military verified multiple allegations of sexual harassment.

"I would not recommend placing him back into a position of authority but rather pursuing disciplinary actions at his home station," wrote one commanding officer when recommending that the Army order Frodsham to leave his post at Bagram Airfield and return to Fort Huachuca, a major Army installation in Arizona, according to a U.S. Army investigative file obtained by The Associated Press.

But when Frodsham returned to his home station in fall 2015, he rejoined the Network Enterprise Technology Command, the Army's information technology service provider, where he had served as director of personnel for a global command of 15,000 soldiers and civilians, according to his Army resume.

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By spring of the following year, he was arrested in Arizona for leading a child sex abuse ring that included an Army sergeant who was posting child pornography to the internet. Among the victims was one of Frodsham's adopted sons

Frodsham pleaded guilty to sex abuse charges in 2016 and is serving a 17-year sentence. But records reviewed by the AP show that the U.S. Army and the state of Arizona missed or ignored multiple red flags over more than a decade, which allowed Frodsham to allegedly abuse his adopted son and other children for years, all the while putting national security at risk.

The state permitted Frodsham and his wife, Barbara, to foster, adopt and retain custody of their many children despite nearly 20 complaints, and attempted complaints, of abuse, neglect, maltreatment and licensing violations. Meanwhile, the Army gave Frodsham security clearances and sensitive jobs at a time when his illicit sexual practices made him vulnerable to blackmail.

"He would have been an obvious target of foreign intelligence services because of his role and his location," said Frank Figliuzzi, the former assistant director of counterintelligence for the FBI. "Fort Huachuca is one of the more sensitive installations in the continental United States. People with security issues should not be there." In addition to NETCOM, where Frodsham worked, Fort Huachuca is home to the Army's Intelligence and Security Command, according to its website.

Public relations officials at Fort Huachuca confirmed that Frodsham was a program manager for NETCOM before he was arrested on child sex abuse charges. They declined to say whether Frodsham was disciplined after returning from Afghanistan, or whether the Army ever considered him a security risk.

Frodsham, former Sgt. Randall Bischak and a third man not associated with the Army are all serving prison terms for the roles they played in the child sex abuse ring. But the investigation is continuing because Sierra Vista police believe additional men took part.

Now, the criminal investigation is spilling over into civil court, where two of Frodsham's adopted sons have filed separate lawsuits against the state for licensing David and Barbara Frodsham as foster parents in a home where they say they were physically and sexually abused throughout their lives.

A third adopted son is expected to file suit Tuesday in Arizona state court in Cochise County, said attorney Lynne Cadigan, who represents all three. In the latest complaint, 19-year-old Trever Frodsham says case workers missed or overlooked numerous signs that David and Barbara Frodsham were unfit parents. These included a 2002 sex abuse complaint filed with local police by one of the Frodshams' biological daughters against an older biological brother, and the fact that David and Barbara Frodsham were themselves victims of child sex abuse.

Trever's allegations echo those featured in an earlier lawsuit filed by his older biological brother, Ryan Frodsham, and one filed by Neal Taylor, both of whom were also adopted into the Frodsham household.

In an interview with the AP, Ryan Frodsham said his adoptive father began sexually abusing him when he was 9 or 10 years old and the abuse continued into his teens, when David Frodsham began offering his son's sexual services to other men. "Makes me throw up thinking about it," Ryan said.

In his lawsuit, Ryan Frodsham said the state was informed that David and Barbara Frodsham were physically abusing their children "by slapping them in the face, pinching them, hitting them with a wooden spoon, putting hot sauce in their mouths, pulling them by the hair, bending their fingers back to inflict pain, forcing them to hold cans with their arms extended for long periods time," and refusing to let them use the bathroom unless the door remained open. In his AP interview, Ryan said Barbara never sexually abused him but walked into the room where David was abusing him at least twice.

"She knew what was going on," he said.

The two lawsuits already filed by the adopted sons and related legal filings also say investigators with the Department of Child Safety and case workers with Catholic Community Services, which subcontracts foster and adoption work from the state, failed to effectively follow up on 19 complaints and attempted complaints regarding the Frodsham home spanning more than a decade.

The complaints began in 2002, when the Frodshams applied for their foster care license, and continued until 2015, when David Frodsham was charged with disorderly conduct and driving drunk with children in

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his car, prompting the state to suspend their license indefinitely and remove all foster children from their home, although the charges were later dismissed.

Five months later, the Army deployed Frodsham to Afghanistan, where he was ordered back to Arizona after only four months of service.

REPORTS FELL ON DEAF EARS

The lawsuits say the Frodshams' adopted children attempted to report their own physical and sexual abuse without success.

For instance, Neal Taylor's lawsuit says he attempted to report that David Frodsham was sexually abusing him in two phone calls to his case manager, both of which he placed from school.

The first time, the case manager reported the call to Neal's adoptive mother, who "interrogated" him and "proceeded to punish" him, according to his lawsuit. The second time, the case manager refused to meet with him unless he disclosed the reason for his call over the phone, because he would have had to drive 90 minutes from Tucson to Sierra Vista for a private meeting.

Ryan Frodsham's lawsuit and the related legal filings say he reported repeated alleged physical abuse by Barbara Frodsham to Sierra Vista police when he was 12 years old after running away from home. Police photographed several bruises, returned him to Barbara Frodsham, and reported the incident to the state Department of Child Safety. Despite the photographs and a police report, a case worker who met with Ryan five weeks later found his allegations "unsubstantiated."

Arizona Department of Child Safety spokesman Darren DaRonco declined to answer specific questions about the lawsuits. He instead sent an email outlining the state's procedures for screening prospective foster and adoptive parents. "Despite all of these safeguards, people are sometimes able to avoid detection," DaRonco said, "especially if a person has no prior criminal or child abuse history."

Yet David and Barbara Frodsham have both said they were abused as minors.

In their written application to become foster parents, Barbara Frodsham indicated that neither she nor her husband had been sexually victimized. But in recent pretrial testimony for Ryan Frodsham's lawsuit, she said she would have revealed her abuse if she had been asked by a state investigator as part of the licensing process.

David Frodsham, for his part, told a probation official after his guilty plea that he had been abused as a teenager.

Many child welfare experts believe people with a history of child sexual abuse are more likely to abuse children in their own households and should be questioned to ensure they've overcome their trauma before being allowed to provide foster care.

Arizona's child welfare case workers "did not know how to interview and, therefore, they didn't get candid answers from the Frodshams," said Kathleen Faller, an expert witness retained in Ryan Frodsham's lawsuit. In pretrial testimony, Faller also said the state should not have granted the Frodshams' foster care license.

Barbara Frodsham, who divorced David following his guilty plea, did not return multiple telephone calls from the AP, and did not respond to detailed questions left on her voice mail. At the time of her husband's sentencing, she was working at Fort Huachuca as a personnel specialist, according to law enforcement records. A spokeswoman at Fort Huachuca said she still holds the position.

Attorneys for the state and the other defendants are seeking to have the cases dismissed, based in part on state law that grants immunity to state employees for mistakes or misjudgments committed in the course of their work. The law does not provide immunity for "gross negligence," which the Frodsham brothers and Neal Taylor are alleging.

The state also says all the complaints about the Frodsham children and the Frodsham home were properly handled.

CHILD SEX ABUSE RING

The Frodsham case started as child sex abuse investigations often do: with an undercover Homeland Security agent lurking in a chat room favored by child pornographers. The Philadelphia-based agent, using the Kik messaging app, ran into someone calling himself "Pup Brass" who was posting videos and photos

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labeled "pedopicsandvidd."

Kik offers users a degree of anonymity but it stores IP addresses, which help identify a device's connection to the internet and can help identify the device's owner. According to a Sierra Vista police probable cause statement, federal and local law enforcement agents using the IP address and other information — some gleaned from social media accounts — soon determined that "Pup Brass" was Sgt. Randall Bischak.

When they raided his home, seizing computers, cell phones, tablets and CDs holding child pornography, Bischak confessed that he'd been having sex with a 59-year-old man he called "Dave" and his teenage son. In at least one instance Bischak had secretly recorded the sex on video. He also told investigators that he and Frodsham discussed having sex with small children and that Frodsham had supplied him with at least one of the "little ones."

Thomas Ransford, who specializes in child sex abuse cases for the Sierra Vista police, was no stranger to Frodsham. In the mid-2000s, he served as a military police officer at Fort Huachuca when Frodsham was director of Training, Plans, Mobilization and Security. "So, I knew him. I was familiar with him, attended meetings with him," Ransford recalled. He also knew that Frodsham's foster kids were always in trouble.

When Ransford first questioned Frodsham he denied everything. "He was pompous, like he was the smartest guy in the room," Ransford recalled. Then Ransford played the video Bischak had secretly taken of himself having three-way sex with Frodsham and his adopted son, Ryan, and Frodsham began to acknowledge his crimes.

Ryan Frodsham also initially denied his father had abused him. "Ryan appeared very defensive of his father and did not want to implicate him in any misconduct," Ransford wrote in a probable cause statement.

But when Ransford showed him a compromising photograph seized from Bischak's cell phone, Ryan began to open up. Over the course of several months, Ransford said, Ryan identified others he said were part of his father's child sex abuse ring, fueling the continuing investigation.

"There's others we're aware of," Ransford said. "It's open."

The Frodsham child sex abuse ring is part of a cluster of sex abuse cases that have come to light in Cochise County, Arizona, over the last several years, including several involving U.S. Border Patrol agents, two of whom worked at the Naco, Arizona, Border Crossing. Among them:

— John Daly III. A year ago, authorities arrested the recently retired Border Patrol agent after DNA evidence led them to suspect him in at least eight rapes, and to consider whether he is the so-called East Valley rapist, who terrorized women outside Phoenix throughout the 1990s. Prosecutors in Maricopa and Cochise counties have charged him with multiple counts of sexual assault and kidnapping. Daly, who is being held without bail, has pleaded not guilty.

— Dana Thornhill. A year ago, Thornhill was sentenced to a 40-year prison term after pleading guilty to years of sexually abusing his two children. Thornhill was charged following a stand-off with police in which he holed up in a local church. At the time, Thornhill was the chaplain at the Naco Border Crossing.

— Paul Adams. In 2017, Adams was charged with raping his two daughters, one of whom was just 6 weeks old; taking videos of the sexual assaults; and posting them on the Internet. Adams, who took his own life before standing trial, was also stationed at the Naco Border Crossing.

Ransford believes the cluster of cases should be attributed to good police work and effective prosecution, which give victims and others the confidence to report child sex abuse. "People report because they know something's going to be done about it," he said.

But Cadigan, the attorney representing the Frodsham brothers and Neal Taylor, wonders whether child sex abuse in southern Arizona is on the rise. "Law enforcement has been very effective, and I appreciate their efforts, but I've been taking these cases for 30 years and I've never been so busy," she said.

A SCANDAL-PLAGUED DEPARTMENT

The physical and sexual abuse allegedly endured by the Frodsham brothers and Neal Taylor occurred at a time when Arizona's child welfare system was embroiled in scandal. In 2013, officials revealed that what was then the Department of Protective Services had a backlog of more than 6,500 abuse and neglect complaints it had never investigated.

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The revelation prompted then-Gov. Jan Brewer to dissolve the entire department and create a new Cabinet-level office called the Department of Child Safety. "It is evident that our child welfare system is broken, impeded by years of operational failures," said Brewer, a Republican.

Underlying the scandal were deep budget cuts to family support services, leading to soaring abuse and neglect complaints and what an auditor general's report would later refer to as "unmanageable workloads, staff turnover and the limited experience of some CPS supervisors and newly hired investigators."

