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What's New?

There are a couple of new links on the home page. On the black bar, we have replaced the school calendar with the April Community Calendar. On the left hand side, you will find a SD Public Notices link. All legal notices now published in the Groton Independent are available here. Under publication, click on The Groton Independent and search for all of them. Also on the black bar is the 2022-23 School Calendar.

UpComing Events

Thursday, March 31

3:30 p.m.: HS Boys Soccer Meeting in Room 304.

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

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

"Friendship improves happiness, and abates misery, by doubling our joys, and dividing our grief."

-Marcus Tullius Cicero



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.

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.

Truss Pros Help Wanted

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

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

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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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!!!



Friendly Fellows and Daisies 4-H Club

The Friendly Fellows and Daisies 4-H Club met on March 6, 2022, in Aberdeen at the Water Treatment Plant. The meeting was called to order by President Andrew Marzahn. American Pledge was led by Hudson Eichler. The 4-H Pledge was led by Ashlynn Warrington. Roll call topic was favorite sport or activity. The treasurer's report was approved by Kennedy Anderson and seconded by Treyton Smith. There were no additions or improvements. The Secretary's report was read by Logan Warrington and approved by Parker Zoellner and seconded by Hudson Eichler. Logan Warrington made a motion to close old business; Ashlynn Warrington approved it and was seconded by Treyton Smith. For new business the club read the Newshound and discussed the 4-H fundraiser pick up day. New business was closed by Logan Warrington and seconded by Treyton Smith. The meeting was adjourned by Ashlynn Warrington and seconded by Hudson Eichler. Lunch was served by the Pauli family. The club members took a tour of the water treatment plant.

Submitted by Walker Zoellner, Club Reporter

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Happy Spring, Friends!

Can you believe March is nearly over? How are your March Madness basketball brackets holding up? Mine? Not so good!

The winter flew by for the team and me as we worked on a number of projects and kept busy with a few key items during the just-completed legislative session. Our marketing campaigns are in full swing in our key markets. National Travel & Tourism Week and our annual Spring Hospitality Training planning is moving full speed ahead, and before we know it, visitors will once again be flocking to our Great Faces and Great Places. As we inch towards summer, we are keeping a very close eye on gas prices and inflation and how they may impact visitation. I'll share a few thoughts about these two challenges further down in my message, but first, here is what we are working on:

1. By statute, our department is required to issue an RFP (Request for Proposals) for our marketing contracts at least every five years. We have been working on our RFP since late last year and issued it in early January. We had more than one dozen marketing agencies from around the country submit written proposals on why they would be a good fit for the South Dakota Department of Tourism and our marketing work. The team and I whittled the submissions down to seven and will be conducting oral interviews with these agencies in April. It's an exciting time for the department and our industry as we look to continue growing our marketing footprint regionally, nationally, and globally. We are eager to hear the pitches from our seven finalists about their vision for helping us achieve our marketing goals. We'll keep you posted on our progress.

2. Last fall in her FY 23 budget proposal, Governor Noem requested an additional \$35 million dollars in ARPA (American Rescue Plan Act) funds for our department's budget and marketing work. We are thrilled to report that our budget was approved by the legislature and we are excited to create some new marketing partnerships and initiatives with these additional dollars over the next four years. Part of our plan includes some new funding assistance to DMOs. We still have details to work out on a number of fronts, but please know we will keep the industry abreast of what we develop. Stay tuned!

3. In March, we attended the National Pheasant Fest & Quail Classic in Omaha as well as the Los Angeles Travel & Adventure Show. Both shows were OUTSTANDING for our department. The interest in hunting in our state was excellent. The numbers of folks from southern California planning a road trip to our state

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was almost overwhelming. There is no question that South Dakota is on the map – in a big way – and the interest in traveling to The Mount Rushmore State is some of the very best we have ever seen.

4. National Travel & Tourism Week and our annual Spring Hospitality Training seminars will be here before we know it. Check out SDVisit.com to learn more about how you can plug into each of these events.

5. Please take a moment to watch our next MEET THE TEAM video below featuring our outstanding Industry Outreach & Development Representative and Cultural Tourism Manager Calvin Bloemendaal. Calvin has been such a perfect addition to our team. We hope you enjoy learning a bit more about him.

Finally, as I mentioned at the beginning of my comments, we are keeping a very close eye on gas prices and inflation and their impacts on summer travel. According to the latest research from Longwoods International, there continues to be strong pent up demand for travel and most key Travel Sentiment Indicators continue to be positive. Longwoods cautions, however, “the issue of rising gas prices is having a growing impact”. Longwoods also reports:

- 38% of American travelers now say that rising gas prices will greatly impact their decision to travel in the next six months (up nine points in the past two weeks).
- A total of 63% of American travelers now say that rising gas prices will either impact or greatly impact their decision to travel in the next six months (up three points in the past two weeks).
- Despite this concern, pent up demand to travel remains near pandemic-high levels, with 90% of American travelers saying they have plans to go somewhere in the next six months.
- When asked how those gas prices were impacting their travel plans, it is clear that Americans still very much intend to travel and would rather readjust their planned spending to meet their budget, rather than cancel the trips they have already planned. In fact, only 7% indicate that they are cancelling trips. This is a pattern we have seen during previous surges in the price of gas. Bottom line: Folks will still travel. It is how they spend on travel that is most impacted.
- So how will they adjust their travel spend? 34% will reduce the overall number of trips they will take; 33% will choose destinations closer to home; 27% will reduce the amount they spend on retail purchases; 26% will reduce the amount they spend on entertainment & recreation; 19% will reduce the amount they spend on food & beverage; 16% will reduce the amount they spend on lodging; and 16% will choose to drive instead of fly. These are all similar patterns of behavior seen during past gas spikes.
- That being said, one in five (21%) say gas prices are not currently impacting their travel plans.

We will continue to monitor traveler sentiment and share new updates with you. If you have any questions about anything you read in this edition of the Mile Marker, please don't hesitate to reach out. I can always be reached at James.Hagen@TravelSouthDakota.com. We look forward to seeing you soon!

All our best,

Jim Hagen
Secretary of Tourism

Marzahn, Johnson take first at NSU

The first track meet of the season was held inside at Northern State University. Aspen Johnson placed first in the triple jump and Andrew Marzahn placed first in the 55m dash.

Girl's Division

55m Dash: 7, Laila Roberts, 8.21; 13, Jerica Locke, 8.45; 18, Karen Jangula, 8.71; 21, Brooklyn Hanson, 8.79; 22, Kayla Lehr, 8.88; 30, Emilie Thurston, 9.06; 42, Trista Keith, 9.54.

4x160 Relay: 2, Groton (Jerica Locke, Kennedy Hanson, Aspen Johnson, Laila Roberts), 1:33.27.

4x160 Relay: 9, Groton (Kayla Lehr, Brooklyn Hanson, Jayla Jones, Karsyn Jangula), 1:39.58.

4x400 Relay: 5, Groton (Jerica Locke, Faith Traphagen, Kennedy Hanson, Rylee Dunker), 4:54.

SMR 100-100-200-400m: 3, Groton (Laila Roberts, Kennedy Hanson, Jerica Locke, Faith Traphagen), 3:51.43.

SMR 100-100-200-400m: 7, Groton (Kayla Lehr, Karsyn Jangula, Brooklyn Hanson, Rylee Dunker), 4:01.02.

Shot Put: 5, Maddie Bjerke, 8.77m; 7, Faith Flihs, 8.43m; 13, Emma Kutter, 7.48m; 17, Emma Schinkel, 7.20m; 23, Ashley Johnson, 6.50m.

High Jump: 7, Anna Fjeldheim, 1.32m.

Long Jump: 2, Aspen Johnson, 4.26m; 7, Kennedy Hanson, 4.07m; 9, Trista Keith, 3.97m; 13, Anna Fjeldheim, 3.77m.

Triple Jump: 1, Aspen Johnson, 8.72m; 8, Tristia Keith, 7.87m.

Boy's Division

55m Dash: 1, Andrew Marzahn, 6.92; 6, Keegan Tracy, 7.22; 10, Korbin Kucker, 7.36; 22, Colby Dunker, 7.65; 32, Christian Ehresmann, 7.87; 42, Karsten Jeschke, 8.02; 45, Logan Ringgenberg, 8.10; 51, Payton Mitchell, 8.32; 52, Caden McInerney, 8.43.

4x160m Relay: 5, Groton, (Andrew Marzahn, Keegan Tracy, Colby Dunker, Jackson Cogley), 1:23.37.

4x160m Relay: 9, Groton, (Christian Ehresmann, Korbon Kucker, Karsten Jeschke, Caden McInerney), 1:28.94.

4x400m Relay: 4, Groton (Andrew Marzahn, Keegan Tracy, Colby Dunker, Jacob Lewandowski, 4:11.29.

SMR 100-100-200-400m: 4, Groton (Andrew Marzahn, Colby Dunker, Keegan Tracy, Jacob Lewandowski), 3:15.11.

Shot Put: 4, Holden Sippel, 12.15m; 5, Caleb Hanten, 11.83m; 10, Kaleb Antonsen, 11.12m; 28, Logan Ringgenberg, 9.34m; 42, Drew Thurston, 7.91m.

High Jump: 5, Jackson Cogley, 1.57m.

Long Jump: 6, Jackson Cogley, 5.26m; 25, Caden McInerney, 3.96m; 27, Payton Mitchell, 3.72m.

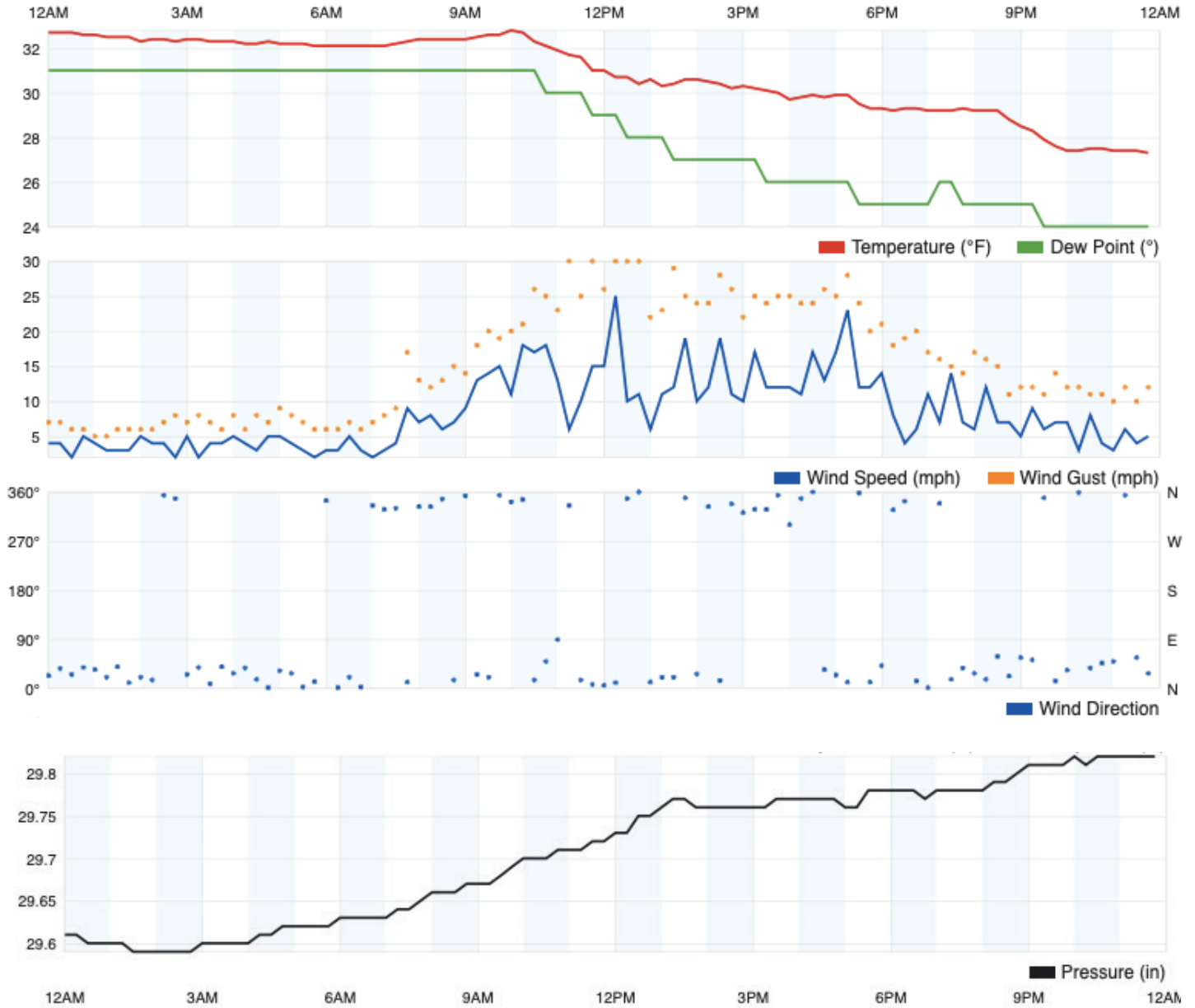
Death Notice: Hilda Sippel

Hilda Sippel, 99, of Groton passed away March 30, 2022 at Good Samaritan Society, St. Martin Village in Rapid City. Memorial services are pending with Paetznick-Garness Funeral Chapel, Groton.

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Yesterday's Groton Weather Graphs



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Today



Mostly Sunny

High: 37 °F

Tonight



Partly Cloudy

Low: 21 °F

Friday



Chance
Rain/Snow
then Chance
Rain

High: 50 °F

Friday
Night



Slight Chance
Rain

Low: 29 °F

Saturday



Sunny


High: 53 °F

Today
33 to 47°

Melting Snow!
Sunny over central SD.
Becoming sunny across far
eastern SD & west central MN
this afternoon.

Looking Ahead

Chance of **Light Snow** over central SD late tonight.
Light Snow likely over south central SD early Friday morning,
expanding and changing to all rain over eastern SD and
western MN by late Friday morning.

 National Weather Service
Aberdeen, SD

Melting snow continues today as temperatures rise into the 30s and 40s. The next chance of light snow will be late tonight over central South Dakota. Little to no snow accumulation is expected. Light snow will expand over eastern South Dakota and west central Minnesota Friday morning, with precipitation changing to all rain by late Friday morning.

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Today in Weather History

March 31, 1967: Heavy snow of 6 to 15 inches combined with 30 to 50 mph winds, caused blizzard conditions across most of northeast South Dakota. Many people were stranded, especially along Interstate-29 and Highway 12. In Hamlin County, a man was injured when his snowmobile struck a snowplow in Bryant in the early evening. Also, in the early afternoon, 4 miles west of Lake Norden on Highway 28, a car crossed the lane and hit a semi. The car was destroyed with thousands of dollars of damage to the semi. The driver of the car was injured. Many schools were let out early on the 31st and were canceled for April 1st. Many activities and sports events were either postponed or canceled. Some snowfall amounts included 6 inches at Doland, Conde, and Castlewood, 7 inches at Turton and Clear Lake, 8 inches at Clark and Britton, 9 inches at Bryant and Webster, 10 inches near Peever, and 11 inches at Summit. Snowfall amounts of a foot or more included, 12 inches at Watertown and Big Stone City, 13 inches at Victor, the Waubay NWR, and Sisseton, 14 inches at Wilmot, and 15 inches at Milbank.