In 2014, an analysis produced for the state Legislature showed that the increase in workloads in Arizona during the decade that ended in 2012 was greater than in any other state but one. It also showed that the response time for abuse and neglect complaints ballooned from 63 hours to nearly 250 hours, between 2009 and 2012.

In its defense against Ryan Frodsham's lawsuit, the state is trying to exclude any mention of the department's troubled past. "There is no evidence that the types of problems that led to the dissolution of CPS has any relation to or impact on his case," the state said in a pretrial motion.

But David and Barbara Frodsham were licensed as foster parents in 2002, at the dawn of what was perhaps the department's most troubled period, and formally adopted the three men going to court about a decade later, shortly before the system collapsed. "The jury is entitled to the full picture," lawyers for Ryan Frodsham said.

In his AP interview, Ryan Frodsham said he filed his lawsuit for one reason: "I want the state to admit what it did was wrong."

Hong Kong's COVID toll leads some to eco-friendlier coffins

By ALICE FUNG and JANICE LO Associated Press

HONG KONG (AP) — Hong Kong's deadliest coronavirus outbreak has cost about 6,000 lives this year — and the city is now running out of coffins.

Authorities have scrambled to order more, with the government saying 1,200 coffins had reached the city last week with more to come.

Space constraints make cremation a common burial practice in the densely populated island territory off the Chinese mainland, and the coffins typically are wood or wood substitutes.

To answer the shortage of them due to the COVID-19 toll, some companies are offering alternatives such as an environmentally friendly cardboard coffin.

LifeArt Asia has cardboard coffins made of recycled wood fiber that can be customized with designs on the exterior. In its factory in Aberdeen, a southern district of Hong Kong, up to 50 coffins can be produced a day.

CEO Wilson Tong said there is still some resistance to using caskets made of cardboard. "(People feel that) it's a little bit shameful to use so-called paper caskets. They feel that this is not very respectful to their loved ones," Tong said.

But he noted the company has designs that can reflect religion or hobbies and the coffin can even have a personalized color. "So it gives more than enough sufficient choices to the people, and so that they can customize the funeral and offer a more pleasant farewell without the fear of death."

The company says its cardboard coffins, when burned during the cremation, emits 87% less greenhouse gas compared to those made of wood or wood substitutes. Each LifeArt coffin weights about 10.5 kilograms (23 pounds), and can carry a body that weights up to 200 kilograms (441 pounds).

Hong Kong has reported about 200 deaths daily on average over the past week as many elderly residents who were unvaccinated die from COVID-19. The surge has put a strain on mortuaries, and refrigerated containers are being used to temporarily store bodies.

Amid the rising toll, non-profit Forget Thee Not, which advises people on their choices for last rites, bought 300 cardboard coffins and caskets to either send to hospitals or give to families who need them.

"We have been promoting environmental-friendly and personalized funerals. Now we see that Hong Kong needs more coffins. There are not enough coffins for the bodies in our hospitals," said Albert Ko, a

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board director at Forget Me Not.

Ko said some of the elderly who discussed their last rites with the organization have been open-minded and welcoming to the idea of eco-coffins.

"We hope to take this opportunity to contribute as well as promote eco-coffins," he said.

Ukrainians claim to retake ground ahead of latest talks

By YURAS KARMANAU Associated Press

LVIV, Ukraine (AP) — Ukrainian forces claimed to have retaken a Kyiv suburb and an eastern town from the Russians in what is becoming a back-and-forth stalemate on the ground, while negotiators began assembling for another round of talks Tuesday aimed at stopping the fighting.

Ahead of the talks, to be held in Istanbul, Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy said his country is prepared to declare its neutrality, as Moscow has demanded, and is open to compromise on the fate of the Donbas, the contested region in the country's east.

The mayor of Irpin, a northwestern Kyiv suburb that has been the scene of some of the heaviest fighting near the capital, said Monday that the city has been "liberated" from Russian troops.

Zelenskyy warned that Russian forces are trying to regroup after losing the area.

"We still have to fight, we have to endure," the president said late Monday in his nighttime video address to the nation. "We can't express our emotions now. We can't raise expectations, simply so that we don't burn out."

Irpin gained wide attention after photos circulated of a mother and her two children who were killed by shelling as they tried to flee, their bodies lying on the pavement with luggage and a pet carrier nearby.

A senior U.S. defense official said the U.S. believes the Ukrainians have also retaken the town of Trosty-anets, south of Sumy, in the east.

The official, who spoke on condition of anonymity to discuss U.S. intelligence assessments, said Russian forces largely remained in defensive positions near the capital, Kyiv, and were making little forward progress elsewhere in the country.

The official said Russia appeared to be de-emphasizing ground operations near Kyiv and concentrating more on the Donbas, the predominantly Russian-speaking region where Moscow-backed rebels have been waging a separatist war for the past eight years.

Late last week, with its forces bogged down in parts of the country, Russia seemed to scale back its war aims, saying its main goal was gaining control of the Donbas.

While that suggested a possible face-saving exit strategy for Russian President Vladimir Putin, it also raised Ukrainian fears that the Kremlin intends to split the country in two and force it to surrender a swath of its territory.

Meanwhile, a cyberattack knocked Ukraine's national telecommunications provider Ukrtelecom almost completely offline. The chief of Ukraine's state service for special communication, Yurii Shchyhol, blamed "the enemy" without specifically naming Russia and said most customers were cut off from telephone, internet and mobile service so that coverage could continue for Ukraine's military.

Also Monday, an oil depot in western Ukraine's Rivne region was hit by a missile attack, the governor said. It was the second attack on oil facilities in the region near the Polish border.

In recent days, Ukrainian troops have pushed the Russians back in other sectors.

In the city of Makariv, near a strategic highway west of the capital, Associated Press reporters saw the carcass of a Russian rocket launcher, a burned Russian truck, the body of a Russian soldier and a destroyed Ukrainian tank after fighting there a few days ago. In the nearby village of Yasnohorodka, the AP witnessed positions abandoned by Ukrainian soldiers who had moved farther west, but no sign of Russian troops.

And on Friday, the U.S. defense official said the Russians were no longer in full control of Kherson, the first major city to fall to Moscow's forces. The Kremlin denied it had lost full control of the southern city.

Russia has long demanded that Ukraine drop any hope of joining NATO, which Moscow sees as a threat. Zelenskyy, for his part, has stressed that Ukraine needs security guarantees of its own as part of any deal.

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Over the weekend, Zelenskyy said he is ready to agree to neutrality. He also said that "Ukraine's sovereignty and territorial integrity are beyond doubt," while suggesting at the same time that compromise might be possible over "the complex issue of Donbas."

The Ukrainian leader has suggested as much before but rarely commented so extensively. That could create momentum for the talks, for which the Russian delegates arrived in Istanbul on Monday, Turkish media reported.

Still, it was not clear how a compromise on the Donbas would square with maintaining Ukraine's territorial integrity.

In other developments:

— President Joe Biden made no apologies for calling for Putin's ouster, saying he was expressing his "moral outrage," not a new U.S. policy. Over the weekend, Biden said, "For God's sake, this man cannot remain in power." On Monday, the president said: "I'm not walking anything back."

— U.N. Secretary-General Antonio Guterres said he has launched an effort to achieve a humanitarian cease-fire that would allow aid to be brought in and people to move around safely.

— Russia's invasion has most Americans at least somewhat worried that the U.S. will be drawn directly into the conflict and could be targeted with nuclear weapons, according to a poll from The Associated Press-NORC Center for Public Affairs Research.

— The Group of Seven major economies rejected a Kremlin demand that some countries pay in rubles for Russia's natural gas. That demand appeared designed to support the Russian currency, which is under pressure from Western sanctions.

Earlier talks, both by video and in person, have failed to make progress on ending the more than month-old war that has killed thousands and driven more than 10 million Ukrainians from their homes. That includes almost 4 million who have fled the country.

In the besieged southern port of Mariupol, the mayor said half the pre-war population of more than 400,000 has fled, often under fire, during weeks of shooting and shelling.

Alina Beskrovna, who escaped the city in a convoy of cars and made it to Poland, said desperate people are melting snow for water and cooking on open fires despite the risk of bombardment, "because if you don't, you will have nothing to eat."

"A lot of people are just, I think, starving to death in their apartments right now with no help," she said. "It's a mass murder that's happening at the hands of the Russians."

Putin's ground forces have become bogged down because of stronger-than-expected Ukrainian resistance, combined with what Western officials say are Russian tactical missteps, poor morale, shortages of food, fuel and cold weather gear, and other problems. Moscow has resorted to pummeling Ukrainian cities with artillery and airstrikes.

In Stoyanka village near Kyiv, Ukrainian soldier Serhiy Udod said Russian troops had taken up defensive positions and suffered heavy losses.

The Russians probably "thought it would be like Crimea," which the Kremlin annexed in 2014. "But here it's not like in Crimea. We are not happy to see them. Here they suffer and get killed."

Will Smith apologizes: 'I was out of line and I was wrong'

By JAKE COYLE AP Film Writer

LOS ANGELES (AP) — The day after slapping Chris Rock on the Oscars stage and upending the 94th Academy Awards, Will Smith issued an apology to the comedian, to the academy and to viewers at home, saying he was "out of line" and that his actions are "not indicative of the man I want to be."

The fallout from Smith's actions during Sunday's ceremony continued Monday as Hollywood and the public continued to wrestle with a moment that stunned the Dolby Theatre crowd and viewers at home. The Academy of Motion Pictures Arts and Sciences condemned Smith striking Rock, who had made a joke about his wife, Jada Pinkett Smith, and said it would launch an inquiry.

Later in the day, Smith gave a stronger apology than he did in his best actor acceptance speech, which

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notably hadn't included an apology to Rock.

"Violence in all of its forms is poisonous and destructive," said Smith in a statement issued by his publicist and posted on Instagram. "My behavior at last night's Academy Awards was unacceptable and inexcusable. Jokes at my expense are a part of the job, but a joke about Jada's medical condition was too much for me to bear and I reacted emotionally. I would like to publicly apologize to you, Chris. I was out of line and I was wrong. I am embarrassed and my actions were not indicative of the man I want to be. There is no place for violence in a world of love and kindness."

The 53-year-old actor added apologies to the film academy, producers of the telecast, attendees, viewers and the Williams family. Smith was honored Sunday for his role as Richard Williams, father of Venus and Serena, in "King Richard."

"I am a work in progress," added Smith.

After calling a board of governors meeting Monday to discuss the incident, the film academy said that it review Smith's actions and "will explore further action and consequences in accordance with our bylaws, standards of conduct and California law." The Los Angeles Police Department said Sunday it was aware of the incident but was not pursuing an investigation because the person involved declined to file a police report.

Smith shocked the Dolby Theatre crowd and viewers at home when he took the stage after Rock, appearing as a presenter, joked: "Jada, I love you. 'G.I. Jane 2,' can't wait to see it."

The joke touched a nerve. Pinkett Smith, whose head is shaved, has spoken publicly about her alopecia diagnosis. Smith strode on stage and slapped Rock across the face. Back in his seat, Smith twice shouted for Rock to "get my wife's name out your (expletive) mouth." His words echoed clearly throughout the Dolby, though broadcaster ABC cut the audio for about 15 seconds. Within an hour, Smith won best actor, receiving a standing ovation. During his five-minute acceptance speech, Smith spoke about defending his family. He also apologized to the academy.

Rock's joke wasn't part of his routine during the rehearsals leading up to the show, according to two sources close to production who were not authorized to speak publicly.

But Rock had joked about Pinkett Smith before. He hosted the 2016 Oscars, when some were boycotting the ceremony over the #OscarsSoWhite group of nominees, including the Smiths. Said Rock then: "Jada boycotting the Oscars is like me boycotting Rihanna's panties. I wasn't invited."