March 31, 2014: A strong surface low-pressure area moving across the region brought mixed precipitation to all of the area including rain, freezing rain, sleet, snow along with some thunder. As the precipitation changed to over to all snow, northwest winds increased substantially to 30 to 40 mph with gusts to 50 to 60 mph causing widespread blizzard conditions. Much of the area received a coating of ice with trace amounts up to a tenth of an inch with several locations receiving up to 2 inches of sleet. Snowfall amounts from 2 to as much as 10 inches occurred with this storm. The precipitation changed over to snow in the morning out west and into the late afternoon hours across the east. The light snow did not end in the eastern portion of South Dakota until the early morning hours of April 1st. Many schools, government offices, and businesses were closed or canceled early. Travel was not advised across much of region with Interstate-29 being closed for a time from Brookings to the North Dakota border.

1890 - Saint Louis, MO, received 20 inches of snow in 24 hours. It was the worst snowstorm of record for the St Louis. (David Ludlum)

1942: 107 inches of rain fell during the month at Puu Kukui at Maui, Hawaii to set the U.S. record for rainfall in one month. The same place also holds the annual rainfall record for the United States with 578 inches in 1950.

1954 - The temperature at Rio Grande City, TX, hit 108 degrees, which for thirty years was a U.S. record for the month of March. (The Weather Channel)

1962 - A tornado struck the town of Milton, FL, killing 17 persons and injuring 100 others. It was the worst tornado disaster in Florida history. (David Ludlum)

1973 - A devastating tornado took a nearly continuous 75 mile path through north central Georgia causing more than 113 million dollars damage, the highest total of record for a natural disaster in the state. (The Weather Channel)

1987 - March went out like a lion in the northeastern U.S. A slow moving storm produced heavy snow in the Lower Great Lakes Region, and heavy rain in New England. Heavy rain and melting snow caused catastrophic flooding along rivers and streams in Maine and New Hampshire. Strong southerly winds ahead of the storm gusted to 62 mph at New York City, and reached 87 mph at Milton MA. (The National Weather Summary) (Storm Data)

1988 - March went out like a lion in eastern Colorado. A winter-like storm produced 42 inches of snow at Lake Isabel, including 20 inches in six hours. Fort Collins reported 15 inches of snow in 24 hours. Winds gusted to 80 mph at Centerville UT. Albuquerque NM received 14 inches of snow. (The National Weather Summary) (Storm Data)

1989 - Afternoon thunderstorms produced severe weather from North Carolina to Pennsylvania. Thunderstorm winds gusted to 76 mph at Cape Henry VA. While squalls blanketed northwest Pennsylvania with up to 9 inches of snow, thunderstorms in eastern Pennsylvania produced golf ball size hail at Avondale. (Storm Data) (The National Weather Summary)

1990 - The month of March went out just as it came in, like a lamb. Marquette MI, which started the month with a record high of 52 degrees, equalled their record for the date with a reading of 62 degrees. (The National Weather Summary)

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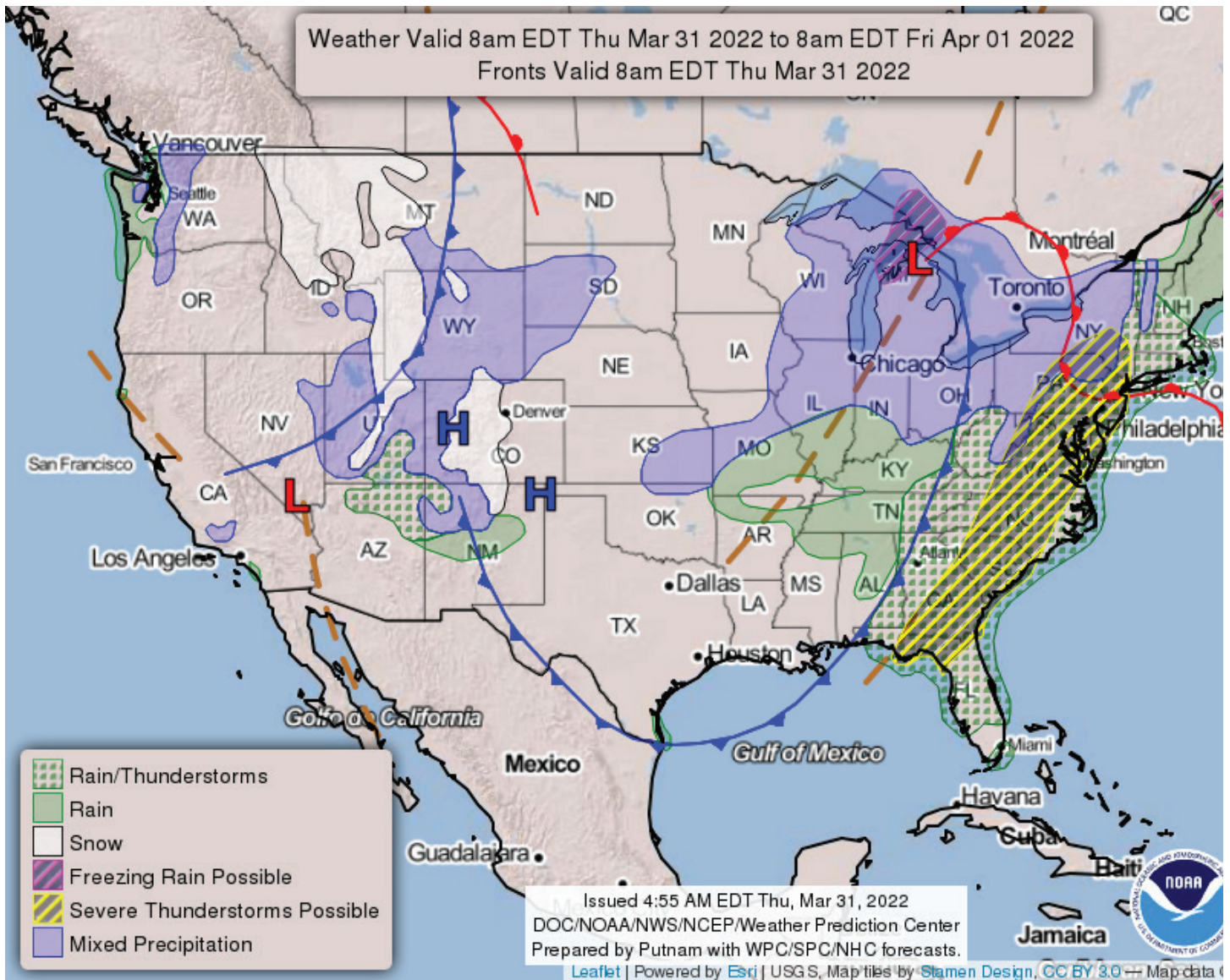
Yesterday's Groton Weather

High Temp: 33 °F at 12:00 AM
Low Temp: 27 °F at 11:35 PM
Wind: 30 mph at 11:07 AM
Precip: 0.00

Day length: 12 hours, 48 minutes

Today's Info

Record High: 86 in 1946
Record Low: -0 in 1899
Average High: 50°F
Average Low: 26°F
Average Precip in Mar.: 0.89
Precip to date in Mar.: 0.12
Average Precip to date: 2.06
Precip Year to Date: 1.09
Sunset Tonight: 8:00:34 PM
Sunrise Tomorrow: 7:10:29 AM



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A REASON TO REJOICE

Certain events in our lives bring different responses. Years ago, a smile would race across my face, and my heart would beat a little faster if someone would ask me to spend the day riding a bicycle with them over the hills to Los Gatos for lunch. It would take about nine hours for the 120-mile trip, not including lunch.

Now, if someone were to ask me to ride a bicycle to a nearby town for lunch, a smile would race across my face, and my heart would send a message to my brain and ask, "Are they serious? You're an old man now." But the memories will remain with me forever and bring me joy when I think of the rides I once took around Monterey Bay.

All of us store up memories of one kind or another. Some are pleasant and others painful. Some remind us of lessons that were difficult to learn yet made us much wiser than we once were. And some leave us with stories we like to share because they are simply too wonderful to forget.

David was that way when he thought about going to the House of the Lord. "I rejoiced with those who said to me, 'Let us go to the house of the Lord,'" are the words he wrote on one occasion. Notice that he used the word "rejoiced." The very thought of going to a place of worship caused him to rejoice.

Worship was important to him. It was at the center of his life and kept him close to the Lord. When his friends said, "Let's get together and worship," he would get excited.

It's very different today. Too few people find too little joy when they are invited to worship. Faithfulness to Christ and the obligation to gather for worship are no longer important. But those who truly love the Lord will always find the time and a way to worship Him.

Prayer: Lord, our love for You is reflected in our worship of You. Teach us to worship so that our hearts rejoice whenever we recall times of worship. In Jesus' Name, Amen.

Scripture For Today: I rejoiced with those who said to me, "Let us go to the house of the Lord." Psalm 122:1

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2022 Community Events

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

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The Groton Independent Printed & Mailed Weekly Edition

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News from the Associated Press

SD Lottery

By The Associated Press undefined

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

Dakota Cash

04-11-17-27-29

(four, eleven, seventeen, twenty-seven, twenty-nine)

Estimated jackpot: \$20,000

Lotto America

01-06-23-35-36, Star Ball: 8, ASB: 2

(one, six, twenty-three, thirty-five, thirty-six; Star Ball: eight; ASB: two)

Estimated jackpot: \$10.09 million

Mega Millions

Estimated jackpot: \$70 million

Powerball

03-07-21-31-37, Powerball: 11, Power Play: 3

(three, seven, twenty-one, thirty-one, thirty-seven; Powerball: eleven; Power Play: three)

Estimated jackpot: \$206 million

File release gives details on South Dakota AG's fatal crash

By STEPHEN GROVES Associated Press

SIOUX FALLS, S.D. (AP) — Details surrounding South Dakota Attorney General Jason Ravensborg's fatal crash with a pedestrian in 2020 were revealed publicly Wednesday as the Legislature released unredacted parts of the crash investigation, providing a fresh look at the minutes surrounding the crash but leaving unanswered how Ravensborg could not have seen the man he struck.

Nearly 200 files in the crash and impeachment investigations were posted online Wednesday, allowing a public examination of the investigation for the first time since the September 2020 fatal crash. Parts of the crash investigation, including messages on Ravensborg's phones and photos of the body of the pedestrian, Joseph Boever, were redacted by the House committee.

Lawmakers on Monday concluded a monthslong investigation by voting on party lines to recommend that Ravensborg not be impeached. The House will convene on April 12 to consider the committee's report.

The Republican attorney general last year pleaded no contest to a pair of misdemeanors in the crash and was required to pay fines. He has cast the crash as a tragic accident, insisting he did not realize he killed a man until he returned to the scene the next day and found his body.

The crash investigation files revealed Ravensborg has been pulled over 25 times for traffic violations, including eight times since he took office in 2019. Ravensborg told investigators, "I never go more than four over," even though he had been pulled over for speeding five times since 2019.

The House impeachment committee also found that Ravensborg in law enforcement interviews "underplayed or omitted, and at worst, misrepresented" how he had been scrolling through his cell phone during his drive from a GOP fundraiser the night of the crash. However, Republican lawmakers argued that did not rise to the level of an impeachable offense because it was not part of his official duties "in office" as attorney general.

Ravnsborg told investigators that the last thing he remembered was looking at his speedometer "and then wham." He hit Boever.

Boever's body suffered "multiple traumatic injuries," according to an autopsy. A toxicology report also found Boever had taken a high amount of Lorazepam, an anxiety medication, but not enough to be fatal.

Crash investigators found that Ravensborg's car had crossed fully onto the shoulder of the highway when

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he struck Boever. It then took 44 seconds for Ravensborg to halt his car and dial 911, investigators found after examining his cell phone.

Ravnsborg searched the area of the crash, cell phone data showed, and came within feet of Boever's body. But the attorney general has insisted he did not see his body or a small flashlight he had been carrying.

"Still not sure what fully happened as I was just driving along," Ravensborg texted his top aides about 30 minutes after the crash.

Hyde County Sheriff Mike Volek, who responded to the scene, also reported he didn't see the body. After assuming that Ravensborg hit a deer, Volek sent the attorney general on his way home, lending him a personal vehicle.

However, as Volek waited for a tow truck to show up, he was bothered that no deer had been found and took another look around the scene. He saw Boever's flashlight shining in the grass, he told investigators, but did not take a close look because he thought it was a lightbulb from Ravensborg's car.

Ravnsborg reported Boever's death to Volek the next day after returning to the crash scene and finding Boever's body.

By that evening, Gov. Kristi Noem was preparing to give a news conference on the crash, and her chief of staff at the time was coordinating with the attorney general's office to release a statement saying he would cooperate with the investigation, text messages show.

But days later Noem, a fellow Republican, would push for Ravensborg to step down.

Three days after the crash and with the investigation underway, Ravensborg was at the Division of Criminal Investigation headquarters in Pierre when he approached an agent, Brent Gromer, who had expertise in cell phone forensic examinations and asked him about what investigators could find on his phones. The crash investigation states that a detective was told the interaction had made Gromer "uncomfortable," but does not detail who told the detective that.

The same day, the governor's chief of staff, Tony Venhuizen, texted Ravensborg: "Given what is happening, the Governor is going to ask you to take a leave of absence, at least until the conclusion of the investigation."

As the investigation concluded last year, Noem publicly called for Ravensborg to resign, and after he avoided jail time for the crash, she would push harder for his impeachment.

So far, she has been thwarted. Ravensborg has refused to step down. He also enlisted Ross Garber, a professor at Tulane Law School, to send a letter to the House impeachment committee arguing against impeachment because his actions "were unrelated to his office."

Republicans on the committee agreed in a majority report that argues anything Ravensborg did wrong was not part of his work in office.

South Dakota's elections take shape with crowded GOP field

By STEPHEN GROVES Associated Press

SIOUX FALLS, S.D. (AP) — South Dakota's political races are taking shape as party candidates hit a deadline Tuesday to submit petitions to run for office.

Republicans touted a crowded primary field as a sign their control over state politics may only be increasing; Democrats said they were taking a targeted approach to competitive districts.

The state Republican Party provided a list of over 150 legislative candidates and said it was the first time in decades they had recruited a candidate in nearly every legislative district. Meanwhile, Democrats appeared to field a handful fewer candidates than in 2020 — an election that saw the party hit a 60-year low for statehouse seats. The Democratic Party provided a list of 53 legislative candidates — a dozen less than it fielded in 2020. Both parties may still see more candidates if the Secretary of State receives petitions in the coming days from candidates who submitted petitions through certified mail.

After redistricting last year, candidates will also be navigating a new political map. The new districts were proposed by Senate Republicans, but Democrats were able to draw some key concessions. South Dakota Democratic Party chair Randy Seiler said it was a "fair" that should produce more competitive

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races. Republican incumbents are also seeing primary races across the state amid a divide between the GOP establishment and the right-wing of the party.

Republican Party of South Dakota chairman Dan Lederman contended the party was "in position to pick up the remaining 11 seats in the Pierre."

"The GOP's dedication to building in-roads in communities across South Dakota has allowed the party to make historic moves ahead of the midterm elections," he said in a statement.