Smith's actions rattled a pivotal Oscar ceremony. Until that moment, producer Will Packer had steered an orderly and lighthearted telecast that the academy hoped would restore the Academy Awards following last year's record-low ratings. Sunday's ceremony reached an estimated 15.36 million viewers, according to preliminary Nielsen company numbers Monday. While a marked improvement over the 9.85 million that watched last year, it was still the second-least viewed Oscars.

Some academy members, like writer-producer Marshall Herskovitz, called for the academy to take disciplinary action against Smith.

"He disgraced our entire community tonight," wrote Herskovitz on Twitter.

Whoopi Goldberg, a member of the Academy's board of governors, said Monday on "The View": "We're not going to take that Oscar from him. There will be consequences, I'm sure."

The Screen Actors Guild also weighed in. The film, television and radio union called the incident "unacceptable." SAG said that it had been in contact with the academy and ABC, and it doesn't comment on the guild's own disciplinary process.

A sense of disbelief hung in the air at the Dolby Theatre after Smith's assault. Not only was it a hard-to-fathom break with decorum on live national television — an incident so dramatic, even movie-like, that many initially assumed it was a staged bit — it seemed wildly out of character for one of Hollywood's most relentlessly upbeat stars. And it came less than an hour before Smith reached possibly the pinnacle of his career, winning his first Oscar, for best actor.

"In a way, I feel bad for Will Smith, too, because I think he let his emotions get the better of him, and this should have been one of the great nights of his life," said former Oscar host Jimmy Kimmel on Bill Sim-

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mons' podcast. "And now it's not. Was there anyone who didn't like Will Smith an hour ago in the world? Like no one, right? Now he doesn't have a single comedian friend — that's for sure."

Some questioned whether Smith should have been allowed to continue to sit front and center after smacking Rock. Several stars rushed to counsel and calm Smith, including Denzel Washington, Bradley Cooper and Tyler Perry. But the timing was intensely awkward because the best actor category was due up soon after, and Smith had long been considered a lock for the award.

"I know we're all still processing, but the way casual violence was normalized tonight by a collective national audience will have consequences that we can't even fathom in the moment," wrote Janai Nelson, president and director-counsel of the NAACP Legal Defense Fund, on Twitter.

The drama overshadowed some historical wins at an Oscars. The deaf family drama "CODA" became the first film with a largely deaf cast to win best picture. For the first time, a streaming service, Apple TV+, took Hollywood's top honor, signaling a profound shift in Hollywood and in moviegoing. Wins for Ariana DeBose of "West Side Story," Troy Kotsur of "CODA" and Jane Campion, director of "The Power of the Dog," all had made history.

Others came to Smith's defense, including Tiffany Haddish, who co-starred with Pinkett Smith in "Girls Trip."

"Maybe the world might not like how it went down, but for me, it was the most beautiful thing I've ever seen because it made me believe that there are still men out there that love and care about their women, their wives," Haddish told People magazine.

After the show, Smith posed for photographs with his family outside the Vanity Fair party. Inside, cell phone videos captured him dancing to "Gettin' Jiggy Wit It" while clutching his Oscar. Their son Jaden tweeted: "And That's How We Do It." On Instagram, Smith posted: "Me 'n Jada Pinkett Smith got all dressed up to choose chaos."

EXPLAINER: How would billionaire income tax work?

By FATIMA HUSSEIN Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — A "Billionaire Minimum Income Tax" is included in President Joe Biden's fiscal year 2023 budget proposal — part of the administration's effort to reduce the federal deficit over the next decade and fund new spending. The proposal "eliminates the inefficient sheltering of income for decades or generations," the White House says.

During a press conference highlighting the budget on Monday, Biden said one-hundredth of 1% of Americans would be subject to the tax. "The billionaire minimum tax is fair, and it raises \$360 billion that can be used to lower costs for families and cut the deficit," he said.

Whether Congress will approve is a major question as the administration outlines its hope to tax the nation's highest earners.

Here's how it would work:

HOW WOULD THE TAX APPLY?

The budget proposes that households worth more than \$100 million pay at least 20% in taxes on both income and "unrealized gains"— the increase in an unsold investment's value. For many wealthy individuals, the administration says, that "true income" never gets taxed since it can be held onto for decades and sometimes generations.

Biden's proposal would allow wealthy households to spread some payments on unrealized gains over nine years, and then for five years on new income going forward. Stretching payments over multiple years is meant to smooth yearly variations in investment income, while still ensuring that the wealthiest end up paying a minimum tax rate of 20%. In effect, the Billionaire Minimum Income Tax payments are a prepayment of tax obligations these households will owe when they later realize their gains.

This is an extremely nuanced policy. The tax is targeting the ultra wealthy. It's taxing gains achieved from their wealth, but it's real and unrealized income rather than simply the underlying assets.

That's why David Gamage, a tax law professor at Indiana University says "it's not a wealth tax, it's an

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income tax reform." He says, "This is a minimum income tax that includes the true economic value" of income that can be held for a very long time, he said.

WHO WOULD SEE THE IMPACT?

Roughly 700 billionaires would be affected by the tax proposal, the White House says, estimating that these individuals increased their wealth in 2021 by \$1 trillion, paying roughly 8% of their income and unrealized gains in taxes.

"A firefighter and a teacher pay more than double" the tax rate that a billionaire pays, Biden said during Monday's press conference.

Elon Musk, Bill Gates, Jeff Bezos, Warren Buffet and Michael Bloomberg are just a well-known few individuals who could see the earnings on their holdings taxed under this proposal if it were to become law.

HOW MUCH MONEY WOULD IT RAISE?

According to the White House, \$361 billion over 10 years. The budget proposal contains an additional \$1.4 trillion worth of revenue raisers, which would include a higher top tax rate of 39.6% on individuals and an increase in the corporate tax rate to 28%.

HOW DO VOTERS FEEL?

The subject of tax avoidance has grown in recent years. A ProPublica report from last June outlined how the wealthiest Americans can legally pay income taxes that are a fraction of what middle income Americans pay on their income. And a Pew Research Center study from last April states that most Americans — some 59%— say they are bothered "a lot" that some corporations and wealthy people don't pay their fair share in taxes.

A 2017 Gallup poll states that slightly more than six in 10 Americans say that upper-income people pay too little in taxes.

IS CONGRESS LIKELY TO APPROVE THIS MEASURE?

Donald Williamson, an accounting and taxation professor at American University in Washington, said "a couple of years ago, I would've laughed out loud. Today it's conceivable."

The highest likelihood is through "reconciliation" — a budget process for passing fiscal legislation with a simple majority of Senate votes.

That will require buy-in from West Virginia Sen. Joe Machin and Arizona Sen. Kyrsten Sinema, who have each objected to proposals to tax the ultra-wealthy in the past.

Steve Wamhoff, director of tax policy at the Institute on Taxation and Economic Policy, says the Democrats "have got this reconciliation vehicle that they can use that to pass legislation."

"This is a step toward a much fairer tax code."

3 dead in snowy pileup of dozens of vehicles in Pennsylvania

POTTSVILLE, Pa. (AP) — Tractor-trailers and other vehicles lost control and slammed into each other, people leapt away from careering trucks seconds before collision and at least three people were killed and more than a dozen others injured during a snow squall on a Pennsylvania highway Monday.

The crash on Interstate 81 was captured in videos posted on social media that show drivers and passengers lining the snowy road and jumping out of the way as a cascade of crashes unfolds.

Dr. David J. Moylan, the Schuylkill County coroner, said three fatalities had been confirmed by late afternoon and that number could rise because fires were impeding rescuers.

In one video, an out of control tractor-trailer smashed into a large dump truck turning it nearly 180 degrees, another large truck caught fire and spewed black smoke into the air, and an SUV struck a passenger car sending it spinning narrowly past a person standing on the shoulder in snow and fog.

Video mounted on the dash of a vehicle showed how quickly the road conditions changed. Stopped vehicles rose like a wall in front of the driver, and a person on the roadway stretched their arms out and jumped to escape the runaway vehicle. The impact sounded like thunder.

The Schuylkill County Office of Emergency Management said the crash in northeast Pennsylvania happened around 10:30 a.m. Monday. John Blickley, the agency's deputy emergency management coordinator,

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said officials believe a snow squall clouded visibility and likely contributed to the crash.

Estimates of the number of vehicles involved from the emergency management agency and state police ranged between 40 and 60, including multiple tractor trailers. Bickley said emergency personnel from four different counties took about 20 patients to area hospitals for treatment. Three tractor trailers carrying unknown cargo were on fire when emergency personnel arrived and some smaller vehicles were also on fire, he said.

Pennsylvania State Police Trooper David Boehm said Monday afternoon that the fires were delaying a full investigation.

Fire units on the scene included a steady stream of water tankers because the crash is "in the middle of nowhere ... there's not a fire hydrant out here anywhere," Boehm said.

The highway was snow-covered when the snow squall came through, he said.

"All it takes is one person to crash into something and you have to pull off the road, but when you continue to drive at highway speed, this is what happens," he said.

People whose vehicles were in the crash and the "walking wounded" were taken to the Wegman's distribution center in an industrial park near the crash, he said, and a reunification center had been set up at the Goodwill Fire Company No. 1 in Minersville for people to meet friends or relatives or arrange accommodations.

The National Weather Service had warned of "numerous brief heavy snow squalls with very poor visibility."

"The squalls will quickly reduce the visibility to under one-half of a mile and coat the roads with snow," forecasters said, urging drivers to get off the road if possible or turn on hazard lights "and gradually slow down to avoid a chain reaction vehicular accident."

Mike Colbert, a forecaster with the National Weather Service office in State College, said the weather service started issuing warnings for snow squalls a few years ago, and pileups of the kind being reported were the reason they began doing so.

"They are very heavy snow showers where if you are driving into them, you can go from partly cloudy or sunny skies into an instant blizzard in a matter of seconds. That's why they are so dangerous," he said.

'Don't Say Gay' bill signed by Florida Gov. Ron DeSantis

By ANTHONY IZAGUIRRE Associated Press

TALLAHASSEE, Fla. (AP) — Florida Gov. Ron DeSantis signed a bill into law on Monday that forbids instruction on sexual orientation and gender identity in kindergarten through third grade, a policy that has drawn intense national scrutiny from critics who argue it marginalizes LGBTQ people.

The legislation has pushed Florida and DeSantis, an ascending Republican and potential 2024 presidential candidate, to the forefront of the country's culture wars. LGBTQ advocates, students, Democrats, the entertainment industry and the White House have dubbed the measure the "Don't Say Gay" law.

DeSantis and other Republicans have repeatedly said the measure is reasonable and that parents, not teachers, should be broaching subjects of sexual orientation and gender identity with their children. The law went into effect just days after DeSantis signed a separate bill that potentially restricts what books elementary schools can keep in their libraries or use for instruction.

"We will make sure that parents can send their kids to school to get an education, not an indoctrination," DeSantis said to applause before he signed the sexual orientation and gender identity measure during a ceremony at a preparatory school outside Tampa.

The law states: "Classroom instruction by school personnel or third parties on sexual orientation or gender identity may not occur in kindergarten through grade 3 or in a manner that is not age appropriate or developmentally appropriate for students in accordance with state standards." Parents would be able to sue districts over violations.

Public backlash began almost immediately after the bill was introduced, with early criticism lobbed by Chasten Buttigieg, the husband of U.S. Transportation Secretary Pete Buttigieg, and condemnation from LGBTQ advocacy groups. Democratic President Joe Biden called it "hateful."

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As the bill moved through the legislature, celebrities mobilized against it on social media, and criticized it at this year's Academy Awards. Florida students staged walkouts and packed into committee rooms and statehouse halls to protest the measure, often with booming chants of "We say gay!"