The state Democratic Party has been rebuilding with new leadership in the last year, and the party's chair Randy Seiler said it was not taking a "shotgun approach" but targeting winnable districts.

"We're cautiously optimistic that we are going to pick up some seats," he said, adding that the party also planned to put energy behind its candidate for governor, state Rep. Jamie Smith, and U.S. Senate, Brian Bengs.

In statewide races, two Republicans, Mark Mowry and Bruce Whalen, have also submitted petitions to challenge Sen. John Thune in June's primary. Thune's petitions have already been verified by the Secretary of State, while his challengers are still waiting for verification. Democrat Brian Bengs has also submitted petitions for the Senate race.

Gov. Kristi Noem's candidacy for reelection has also been certified. Her Republican primary challenger, Rep. Steve Haugaard, as well as Smith, the Democrat, have submitted petitions and are awaiting verification. And both U.S. Rep. Dusty Johnson and his primary challenger, state Rep. Taffy Howard, have had their petitions verified.

South Dakota Board of Regents freezes university tuition

SPEARFISH, S.D. (AP) — The South Dakota Board of Regents on Wednesday agreed to freeze tuition at the state's six public universities.

The move comes after lawmakers increased base funding for the university system by more than \$8.6 million in the session that ended earlier this month.

The money is meant to cover raises for university workers, as part of an overall plan to increase salaries for state employees by 6%.

Previously the state covered less than half of the salary and benefit package for employees in the university system, so it forced higher education leaders to raise dollars to pay for tuition, fees and other charges.

"Addition of base general funds is a major step forward as we continue to address student affordability and the costs of higher education," said Brian Maher, the board's executive director and CEO.

Editorial Roundup: South Dakota

By The Associated Press undefined

Yankton Press & Dakotan. March XX, 2022.

Editorial: Cinderella Seasons And The Promise Ahead

This moment shouldn't pass without a word of congratulations to the University of South Dakota women's basketball team, which saw its outstanding season end Saturday with a 52-49 loss to Michigan in the Wichita Region semifinals. The Coyotes crashing the Sweet 16 in the NCAA tournament is a terrific achievement, even though the sting of Saturday's defeat may, right now, numb some of that joy. But the gravity of this season's performance will grow even stronger with time.

In fact, USD's accomplishment, combined with the Sweet 16 appearance by the South Dakota State University women's basketball team three years ago, makes a statement about how far NCAA Division I collegiate athletics have come in this state.

Two decades ago, South Dakota was the only state in the country without a Division I collegiate athletic program (in North Dakota, the University of North Dakota was DI in hockey), but the two biggest schools here were either ready (SDSU) or nearly ready (USD) to make the jump. However, it seemed a daunting and perhaps ill-advised step up for some fans.

Since making the jump, both South Dakota schools have proven themselves to be solid "mid-major"

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entries. Both have posted signature victories over larger Division I competition in various sports. Clearly, these fish have adjusted well to the larger NCAA seas.

While we could cite various triumphs in other sports, let's stick to women's basketball today.

In the past three years, both SDSU and USD have surprised "bracketologists" by making the Sweet 16, which indicates that these schools field some formidable talent.

In fact, both SDSU and USD have been dominant in Summit League play. According to the Press & Dakotan's sports department, the State-U combination went 36-0 against the rest of the league this past season; over the past five years, these two programs have gone 151-3 overall against the other Summit League teams, including 132-2 in the regular season.

As a rule, whenever mid-major schools get so far in the NCAA tourney, it rates as a surprise. Smaller DI programs usually hail from leagues that traditionally (but not always) get only one NCAA postseason bid, while major conferences score multiple invites. That's always been the nature of the NCAA beast.

When smaller schools manage to crack the Sweet 16 or Elite Eight, it is, for them, practically like winning a championship. It's a glorious climb viewed in the broader context as a Cinderella ride that will be forever remembered by the players and fans.

But for both the SDSU and USD programs, it's not unreasonable now to see something more as a realistic goal. These programs have matched up with the best and have held their own. For instance, USD's postseason win last week at Baylor, one of the strongest women's basketball programs in the country, was a huge statement. Also, the success both USD and SDSU have had in the WNIT — the Coyotes won it in 2016 and the Jackrabbits are in the semifinals now — adds some muscle to their reputations.

Bigger things may be in store for both programs, which says a lot about the quality of women's basketball in this state. While we should revel in the magic of this moment, we shouldn't be shocked if even bigger steps are ahead.

END

SD guard pleads not guilty to making threats, assault

TYNDALL, S.D. (AP) — A state prison guard has pleaded not guilty in Bon Homme County court to making terroristic threats and domestic assault.

Christopher Taylor, 29, appeared in court Tuesday to plead to the threat charge. He previously pleaded not guilty to the domestic assault charge which allegedly involved an altercation with his girlfriend at the home they shared in Springfield.

Judge Cheryl Gering ordered Taylor to continue meeting bond conditions, including having a mental health evaluation, having no contact with his girlfriend and refraining from alcohol and illegal drugs.

He has complied with an order to surrender his weapons and ammunition to the county sheriff, the Yankton Press and Dakotan reported.

According to prosecutors, Taylor threatened to harm a local man and set fire to his house with the man's children inside.

Taylor's girlfriend called police to their home March 8 because he had become belligerent, was yelling and was poking her in the chest, according to court documents.

Taylor works at Mike Durfee State Prison and is scheduled for a June 13-17 jury trial in Tyndall.

Two people struck by pickup, one fatally, in Sioux Falls

SIOUX FALLS, S.D. (AP) — Police are investigating a deadly pedestrian crash near downtown Sioux Falls. Two people were crossing a street outside of the crosswalk when a pickup truck struck them about 8:30 p.m. Tuesday, according to authorities.

One of the pedestrians, a 47-year-old Sioux Falls man, was taken to the hospital by ambulance where he later died. The second person was evaluated by emergency medics at the scene and cleared.

The Sioux Falls Police Department is still investigating the crash.

Convoy heads to Ukraine's Mariupol to attempt evacuation

By NEBI QENA and YURAS KARMANAU Associated Press

KYIV, Ukraine (AP) — A convoy of buses headed to Mariupol on Thursday in another attempt to evacuate people from the besieged port city, while Russia pressed its attacks in several parts of Ukraine ahead of a planned new round of talks aimed at ending the fighting.

After the Russian military agreed to a limited cease-fire in the area, the Red Cross said its teams were traveling to Mariupol with relief and medical supplies and hoped to help pull civilians out of the beleaguered city on Friday. Previous attempts at establishing a similar humanitarian corridor have fallen apart.

Russian forces, meanwhile, shelled suburbs of the capital that Ukraine recently retook control of, a regional official said. New attacks in the area where Moscow had promised to de-escalate further undermined hopes of a resolution to end the war on the eve of a new round of talks. A day earlier, Ukrainian officials reported that Russian shelling on the outskirts of Kyiv and around another city where it had vowed to ease up.

Russia's Defense Ministry also reported new strikes on Ukrainian fuel stores late Wednesday, and Ukrainian officials said there were artillery barrages in and around the northeastern city of Kharkiv over the past day.

Despite the fighting raging in those areas, the Russian military said it committed to a cease-fire along the route from Mariupol to the Ukraine-held city of Zaporizhzhia from Thursday morning.

Ukrainian Deputy Prime Minister Iryna Vereshchuk said 45 buses would be sent to collect civilians who have suffered some of the worst deprivations of the war. Food, water and medical supplies have all run low during a weeklong blockade and bombardment of the city. Civilians who have managed to leave have typically done so using private cars, but the number of drivable vehicles left in the city has also dwindled and fuel stocks are low.

The International Committee of the Red Cross, which is helping run the evacuation, said its teams have already left for Mariupol.

"It's desperately important that this operation takes place," the Red Cross said in a statement. "The lives of tens of thousands of people in Mariupol depend on it."

As the new evacuation attempt was announced, evidence emerged that a Red Cross warehouse in the city had been struck earlier this month amid intense Russian shelling of the area.

In satellite pictures from Planet Labs PBC, holes can be seen in the warehouse's roof, along with a painted red cross on a white background. The aid organization said no staff have been at the site since March 15.

Talks between Ukraine and Russia were set to resume Friday by video, according to the head of the Ukrainian delegation, David Arakhamia, six weeks into a bloody war that has seen thousands die and a staggering 4 million Ukrainians flee the country.

But there seemed little faith that the two sides would resolve the conflict soon, particularly after the Russian military's about-face and its most recent attacks.

Russia had promised during talks in Istanbul this week that it would de-escalate operations near Kyiv and Chernihiv to "increase mutual trust and create conditions for further negotiations." Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy and the West were skeptical. Soon after, Ukrainian officials reported that Russian shelling was hitting homes, stores, libraries and other civilian sites in or near those areas.

Britain's Defense Ministry also confirmed "significant Russian shelling and missile strikes" around Chernihiv.

On Thursday, the area's governor, Viacheslav Chaus, said Russian troops were on the move but may not be withdrawing.

Meanwhile, the U.S. said that Russia had begun to reposition less than 20% of its troops that had been arrayed around Kyiv. Pentagon press secretary John Kirby said Wednesday that troops from there and some other zones began moving mostly to the north, and some went into neighboring Belarus. Kirby said it appeared Russia planned to resupply them and send them back into Ukraine, but it is not clear where.

Still, fighting continued in Kyiv suburbs. Regional governor Oleksandr Palviuk said on social media that Russian forces shelled Irpin and Makariv, and that there were battles around Hostomel — all to the west or northwest of the capital. Pavliuk said there were Ukrainian counterattacks and some Russian withdrawals around the suburb of Brovary to the east.

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Britain's Defense Ministry said Thursday that "Russian forces continue to hold positions to the east and west of Kyiv despite the withdrawal of a limited number of units. Heavy fighting will likely take place in the suburbs of the city in coming days."

As Western officials search for clues about what Russia's next move might be, a top British intelligence official said Thursday that demoralized Russian soldiers in Ukraine were refusing to carry out orders and sabotaging their own equipment and had accidentally shot down their own aircraft.

In a speech in the Australian capital of Canberra, Jeremy Fleming said Russian President Vladimir Putin had apparently "massively misjudged" the invasion. Although Putin's advisers appeared to be too afraid to tell the truth, the "extent of these misjudgments must be crystal clear to the regime," said Fleming, who heads the GCHQ electronic spy agency.

U.S. intelligence officials have given similar assessments that Putin is being misinformed by advisers too scared to give honest evaluations.

With Russian troops bogged down in many places and thwarted in their attempts to quickly take the capital, Zelenskyy has said his country's defense was now at a turning point — as he continued to plead with his international partners to provide more equipment.

"Freedom should be armed no worse than tyranny," he said in his nightly video address to the nation on Wednesday.

He continued his appeal Thursday, asking Australian lawmakers in an online address for armored vehicles and called for Russian vessels to be banned from international ports. Prime Minister Scott Morrison had earlier told him Australia would provide additional military assistance including tactical decoys, unmanned aerial and unmanned ground systems, rations and medical supplies.

Zelenskyy then called on lawmakers in Netherlands to be prepared to stop importing Russian energy, to halt trade with Russia and to provide more weapons.

Zelenskyy said the continuing negotiations with Russia were only "words without specifics." He said Ukraine was preparing for concentrated new strikes on the Donbas, the predominantly Russian-speaking industrial heartland where Moscow-backed separatists have been battling Ukrainian forces since 2014.

Top Russian military officials say their main goal now is the "liberation" of the Donbas, though some analysts have suggested that the announcement of the focus on the region may merely be an effort to put a positive spin on reality since Moscow's ground forces have become stalled and taken heavy losses.

Israel raids West Bank, 2 Palestinians killed in gun battle

By JOSEPH KRAUSS Associated Press

JERUSALEM (AP) — Israeli forces raided a refugee camp in the occupied West Bank early Thursday, setting off a gun battle in which two Palestinians were killed and 15 were wounded, the Palestinian Health Ministry said.

In a separate incident, a Palestinian stabbed a 28-year-old Israeli man on a bus in the West Bank before being killed by a bystander, the Israeli military said. The Magen David Adom emergency service said the stabbing victim was treated and taken to a hospital.

Videos circulated online showed smoke rising from the center of the Jenin refugee camp as gunfire echoed in the background. Others appeared to show Israeli soldiers and Palestinian gunmen moving through the narrow streets.

The raid came two days after a Palestinian from a village near Jenin shot and killed five people in central Israel, part of a wave of attacks in recent days that have left a total of 11 people dead.

The Palestinian Health Ministry said 17-year-old Sanad Abu Atiyeh and 23-year-old Yazid al-Saadi were killed. It said 30-year-old Nidal Jaafara was shot and killed near the West Bank town of Bethlehem, apparently referring to the stabbing incident.

The Israeli military said troops came under fire after entering Jenin to arrest suspects. It said one soldier was wounded and evacuated to a hospital for treatment.

The Jenin refugee camp was the scene of one of the deadliest battles of the second Palestinian intifada,

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or uprising. In April 2002, Israeli forces fought Palestinian militants in the camp for nearly three weeks. Twenty-three Israeli soldiers and at least 52 Palestinians, including civilians, were killed, according to the U.N.

The Palestinian Authority, which administers parts of the occupied West Bank and coordinates with Israel on security matters, appears to have had little control over Jenin in recent years. Israeli forces operating in and around the city and refugee camp often come under fire.

The Islamic Jihad militant group announced a "general mobilization" of its fighters after Thursday's raid.

In Tuesday's attack, a 27-year-old Palestinian from the West Bank village of Yabad, near Jenin, methodically gunned down victims, killing five. On Sunday night, a shooting attack by two Islamic State sympathizers in the central city of Hadera killed two police officers. Last week, a combined car-ramming and stabbing attack in the southern city of Beersheba — also by an attacker inspired by IS — killed four. The two attacks claimed by IS were carried out by Arab citizens of Israel.

President Joe Biden spoke with Israeli Prime Minister Naftali Bennett on Wednesday. Biden expressed his condolences after the recent attacks and said the U.S. "stands firmly and resolutely with Israel in the face of this terrorist threat and all threats to the state of Israel," the White House said.

The recent wave of violence has brought the Palestinian issue back to the fore at a time when Israel is focused on building alliances with Arab states against Iran. There have been no serious Israeli-Palestinian peace talks in more than a decade, and Bennett is opposed to Palestinian statehood.

Israeli, Jordanian and Palestinian leaders have held a flurry of meetings in recent weeks, and Israel has announced a series of goodwill gestures, in an effort to maintain calm ahead of the Muslim holy month of Ramadan, which begins this weekend.

They hope to avoid a repeat of last year, when clashes in Jerusalem set off an 11-day Gaza war, but the recent attacks have sent tensions soaring. After a Security Cabinet meeting late Wednesday, Israel nevertheless decided to carry on with plans to ease restrictions on Palestinians in the occupied West Bank and Gaza.

Israel captured east Jerusalem, the West Bank and Gaza in the 1967 Mideast war, territories the Palestinians want for a future state. Israel annexed east Jerusalem in a move not recognized internationally. In the West Bank, it is steadily building and expanding Jewish settlements, which most of the internationally community views as illegal.

Israel withdrew from Gaza in 2005, and the Palestinian militant group Hamas seized power there two years later. Since then, Israel and Hamas have fought four wars and Israel and Egypt have maintained a blockade on the territory, which is home to more than 2 million Palestinians.