The Walt Disney Company, a powerful player in Florida politics, suspended its political donations in the state, and LGBTQ advocates who work for the company criticized CEO Bob Chapek for what they said was his slow response speaking out against the bill. Some walked off the job in protest.

After DeSantis signed the measure, Disney released a statement saying, "Our goal as a company is for this law to be repealed by the legislature or struck down in the courts, and we remain committed to supporting the national and state organizations working to achieve that."

Throughout debate in the GOP-controlled statehouse, Democrats have said the law's language, particularly the phrases "classroom instruction" and "age appropriate," could be interpreted so broadly that discussion in any grade could trigger lawsuits and create a classroom atmosphere where teachers would avoid the subjects entirely.

"The bill's intentionally vague language leaves teachers afraid to talk to their students and opens up school districts to costly and frivolous litigation from those seeking to exclude LGBTQ people from any grade level," said state Rep. Carlos G. Smith, a Democrat who is gay. "Even worse, #DontSayGay sends a hateful message to our most vulnerable youth who simply need our support."

Andrew Spar, president of the Florida Education Association, said the law amounts to a political wedge issue for Republicans because elementary schools, especially in kindergarten through third grade, do not teach about these subjects and have state curriculum standards guiding classroom lessons.

"This bill is based on a falsehood, and that falsehood is that somehow we're teaching kids inappropriate topics at an early age, and clearly we're not," Spar said.

The law's sponsor, Republican Rep. Joe Harding, has said it would not bar spontaneous discussions about sexual orientation or gender identity in schools but would prevent districts from integrating the subjects into official curriculum. During the bill's early stages, Harding sought to require schools to inform parents if a student came out as LGBTQ to a teacher. He withdrew the amendment after it picked up attention online.

"Nothing in the amendment was about outing a student. Rather than battle misinformation related to the amendment, I decided to focus on the primary bill that empowers parents to be engaged in their children's lives," he said in a statement.

DeSantis signed the bill after a news conference held at the Classical Preparatory School in Spring Hill, about 46 miles (74 kilometers) north of Tampa. At the ceremony, several young children accompanied DeSantis and other politicians near the podium, with some holding signs bearing the governor's "Protect Children/Support Parents" slogan. DeSantis gave the children the pens he used to sign the bill.

The White House, which has sparred with the DeSantis administration over a range of policies, has issued statements against the law. "My Administration will continue to fight for dignity and opportunity for every student and family — in Florida and around the country," Biden tweeted Monday.

U.S. Secretary of Education Miguel Cardona recently held a call with LGBTQ students in Florida and said in a statement issued Monday that his agency "will be monitoring this law upon implementation to evaluate whether it violates federal civil rights law."

For teachers in Florida, the law has caused some confusion over what is allowed in the classroom as well as concerns over frivolous lawsuits, said Michael Woods, a special education teacher in Palm Beach County with about three decades of experience.

"From the start, I thought it was a solution in search of a problem, and the sad part about it is, I think it's going to have a chilling effect on making sure that young people, students have a safe learning environment," he said.

Biden says remark on Putin's power was about 'moral outrage'

By CHRIS MEGERIAN Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — President Joe Biden said Monday that he would make "no apologies" and wasn't

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"walking anything back" after his weekend comment that Russian President Vladimir Putin "cannot remain in power," attempting to turn the page on a controversy that clouded his recent trip to Europe.

The president also insisted he's not calling for regime change in Moscow, which would have represented a dramatic shift toward direct confrontation with another nuclear-armed country.

"I was expressing the moral outrage that I felt toward this man," Biden said. "I wasn't articulating a policy change."

The president's jarring remark about Putin, which came at the end of a Saturday speech in Warsaw that was intended to rally democracies for a long global struggle against autocracy, drew criticism in the United States and rattled some allies in Western Europe.

Richard Haass, president of the Council on Foreign Relations, said he believed Biden's comments Monday were "an effective way for the president to move beyond what was an unforced error." Haass had originally been concerned that aggressive American rhetoric could "make Putin feel like he had little to lose by hanging tough or even escalating."

Biden rejected the idea that his comment could escalate tensions over the war in Ukraine or that it would fuel Russian propaganda about Western aggression.

"Nobody believes ... I was talking about taking down Putin," Biden said, adding that "the last thing I want to do is engage in a land war or a nuclear war with Russia."

He said he was expressing an "aspiration" rather than a goal of American foreign policy.

"People like this shouldn't be ruling countries. But they do," he said. "The fact they do doesn't mean I can't express my outrage about it."

Biden's remark in Warsaw ricocheted around the globe despite the White House's swift attempts to clarify that the president only meant that Putin "cannot be allowed to exercise power over his neighbors or the region."

On Monday, United Nations Secretary General Antonio Guterres responded to Biden's speech by saying that "we need de-escalation. We need military de-escalation and rhetoric de-escalation."

Although Biden has frequently touted American unity with European allies since the invasion of Ukraine began, he appears to have caused some discomfort by targeting Putin in Warsaw.

French President Emmanuel Macron said Sunday he "wouldn't use those terms, because I continue to speak to President Putin, because what do we want to do collectively? We want to stop the war that Russia launched in Ukraine, without waging war and without escalation."

Secretary of State Antony Blinken was forced to continue clarifying Biden's speech during a trip through the Middle East, where he had intended to focus on solidifying American partnerships as the administration seeks a renewed nuclear agreement with Iran.

Speaking at a news conference in Jerusalem, Blinken said Biden meant that "Putin cannot be empowered to wage war or engage in aggression against Ukraine or anyone else."

Biden has previously gone further than expected when speaking about Putin, describing him as a "war criminal" at a time when administration officials were saying they were still conducting a review of the matter.

White House press secretary Jen Psaki said then that Biden was "speaking from the heart" rather than articulating a legal conclusion.

Republicans questioned why Biden decided to go off-script in Warsaw when dealing with a combustible conflict.

Some said his provocative rhetoric was strange given his otherwise cautious approach, such as refusing to facilitate the transfer of Polish fighter jets to Ukraine's military.

"If we're so worried about provoking him that we couldn't even send MiGs into Ukraine, how is this any different?" Rep. Michael McCaul, R-Texas, told CNN's "State of the Union" on Sunday. "In fact, I would say it's more provocative than sending MiGs into Ukraine."

The U.S. has been rushing weapons like anti-tank missiles into Ukraine, and is considering providing anti-ship missiles to make it harder for Russia to mount an amphibious offensive along the Black Sea coast.

Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy remains exasperated with the pace of military assistance, accusing Western leaders of cowardice and repeating his request for tanks and fighter jets.

FDA skeptical of benefits from experimental ALS drug

By MATTHEW PERRONE AP Health Writer

WASHINGTON (AP) — Federal health regulators issued a negative review Monday of a closely watched experimental drug for the debilitating illness known as Lou Gehrig's disease, after months of lobbying by patient advocates urging approval.

The drug from Amylyx Pharmaceuticals has become a rallying cause for patients with the deadly neurodegenerative disease ALS, their families and members of Congress who've joined in pushing the Food and Drug Administration to greenlight the drug.

But regulators said in a review that the company's small study was "not persuasive," due to missing data, errors in enrolling patients and other problems. On Wednesday, a panel of FDA advisers will take a non-binding vote on whether the drug should be approved.

The meeting is being closely watched as an indicator of the FDA's approach to experimental drugs with imperfect data and its ability to withstand outside pressure.

The FDA's negative stance on the drug sets up a tense scenario at Wednesday's public session, where several dozen ALS patients and advocates are scheduled to speak. The agency will consider the input from its advisory panel before making a final decision on the drug, expected by June.

ALS, or amyotrophic lateral sclerosis, 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 drugs: a prescription medication for liver disorders and a dietary supplement associated with traditional Chinese medicine. Amylyx has patented the combination in a powder and says the chemicals help protect cells from early death.

But the reviewers found the drug had "only a modest" effect on slowing the disease's progression in a 137-patient, mid-stage study, which reviewers said was plagued with implementation and analysis problems. Typically, FDA approval requires two large studies or one study with a "very persuasive" effect on survival.

According to the FDA document, regulators had "strongly suggested" Amylyx complete a large, late-stage trial to establish the drug's effectiveness before applying. That study is due to be finished in 2024.

After further discussions with regulators last summer, Amylyx decided to submit its drug for approval based on the initial study plus survival data gathered afterwards. The company said that data showed patients who took the drug lived about six months longer than those taking a dummy drug.

But FDA says the results are unreliable because of problems tracking the study participants for several years.

Wednesday's meeting marks the first time FDA has convened this advisory panel since disregarding its advice last June and approving Biogen's Alzheimer's drug, Aduhelm. Three panel members resigned over the controversial decision and congressional investigators launched a probe into FDA's handling of the drug's review. As in the current case, the FDA faced intense pressure from patient groups to grant approval.

Currently, there are only two FDA-approved drugs for ALS, the more effective of which extends life by several months.

The ALS Association, which helped fund Amylyx's research, said the FDA's review does not take into account "the speed and severity of ALS and the few treatment options available."

"This is a uniformly fatal disease so any drug that shows this benefit— and even if that benefit is modest— is fantastic for patients, who have one path forward with this disease: death," said Johns Hopkins University's Dr. Jeffrey Rothstein, who helped enroll patients in the Amylyx study.

Shares of the Cambridge, Massachusetts-based drugmaker fell more than 35% in trading Monday after the FDA posted its review.

US seeks new lithium sources as demand for batteries grows

By PATRICK WHITTLE Associated Press

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NEWRY, Maine (AP) — The race is on to produce more lithium in the United States.

The U.S. will need far more lithium to achieve its clean energy goals — and the industry that mines, extracts and processes the chemical element is poised to grow. But it also faces a host of challenges from environmentalists, Indigenous groups and government regulators.

Although lithium reserves are distributed widely across the globe, the U.S. is home to just one active lithium mine, in Nevada. The element is critical to development of rechargeable lithium-ion batteries that are seen as key to reducing climate-changing carbon emissions created by cars and other forms of transportation.

Worldwide demand for lithium was about 350,000 tons (317,517 metric tons) in 2020, but industry estimates project demand will be up to six times greater by 2030. New and potential lithium mining and extracting projects are in various stages of development in states including Maine, North Carolina, California and Nevada.

“Nobody really foresaw this huge spike in demand,” said Tim Crowley, vice president of government affairs for Lithium Nevada, a subsidiary of a company developing a mine in Thacker Pass, Nevada. “We owned the lithium space for a long time, and we forfeited it to China.”

Much of the world’s lithium comes from South America and Australia, and China dominates the worldwide supply chain for lithium-ion batteries. The U.S. produces less than 2% of the world’s supply of lithium, although it has about 4% of the reserves. The largest reserves in the world are in Chile.

Expanding domestic lithium production would involve open pit mining or brine extraction, which involves pumping a mineral-rich brine to the surface and processing it. Opponents including the Sierra Club have raised concerns that the projects could harm sacred Indigenous lands and jeopardize fragile ecosystems and wildlife.

But the projects could also benefit the environment in the long run by getting fossil fuel-burning cars off the road, said Glenn Miller, emeritus professor of environmental sciences at the University of Nevada.

“A domestic source has tremendous value. Then we can do things that only China is doing with production,” Miller said.

Lithium — the lightest metal on Earth — was discovered by Swedish chemist Johan August Arfwedson more than 200 years ago. Since then, lithium and its compounds have been used in everything from psychiatric medicine to lubricating grease.

But interest in lithium has exploded in recent years because of its use in rechargeable batteries for electric and hybrid cars, lawnmowers, power tools and more. Lithium batteries also power laptops and cell phones.

The Biden administration has made a plan for half a million charging stations for electric vehicles a signature piece of its infrastructure goals. That effort, and the growth of electric vehicle companies such as Tesla, will require much more lithium to make batteries.