Pence unveils Republican policy agenda for midterm elections

By JILL COLVIN Associated Press

NEW YORK (AP) — Former Vice President Mike Pence has unveiled a new policy platform for Republicans ahead of this year's midterms elections, offering a framework for candidates — and possibly himself — ahead of a potential 2024 presidential run.

Pence's "Freedom Agenda," released Thursday, combines traditional Republican goals like increasing American energy production, cutting taxes and rolling back regulations with priorities pursued by former President Donald Trump on issues like trade and immigration. Pence also offers plenty of culture war red meat for the GOP base, pledging, for instance, to save women's sports by "ensuring that sports competitions are between those who share their God-given gender" and calling for all high school students to pass a civics test.

"Elections are about the future, and I think it's absolutely essential that, while we do our part to take the fight to the failed policies of the Biden administration and the radical left, at the same time, we want to offer a compelling vision built on our highest American ideals," Pence said ahead of the plan's release. "It really is an effort to put in one place the agenda that I think carried us to the White House in 2016, carried two Bush presidencies to the White House and carried Ronald Reagan to the White House in 1980."

Much of the 28-page plan reads like the platform of a presidential campaign, underscoring Pence's ambi-

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tions and providing a clear road map of the themes and policies he is likely to pursue if he moves forward with a 2024 run. While Pence in recent weeks has worked to distance himself from his former boss as he begins to reintroduce himself to voters and develop a political identity of his own, he has also been careful to tie himself to the policies of the Trump-Pence administration, which remain extremely popular among Republican voters.

It's part of what aides see as Pence's unique opportunity, as a former talk radio host, congressman and Indiana governor, to merge the traditional conservative movement with Trump's "Make America Great Again" agenda.

"There is a winning coalition for America that believes in the traditionally conservative values that the vice president has championed through his career," said Marc Short, co-chair of Advancing American Freedom, the advocacy group Pence launched last year.

Pence's plan comes as the GOP has been at odds over the wisdom of offering voters a concrete policy agenda ahead of the midterm elections this year. Senate Republican leader Mitch McConnell has been pointedly opposed to such efforts, arguing that Republicans should keep the focus on President Joe Biden, whose popularity has slumped amid the highest inflation in 40 years and the Russian war in Ukraine, and make the election a referendum on him.

The risks came into stark relief last month when Florida Sen. Rick Scott, another potential 2024 contender and the chair of the Senate Republicans' campaign arm, unveiled his 11-point plan to "rescue America." The effort drew immediate criticism from Democrats and even some Republicans, particularly its call for all Americans to "pay some income tax to have skin in the game" — a move that would amount to a tax hike for millions of people who pay no income tax because they earn so little.

House Republicans, meanwhile, have been working on their own "Commitment to America" plan with echoes of former House Speaker Newt Gingrich's "Contract with America," which Republicans unveiled in 1994 before sweeping the midterms that year.

"For the American public to join with you and support you, first they want to know what will you do," House Minority Leader Kevin McCarthy said at the party's annual retreat in Jacksonville, Florida, last week.

Candidates on the campaign trail have expressed similar sentiment.

At a Republican Senate primary debate in Ohio on Monday, several of the candidates applauded Scott for his effort, even as they said they disagreed with parts of his plan.

"I'm so sick of Republicans who say, 'Well, we're just going to push back against the Biden agenda.' Well, of course we're going to do that. But what are we gonna actually do for our voters?" candidate J.D. Vance asked. "There are a lot of problems out there. A lot of very serious problems. And we can't just sort of stick our flag in the mud and say, 'We're against, we're against, we're against.' We gotta be for stuff."

Pence said that was part of his intention.

"As important as it is for us to criticize and to confront and to be the loyal opposition," he said, it is "absolutely of equal importance that we offer a positive, compelling vision built on our highest ideals and frankly the successes that we were able to demonstrate during our administration."

The economic plan unveiled Thursday calls for fast-tracking permits for oil and gas production, expanding drilling on federal lands and offshore and pursuing trade agreements that better protect American workers. On foreign policy, Pence calls on China to "establish a victims compensation and economic recovery fund" for "negligently unleashing and hiding the origins of COVID-19."

On immigration, Pence's agenda sounds much like a Trump press release. It calls on leaders to "oppose all forms of amnesty," typically defined as a path to citizenship for those who entered the country illegally, and seeks an end to what he calls "chain migration" by limiting family reunification to an immigrant's nuclear family. It also calls for promoting "the patriotic assimilation of immigrants" and finishing Trump's border wall.

Under a section dedicated to "protecting American culture," Pence calls for the promotion of "patriotic education" by ending "radical political indoctrination — including the teaching of anti-American racist ideologies like Critical Race Theory," which views racism as systemic in the nation's institutions. There is little to no evidence that critical race theory is being taught to K-12 public school students.

Pence also calls on states and local jurisdictions to require that all high school students pass a test on

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the Declaration of Independence, the U.S. Constitution and the Federalist Papers to graduate. And he seeks limits on mail-in voting and early in-person voting, as well as mandatory voter identification, among other election measures.

The plan comes as Pence has been raising his public profile, making frequent media appearances, headlining political events and delivering policy speeches. He has traveled in recent weeks to South Korea, Israel and the Ukrainian border with Poland, where he greeted fleeing refugees. And he has paid numerous visits to early voting states, including New Hampshire, Iowa and South Carolina, which he'll return to next month.

Meanwhile, his advocacy group is spending millions of dollars on ads and filing amicus briefs opposing vaccine mandates and abortion rights, and he's working on a pair of books in addition to projects with the conservative Heritage Foundation and Young America's Foundation.

Live updates: UK sanctions Russian media over disinformation

By The Associated Press undefined

LONDON — Britain has imposed sanctions on more than a dozen Russian media figures and organizations accused of spreading propaganda and disinformation about the war in Ukraine.

The latest group subjected to asset freezes and travel bans includes Rossiya television anchor Sergey Brilev, who previously lived in the U.K., Gazprom-Media chief executive Aleksandr Zharov and Alexey Nikolov, managing director of Kremlin-backed broadcaster RT.

Sanctions have also been slapped on media organizations TV-Novosti, which owns RT, and Rossiya Segodnya, which controls the Sputnik news agency.

British Foreign Secretary Liz Truss said Thursday's sanctions would hit "the shameless propagandists who push out Putin's fake news and narratives."

The U.K. also said it was sanctioning Colonel-General Mikhail Mizintsev, chief of Russia's National Defence Command and Control Center, accusing him of orchestrating atrocities including the siege of Mariupol.

KEY DEVELOPMENTS IN THE RUSSIA-UKRAINE WAR:

- Russia shells areas in Ukraine where it vowed to scale back
- US intel determines Putin has been misled by advisers on Ukraine
- Poland to end Russian oil imports; Germany warns on gas
- UN agency says 4 million refugees have now fled Ukraine
- UN food chief says Ukraine war's food crisis is worst since WWII
- Go to <https://apnews.com/hub/russia-ukraine> for more coverage

OTHER DEVELOPMENTS:

MOSCOW -- Russian President Vladimir Putin has signed a decree on the spring draft, with 134,500 new conscripts to be added to the Russian army amid the country's war on Ukraine.

Both Putin and Russia's Defense Minister Sergei Shoigu have said that conscripts will not be taking part in the operation in Ukraine. Earlier this month, however, the Russian military admitted that a number of conscripts ended up in Ukraine and were even captured there.

The decree signed on Thursday outlines the draft which will kick off on April 1 and last through July 15.

BERLIN — The International Committee of the Red Cross says its teams are ready to facilitate the evacuation of civilians out of the besieged city of Mariupol.

The Red Cross said "for logistics and security reasons, we'll be ready to lead the safe passage operation tomorrow, Friday, provided all the parties agree to the exact terms, including the route, the start time, and the duration."

Ukrainian Deputy Prime Minister Iryna Vereshchuk said Ukraine is sending out several dozen buses to collect civilians from Mariupol after Russia's military said it committed to a localized cease-fire from the

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city to Ukraine-held Zaporizhzhia from Thursday morning.

"It's desperately important that this operation takes place. The lives of tens of thousands of people in Mariupol depend on it," the Red Cross said.

AMSTERDAM — Ukraine's President Volodymyr Zelenskyy has spoke by video link to the Dutch parliament. Zelenskyy, who delivered his speech in Ukrainian, called on the Netherlands to be prepared to stop importing Russian energy, to halt trade with Russia and to provide more weapons.

He also addressed Prime Minister Mark Rutte, saying "Our EU membership depends on you."

Rutte had told Zelenskyy at an EU summit earlier this month that Ukraine's EU accession can't be sped up. "There isn't something like a fast track, a fast procedure," Rutte said at the March 11 summit in Versailles.

BRUSSELS — European Union antitrust regulators have raided the offices of several companies in Germany involved in the supply, transmission and storage of natural gas amid concern over skyrocketing prices in Europe.

The European Commission, which polices EU competition policy, did not name the companies targeted in the March 29 "surprise inspections." But anti-trust regulators have been probing the actions of Russian energy giant Gazprom, which has premises in Germany, in the European market. Gazprom could not be immediately reached for comment.

The Commission suspects that the companies "have violated EU competition rules that prohibit abuse of a dominant position" in the market. It says the inspections do not imply that those involved are guilty.

Russia is the biggest exporter of oil, natural gas and coal to the 27-nation EU. About 40% of the bloc's gas imports come from Russia, much of it piped through Ukraine.

In January, the head of the International Energy Agency blamed Russia for Europe's natural gas crisis, saying that high prices and low storage levels are largely due to Gazprom withholding supplies.

ANKARA, Turkey — Turkey's top diplomat says Ankara is working to bring the Ukrainian and Russian foreign ministers together again for talks.

In an interview with Turkey's A Haber channel, Mevlut Cavusoglu said the meeting could happen within two weeks.

His comments came days after Turkey hosted Ukrainian and Russian negotiators for face-to-face talks in Istanbul. Cavusoglu said decisions taken during the talks to reduce tensions had not fully been put into effect on the ground.

"We do not see these decisions being reflected on the field - for example, the removal of Russian soldiers from some areas," he said.

Asked about the presence of sanctioned Russian oligarch Roman Abramovich in the negotiations, Cavusoglu said the businessman was engaged in "useful" efforts to end the fighting.

"Abramovich has been sincerely making efforts to end the fighting since the first day of the war," he said.

During the talks in Istanbul Tuesday, Ukraine set out a detailed framework for a peace deal under which the country would remain neutral but its security would be guaranteed by a group of third countries, including the U.S., Britain, France, Turkey, China and Poland.

DUBAI, United Arab Emirates — A Red Cross warehouse in the besieged Ukrainian port city of Mariupol has been struck amid intense Russian shelling of the area.

Satellite pictures from Planet Labs PBC analyzed by The Associated Press on Thursday show clear damage to the warehouse's roof along the Kalmius River near its mouth on the Sea of Azov. A red cross had been painted on the top of the warehouse.

At least one hole from suspected shelling could be seen in an image taken March 21. Some four holes in the roof were clearly visible in images taken Wednesday. The red cross had been on the warehouse's roof from at least late August 2021, according to satellite images.

The International Committee of the Red Cross distributed all the supplies from inside the warehouse

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earlier in March and no staff have been at the site since March 15, the aid group said in a statement.

The Special Forces Unit "Azov," a Ukrainian National Guard unit fighting in Mariupol whose members include far-right activists, has accused Russian forces of firing on the building. Russia did not immediately acknowledge the allegation.

Mariupol, home to some 430,000 people before the war, has seen intense fighting for weeks amid Russia's war on Ukraine. Russian attacks have struck a maternity hospital, fire department locations and civilian homes.

CANBERRA, Australia — Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy has appealed directly to Australian lawmakers for more help in Ukraine's war against Russia including armored vehicles and tougher sanctions.

Zelenskyy has been tailoring his message to individual countries through video appeals like the one shown Thursday to legislators in the Australian Parliament. Lawmakers gave him a standing ovation at the start and end of his 16-minute address.

He called for Russian vessels to be banned from international ports. Zelenskyy specifically asked for Australian-manufactured Bushmaster four-wheel drive armored vehicles.

Prime Minister Scott Morrison had earlier told Zelenskyy that Australia would provide additional military assistance including tactical decoys, unmanned aerial and unmanned ground systems, rations and medical supplies.

LONDON — Britain's defense ministry says Russia continues to pound Chernihiv in northern Ukraine, despite Moscow's claim to have scaled back its offensive around that city and Kyiv.

The Ministry of Defense says "significant Russian shelling and missile strikes have continued."

It said Thursday that "Russian forces continue to hold positions to the east and west of Kyiv despite the withdrawal of a limited number of units. Heavy fighting will likely take place in the suburbs of the city in coming days."

The U.K. intelligence update also said heavy fighting continues in the southern port of Mariupol, which has been besieged by Russia for weeks, but that Ukrainian forces remain in control of the center of the city.

Russia and Ukraine both say they are making efforts to help civilians evacuate westwards out of the besieged port city of Mariupol in eastern Ukraine.

The Russian military said it committed to a local cease-fire along the route from Mariupol to the Ukraine-held city of Zaporizhzhia from Thursday morning.

Ukrainian Deputy Prime Minister Iryna Vereshchuk said Thursday that Ukraine was sending 45 buses to collect people. She said the International Committee of the Red Cross was acting as an intermediary between the two sides.

Similar evacuation efforts have been planned before and collapsed amid recriminations over fighting along the route. Ukraine accused Russian forces last week of seizing bus drivers and rescue workers headed to Mariupol.

Civilians who have managed to leave the city for Ukraine-held territory have typically done so using private cars, but the number of drivable vehicles left in Mariupol has dwindled and fuel stocks are low.

Russia has operated its own evacuations from territory it has captured in Mariupol. Ukraine alleges Russia is sending its citizens to "filtration camps" in separatist-controlled eastern Ukraine and then forcibly taking people to Russia.

Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy has recalled Ukraine's ambassadors to Georgia and Morocco, suggesting they hadn't done enough to persuade those countries to support Ukraine and punish Russia for the invasion.

"With all due respect, if there won't be weapons, won't be sanctions, won't be restrictions for Russian business, then please look for other work," Zelenskyy said in his nighttime video address to the nation

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Wednesday. "I am waiting for concrete results in the coming days from the work of our representatives in Latin America, the Middle East, Southeast Asia and Africa."

Zelenskyy also said he was expecting results from Ukraine's military attaches in embassies abroad. He said "the diplomatic front is one of the key fronts" in Ukraine's battle to win the war against Russia.

The talks between Ukraine and Russia will resume on Friday by video, according to the head of the Ukrainian delegation, David Arakhamia.

The delegations met in-person on Tuesday in Istanbul, after two weeks of meeting by video, and the faint outlines of a possible peace agreement seemed to emerge.

The Ukrainian delegation offered a framework under which the country would declare itself neutral – dropping its bid to join NATO, as Moscow has long demanded – in return for security guarantees from a group of other nations.

Russian diplomats responded positively to Ukraine's proposal.

DUBLIN — An aircraft-leasing company has filed \$3.5 billion in insurance claims for planes and aircraft engines that are stranded in Russia because of sanctions following Russia's invasion of Ukraine.