The new lithium mining project closest to development is the one proposed for Thacker Pass by Lithium Americas. That northern Nevada mine would make millions of tons of lithium available, but Native American tribes have argued that it’s located on sacred lands and should be stopped.

Construction could start late this year, said Lithium Americas CEO Jonathan Evans, noting that it would be the first lithium project on federal land permitted in six decades.

Evans said there will likely be more U.S. attempts to extract lithium because of the rising demand. “It has been a small industry and it has grown quickly,” he said. “I do expect larger companies to enter the space via acquisitions or other means.”

Australian-based Ioneer also wants to build a large lithium mine in Nevada, which the company says is expected to produce 22,000 tons (19,958 metric tons) of lithium — enough to power hundreds of thousands of electric vehicles annually.

Lithium mining projects represent a challenge for environmentalists because they carry the promise of decarbonization in exchange for heavy impacts on ecosystems and local communities. Lithium mining could jeopardize water quality and ranching in some states, the Sierra Club has argued.

The big challenge is making sure lithium mines are located in places where they do the least amount of

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damage, said Lisa Belenky, senior attorney for the Center for Biological Diversity.

"It really is very site specific as far as what impacts it would have to the local species, water," Belenky said. "Almost every energy project we look at for climate change has its own greenhouse gas footprint."

The drive for more domestic lithium has opened the potential for mining and extracting in states beyond Nevada. An Australian company called Piedmont Lithium wants to develop an open-pit mining project it has proposed for the Kings Mountain area west of Charlotte, North Carolina. The area was a major supplier of lithium from the mid-20th century into the 1980s, the company said.

California's largest lake, the salty and shrinking Salton Sea, is also primed to host lithium operations. Lithium can be extracted from geothermal brine, and the Salton Sea has been the site of geothermal plants that have pumped brine for decades. Proponents of extracting lithium from the lake said it would require less land and water than other brining operations.

One project, led by EnergySource Minerals, is expected to be operational next year, a spokesperson for the company said. General Motors Corp. is also an investor in another project on the Salton Sea that could start producing lithium by 2024.

Gov. Gavin Newsom, a Democrat, envisions that California's lithium can position the state to become a leader in the production of batteries. He called the state the "Saudi Arabia of lithium" during a January address.

Dee Dee Myers, a senior adviser to Newsom focused on business, said that lithium is an "increasingly critical resource" as California and the world pursue clean energy development to slow climate change impacts.

The state has an opportunity to produce "epic quantities of lithium" given the resources around the Salton Sea, Myers said. But she said it wants to ensure lithium is extracted and produced sustainably.

State government could play a role in regulating the extraction process. In 2020, California also created the Lithium Valley Commission to review and analyze incentives for lithium extraction. They must file a report with their findings by October.

In Maine, Plumbago Mountain in the western part of the state has attracted mining interest. The mountain is "a potentially significant new lithium resource," with a higher average lithium content than similar deposits around the world, according to a 2020 paper in the scientific journal *Mineralium Deposita*.

However, Maine mining regulations could make it difficult to extract the lithium. The Maine Department of Environmental Protection is reviewing the possibility of quarrying for lithium at Plumbago at the request of the property's owners, state mining coordinator Mike Clark said.

Plumbago Mountain is the kind of site that could be significant for the U.S. as it seeks to fulfill its clean energy goals, said Alicia Cruz-Uribe, an associate professor of petrology and mineralogy at University of Maine.

The country's lithium reserves rank among the largest in the world, Cruz-Uribe said. "But the amount that we produce is peanuts."

Judge: Trump likely committed crimes related to election

By FARNOUSH AMIRI Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — A federal judge on Monday asserted it is "more likely than not" that former President Donald Trump committed crimes in his attempt to stop the certification of the 2020 election, ruling to order the release of more than 100 emails from Trump adviser John Eastman to the committee investigating the insurrection at the U.S. Capitol.

The ruling by U.S. District Court Judge David Carter marked a major legal win for the House panel as it looks to correspondence from Eastman, the lawyer who was consulting with Trump as he attempted to overturn the presidential election.

"Based on the evidence, the Court finds it more likely than not that President Trump corruptly attempted to obstruct the Joint Session of Congress on January 6, 2021," Carter, who was nominated by former President Bill Clinton, wrote in the ruling submitted in the federal Central District of California.

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Eastman was trying to withhold documents from the committee on the basis of an attorney-client privilege claim between him and the former president. The committee responded earlier this month, arguing that there is a legal exception allowing the disclosure of communications regarding ongoing or future crimes.

Charles Burnham, an attorney representing Eastman, said in a statement Monday that his client has a responsibility to his attorney-client privilege and his lawsuit against the committee "seeks to fulfill this responsibility."

"It is not an attempt to 'hide' documents or 'obstruct' congressional investigations, as the January 6th committee falsely claims," Burnham said.

Taylor Budowich, a Trump spokesperson, also responded to the judge's decision, calling it an "absurd and baseless ruling by a Clinton-appointed Judge in California." He called the House committee's investigation a "circus of partisanship."

The March 3 filing from the committee was their most formal effort to link the former president to a federal crime. Lawmakers do not have the power to bring criminal charges on their own and can only make a referral to the Justice Department. The department has been investigating last year's riot, but it has not given any indication that it is considering seeking charges against Trump.

The committee argued in the court documents that Trump and his associates engaged in a "criminal conspiracy" to prevent Congress from certifying Democrat Joe Biden's victory in the Electoral College. Trump and those working with him then spread false information about the outcome of the presidential election and pressured state officials to overturn the results, potentially violating multiple federal laws, the panel said.

The trove of documents the nine-member panel has publicly released so far, which include some emails already retrieved from Eastman, offers an early look at some of the panel's likely conclusions, which are expected to be submitted in the coming months. The committee says it has interviewed more than 650 witnesses as it investigates the violent siege by Trump supporters, the worst attack on the Capitol in more than two centuries.

Indigenous tell pope of abuses at Canada residential schools

By NICOLE WINFIELD Associated Press

VATICAN CITY (AP) — Indigenous leaders from Canada and survivors of the country's notorious residential schools met with Pope Francis on Monday and told him of the abuses they suffered at the hands of Catholic priests and school workers. They came hoping to secure a papal apology and a commitment by the church to repair the harm done.

"While the time for acknowledgement, apology and atonement is long overdue, it is never too late to do the right thing," Cassidy Caron, president of the Metis National Council, told reporters in St. Peter's Square after the audience.

This week's meetings, postponed from December because of the pandemic, are part of the Canadian church and government's efforts to respond to Indigenous demands for justice, reconciliation and reparations — long-standing demands that gained traction last year after the discovery of hundreds of unmarked graves outside some of the schools.

More than 150,000 native children in Canada were forced to attend state-funded Christian schools from the 19th century until the 1970s in an effort to isolate them from the influence of their homes and culture, and Christianize and assimilate them into mainstream society, which previous Canadian governments considered superior.

Francis set aside several hours this week to meet privately with the delegations from the Metis and Inuit on Monday, and First Nations on Thursday, with a mental health counselor in the room for each session. The delegates then gather Friday as a group for a more formal audience, with Francis delivering an address.

The encounters Monday included prayers in the Metis and Inuit languages and other gestures of deep symbolic significance. The Inuit delegation brought a traditional oil lamp, or qulliq, that is lit whenever Inuit gather and stayed lit in the pope's library throughout the meeting. The Inuit delegates presented Francis

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with a sealskin stole and a sealskin rosary case.

The Metis offered Francis a pair of red beaded moccasins, "a sign of the willingness of the Metis people to forgive if there is meaningful action from the church," the group explained. The red dye "represents that even though Pope Francis does not wear the traditional red papal shoes, he walks with the legacy of those who came before him, the good, the great and the terrible."

In a statement, the Vatican said each meeting lasted about an hour "and was characterized by desire on the part of the pope to listen and make space for the painful stories brought by the survivors."

The Canadian government has admitted that physical and sexual abuse was rampant at the schools, with students beaten for speaking their native languages. That legacy of that abuse and isolation from family has been cited by Indigenous leaders as a root cause of the epidemic rates of alcohol and drug addiction on Canadian reservations.

Nearly three-quarters of the 130 residential schools were run by Catholic missionary congregations.

Last May, the Tk'emlups te Secwepemc Nation announced the discovery of 215 gravesites near Kamloops, British Columbia, that were found using ground-penetrating radar. It was Canada's largest Indigenous residential school and the discovery of the graves was the first of numerous, similar grim sites across the country.

Caron said Francis listened intently Monday as three of the many Metis survivors told him their personal stories of abuse at residential schools. The pope showed sorrow but offered no immediate apology. Speaking in English, he repeated the words Caron said she had emphasized in her remarks: truth, justice and healing.

"I take that as a personal commitment," Caron said, surrounded by Metis fiddlers who accompanied her into the square.

She said what needs to follow is an apology that acknowledges the harm done, the return of Indigenous artifacts, a commitment to facilitating prosecutions of abusive priests and access to church-held records of residential schools.

Canadian Bishop Raymond Poisson, who heads the Canadian Conference of Catholic Bishops, insisted the Vatican holds no such records and said they more likely are held by individual religious orders in Canada or at their headquarters in Rome.

Even before the grave sites were discovered, Canada's Truth and Reconciliation Commission specifically called for a papal apology to be delivered on Canadian soil for the church's role in the abuses. Francis has committed to traveling to Canada, though no date for such a visit has been announced.

"Primarily, the reconciliation requires action. And we still are in need of very specific actions from the Catholic Church," said Natan Obed, president of the Inuit Tapiriit Kanatami, who led the Inuit delegation.

He cited the reparations the Canadian church has been ordered to pay, access to records to understand the scope of the unmarked graves, as well as Francis' own help to find justice for victims of a Catholic Oblate priest, the Rev. Johannes Rivoire, accused of multiple cases of sexual abuse who is currently living in France.

"We often as Inuit have felt powerless over time to sometimes correct the wrongs that have been done to us," Obed said. "We are incredibly resilient and we are great at forgiving ... but we are still in search of lasting respect and the right to self-determination and the acknowledgement of that right by the institutions that harmed us."

As part of a settlement of a lawsuit involving the government, churches and the approximately 90,000 surviving students, Canada paid reparations that amounted to billions of dollars being transferred to Indigenous communities.

The Catholic Church, for its part, has paid over \$50 million and now intends to add \$30 million more over the next five years.

The Metis delegation made clear to Francis that the church-run residential school system, and the forced removal of children from their homes, facilitated the ability of Canada authorities to take indigenous lands while also teaching Metis children "that they were not to love who they are as Metis people," Caron said.

"Our children came home hating who they were, hating their language, hating their culture, hating their tradition," Caron said. "They had no love. But our survivors are so resilient. They are learning to love."

The Argentine pope is no stranger to offering apologies for his own errors and what he himself has termed the "crimes" of the institutional church.

During a 2015 visit to Bolivia, he apologized for the sins, crimes and offenses committed by the church against Indigenous peoples during the colonial-era conquest of the Americas. In Dublin, Ireland, in 2018, he offered a sweeping apology to those sexually and physically abused over generations.

That same year, he met privately with three Chilean sex abuse survivors whom he had discredited by backing a bishop they accused of covering up their abuse. In a series of meetings that echo those now being held for the Canadian delegates, Francis listened, and apologized.

Ukraine refugees near 4 million. Will exodus slowdown last?

By SRDJAN NEDELJKOVIC and JAMEY KEATEN Associated Press

MEDYKA, Poland (AP) — A slowdown for good or a temporary lull during the storm of war?