AerCap said it had leased 135 planes to Russian airlines and has repossessed 22 of them outside of Russia.

The Dublin-based company said AerCap says it's unclear whether it will recover more, and Russian airlines continue to use its planes even though it terminated the leases and demanded that the planes be returned.

After sanctions prohibited U.S. and European companies from leasing, selling or servicing planes and aircraft parts to Russia, Russian President Vladimir Putin signed a law letting his country's airlines re-register foreign planes and use them for domestic flights.

The head of the International Atomic Energy Agency visited a nuclear power plant in southern Ukraine on Wednesday to meet Ukrainian officials and provide technical assistance.

Rafael Mariano Grossi said the IAEA is not involved in political talks with the Russians.

"We are trying to be very active in order to ensure that as soon as possible, the situation is regressed, and the facilities are back in the hands of the Ukrainians," Grossi said.

Ukraine has 15 nuclear reactors at four plants, one of which (Zaporizhzhia) is under the Russian military's control.

Ukraine also is home to the decommissioned Chernobyl plant, the site of the 1986 nuclear accident, with the Russian military seized early in the war. As of Tuesday, eight reactors were operating and the rest were shut down for regular maintenance.

— From video published by Energoatom Press Service in Media Port —Mykolaiv region, Ukraine

LONDON — A U.K. intelligence chief is warning that Russia is looking for cyber targets and bringing in mercenaries to shore up its stalled military campaign in Ukraine.

Jeremy Fleming, who heads the U.K.'s GCHQ electronic spy agency, said Russian President Vladimir Putin "massively misjudged" his chances for a swift military victory in Ukraine.

In a speech in Australia, Fleming praised Ukraine's "information operation" for effectively countering Russia's big disinformation campaign about the war.

While there were expectations that Russia would launch a major cyberattack as part of its military campaign, Fleming said such a move was never part of Moscow's playbook.

But Fleming warns that Russia's "cyber actors are looking for targets in the countries that oppose their actions."

Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy thanked the White House for pledging an additional \$500 million in direct aid, but said he was open with U.S. President Biden about Ukraine needing more to resist the Russian invasion.

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"If we really are fighting for freedom and in defense of democracy together, then we have a right to demand help in this difficult turning point," Zelenskyy said in his nighttime video address to the nation Wednesday. "Tanks, aircraft, artillery systems. Freedom should be armed no worse than tyranny."

Prior to Wednesday's announcement of \$500 million in aid, the Biden administration had sent Ukraine about \$2 billion in humanitarian and security assistance since the start of the war last month. That's all part of the \$13.6 billion that Congress approved earlier this month for Ukraine as part of a broader spending bill.

Zelenskyy said the negotiations with Russia were continuing but for now, they were only "words without specifics."

About the supposed withdrawal of Russian forces from Kyiv and Chernihiv, Zelenskyy said: "We know that this is not a withdrawal but the consequences of being driven out. But we also are seeing that Russia is now concentrating its forces for new strikes on Donbas and we are preparing for this."

Ukrainian YouTube brothers reach out to Japanese to end war

By MARI YAMAGUCHI Associated Press

TOKYO (AP) — Starting out with funny videos and chat over Mario Kart racing games, two Ukrainian brothers have added a somber tone to their YouTube channel popular with young Japanese with updates from their country that bring the harsh realities of war closer to Japan.

The Russian invasion of Ukraine began just after the duo, Sava Tkachov, 26, and his younger brother Yan, 20, celebrated the second anniversary of their YouTube debut with subscribers exceeding 2 million for their Sawayan Channel and Sawayan Games that Sava hosts.

The first word of war came from their father, a business consultant who had returned to Kyiv two months ago just before Russian troops rolled in and has stayed since to help defend his country. The siblings' YouTube content, which used to be full of pranks, jokes and action videos, has become more serious.

Worried about their 53-year-old father and friends in Ukraine, the brothers in early March announced on their channel that they planned to volunteer as defenders too. It triggered a wave of reactions, some supporting and others criticizing them.

The father objected and the Tkachovs, who have no military training, abandoned the idea, especially when Sava said he received long and serious messages from some of his teenage fans showing their willingness to follow the brothers to Ukraine.

"By sending out messages through our channel, I made kids want to go to war and I cannot say if it was good or bad," Sava said at a news conference Thursday. "But at least it was meaningful that they became interested in the issue. Fighting the war on the front-line is not the only way."

Sava, who uses the handle "No War," instead turned his gaming channel into a driver for donations and charity game events. He collected some 3.6 million yen (\$29,500) in three hours, and donated entirely to the Ukrainian Embassy.

The siblings said they also started receiving messages from parents saying their children started thinking about peace and others thanking them for raising important social issues.

"I believe the merit of YouTube is I can convey the real information from the ground that my father is sharing with us about the situation that is very up to date, and I can stream that online almost immediately, so in that sense it could be much faster and accurate than news provided by traditional news media," Sava said.

He said that his father would send videos of bombardment and bodies "as in war movies," but he couldn't use them because they were too graphic. In a recent appearance on a YouTube talk show hosted by popular former vaccine minister Taro Kono, Sava said the brothers were in regular communication with their father from an undisclosed location.

Japan was quick to join other industrialized nations in imposing sanctions against Russia and providing support for Ukraine.

Tokyo has also sent bulletproof vests, helmets, tents, medical supplies and other nonlethal defense equipment to Ukraine as an exception to Japan's ban on military equipment transfer to countries in conflict.

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Japan has taken tougher measures against Russia, worried about the impact of Moscow's war on East Asia where Tokyo has faced threats from North Korea and China. In response to sanctions, Russia suspended peace treaty talks with Japan over the disputed Kuril Islands, which Moscow has held since 1945.

Sava Tkachov, who arrived with his family in Japan when he was 4 and studied at a top Japanese university, thanked his adopted country for its support but says Tokyo should stick to its pacifist role.

"Japan is the world's top-class peaceful nation ... and what the country is doing right now is very appropriate," he said. "As to the question of whether Japan should send weapons, I do not think it's the kind of role Japan should be playing."

Instead, he said, Japan can better contribute by continuing to appeal for peace and take a leadership role within Asia.

He also said Japan can provide home to many war-displaced Ukrainians. Some may face challenges of language or unfamiliar food, "but I'm sure they can overcome the difficulties with the empathy of the Japanese people and the spirits of the Ukrainians."

Biden to mark Transgender Day of Visibility with new actions

WASHINGTON (AP) — President Joe Biden is commemorating Transgender Day of Visibility by celebrating prominent transgender Americans and advocating against what his administration terms "dangerous anti-transgender legislative attacks" that have passed in statehouses across the country.

Biden on Thursday is announcing new measures aimed at making the federal government more inclusive for transgender people, including a new "X" gender marker on U.S. passport applications beginning on April 11 and new Transportation Security Administration scanners that are gender-neutral.

The Democratic president's administration is working to expand the availability of the "X" gender marker to airlines and federal travel programs and will make it easier for transgender people to change their gender information in Social Security Administration records.

Visitors to the White House will soon also be able to select an "X" gender marker option in the White House Worker and Visitor Entry System, which is used to conduct screening background checks for visitors to the executive mansion.

"Transgender Americans continue to face discrimination, harassment, and barriers to opportunity," Biden wrote in a proclamation marking the day. "In the past year, hundreds of anti-transgender bills in States were proposed across America, most of them targeting transgender kids. The onslaught has continued this year. These bills are wrong."

Biden also planned to release a video message to transgender Americans on Thursday.

"Jeopardy!" champion Amy Schneider, the first openly transgender winner on the quiz show, will visit the White House on Thursday to meet with second gentleman Doug Emhoff. Emhoff, along with Admiral Rachel Levine, the assistant secretary for health at the Department of Health and Human Services, will also host a conversation with transgender kids and their parents at the White House.

In Florida, Education Secretary Miguel Cardona will meet with LGBTQ+ students in the wake of the state's new law that 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.

"Their conversation will focus on the impacts of Florida's so-called 'Don't Say Gay' bill, students' experiences at school and, in particular, support for LGBTQI+ student mental health and well-being," the White House said.

HHS, the White House said, will also be the first agency to fly a trans pride flag.

Chris Rock takes to comedy mic, still processing Oscars slap

By MICHAEL CASEY Associated Press

BOSTON (AP) — Chris Rock received several standing ovations before he told one joke Wednesday at his first comedy show since Will Smith slapped him in the face onstage at the Oscars.

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Rock only briefly addressed the slap to the sold out crowd in Boston, saying he was "still kind of processing what happened."

"Other than the weird thing, life is pretty good," Rock said midway through his first of two sets. The nighttime performances came just three days after Smith smacked the comedian for making a joke about his wife, Jada Pinkett Smith, while presenting an Academy Award.

Rock didn't mention Smith or Pinkett Smith by name at his show in Boston. Wearing all white, he seemed to be almost embarrassed by the multiple ovations he received. As the applause carried on for minutes — with fans yelling "I love you, Chris!" — the comedian appeared to be getting emotional, a guest seated near the stage told The Associated Press.

"How was your weekend?" Rock joked before getting into his set.

Ticket prices skyrocketed after Smith took to the awards stage and slapped Rock on live TV, but the comedian made clear he wasn't going to talk at length about it Wednesday.

"If you came to hear that, I'm not ... I had like a whole show I wrote before this weekend," Rock said.

He spent much of the night skewering celebrities and politicians. Among them were the Duchess of Sussex, the Kardashians, as well as President Joe Biden, Hillary Clinton and former President Donald Trump.

Outside the venue, a fan showed off a T-shirt featuring the "G.I. Jane" logo and Pinkett Smith's face. Another had a shirt he made that showed Smith's face and displayed a crude joke about the couple's relationship.

At least one person yelled during the show that Rock should sue Smith.

Rock's joke at the Oscars was about Jada Pinkett Smith's buzzed haircut: "Jada, I love you. 'G.I. Jane 2,' can't wait to see it," Rock said, comparing Pinkett Smith to Demi Moore's "G.I. Jane" character, who had a buzz cut in the 1997 film.

Smith promptly stood up from his seat at the front of the venue and took to the stage, slapping Rock across the face before sitting back down and yelling at Rock to keep his wife's name out of his mouth.

Pinkett Smith has spoken publicly about her diagnosis of alopecia, which can cause baldness.

Within an hour, Smith won best actor, receiving a standing ovation. During his five-minute acceptance speech, Smith talked about defending his family and apologized to the academy. A day later, 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."

Pinkett Smith responded Tuesday with a graphic on Instagram that read: "This is a season of healing and I'm here for it." She offered no further comment.

George Guay, a 24-year-old fan from Boston who grew up on "Everybody Hates Chris," said he bought a ticket after Rock was slapped by Smith.

"He's the most popular celebrity so I want to be here," Guay said before the show, adding that he hoped Rock would open with a response to the situation. "I just want a good show."

Afterward, some fans were a little disappointed he did not address the controversy more directly. But they also said they could see from his body language that he wasn't sure how to do it.

"As soon as I saw him, his mood was a little bit shocked," said Dave Henriquez, a 48-year-old musician from Newton, Massachusetts. "I got that it was weighing on him."

Erin Ryan, a 33-year-old teacher also from Newton who was with Henriquez, said she felt Rock wanted to perform his act, "not make the standup about the one incident."

Kathryn West-Hines, a 50-year-old Pilates instructor from Malden, Massachusetts, said she came away with even more respect for Rock. "I thought it was amazing, classy," she said, adding that he wasn't going to let "what happened Sunday" take away his shine.

The Academy of Motion Pictures Arts and Sciences condemned Smith striking Rock. Its board of governors met Wednesday to initiate disciplinary proceedings against Smith for violations of the group's standards of conduct. The academy said it had asked Smith to leave the ceremony after hitting Rock, but he refused to do so.

This was not the first time Rock had made a joke at Pinkett Smith's expense. When he hosted the 2016

Oscars, some people boycotted 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."

Wanda Sykes, who co-hosted the Oscars with Amy Schumer and Regina Hall, said she felt physically ill after Smith slapped Rock. In an interview with Ellen DeGeneres scheduled to air April 7, Sykes also said letting Smith stay and accept his award should not have happened.

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.

Ukrainians in US mobilize to help 100,000 expected refugees

By KATHLEEN RONAYNE Associated Press

SACRAMENTO, Calif. (AP) — As the United States prepares to accept up to 100,000 Ukrainian refugees following Russia's invasion of their country, existing communities in cities like Sacramento and Seattle are already mobilizing to provide food, shelter and support to those fleeing the war.

The federal government hasn't said when the formal resettlement process will begin, but Ukrainian groups in the U.S. are already providing support to people entering the country through other channels, including on visas that will eventually expire or by flying to Mexico and crossing over the border.

"No refugee is waiting for you to be ready for them," said Eduard Kislyanka, senior pastor at the House of Bread church near Sacramento, which has been sending teams of people to Poland and preparing dozens of its member families to house people arriving in California.

Since the war began in late February over 4 million people are estimated to have fled Ukraine and millions more have been displaced within the country. President Joe Biden said last week that the U.S. would admit up to 100,000 Ukrainian refugees and provide \$1 billion in humanitarian assistance to countries affected by the exodus.

The federal government has yet to provide a timeline for refugee resettlement — often a lengthy process — or details on where refugees will be resettled. It's unlikely the United States will see a massive influx of Ukrainians on charter and military flights like happened with Afghan refugees last year.

Krish O'Mara Vignarajah, president of Lutheran Immigration and Refugee Service, said the White House commitment of accepting up to 100,000 Ukrainians does not come with a minimum. Aside from the refugee resettlement program, their main avenues will be seeking humanitarian parole and appearing at the border with Mexico, she said.

Many who reach the United States will likely go to cities that already have strong Ukrainian communities.

The Sacramento region is home to the highest concentration of Ukrainian immigrants in the country, with about 18,000 people, according to census data analyzed by the Migration Policy Institute. The Seattle, Chicago and New York City areas are also hubs.

Word is spreading about the resources available in Sacramento, where churches like House of Bread are connecting Ukrainians who have already arrived with host families who can offer shelter and help access government resources and transportation. Kislyanka called the church's actions a "stop gap" measure designed to help as people await more clarity about the formal government resettlement process.

"Most of these people do not have any relations, like they don't know anybody here," said Kislyanka, who came to the U.S. as a child in the early 1990s. "Having somebody who can help them navigate the cultural shock and navigate the system. . . it just makes things a lot easier and smoother."

Sacramento has been a destination for Ukrainians since the late 1980s and early 1990s, when many of those arriving were Christians taking advantage of a U.S. law offering entrance to anyone escaping religious persecution in the former Soviet Union.

Another wave of refugees began arriving after Russia's initial invasion of Ukraine in 2014. Of the 8,000

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Ukrainians resettled by the organization World Relief since then, 3,000 have come to Sacramento, said Vanassa Hamra, the group's community engagement manager in Sacramento.

Beyond the dozens of Slavic churches in the Sacramento region, there are schools that serve mainly Ukrainian and Russian students. Eastern European grocery stores and restaurants offer favorite foods like borscht, a type of beetroot soup, and varenyky, a boiled dumpling. Businesses started by Ukrainians try to hire others from their country.

All of that makes it easy for younger people to maintain a sense of connection to their heritage and for older immigrants to adapt without having to become fluent in a new language and culture.