While the number of refugees who have flooded out of Ukraine nears 4 million, fewer people have crossed the border in recent days. Border guards, aid agencies and refugees themselves say Russia's unpredictable war on Ukraine offers few signs whether it's just a pause or a permanent drop-off.

Some Ukrainians are sticking it out to fight or help defend their country. Others have left their homes but are staying elsewhere in Ukraine to wait and see how the winds of war will blow. Still others are elderly or ill and need extra help moving anywhere. And some remain, as one refugee put it, because "homeland is homeland."

In the first two weeks after Russia's invasion on Feb. 24, about 2.5 million people in Ukraine's pre-war population of 44 million left the country to avoid the bombs and bloodshed. In the second two weeks, the number of refugees was roughly half that.

The total exodus now stands at 3.87 million, according to the latest tally announced Monday from UNHCR, the U.N. refugee agency. But in the previous 24 hours, only 45,000 people crossed Ukraine's borders to seek safety, the slowest one-day count yet, and for four of the last five days the numbers have not surpassed 50,000 a day. In contrast, on March 6 and March 7, over 200,000 people a day left Ukraine.

"People who were determined to leave when war breaks out fled in the first days," explained Anna Michalska, a spokeswoman for the Polish border guards.

Even if the exodus is easing, there's no understating the scope of it.

UNHCR says the war has triggered Europe's worst refugee crisis since World War II, and the speed and breadth of refugees fleeing to countries including Poland, Romania, Moldova, Hungary, Slovakia — as well as Russia — is unprecedented in recent times. Poland alone has taken in 2.3 million refugees and Romania nearly 600,000. The United States has vowed to take in 100,000.

Even the devastating 11-year war in Syria, source of the world's biggest refugee crisis, didn't force out so many people so fast.

"We hope that hopefully the trend of new arrivals will decrease. But I don't think there's any guarantee of that until there's a political solution" to the war, said Alex Mundt, UNHCR's senior emergency coordinator in Poland.

The International Organization for Migration has also estimated that more 6.5 million people in Ukraine have been driven from their homes by the Russian invasion but remain displaced inside the country, suggesting that a large pool of potential refugees still awaits. IOM said another 12 million people are believed to be trapped in places where fighting has been intense, or don't want to leave.

"Sadly, there are a lot of people who are not able to leave, either because transportation routes have been cut off or they just don't have the means arrive to safety in the neighboring countries," IOM spokesman Jorge Galindo told The Associated Press in Medyka, a Polish border town.

Jewish groups have begun an effort to bring frail Holocaust survivors out of Ukraine, but each person requires a team of rescue workers to extract such refugees.

"Now I'm too old to run to the bunker. So I just stayed inside my apartment and prayed that the bombs would not kill me," said 83-year-old Holocaust survivor Tatyana Zhuravliova, a retired doctor who was

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relocated to a nursing home in Germany last week.

Michalska, the Polish border guard spokeswoman, suggested that many Ukrainians who have already fled have left the areas most affected by the fighting, and future battles could determine whether civilians in other areas decide to leave.

"We cannot exclude that there will be more waves of refugees in the future," Michalska said by phone.

Aid agencies are not letting up in their efforts, helping those who have already gotten out of Ukraine and preparing in case new surges of refugees arrive.

At the border post in Medyka, Poland, shopping trolleys filled with luggage still rattle down a small path leading from passport control, through a village of aid tents to buses waiting to carry Ukrainian refugees to a nearby town.

"Maybe people are waiting it out, to see if their city will get attacked or not," said Alina Beskrovna, 31, who fled the devastated, besieged southeastern city of Mariupol. She and her mother left the city five days ago but even to get to the border they had to cross 18 checkpoints: 16 Russian and two Ukrainian.

She alluded to new Russian airstrikes over the weekend near Ukraine's western city of Lviv, which has been a key refuge for Ukrainians fleeing after the invasion ordered by Russian President Vladimir Putin.

"Putin is very unpredictable. And judging from what happened in Lviv two days ago, I think it will not stop in my region, it will not stop at Ukraine," she said. "It will go further, so the world should prepare for more waves to come."

Oksana Mironova, a 35-year-old refugee from Kyiv, said: "It is not getting any better — definitely not. We would like to believe it will improve, but unfortunately we need to escape."

Yet even in the face of Russian airstrikes that obliterate apartment buildings, shopping malls and schools, the pull of home remains strong.

Olena Vorontsova, 50, fled the capital of Kyiv.

"Many people just do not want to leave their homes, because homeland is homeland," she said.

Justice Thomas joins arguments remotely after hospital stay

WASHINGTON (AP) — Justice Clarence Thomas participated in arguments at the Supreme Court via telephone rather than in person on Monday following a hospital stay of nearly a week.

Chief Justice John Roberts said at the beginning of arguments that the 73-year-old Thomas would be "participating remotely this morning," but did not say why.

Thomas' voice was clear when he asked several questions during arguments over a federal law meant to protect railroad workers, at one point making an analogy to when he drives his 40-foot long motor coach.

"Some of this seems a little bit counterintuitive and I admit to being a little bit wrapped around the axle," Thomas said, eliciting smiles from some colleagues. Thomas also posed questions in the day's second case about arbitration.

Other justices have participated in arguments remotely since the court started its term in the fall.

Thomas missed all three days of arguments last week while he was hospitalized, although he is planning to take part in the decisions, Roberts said.

Thomas was admitted to the hospital March 18 after experiencing "flu-like symptoms" and was treated for an infection with intravenous antibiotics. Thomas did not have COVID-19, the court said. He has been vaccinated and had a booster shot, like the rest of the court. Though the court had said Thomas was expected to be released from the hospital by Tuesday, he was not discharged until Friday.

The court did not say why he remained in the hospital longer than initially thought or what kind of infection he was treated for.

Thomas, a conservative and appointee of former President George H.W. Bush, has been on the court since 1991.

Earlier this term, Justice Brett Kavanaugh participated remotely from his home after testing positive for COVID-19 and Justice Sonia Sotomayor participated remotely from her office when coronavirus case counts were particularly high. Justice Neil Gorsuch also participated remotely after getting what the court

described as a "stomach bug," but testing negative for COVID-19.

Because of the pandemic the court spent more than a year and a half hearing arguments remotely, with every justice participating by phone. While the justices and lawyers arguing the cases are back in the courtroom, it is still closed to the public.

But the court has relaxed some coronavirus-related requirements, making the wearing of masks optional for reporters and lawyers who have tested negative for COVID-19.

There was a second empty seat Monday, too. Justice Amy Coney Barrett didn't take part in either case because she was involved at earlier stages as a federal appeals court judge.

Shanghai starts China's biggest COVID-19 lockdown in 2 years

BEIJING (AP) — China began its most extensive coronavirus lockdown in two years Monday to conduct mass testing and control a growing outbreak in Shanghai as questions are raised about the economic toll of the nation's "zero-COVID" strategy.

Shanghai, China's financial capital and largest city with 26 million people, had managed its smaller previous outbreaks with limited lockdowns of housing compounds and workplaces where the virus was spreading.

But the citywide lockdown that will be conducted in two phases will be China's most extensive since the central city of Wuhan, where the virus was first detected in late 2019, confined its 11 million people to their homes for 76 days in early 2020. Millions more have been kept in lockdown since then.

Shanghai's Pudong financial district and nearby areas will be locked down from Monday to Friday as mass testing gets underway, the local government said. In the second phase of the lockdown, the vast downtown area west of the Huangpu River that divides the city will start its own five-day lockdown Friday.

Residents will be required to stay home and deliveries will be left at checkpoints to ensure there is no contact with the outside world. Offices and all businesses not considered essential will be closed and public transport suspended.

Already, many communities within Shanghai have been locked down for the past week, with their housing compounds blocked off with blue and yellow plastic barriers and residents required to submit to multiple tests for COVID-19. Shanghai's Disneyland theme park is among the businesses that closed earlier. Auto-maker Tesla is also suspending production at its Shanghai plant, according to media reports.

Panic-buying was reported on Sunday, with supermarket shelves cleared of food, beverages and household items. Additional barriers were being erected in neighborhoods Monday, with workers in hazmat suits staffing checkpoints.

In-person observations of the April 5 Tomb Sweeping Festival have been canceled and memorials will instead be held online.

Some workers, including traders at the city's stock market, were preparing to stay within a COVID-19 "bubble" for the duration of the lockdown.

Li Jiamin, 31, who works in the finance industry, said she had packed several days of clothing and supplies, and her company was sorting out sleeping and eating arrangements.

"The overall impact is still great," Li told The Associated Press, pointing especially to losses suffered by workers in the informal sector who have no such support.

Huang Qi, 35, who works at a local university, said he had undergone a lockdown at home before and prepared for the new round by stocking up.

"I think if the closure continues like this, our school workers will not be affected much, but what about those who work in the real economy? How can their business be maintained?" Huang said.

"I still hope that our society can find a better balance between ensuring normal life and epidemic prevention and control," Huang added.

Shanghai detected another 3,500 cases of infection on Sunday, though all but 50 were people who tested positive for the coronavirus but were not showing symptoms of COVID-19. While people who are asymptomatic can still infect others, China categorizes such cases separately from "confirmed cases" — those in people who are sick — leading to much lower totals in daily reports.

Nationwide, 1,219 new confirmed cases of domestic infection were detected on Sunday, more than 1,000

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of them in the northeastern province of Jilin, along with 4,996 asymptomatic cases, the National Health Commission reported on Monday.

Two deaths were reported March 20 in Jilin. Before that, mainland China's official death toll had stood at 4,636 for a year.

China has reported more than 56,000 confirmed cases nationwide this month, with the surge in Jilin accounting for most of them.

Jilin province is enforcing travel bans and partial lockdowns in several cities, including Changchun, one of the centers of the Chinese auto industry. Although the province has seen more than 1,000 new confirmed cases per day, prevention and control measures taken there do not appear to have been as extreme as in other places.

As has become customary, Jilin has been building pre-fabricated temporary wards to house COVID-19 patients and those under observation as suspected cases. The city of Suzhou, about an hour from Shanghai, as well as Changsha in the country's center and Shenyang in the northeast are also erecting such structures capable of housing more than 6,000 people.

Shanghai itself has converted two gymnasiums, an exhibition hall and other facilities to house potential infected patients.

China has called its long-standing "zero-tolerance" approach the most economical and effective prevention strategy against COVID-19.

The new measures being enforced in Shanghai aim to "curb the virus spread, protect people's life and health, and achieve the dynamic zero-COVID target as soon as possible," the city's COVID-19 prevention and control office stated in an announcement Sunday evening.

That requires lockdowns and mass testing, with close contacts often being quarantined at home or in a central government facility. The strategy focuses on eradicating community transmission of the virus as quickly as possible.

While officials, including Communist Party leader Xi Jinping have encouraged more targeted measures, local officials tend to take a more extreme approach, concerned with being fired or otherwise punished over accusations of failing to prevent outbreaks.

Most recently, Hunan province, which has seen relatively few cases, ordered punishments against 19 officials for "failure to vigorously consolidate anti-pandemic policies," state broadcaster CCTV reported Monday.

With China's economic growth already slowing, the extreme measures are seen as worsening difficulties hitting employment, consumption and even global supply chains. With a 21-day curfew in place for all foreigners arriving from abroad, travel between China and other countries has fallen dramatically.

On Friday, the International Air Transport Association announced it was moving its annual general meeting from Shanghai to Doha, citing "continuing COVID-19 related restrictions on travel to China."

"It is deeply disappointing that we are not able to meet in Shanghai as planned," IATA Director General Willie Walsh said in a news release.

Still, Shanghai's announcement of the dates when the two lockdowns would be lifted appeared to show a further refinement in China's approach. Previous citywide lockdowns had been open-ended.