"It's very easy when you come here. Every door, it's open for you," said Oleksandra Datsenko, who came to the U.S. six years ago and works as a waitress at Firebird Russian Restaurant, which serves Eastern European fare in a Sacramento suburb.

Valeriy Goloborodko, who immigrated to Southern California in 2006, wanted to return to Ukraine until he settled with his wife in the Seattle area. There, he found a thriving Ukrainian community and went on to become the country's honorary consul in Seattle in 2015, helping organize an annual festival where as many as 16,000 people a day would show up to feast on traditional food, listen to Ukrainian musicians and wear traditionally embroidered clothing.

"The Ukrainian community in Washington helped me to feel like I was at home — and this is my home now," Goloborodko said. "We feel like this is a Little Ukraine."

Since the invasion, Goloborodko and others in the Washington state Ukrainian community have lobbied hard for support from state officials. Democratic Gov. Jay Inslee has vowed that Washington will welcome Ukrainians fleeing the violence. The Legislature has set aside nearly \$20 million to help pay anticipated costs of housing, job training, health care and legal aid for Ukrainian refugees. The Port of Seattle has promised to help welcome the refugees at Seattle-Tacoma International Airport, where they can begin to be connected with services.

In Sacramento, meanwhile, the state's housing crisis could prove challenging as resettlement and community organizations look for lodging for new arrivals. Like much of California, the region is facing a housing crunch with limited supply and rising rents.

"People are coming here; we can help them; we can provide something. But it's going to get swamped so quick," said Kislyanka, the head pastor at House of Bread.

The International Rescue Committee's Sacramento branch has an affiliated immigrant welcome center that's already assisting people who entered the country illegally, said Lisa Welze, director of IRC Sacramento. Many are nervous to engage with resettlement agencies but in need of resources — particularly housing — as well as help navigating the immigration system to see if they can find a legal path to stay.

As for when the more formal resettlement process will begin, "we've been told we just need to wait," Welze said.

Fights over illegal fishing lead to armed conflict, deaths

By HELEN WIEFFERING Associated Press

Protesters from across Sri Lanka descended on the nation's capital in February, shouting above the street noise and pumping their fists in the air in frustration.

The group was made up of fishermen and their supporters, and their rage was sparked by the Indian boats that regularly sail into Sri Lankan waters by the thousands, hauling away valuable sea cucumbers and prawns. Sri Lankan fishermen say they've lost business, and some have lost their lives in confrontations with foreign crews.

The protesters demanded more action from the government, even as Sri Lanka's navy has used force to guard its fisheries — destroying Indian fishing gear, charging at the vessels, and in at least one violent episode, firing shots. Five Indian fishermen were reportedly killed last year in encounters with the navy, although Sri Lankan authorities deny they killed or shot at crews, and say they were not the aggressors.

"The intensity is increasing, the level of violence is increasing, deaths are increasing," said N. Manoharan,

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who has researched the conflict as director of East Asian studies at Bangalore's Christ University. Warnings and arrests, he said, have failed to keep Indian trawlers from crossing into Sri Lankan waters — in part because their own shores are overfished. "They are so desperate for the catch, and they go and lose their lives."

This 600-mile stretch of the Indian Ocean is far from the only place where tensions over fishing run high. Elsewhere in the region, fishermen in India and Pakistan are also entangled in an ongoing boundary dispute between the two nations in the Arabian Sea. According to Indian news reports, Pakistan's maritime authority has shot at Indian fishing boats at least twice in the past two years.

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Around the world, from Sri Lanka to Argentina to the South China Sea, the ocean has become an expanding front in the armed conflict between nations over illegal fishing and overfishing, practices that deplete a vulnerable food source for billions of people worldwide. Jessica Spijkers, a researcher for Australia's national science agency, found a rise in global fishing conflicts when she studied a four-decade period ending in 2016. Conflicts this century, she said, often involved claims of illegal and overfishing. Her analysis included nonviolent disputes that sometimes precede the outbreak of violence.

An Associated Press review of conflict databases compiled by non-governmental organizations, government tallies, and media reports found in the past five years more than 360 instances of state authorities ramming or shooting at foreign fishing boats, sometimes leading to deaths.

During that same time, another 850 foreign fishing boats were seized by authorities and systematically crushed, blown up, or sunk.

The figures cover incidents across six continents but are likely an undercount since no single entity tracks violent conflicts over fishing rights worldwide. The AP analysis did not include routine citations and arrests but focused on where and how violence has escalated in fishing grounds around the world.

Environmental and national security experts say countries that depend on fishing both as a source of food and commerce are at risk of greater conflict in the coming years. Already, industrial fishing boats extract droves of fish from the sea, with distant-water fleets from China and other countries roaming far beyond their domestic waters in search of stocks that have been depleted closer to home.

The search for new sources of fish comes as nations are tasked with feeding growing populations and climate change further endangers ocean life.

"It is getting significantly worse," said Johan Bergenas, a World Wildlife Fund expert on oceans who first warned of a rise in global fishing conflicts five years ago.

"We are now seeing armed conflict and tensions and strains as a result of fish stocks and competition over in West Africa, in the West Indian Ocean, in Latin America," he said. "There's going to be conflicts and armed engagements over these incredibly important fish stocks around the world."

In early February, the 400-foot U.S. Coast Guard Cutter Stratton docked in Fiji and welcomed three local officials aboard. For one week, the combined crew toured the oceans around Fiji's islands in search of fishing boats that might be flouting the rules — boarding eight boats and flagging 22 customs and fishing violations.

Fiji's exclusive economic zone is an area of water 70 times larger than its landmass. Vilisoni Tarabe, a fisheries policy officer at the WWF office in Fiji, said many Pacific island countries suspect fishing boats of catching more tuna or sharks than they report.

"We don't always have the capacity or resources," he said, to "monitor the activities that goes on those fishing vessels."

This sheer size of the ocean is partly what makes fishing enforcement so difficult — what Capt. Stephen Adler, the Stratton's commanding officer, calls "the tyranny of distance."

"What we do is we help provide those islands the support and the capabilities to go out and target those

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kinds of issues that they're seeing out on their waters," Adler said.

The U.S. partnership with Fiji is one of 11 between the U.S. and Pacific Island countries, with a possible 12th on the horizon — each meant to stave off the economic collapse and regional instability that could follow if waters are fished to depletion. In a 2020 report, the service for the first time listed illegal, unreported and unregulated fishing ahead of piracy as the leading security issue at sea — even a possible threat to world order.

"It's incredibly important to make sure that these regions stay stable," said U.S. Coast Guard Lt. Cmdr. Kristen Caldwell, who leads the service's fisheries law enforcement in the Pacific. "Every single one of these countries that we're concerned about are in our backyard."

The joint patrols are fueled, too, by U.S. concerns about China, which maintains the largest fishing fleet in the world and has invested heavily in port access in coastal nations from Latin America to West Africa.

Hundreds of Chinese fishing vessels have swarmed the high seas near South America, with the Argentine navy twice firing shots at Chinese boats in 2018 and 2019. Last summer, the AP discovered that two dozen Chinese vessels fishing near the Galapagos Islands had a history of labor abuse accusations, past convictions for illegal fishing, or showed signs of possibly violating maritime law.

Meanwhile, China and its neighbors in the South China Sea are at a long-running standoff over access to islands and fishing grounds. Conflict has flared between coast guards and foreign fishing crews in the Paracel Islands near Vietnam, the Natuna Islands near Indonesia and the Spratly Islands west of the Philippines.

"It's a tinderbox," said Sally Yozell, a senior fellow at the Stimson Center, a national security think tank based in Washington.

The AP reviewed data from the Center for Strategic and International Studies, which tracked armed standoffs in the South China Sea from 2010 through 2020. More than three-quarters of the 17 events since 2017 involved violence between a law enforcement vessel and a foreign fishing crew.

The conflicts show that fishing and national security concerns are increasingly intertwined.

China maintains a fleet of maritime militia fishing boats, for instance, that can store weapons and water cannons alongside their catch, according to research by CSIS and the Center for Advanced Defense Studies. A separate fleet of fishing boats lingers near the disputed Spratly Islands, serving as an implicit extension of Chinese law enforcement.

Neither fleet does much fishing, said Gregory Poling, director of the Asia Maritime Transparency Initiative at CSIS. Mainly, he said, the boats stay put, anchored — achieving a larger political goal.

"Nobody's crazy enough to try to board a Chinese boat surrounded by a hundred other Chinese boats, all of whom are bigger than you."

Even Chinese boats that do fish commercially are often escorted by armed coast guard vessels, Poling said.

The U.S. Coast Guard has accused China's maritime militia of "aggressive behavior" meant to intimidate foreign fishermen at home and on the high seas.

For many countries, violent confrontations at sea are a last-ditch effort to keep foreign fleets from fishing illegally.

Countries like Indonesia, Malaysia, and Australia try to deter illegal fishing by making a spectacle of their enforcement, lining confiscated boats with explosives and setting them aflame.

Indonesia sank more than 370 foreign fishing boats in the past five years, according to the Ministry of Marine Affairs and Fisheries.

Andreas Aditya Salim, co-founder of the Indonesia Ocean Justice Initiative and a former member of the fishing ministry, said seeing his country destroying foreign fishing boats felt "heroic." As a nation comprising more than 17,000 islands, Indonesia has far more marine territory than land.

"This is important for my country. We have to defend it," he said. The explosions send a message that "illegal fishing stops here."

But elsewhere in the Indian Ocean, it is Indonesian boats that are being destroyed. Last fall, Australia's

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Border Force destroyed three Indonesian fishing boats and posted pictures on Facebook of a vessel on fire. Authorities destroyed at least 15 foreign fishing boats between July and October last year, part of a task force operation to combat rising incursions.

"Our message to foreign fishers that choose to fish outside the rules is simple," the Border Force said in a statement last year. "We will intercept you, you will lose your catch, your equipment and possibly even your vessel."

The U.S. Coast Guard has taken a much quieter approach to disposing of Mexican fishing boats captured in U.S. waters. At the South Padre Island station in Texas, 440 boats were cut apart over the past five years, the Coast Guard said — their engines crushed.

The Canadian Coast Guard and the Fisheries Control Agency for the European Union both told the AP they had not rammed or shot at a foreign fishing boat in that timeframe. Still, Europe has not been immune to conflict, with press reports describing Romanian authorities firing at a Turkish boat suspected of illegal fishing, and Italian law enforcement chasing and shooting at a Tunisian fishing boat.

Feuds at sea were common before the United Nations established broader international agreement on maritime boundaries in 1982. The Americas were no exception.

In the late sixties, a U.S. tuna boat was hit by machine gun fire for fishing in Peru's claimed economic waters. The U.S. and Canada also argued for years over the right to fish around Georges Bank, a rich scallop ground between Nova Scotia and Maine, until the dispute was settled in international court in 1984.

Some experts say climate change could be the next driver of armed conflicts between nations over fishing. Bergenas, who is working to predict the next areas of fishing conflict, has his eyes trained on the Arctic and the tropical Pacific.

Polar ice melting could free up valuable fisheries for Russia, China and the United States, he said, and he expects Pacific tuna stocks to migrate eastward, leaving poverty and bitter competition in their wake.

Where lines of demarcation between nations remain unclear or international relations are fraught, fishing serves as an easy spark for conflict. Last year, Eritrean military forces opened fire at Yemeni fishermen near the Hanish Islands, reviving a conflict over the contested area that started decades ago. And off the coast of the Gaza Strip, Palestinian fishermen have been in constant conflict with Israeli security forces.

The AP, drawing on data from the nonprofit Armed Conflict Location and Event Data Project, found more than 300 incidents of Israeli authorities firing shots, damaging vessels, or shooting water cannons at Gaza fishermen in the past five years.

The tight control Israel keeps over Gaza's borders has meant Palestinians are restricted to fishing in a narrow ribbon of the Mediterranean Sea, and in wartime, Israel has cut off access to the fishing zone altogether. The Israeli Defense Forces did not respond to AP's requests for comment but have previously said the restrictions are a security measure to prevent the militant group Hamas from launching attacks in Israel.

Nizar Ayyash, head of Gaza's fishermen union, told the AP three fishermen have died from attacks in the past five years. The best fishing is for sea bass, he said, but stocks are mostly located outside the permitted area.

Most shootings happen within 100-200 meters of fishing boundaries to the north and south, Ayyash said, though organizations like Gisha and the Palestinian Centre for Human Rights have documented attacks well within areas where Gaza's fishermen were allowed to work.

"Fishing has become a far more dangerous occupation and also one that fewer Gaza residents are able to actually make a living off of because of the problems in accessing Gaza's sea space," said Miriam Mar-mur, Gisha's public advocacy director.

The violence between Sri Lanka and India persists despite the countries' otherwise friendly relations. Many Indian and Sri Lankan fishermen share the same Tamil ethnicity and language, even if their countries sit opposite a narrow band of the ocean.

Yet Sri Lankan authorities say Indian trawlers pose a real threat to the country's fishing sector. Sri Lanka

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has banned bottom trawling, a practice environmentalists say strips the sea of fish and damages seaweed and coral reefs.

Bottom trawling "is bad enough," said V. Vivekanandan, former head of the South Indian Federation of Fisherman Societies. Subsequent innovations are even worse, he said, allowing the nets to catch "every fish available in the sea."

Decades of civil war in Sri Lanka meant that Indian crews could reap the benefits of fishing in the waters around the island without repercussion, but the war's end in 2009 and the return of Sri Lankan fishermen to the sea pushed fishing conflicts back into the limelight.

Deadly brawls have erupted between the competing boats even when national authorities aren't present. Herman Kumara, head of Sri Lanka's National Fisheries Solidarity Movement, said seven Sri Lankan fishermen died amid violence with Indian crews in 2019. Another two died this year.

Kumara wants to see even stronger enforcement and hopes for a dialogue with Indian fishermen.

"It has already turned violent," he said. Without intervention, he added, "this situation might explode."

Seafood biz braces for losses of jobs, fish due to sanctions

By PATRICK WHITTLE Associated Press

PORTLAND, Maine (AP) — The worldwide seafood industry is steeling itself for price hikes, supply disruptions and potential job losses as new rounds of economic sanctions on Russia make key species such as cod and crab harder to come by.

The latest round of U.S. attempts to punish Russia for the invasion of Ukraine includes bans on imports of seafood, alcohol and diamonds. The U.S. is also stripping "most favored nation status" from Russia. Nations around the world are taking similar steps.

Russia is one of the largest producers of seafood in the world, and was the fifth-largest producer of wild-caught fish, according to a 2020 report by the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations. Russia is not one of the biggest exporters of seafood to the U.S., but it's a world leader in exports of cod (the preference for fish and chips in the U.S.). It's also a major supplier of crabs and Alaska pollock, widely used in fast-food sandwiches and processed products like fish sticks.

The impact is likely to be felt globally, as well as in places with working waterfronts. One of those is Maine, where more than \$50 million in seafood products from Russia passed through Portland in 2021, according to federal statistics.

"If you're getting cod from Russia, it's going to be a problem," said Glen Libby, an owner of Port Clyde Fresh Catch, a seafood market in Tenants Harbor, Maine. "That's quite a mess. We'll see how it turns out."

Russia exported more than 28 million pounds (12.7 million kilograms) of cod to the U.S. from Jan. 1, 2020, to Jan. 31, 2022, according to census data.

The European Union and United Kingdom are both deeply dependent on Russian seafood. And prices of seafood are already spiking in Japan, a major seafood consumer that is limiting its trade with Russia.

In the U.K., where fish and chips are a cultural marker, shop owners and consumers alike are bracing for price surges. British fish and chip shops were already facing a squeeze because of soaring energy costs and rising food prices.

Andrew Crook, head of the National Federation of Fish Friers, said earlier this month that — even before the war — he expected a third of Britain's fish and chip shops to go out of business. If fish prices shoot up even higher, "we are in real dire straits," he said.

In mid-March, the U.K. slapped a 35% tariff hike on Russian whitefish, including chip-shop staples cod and haddock.

"We're a massive part of U.K. culture and it would be a shame to see that go," he told broadcaster ITV.

U.S. consumers are most likely to notice the impact of sanctions via price and availability of fish, said Kanae Tokunaga, who runs the Coastal and Marine Economics Lab at Gulf of Maine Research Institute in Portland.

"Because seafood is a global commodity, even if they are not harvested in Russia, you will notice the

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price hike," Tokunaga said.

In the U.S., the dependence on foreign cod stems to the loss of its own once-robust Atlantic cod fishery that cratered in the face of overfishing and environmental changes. U.S. fishermen, based mostly in New England, brought more than 100 million pounds (45.4 million kilograms) of cod to the docks per year in the early 1980s, but the 2020 catch was less than 2 million pounds (900,000 kilograms).

Regulators have tried to save the fishery with management measures such as very low fishing quotas, and many fishermen targeting other East Coast groundfish species such as haddock and flounder now avoid cod altogether.

Seafood processors in Massachusetts are concerned about job losses due to loss of Russian products, Democratic U.S. Sen. Ed Markey, who does support sanctions on Russia, said.

"I have heard from seafood processors in my home state with concerns about potential sudden effects of a new, immediate ban on imports on their workforce, including hundreds of union workers in the seafood processing industry," he said on the Senate floor in February.

For U.S. producers of seafood staples such as fish and chips, the lack of Russian cod could mean pivoting to other foreign sources, said Walt Golet, a research assistant professor at the University of Maine's School of Marine Sciences.

"We might be able to bring in more from Norway, a little more from Canadian fisheries," Golet said. "It really is driven by the price of those imports."

As an alternative, producers and consumers could try underutilized fish species caught domestically, such as Atlantic pollock and redfish, said Ben Martens, executive director of Maine Coast Fishermen's Association.

"Maybe this is a time to use haddock or hake or maybe monkfish, something different," Martens said. "If it's going to disrupt supply chains it does present an opportunity for other species to fill that void."

Biden planning to tap oil reserve to control gas prices

By ZEKE MILLER and JOSH BOAK Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — President Joe Biden is preparing to order the release of up to 1 million barrels of oil per day from the nation's strategic petroleum reserve, according to two people familiar with the decision, in a bid to control energy prices that have spiked as the U.S. and allies have imposed steep sanctions on Russia over its invasion of Ukraine.

The announcement could come as soon as Thursday, when the White House says Biden is planning to deliver remarks on his administration's plans to combat rising gas prices. The duration of the release hasn't been finalized but could last for several months. The people spoke on the condition of anonymity to preview the decision.

High oil prices have not coaxed more production, creating a challenge for Biden. The president has seen his popularity sink as inflation reached a 40-year high in February and the cost of petroleum and gasoline climbed after Russia invaded Ukraine. Crude oil on Wednesday traded at nearly \$105 a barrel, up from about \$60 a year ago.

Still, oil producers have been more focused on meeting the needs of investors, according to a survey released last week by the Dallas Federal Reserve. About 59% of the executives surveyed said investor pressure to preserve "capital discipline" amid high prices was the reason they weren't pumping more, while fewer than 10% blamed government regulation.

The steady release from the reserves would be a meaningful sum and come near to closing the domestic production gap relative to February 2020, before the coronavirus caused a steep decline in oil output.

The Biden administration in November announced the release of 50 million barrels from the strategic reserve in coordination with other countries. And after the Ukrainian war began, the U.S. and 30 other countries agreed to an additional release of 60 million barrels from reserves, with half of the total coming from the U.S.

According to the Department of Energy, which manages it, more than 568 million barrels of oil were held in the reserve as of Mar. 25.

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News of the administration's planning was first reported by Bloomberg.

End of COVID may bring major turbulence for US health care

By RICARDO ALONSO-ZALDIVAR Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — When the end of the COVID-19 pandemic comes, it could create major disruptions for a cumbersome U.S. health care system made more generous, flexible and up-to-date technologically through a raft of temporary emergency measures.

Winding down those policies could begin as early as the summer. That could force an estimated 15 million Medicaid recipients to find new sources of coverage, require congressional action to preserve broad telehealth access for Medicare enrollees, and scramble special COVID-19 rules and payment policies for hospitals, doctors and insurers. There are also questions about how emergency use approvals for COVID-19 treatments will be handled.

The array of issues is tied to the coronavirus public health emergency first declared more than two years ago and periodically renewed since then. It's set to end April 16 and the expectation is that the Biden administration will extend it through mid-July. Some would like a longer off-ramp.

Transitions don't bode well for the complex U.S. health care system, with its mix of private and government insurance and its labyrinth of policies and procedures. Health care chaos, if it breaks out, could create midterm election headaches for Democrats and Republicans alike.

"The flexibilities granted through the public health emergency have helped people stay covered and get access to care, so moving forward the key question is how to build on what has been a success and not lose ground," said Juliette Cubanski, a Medicare expert with the nonpartisan Kaiser Family Foundation, who has been researching potential consequences of winding down the pandemic emergency.

MEDICAID CHURN

Medicaid, the state-federal health insurance program for low-income people, is covering about 79 million people, a record partly due to the pandemic.

But the nonpartisan Urban Institute think tank estimates that about 15 million people could lose Medicaid when the public health emergency ends, at a rate of at least 1 million per month.

Congress increased federal Medicaid payments to states because of COVID-19, but it also required states to keep people on the rolls during the health emergency. In normal times states routinely disenroll Medicaid recipients whose incomes rise beyond certain levels, or for other life changes affecting eligibility. That process will switch on again when the emergency ends, and some states are eager to move forward.

Virtually all of those losing Medicaid are expected to be eligible for some other source of coverage, either through employers, the Affordable Care Act or — for kids — the Children's Health Insurance Program.

But that's not going to happen automatically, said Matthew Buettgens, lead researcher on the Urban Institute study. Cost and lack of awareness about options could get in the way.

People dropped from Medicaid may not realize they can pick up taxpayer-subsidized ACA coverage. Medicaid is usually free, so people offered workplace insurance could find the premiums too high.

"This is an unprecedented situation," said Buettgens. "The uncertainty is real."

The federal Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services, or CMS, is advising states to take it slow and connect Medicaid recipients who are disenrolled with other potential coverage. The agency will keep an eye on states' accuracy in making eligibility decisions. Biden officials want coverage shifts, not losses.

"We are focused making sure we hold on to the gains in coverage we have made under the Biden-Harris administration," said CMS Administrator Chiquita Brooks-LaSure. "We are at the strongest point in our history and we are going to make sure that we hold on to the coverage gains."

ACA coverage — or "Obamacare" — is an option for many who would lose Medicaid. But it will be less affordable if congressional Democrats fail to extend generous financial assistance called for in President Joe Biden's social legislation. Democrats stalling the bill would face blame.

Republicans in mostly Southern states that have refused to expand Medicaid are also vulnerable. In those states, it can be very difficult for low-income adults to get coverage and more people could wind

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up uninsured.

State Medicaid officials don't want to be the scapegoats. "Medicaid has done its job," said Matt Salo, head of the National Association of Medicaid Directors. "We have looked out for physical, mental and behavioral health needs. As we come out of this emergency, we are supposed to right-size the program."

TELEHEALTH STATIC

Millions of Americans discovered telehealth in 2020 when coronavirus shutdowns led to the suspension of routine medical consultations. In-person visits are again the norm, but telehealth has shown its usefulness and gained broader acceptance.

The end of the public health emergency would jeopardize telehealth access for millions enrolled in traditional Medicare. Restrictions predating COVID-19 limit telehealth mainly to rural residents, in part to mitigate against health care fraud. Congress has given itself 151 days after the end of the public health emergency to come up with new rules.

"If there are no changes to the law after that, most Medicare beneficiaries will lose access to coverage for telehealth," the Kaiser Foundation's Cubanski said.

A major exception applies to enrollees in private Medicare Advantage plans, which generally do cover telehealth. However, nearly 6 in 10 Medicare enrollees are in the traditional fee-for-service program.

TESTS, VACCINES, TREATMENTS, PAYMENTS & PROCEDURES

Widespread access to COVID-19 vaccines, tests and treatments rests on legal authority connected to the public health emergency.

One example is the Biden administration's requirement for insurers to cover up to eight free at-home COVID-19 tests per month.

An area that's particularly murky is what happens to tests, treatments and vaccines covered under emergency use authorization from the Food and Drug Administration.

Some experts say emergency use approvals last only through the duration of the public health emergency. Others say it's not as simple as that, because a different federal emergency statute also applies to vaccines, tests and treatments. There's no clear direction yet from health officials.

The FDA has granted full approval to Pfizer-BioNTech's COVID-19 vaccine for those 16 and older and Moderna's for those 18 and older, so their continued use would not be affected.

But hospitals could take a financial hit. Currently they're paid 20% more for the care of COVID-19 patients. That added payment is only for the duration of the emergency.

And Medicare enrollees would have more hoops to jump through to be approved for rehab in a nursing home. A suspended Medicare rule requiring a prior three-day hospital stay would come back into effect.

Health and Human Services Secretary Xavier Becerra recently told The Associated Press that his department is committed to giving "ample notice" when it ends the public health emergency.

"We want to make sure we're not putting in a detrimental position Americans who still need our help," Becerra said. "The one that people are really worried about is Medicaid."

Arians retires as Bucs' coach, Bowles promoted to top spot

By FRED GOODALL AP Sports Writer

TAMPA, Fla. (AP) — Bruce Arians unexpectedly retired as coach of the Tampa Bay Buccaneers, a stunning move Wednesday night that the 69-year-old who guided the team to its second Super Bowl title says is not related to health.

It's the second major retirement announcement for the Bucs this offseason, following Tom Brady's announcement in February that he was ending his career. Brady, a seven-time Super Bowl champion quarterback, returned 40 days later, saying he would return for a 23rd season and noting he had "unfinished business."

But instead of Arians, Brady will be playing for Todd Bowles after the defensive coordinator was promoted as the coach's successor.

Arians, a two-time cancer survivor, stepped down as coach of the Arizona Cardinals due to medical concerns in 2017, only to be lured back to the sideline by the then-struggling Bucs two years later. This

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time, he said, he exits feeling the best he has in “many years” and is looking forward to transitioning into a front-office position working with general manager Jason Licht.

“This team is in a much better place than it was three years ago due to Jason’s great work and the Glazer family’s commitment to winning,” Arians said in a lengthy statement issued by the team.

“I want to focus on what I can give back to this incredible game that has provided so much for me and my family,” Arians added. “I really began thinking about my personal transition plan earlier this offseason. I wanted to ensure when I walked away that Todd Bowles would have the best opportunity to succeed.”

Arians, who will turn 70 this coming season, coached the Bucs to the Super Bowl title in the 2020 season — Brady’s first with Tampa Bay. The Bucs were 31-18 in Arians’ three seasons there and he was 80-48-1 in eight years as a head coach overall when adding in five seasons with the Cardinals from 2013 to 2017.

NBC Sports and the Los Angeles Times first reported Arians’ decision and that Bowles would be replace him.

“I have spent most of the last 50 years of my life on the sidelines as a football coach in one form or another,” Arians said. “I love football. I love the relationships, the strategy, the competition — everything. It has been one hell of a ride, but I know this is the right time for me to make this transition.”

Bowles becomes the sixth minority head coach currently in the NFL, joining Pittsburgh’s Mike Tomlin, Washington’s Ron Rivera, the New York Jets’ Robert Saleh, Houston’s Lovie Smith and Miami’s Mike McDaniel. He also is the fourth Black coach in Bucs’ history, joining Tony Dungy, Raheem Morris and Smith.

Brady, in an Instagram post Wednesday night, said Arians was a major part of his decision to play for Tampa Bay and that he’ll be “forever grateful.”

“You are an incredible man and coach, and it was a privilege to play for you,” Brady wrote. “You are a true NFL legend and pioneer for all the work you have done to make the league more diverse and inclusive. Smart, tough, and loyal are a few of the words to describe your style. I will always remember the conversations we had when you recruited me two years ago and all of the things we discussed came true.”

There was no public indication at the NFL’s annual meetings on the Atlantic side of the state in Palm Beach, Florida, that such a move was coming. Arians was there, briefly, and did an interview with NFL Network about what the team would have done to replace Brady if the quarterback hadn’t changed his mind. Licht addressed reporters for a short time during the meetings, as did team co-owner Joel Glazer.

Arians did not do a group interview there, with the team saying he was leaving for personal reasons. He was also one of the four coaches who opted to not be part of the annual group photo of all NFL head coaches at the meetings.

Bowles was an interim head coach in Miami for three games in 2011, and went 24-40 in four seasons with the New York Jets from 2015 through 2018.

“I am appreciative of the Glazer family and Jason Licht for having faith in me to take on this role, and to Coach Arians for his support and guidance over the past four decades,” Bowles said. “Tampa has become home for my family, and we are excited to remain part of this community for years to come. ... I am eager to get started with our players, coaching staff, and front office in preparation for the 2022 season.”

Bowles was Arizona’s defensive coordinator for a portion of Arians’ tenure with the Cardinals. He reunited with his old boss in Tampa Bay after the Jets fired Bowles following the 2018 season.

Arians said timing of his decision to step away — along with’s Brady return — should serve Bowles well.

“So many head coaches come into situations where they are set up for failure, and I didn’t want that for Todd,” Arians said. “Tom’s decision to come back, along with Jason and his staff doing another great job of keeping the core of this team intact during free agency, confirmed for me that it was the right time to pass the torch.”

Licht said he’s excited to continue working with the former coach.

“Bruce established a culture here that set the foundation for a Super Bowl championship,” Licht said. “In my opinion, he is a Hall of Fame coach, so it is difficult for our football team to lose that type of leader. However, I am excited to have him continuing his contributions to our franchise in his new capacity.”

Russia bombards areas where it pledged to scale back

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By NEBI QENA and YURAS KARMANAU Associated Press

KYIV, Ukraine (AP) — Russian forces bombarded areas around Kyiv and another city just hours after pledging to scale back operations in those zones to promote trust between the two sides, Ukrainian authorities said Wednesday.

The shelling — and intensified Russian attacks on other parts of the country — tempered optimism about any progress in the talks aimed at ending the punishing war.

Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy said he stressed in a conversation with U.S. President Joe Biden that the war is at a “turning point” and renewed his longstanding request for more help to resist the Russian invasion.

“If we really are fighting for freedom and in defense of democracy together, then we have a right to demand help in this difficult turning point. Tanks, aircraft, artillery systems. Freedom should be armed no worse than tyranny,” Zelenskyy said in his nightly video address to the nation, which he delivered standing in the dark outside the dimly lit presidential offices in Kyiv. He thanked the U.S. for an additional \$500 million in aid that was announced Wednesday.