Although China's vaccination rate is around 87%, it is considerably lower among older people who are more likely to become seriously ill if they contract the virus.

In Hong Kong, Chief Executive Carrie Lam said the government was still considering next steps in what has been criticized as a halting response to a recent fifth wave of COVID-19 infections that has led to tens of thousands of cases and more than 7,000 deaths.

Lam said no decision has been made on whether or when to test all 7.4 million residents of the southern Chinese semi-autonomous region.

"I don't have a timetable yet. It's not easy to predetermine a timetable, in the same way that I don't know how quickly the cases will come down," Lam told reporters at a daily briefing.

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Russia shifts focus to try to grind Ukraine's army in east

By NEBI QENA and YURAS KARMANAU Associated Press

KYIV, Ukraine (AP) — With its aspirations for a quick victory dashed by a stiff Ukrainian resistance, Russia has increasingly focused on grinding down Ukraine's military in the east in the hope of forcing Kyiv into surrendering part of the country's territory to possibly end the war.

The bulk of the Ukrainian army is concentrated in eastern Ukraine, where it has been locked up in fighting with Moscow-backed separatists in a nearly eight-year conflict. If Russia succeeds in encircling and destroying the Ukrainian forces in the country's industrial heartland, called Donbas, it could try to dictate its terms to Kyiv and potentially attempt to split the country in two.

The Russian military declared Friday that the "first stage of the operation" had been largely accomplished, allowing Russian troops to concentrate on their "top goal — the liberation of Donbas."

Many observers say the shift in strategy could reflect President Vladimir Putin's acknowledgment that his plan for a blitz in Ukraine has failed, forcing him to narrow his goals and change tactics amid a disastrous war that has turned Russia into a pariah and decimated its economy.

In some sectors, Ukrainian troops have recently pushed the Russians back.

In the city of Makariv, near a strategic highway west of the capital, Kyiv, Associated Press reporters saw the carcass of a Russian rocket launcher, a burned Russian truck, the body of a Russian soldier and a destroyed Ukrainian tank after fighting there a few days ago. In the nearby village of Yasnohorodka, the AP witnessed positions abandoned by Ukrainian soldiers who had moved farther west, but no sign of Russian troops' presence.

U.S. and British officials have noted that Moscow has increasingly focused on fighting the Ukrainian forces in the east while digging in around Kyiv and other big cities and pummeling them with rockets and artillery.

The chief of Ukrainian military intelligence, Kyrylo Budanov, said Sunday the change of focus could reflect Putin's hope to break Ukraine in two, like North and South Korea, and enforce "a line of separation between the occupied and unoccupied regions."

"He can't swallow the entire country," Budanov said, adding that Russia appears to be trying "to pull the occupied territories into a single quasi-state structure and pit it against independent Ukraine."

Putin and his generals haven't revealed specific military goals or a planned timeline, but the Kremlin clearly expected a quick victory when Russian troops rolled into Ukraine from the north, east and south on Feb. 24.

But the Russian attempts to swiftly capture Kyiv, the country's second-largest city, Kharkiv, and other big cities in the northeast have been thwarted by well-organized Ukrainian defenses and logistical challenges that stalled the Russian offensive.

Russian forces have pounded the outskirts of Kyiv with artillery and air raids from a distance while putting their ground offensive on hold, tactics they also have used in attacking Kharkiv, Chernihiv and Sumy in the northeast.

Mykola Sunhurovskyi, a military analyst at the Kyiv-based Razumkov Center think tank, said Russia has abandoned attempts to storm Kyiv and other big Ukrainian cities for now and is laying siege to them to try to weaken Ukraine and win time.

"Russia has shifted tactics ... to redistribute its forces and prepare for the next active stage of the war," Sunhurovskyi said.

The Russian forces encircled the key strategic port of Mariupol and besieged it for weeks, hammering it with rockets and artillery in a carnage that killed thousands of civilians. The fall of Mariupol would free up Russian forces there and allow them to engage in a potential pincer movement together with another group of troops moving from Kharkiv in the northeast to try to encircle the Ukrainian military in the east.

"Russian forces appear to be concentrating their effort to attempt the encirclement of Ukrainian forces directly facing the separatist regions in the east of the country, advancing from the direction of Kharkiv in the north and Mariupol in the south," the British Ministry of Defense said Sunday.

A senior U.S. defense official, noting the latest Russian focus on Donbas, said Putin may now hope to take full control of the east while keeping other Ukrainian forces occupied with the defense of Kyiv and

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other areas, then try to pressure Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy to formally surrender Donbas and recognize Russia's ownership of Crimea, which Moscow annexed in 2014.

An analysis published Saturday by the Institute for the Study of War in Washington said the degree to which the Russians can push an accelerated move to cut off Donbas will depend in part on how soon their forces can gain full control of Mariupol and how badly damaged they emerge from that fight. It also noted that a halt in the Russian offensive on Kyiv could reflect "the incapacity of Russian forces rather than any shift in Russian objectives or efforts at this time."

While the Russian military has focused increasingly on bleeding the Ukrainian troops in the east, it has continued to use its arsenal of air- and sea-launched cruise missiles to methodically target fuel depots, military arsenals and weapons plants across the country.

Philips P. O'Brien, a professor of strategic studies at the University of St. Andrews, described Saturday's cruise missile strikes on Lviv, near the border with Poland, as part of the Russian strategy to cut off supplies to the Ukrainian forces fighting in the east.

"They will still want to disrupt as much as possible the flow of goods and supplies from west to east, much of which starts their journey around Lviv," O'Brien said.

On the Black Sea coast, the Russians quickly took the port of Kherson and advanced to the outskirts of the key shipbuilding center of Mykolaiv where their offensive stalled.

If the Russian forces succeed in encircling Mykolaiv, Odesa and several other Black Sea ports, it will have completely cut Ukraine's access to its coast in a devastating blow to its economy. The seizure of Odesa will also allow Moscow to establish a link to the separatist Trans-Dniester region of Moldova that hosts a Russian military base.

Despite Ukrainian and Western fears, the Russian army so far hasn't pursued efforts to bypass Mykolaiv and march on Odesa. Ukrainian authorities have noted that Russia's failure to press its offensive along the coast could be explained by the fact that most of its troops in the south have remained locked in the battle for Mariupol where they have suffered heavy losses.

On Friday, the Russian military reported it had lost 1,351 soldiers killed and 3,825 wounded since the start of the campaign, but NATO estimates 7,000 to 15,000 have been killed — potentially as many as the Soviet Union lost in the entire 10-year war in Afghanistan.

The big losses and slow pace of the Russian offensive could be a factor that forced Putin to lower his ambitions and take a more realistic approach.

Volodymyr Fesenko, the head of the independent Kyiv-based Penta Center, said Russia's declared shift to the east could be an attempt to put a good face on its failed blitz and regroup before the next stage of fighting.

"Both sides need a break now for various reasons, and the Kremlin is using it to regroup its forces and search for new tactics without changing its strategic goal of subduing Ukraine," Fesenko told the AP.

"Tactics could change from a blitz to laying siege to cities, destroying the economy and the infrastructure with bombardment, blockading ports and doing other things. Putin has a broad arsenal of means of pressure."

"The stiff Ukrainian resistance could turn the war into a protracted conflict, and then the issue of financial and military resources, including warplanes and tanks Zelenskyy is urging the West to provide will be of primary importance," he said.

Tesla seeks 2nd stock split in less than 2 years

NEW YORK (AP) — Shares of Tesla jumped at the opening bell Monday after the electric car maker announced its second stock split in less than two years.

The company said in a regulatory filing, and also in a tweet, that it plans to make a request at an upcoming annual shareholders meeting to increase its number of authorized shares so that it can split the stock in the form of a dividend.

It did not say when a split would occur or the ratio of such a stock split, but it would follow similar ma-

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neuers by a trio of tech companies that have seen their shares soar in recent months.

Tesla's shares are up more than 60% over the past year, with each costing more than \$1,000.

And the company is growing. CEO Elon Musk opened Tesla's first European factory last week, a "Giga-factory" in Germany that will employ 12,000 people and produce 500,000 vehicles a year.

"Given the stock's meteoric run its not a surprise that Musk & Co. are heading down the path of another stock split especially with robust EV demand and the build-outs of the flagship Berlin and Austin Giga factories now on a glide path, said Dan Ives, who follows Tesla for Wedbush.

A stock split does would change the price-per-stock, but not the overall value of those holdings. It can push up the price of a company's stock, at least temporarily, and the announcement did just that on Monday.

Shares continued to rise after the opening bell, almost 8%, or \$77.22, to \$1,087.86.

Tesla Inc. said that its board has greenlighted the proposal, but that the dividend is contingent on final board approval.

Tesla had a 5-for-1 stock split in August 2020, which went into effect one day after the company announced that it planned to sell up to \$5 billion worth of its stock. Just three months later Tesla said that it was planning another stock sale, looking to raise up to \$5 billion in that offering.

Tesla follows other tech giants that have seen the price of shares vault out of reach of most investors. Alphabet, Google's parent company, announced a 20-for-1 split in February Amazon.com Inc. said this month that it would do a split of the same ratio.

"We view Tesla's move following the likes of Amazon, Google, Apple and initiating its second stock split in two years as a smart strategic move that will be a positive catalyst for shares going forward," Ives wrote in a research report.

In a filing with the Securities and Exchange Commission, Tesla said it would include more information, including the date and place of its annual shareholder meeting, in an upcoming proxy statement.

Walmart to end cigarette sales in some stores

By ANNE D'INNOCENZIO The Associated Press

NEW YORK (AP) — Walmart will no longer sell cigarettes in some of its stores though tobacco sales can be a significant revenue generator.

Wall Street Journal was the first to report the development Monday. It noted some stores in California, Florida, Arkansas and New Mexico were on the list, citing anonymous sources and store visits.

Walmart is not the first national retail chain to cut off cigarette sales even on a trial basis, but it is the largest.

Target ended cigarette sales in 1996 and the drugstore chain CVS Health did the same in 2014.

CVS Health sales in areas outside the pharmacy fell for a few quarters after it pulled tobacco products, and the company had predicted that missing tobacco products would hurt annual earnings by 7 to 8 cents per share.

Overall revenue has grown every year at CVS, however, after a number of acquisitions and changes to its stores bolstered the company's health care offerings. CVS Health bought the health insurer Aetna in 2017.

Decisions about removing cigarettes at Walmart will be made on a store-by-store basis according to the business and particular market, the company said Monday.

"We are always looking at ways to meet our customers' needs while still operating an efficient business," Walmart said in a prepared statement.

Health officials say that cigarette smoking causes about one of every five deaths in the U.S. each year.

Walmart Inc., based in Bentonville, Arkansas, announced in 2019 that it was getting out of the vaping business and would stop selling electronic cigarettes at its stores and also at Sam's Clubs. It said at the time the decision was based on "growing federal, state and local regulatory complexity."

Column: Familiar Four prove NCAA tourney is not 'Hoosiers'

By JIM LITKE AP Sports Columnist

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For all the talk of college basketball's brave new world, it suddenly looks a lot like the old one.

So anyone asking why the same dozen programs are still playing musical chairs at the Final Four every year — Duke, North Carolina, Kansas and Villanova this time around — would do well to recall how Willie Sutton answered the feds when they asked why he kept robbing banks: "Because that's where the money is."

Grit and gumption are great, but as the Saint Peter's Peacocks were reminded in a hurry Sunday, they take you only so far. Yes, the Peacocks beat long odds and three bigger, much better-funded programs to book their Elite Eight spot opposite North Carolina. But the NCAA Tournament is nothing like the movie "Hoosiers."

The Peacocks fell behind 7-0 after less than three minutes, 21-7 a few minutes after that and 69-49 when the final buzzer mercifully ushered them off the court.

"They hang their hat on punching teams in the mouth, being the underdog, that kind of thing," North Carolina's Leaky Black said. "We just had to let them know it wasn't going to happen tonight."

Or maybe ever.

College basketball's powers that be, dragged into court and facing the threat of even more lawsuits, spent the last decade paying lip service to the idea of leveling the playing field. Because of the chaos wrought by the pandemic, players were granted an extra year of eligibility. And because of the transfer portal — a rough equivalent of free agency — more players than ever switched programs in the past few years.

All that movement should have benefitted mid-major programs, which recruit second-tier players and keep them longer, hoping that experience and teamwork can make up what they lack in talent and resources. Occasionally it does, mostly during the regular season and every so often, in the early rounds of the tournament. But as the games pile up, it's not just the tough who get going, the talented ones do, too.

The rosters at Duke, North Carolina and Kansas are loaded with the kind of prospects, practice facilities and support staffs that would turn any NBA G League team green with envy, and they spend two to three times as much money — without paying players' salaries. Villanova doesn't have that kind of cache — yet — but after winning two national championships in the last five years, coach Jay Wright is closing both the talent and budget gaps in a hurry.

Between them, those four schools have combined for 17 national titles and 61 Final Fours. So, improbable as Saint Peter's run was, harder than grabbing a rung that high on the ladder is hanging on. To get a real sense of how hard, look at what happened to Miami.

The Hurricanes came in as a No. 10 seed with dreams of getting coach Jim Larrañaga back to the Final Four for the first time since he led 11th-seeded George Mason, a middling mid-major, on a memorable run in 2006. They sneaked past seventh-seeded USC, clobbered second-seeded Auburn and overpowered 11th-seeded Iowa State before running into Kansas and getting run over 76-50.

The Hurricanes' reliable point guard, Charlie Moore, couldn't have been more experienced, playing on his fourth team in five years — including two at Kansas. Their best scorer, Kameron McCrusty, a redshirt senior guard, joined Miami after two seasons at Big 12 rival Oklahoma. With Miami ahead by six points at halftime, a Final Four berth looked within reach.

"At halftime it was basically ... kind of a challenge against us," said Kansas' Ochai Agbaji, a first-team All-American and likely NBA first-round pick. "We didn't come this far to lay down or give up at this point."

He wasn't kidding. The Jayhawks came out red hot and ran up a 47-15 margin over the final 20 minutes, shooting 59.3% after the break and outrebounding 25-11.

"I've thought all along that this was a possibility," coach Bill Self said afterward, referring to a fourth Final Four in his 19 seasons at Kansas. "But I've also thought all along that the margin for error wasn't such where we could get loose and have it be a probability."

Speaking of probability, that the Jayhawks return to the Final Four as the only top seed left in the field is more than a good omen. A No. 1 seed has won the past four national championships and 11 of the last 14.

Ethiopia urged to uphold press freedom and release reporter

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By ANDREW MELDRUM Associated Press

CAPE TOWN, South Africa (AP) — Ethiopia is being urged to uphold its international commitments to the freedoms of expression and the press by releasing journalists it has imprisoned.

Two lawmakers in the U.S. Congress — Reps. Adam Schiff of California and Mary Gay Scanlon of Pennsylvania — have joined press freedom advocates in calling for the immediate release of journalist Amir Aman Kiyaro, who has been held for four months without charges.

Kiyaro's continued detention is due to be reviewed in court Tuesday, when the state must formally charge him or release him, according to the judge in the case.

Ethiopia, which has adopted the U.N.'s Universal Declaration of Human Rights and as a member of the African Union, should be obliged to release Kiyaro and other journalists, according to Schiff and Scanlon.

Kiyaro, 30, a video journalist accredited to The Associated Press, was detained Nov. 28 in Ethiopia's capital, Addis Ababa, under the country's war-related state of emergency powers. The state of emergency was lifted in February as the government cited changing conditions in the deadly conflict between Ethiopian forces and those of the northern Tigray region. The Ethiopian government last week declared a "humanitarian truce" in the war-ravaged Tigray region.

Ethiopian state media, citing federal police, have said Kiyaro is accused of "serving the purposes" of what they called a terrorist group by interviewing its officials. Local journalist Thomas Engida was arrested at the same time and faces similar charges.

Federal police inspector Tesfaye Olani has told state media the journalists violated the state of emergency law and Ethiopia's anti-terrorism law, and the violations could lead to sentences of seven to 15 years behind bars.

However, the U.N. Human Rights Committee, when interpreting the International Covenant of Civil and Political Rights, which Ethiopia has ratified, specifically stated that journalists should not be imprisoned for interviewing a member of a group classified as terrorist.

"The media plays a crucial role in informing the public about acts of terrorism and its capacity to operate should not be unduly restricted," says the committee's decision further explaining the reach of the covenant's relevant section in paragraph 46 on press freedom.

"Journalists should not be penalized for carrying out their legitimate activities," it states.

The African Union and its African Commission on Human and Peoples Rights have similar provisions that compel member states to uphold freedom of the press.

To encourage judicial rulings that uphold these commitments to the freedoms of expression and the press, UNESCO has an initiative to educate judges on these issues and legal precedents. More than 23,000 judges from 150 countries, including Ethiopia, have participated in the training program, according to Guilherme Canela, chief of UNESCO's freedom of expression and safety of journalists section.

Ethiopia should honor its international commitments by releasing Kiyaro, Schiff said.

"Kiyaro has been unjustly detained in Ethiopia. ... It's clear his only offense is his work as an independent journalist covering the conflict in Tigray — and exposing the unvarnished truth to the Ethiopian people," said the California Democrat, who is chairman of the House Committee on Intelligence.

"Journalists like Amir risk their lives and livelihoods to bring us the news, and we cannot sit idly by as their freedoms come under assault," he said. "Because an attack on the free press anywhere is an attack on democracy everywhere. Ethiopia must free Amir Aman Kiyaro."

Scanlon also called for Kiyaro to be freed.

"A free press is essential in any civil society ... As conflicts unfold in many corners of the globe, it is as important as ever for journalistic freedom to be protected worldwide," the Pennsylvania Democrat said in a statement.

"I am concerned that Amir Aman Kiyaro continues to be detained in Ethiopia without charges," she said. "This ongoing, unjust detention appears to violate international standards on freedom of expression, which the Ethiopian government has agreed to as a signatory on multiple international treaties. I'll continue to monitor this important case with congressional colleagues, and hope the courts move quickly to release

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Amir.”

More than a dozen Ethiopian journalists and the Committee to Protect Journalists have called for the immediate release of the journalist, and his supporters have launched a social media campaign: #Free-AmirAmanKiyaro.

“We urge the Ethiopian government to release Amir immediately and end his unjust detention,” AP Executive Editor Julie Pace said earlier this month. “It is clear he is being targeted for his independent journalism.”

The imprisonment of Kiyaro and other Ethiopian journalists has highlighted a change in the Ethiopian government’s actions toward the press. Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed took office in 2018 with sweeping political reforms that included the release of several journalists from incarceration and for a brief period, no journalist in Ethiopia was in prison. But media advocacy groups that once praised those reforms have since criticized the dramatic backsliding that followed, notably since Ethiopia’s war began in November 2020.

Today in History

By The Associated Press undefined

Today in History

Today is Tuesday, March 29, the 88th day of 2022. There are 277 days left in the year.

Today’s Highlight in History:

On March 29, 2004, President George W. Bush welcomed seven former Soviet-bloc nations (Romania, Bulgaria, Slovakia, Lithuania, Slovenia, Latvia and Estonia) into NATO during a White House ceremony.

On this date:

In 1861, President Abraham Lincoln ordered plans for a relief expedition to sail to South Carolina’s Fort Sumter, which was still in the hands of Union forces despite repeated demands by the Confederacy that it be turned over.

In 1867, Britain’s Parliament passed, and Queen Victoria signed, the British North America Act creating the Dominion of Canada, which came into being the following July.

In 1943, World War II rationing of meat, fats and cheese began, limiting consumers to store purchases of an average of about two pounds a week for beef, pork, lamb and mutton using a coupon system.

In 1951, Julius and Ethel Rosenberg were convicted in New York of conspiracy to commit espionage for the Soviet Union. (They were executed in June 1953.)

In 1971, Army Lt. William L. Calley Jr. was convicted of murdering 22 Vietnamese civilians in the 1968 My Lai (mee ly) massacre. (Calley ended up serving three years under house arrest.) A jury in Los Angeles recommended the death penalty for Charles Manson and three female followers for the 1969 Tate-La Bianca murders. (The sentences were commuted when the California state Supreme Court struck down the death penalty in 1972.)

In 1973, the last United States combat troops left South Vietnam, ending America’s direct military involvement in the Vietnam War.

In 1974, eight Ohio National Guardsmen were indicted on federal charges stemming from the shooting deaths of four students at Kent State University. (The charges were later dismissed.)

In 1984, under cover of early morning darkness, the Baltimore Colts football team left its home city of three decades and moved to Indianapolis.

In 2002, Israeli troops stormed Yasser Arafat’s headquarters complex in the West Bank in a raid that was launched in response to anti-Israeli attacks that had killed 30 people in three days.

In 2010, two female suicide bombers blew themselves up in twin attacks on Moscow subway stations jam-packed with rush-hour passengers, killing at least 40 people and wounding more than 100.

In 2020, country singer Joe Diffie, who had a string of hits in the 1990s, died at 61 from what a spokesman said were complications from COVID-19.

Ten years ago: A divided House approved, 228-191, a \$3.6 trillion Republican budget recasting Medicare and imposing sweeping cuts in domestic programs.

Five years ago: Britain filed for divorce from the European Union as Prime Minister Theresa May sent a

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six-page letter to EU Council President Donald Tusk. Two former aides to New Jersey Gov. Chris Christie were sentenced to prison for creating a colossal traffic jam at the George Washington Bridge for political revenge, a scandal that sank Christie's White House hopes.

One year ago: The former Minneapolis police officer charged with killing George Floyd went on trial with prosecutors showing the jury video of Derek Chauvin pressing his knee on the Black man's neck for several minutes as onlookers yelled at him repeatedly to get off and Floyd gasped that he couldn't breathe. (Chauvin would be convicted of murder and manslaughter and sentenced to 22 1/2 years in prison.) Salvage teams dislodged a huge container ship that had blocked the Suez Canal for six days. The Biden administration extended a federal moratorium on evictions of tenants who'd fallen behind on rent during the coronavirus pandemic.

Today's Birthdays: Author Judith Guest is 86. Former British Prime Minister Sir John Major is 79. Comedian Eric Idle is 79. Composer Vangelis is 79. Basketball Hall of Famer Walt Frazier is 77. Singer Bobby Kimball (Toto) is 75. Actor Bud Cort is 74. Actor Brendan Gleeson is 67. Pro and College Football Hall of Famer Earl Campbell is 67. Actor Marina Sirtis is 67. Actor Christopher Lambert is 65. Rock singer Perry Farrell (Porno for Pyros; Jane's Addiction) is 63. Comedian-actor Amy Sedaris is 61. Model Elle Macpherson is 59. Sen. Catherine Cortez Masto, D-Nev., is 58. Actor Annabella Sciorra (shee-OR'-uh) is 58. Movie director Michel Hazanavicius (mee-SHEHL' ah-zah-nah-VEE'-see-oos) is 55. Rock singer-musician John Popper (Blues Traveler) is 55. Actor Lucy Lawless is 54. Country singer Brady Seals is 53. Actor Sam Hazeldine is 50. International Tennis Hall of Famer Jennifer Capriati is 46. Actor Chris D'Elia is 42. R&B singer PJ Morton is 41. Actor Megan Hilty is 41. Pop singer Kelly Sweet is 34.