Meanwhile, talks between Ukraine and Russia were set to resume Friday by video, according to the head of the Ukrainian delegation, David Arakhamia. But there seemed to be little faith that a resolution would emerge anytime soon. The Russian military reneged on its pledge Tuesday to de-escalate near the capital and the northern city of Chernihiv in order to “increase mutual trust and create conditions for further negotiations.”

The announcement was met with deep suspicion from Zelenskyy and the West. And soon after, Ukrainian officials reported that Russian shelling hit homes, stores, libraries and other civilian sites in and around Chernihiv and on the outskirts of Kyiv. Russian troops also stepped up their attacks on the Donbas region in the east and around the city of Izyum, which lies on a key route to the Donbas, after redeploying units from other areas, the Ukrainian side said.

Olexander Lomako, secretary of the Chernihiv city council, said the Russian announcement turned out to be “a complete lie.”

“At night they didn’t decrease, but vice versa increased the intensity of military action,” Lomako said.

Five weeks into the invasion that has left thousands dead on both sides, the number of Ukrainians fleeing the country topped a staggering 4 million, half of them children, according to the United Nations.

“I do not know if we can still believe the Russians,” Nikolay Nazarov, a refugee from Ukraine, said as he pushed his father’s wheelchair at a border crossing into Poland. “I think more escalation will occur in eastern Ukraine. That is why we cannot go back to Kharkiv.”

Zelenskyy said the continuing negotiations with Russia were only “words without specifics.”

“We know that this is not a withdrawal but the consequences of being driven out,” Zelenskyy said of Russia’s pledge. “But we also are seeing that Russia is now concentrating its forces for new strikes on Donbas, and we are preparing for this.”

Zelenskyy also said he had recalled Ukraine’s ambassadors to Georgia and Morocco, suggesting they had not done enough to persuade those countries to support Ukraine and punish Russia for the invasion.

“With all due respect, if there won’t be weapons, won’t be sanctions, won’t be restrictions for Russian business, then please look for other work,” he said.

In other developments:

—U.S. intelligence officials have concluded that Russian President Vladimir Putin is being misinformed by his advisers about the poor performance of his military in Ukraine because they are too afraid to tell him the truth.

—The German government said it received assurances from Russia that European companies won’t have to pay for Russian gas in rubles. That prospect had raised fears that Russia could cut them off. Also, Poland announced steps to end all Russian oil imports by the end of the year.

— The U.N. is looking into allegations that some residents of the besieged and shattered southern city of Mariupol have been forcibly taken to areas controlled by Russian forces or to Russia itself.

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At a round of talks held Tuesday in Istanbul, the faint outlines of a possible peace agreement seemed to emerge when the Ukrainian delegation offered a framework under which the country would declare itself neutral — dropping its bid to join NATO, as Moscow has long demanded — in return for security guarantees from a group of other nations.

Top Russian officials responded positively, with Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov saying Wednesday that Ukraine's willingness to accept neutrality and look outside NATO for security represents "significant progress," according to Russian news agencies.

But skepticism of statements from Russia by Zelenskyy and others seemed well-founded.

Oleksandr Pavliuk, head of the Kyiv region military administration, said Russian shells targeted residential areas and civilian infrastructure in the Bucha, Brovary and Vyshhorod regions around the capital.

Russian Defense Ministry spokesman Maj. Gen. Igor Konashenkov said the military also targeted fuel depots in two towns in central Ukraine with air-launched long-range cruise missiles. And Russian forces hit a Ukrainian special forces headquarters in the southern Mykolaiv region, he said, and two ammunition depots in the Donetsk region, which is part of the Donbas.

In southern Ukraine, a Russian missile destroyed a fuel depot in Dnipro, the country's fourth-largest city, regional officials said.

The U.S. said that over the last 24 hours, Russia had begun to reposition less than 20% of its troops that had been arrayed around Kyiv.

Pentagon press secretary John Kirby said that troops from there and some other zones have begun moving largely to the north, and some have gone into Belarus. Kirby said it appears Russia intends to resupply them and send them back into Ukraine, but it is not clear where.

The Ukrainian military said some Russian airborne units were recorded in neighboring Belarus and were believed to have withdrawn from Ukraine.

In northern Ukraine, Russian forces took no offensive actions Wednesday, focusing on reconnaissance and logistics, the general staff said in a statement. But Russia is expected to increase attacks soon on Ukrainian forces to protect its own troops as they are repositioned, it said.

The Russians also are expected to try to blockade Chernihiv.

Top Russian military officials have said in recent days that their main goal now is the "liberation" of Donbas, the predominantly Russian-speaking industrial heartland where Moscow-backed separatists have been battling Ukrainian forces since 2014. Western officials say Moscow is reinforcing its troops in the Donbas.

Some analysts have suggested that the focus on the Donbas and the pledge to de-escalate may merely be an effort to put a positive spin on reality: Moscow's ground forces have been thwarted — and have taken heavy losses — in their bid to seize the capital and other cities.

Meanwhile, a missile destroyed part of an apartment block in the rebel-controlled city of Donetsk early Wednesday, and two people were reported killed. Separatists blamed Ukrainian forces for the attack.

"I was just sitting on the couch and — bang! — the window glass popped, the frames came off. I didn't even understand what happened," said resident Anna Gorda.

The U.N. food aid agency said it is providing emergency assistance to 1 million people in Ukraine. It said the food includes 330,000 freshly baked loaves of bread for families in the heavily bombarded eastern city of Kharkiv.

"Children are suffering, and our city, and everything," Tetyana Parmynska, a 28-year-old from the Chernihiv region now at a refugee center in Poland, said as man played songs on a battered piano decorated with a peace emblem. "We have no strength anymore."

Academy: Will Smith refused to leave Oscars after Rock slap

By JAKE COYLE AP Film Writer

NEW YORK (AP) — The Academy of Motion Pictures Arts and Sciences on Wednesday said that Will Smith was asked to leave Sunday's Oscar ceremony after hitting Chris Rock but refused to do so.

The academy's board of governors met Wednesday to initiate disciplinary proceedings against Smith for

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violations against the group's standards of conduct. The academy said disciplinary action for Smith could include suspension, expulsion or other sanctions.

Many have focused on why Smith was allowed to remain seated front row in the Dolby Theatre after the incident. On Wednesday, the academy suggested that it attempted to remove the actor from the audience.

"Things unfolded in a way we could not have anticipated," the academy said. "While we would like to clarify that Mr. Smith was asked to leave the ceremony and refused, we also recognize we could have handled the situation differently."

A representative for the academy declined to give specifics on how it tried to removed Smith. After Smith struck Rock in response to a joke about his wife, Jada Pinkett Smith, several stars including Denzel Washington, Bradley Cooper and Tyler Perry spoke with the 53-year-old Smith.

The academy said Smith has the opportunity to defend himself in a written response before the board meets again on April 18. The film academy earlier condemned Smith's onstage assault of Rock, but it used stronger language Wednesday.

"Mr. Smith's actions at the 94th Oscars were a deeply shocking, traumatic event to witness in-person and on television," the academy said. "Mr. Rock, we apologize to you for what you experienced on our stage and thank you for your resilience in that moment. We also apologize to our nominees, guests and viewers for what transpired during what should have been a celebratory event."

On Monday, Smith issued an apology to Rock, the academy and to viewers, saying "I was out of line and I was wrong."

Rock, who had yet to respond publicly to the incident, performed stand-up Wednesday night in Boston. He was greeted by a thunderous standing ovation.

"How was your weekend?" began Rock who then cautioned the crowd that he didn't have a lot to say yet about the Oscars, according to audio posted by the Hollywood trade outlet Variety. "I'm still kind of processing what happened"

A representative for Smith didn't immediately respond to messages Wednesday regarding the academy's latest moves.

Only a very small number of academy members have ever been expelled, including Harvey Weinstein, Roman Polanski, Bill Cosby and the actor Carmine Caridi, who was kicked out for sharing awards screeners.

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." (Even Oscars won by expelled members haven't previously been ordered to be returned.) Goldberg added that "nobody is OK with what happened"

Others from Sunday's telecast also began speaking out. Co-host Wanda Sykes told Ellen DeGeneres in an interview to air April 7 that she felt physically ill after Smith slapped Rock. When he returned to his seat, Smith twice shouted at Rock to "keep my wife's name out your (expletive) mouth."

"I'm still a little traumatized by it," said Sykes in a clip released Wednesday.

Within an hour, Smith was back on stage accepting the award for best actor for his performance in "King Richard." Many in the Dolby Theatre gave him a standing ovation.

"I was like, how gross is this? This is the wrong message. You assault somebody and you get escorted out the building and that's it. But for them to let him continue, I thought it was gross," Sykes said. "I wanted to be able to run out (on stage) after he won and say, 'Uh, unfortunately, Will couldn't be here tonight.'"

March Madness paying off for players under mishmash of rules

By EDDIE PELLIS AP National Writer

NEW ORLEANS (AP) — At long last, some of the cold, hard cash in the billion-dollar world of college sports is hitting the wallets of the players themselves by legitimate means. One expert estimates by the time next year's Final Four rolls around, every men's basketball and football player on a major Division I roster could be making \$100,000 or more.

On one hand, it's a long-overdue development that will forever change the landscape of what has been widely disparaged as among the most unfair labor markets in America. On the other, trouble could be

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looming for an industry with few rules that doles out big bucks to teenagers with big dreams.

"We have gone from a strict prohibition to now being more liberal than any other sports organization in existence," Purdue athletic director Mike Bobinski said of the changes that have taken hold over the past nine months. "And that's a really odd transformation that we need to somehow, I think, strike a middle ground here, eventually."

This week, Kansas, Villanova, North Carolina and Duke will play in the first Final Four to be held under the new world of "name, image and likeness" (NIL) endorsements in college sports. That world is comprised of a loosely regulated mishmash of state laws and university-written rules that set different standards across the nation with little transparency about which players get what or where it comes from.

The ability of athletes to make money off endorsement deals began last July 1, triggered by a series of events: several states passed laws to make the arrangements legal; proposed federal legislation to regulate NIL stalled; the Supreme Court ruled in favor of athletes' rights to be compensated; and the NCAA never found a way to put the new business model under its umbrella before the state laws went into effect.

What resulted was an open market that, as Barbara Jones, the CEO of Outshine Talent, put it, resembles "the Wild West, in that a lot of people are involved in this, and they don't know what they don't know."

Because schools and athletes are under no obligation to disclose the terms of their deals to endorse anything from seafood restaurants to silk pajamas to sneakers, the parameters of both the individual agreements, and the sum of all the deals combined, have to be teased out via anecdotes from social and traditional media, along with the rare news release from the schools themselves.

Within hours after North Carolina State's Raina Perez made a steal and a layup in the waning seconds of the Sweet 16 of the women's tournament last week, her marketers had produced a T-shirt, selling for \$28, emblazoned with her name and the catchphrase "The Steal and the Lead."

And as his team's Cinderella run to the Elite Eight gained steam, Saint Peter's guard Doug Edert got into the act, announcing on Instagram that he'd struck a deal to hawk chicken wings.

Many of these deals are small — four figures or less — and involve athletes using their social media platforms to promote products. Other arrangements come together before players even reach campus.

Earlier this month, The Athletic reported that a five-star high school football recruit had landed an NIL deal that could be worth up to \$8 million. The player's name was kept confidential and the website reported he had signed with a fund-raising collective from an unknown school.

The contract does not require the player to attend the donor group's school, and so, remains in compliance with possibly the only ironclad rule in the NIL space — that schools themselves do not tether scholarships or recruiting to NIL deals.

"I think NIL has kind of become something that we all hoped that it wouldn't, but we thought that it probably would at some point," Mississippi AD Keith Carter said.

At a rapidly increasing number of schools that play big-time college sports, big-money donors are funding so-called collectives that are designed to sweeten the range of NIL deals for players.

That opens doors for coaches to talk about NIL without directly offering endorsements.

"That's what I talk about in my recruiting pitches, knowing the power of Notre Dame, and having the resources to help them maximize their name, image and likeness is going to be very beneficial," said Notre Dame women's coach Niele Ivey.

Blake Lawrence, whose company Opendorse is becoming a leading broker between players and companies, estimates every player on a men's basketball and football roster at a Power Five conference could soon be making six figures.

"There are certain football teams where every single starter is driving around a brand new car," Lawrence said. "A year ago, that would have been the biggest red flag possible, and today, it's expected in some of these markets."

Watching all this closely are the coaches, whose very fates could rest on business decisions made by teenagers that, under the letter of the law, they are not allowed to influence. That could be a good thing. Virtually every scandal in college sports over the last 50 years have been centered around either academic

tampering or under-the-table money being passed to recruits.

The NCAA has struggled mightily to reign in that behavior, and despite constant pleas from college sports leaders, the help from Congress they have been hoping for is nowhere in sight.

There isn't a ton of faith that the regulating body, which has, of late, shown willingness to cede control of some top-line policy matters to the conferences, will do much better here.

"Unfortunately, I think we've proven that we can't rely on ourselves to just self-regulate," said Bobinski, the Purdue AD.

In a best-case scenario, some coaches suggest NIL could change things for the better and add a long-missing layer of stability to the more than 1,000 schools that run NCAA sports programs in America.

The "one-and-done" rule that allows basketball players to leave college for the NBA draft after one year of school has created a dividing line in Division I between schools that pursue those type of players (Kentucky, Duke, Kansas) and those that generally don't (Purdue, Wisconsin, Villanova).

The rapid movement of players has been expanded by the revamping of the "transfer portal," another fairness-minded move that now allows players to change schools without sitting out a season, as was the decades-old custom.

The optimistic view is that if a player settles down at a school while making decent money on the side, he or she might decide four years and a degree, all from the same school, are a doable thing.

"That's my dream," Villanova coach Jay Wright said. "That it's better for college basketball and it's better for NBA basketball. But I don't think the NCAA is ever going to be able to get it -- they're not going to be able to control it."

Alex Jones faces fines for skipping Sandy Hook deposition

By DAVE COLLINS Associated Press

HARTFORD, Conn. (AP) — A Connecticut judge said Wednesday Infowars host and conspiracy theorist Alex Jones will be fined for each weekday that passes without him appearing for a deposition in a lawsuit brought by relatives of some victims of the Sandy Hook Elementary School shooting.

The penalties were in response to Jones defying court orders to attend a deposition last week, when he cited a health problem including vertigo that later turned out to be a sinus infection. His testimony is being sought ahead of a trial to determine how much he should pay in damages to the families for pushing a conspiracy theory that the massacre never happened.

The penalties will begin at \$25,000 per weekday beginning Friday and increase by \$25,000 per weekday until he appears for a deposition, Judge Barbara Bellis said. She found Jones in contempt of court orders and repeated her view Wednesday that letters submitted by Jones' doctors did not include enough evidence that he was too ill to attend last week's deposition. She noted Jones appeared on his website show — either in-person or by phone — every day last week.

"The court finds by clear and convincing evidence that the defendant, Alex Jones, willfully and in bad faith violated without justification several clear court orders requiring his attendance at his depositions," Bellis said during a court hearing held by video conference.

Bellis, a judge at Waterbury Superior Court, also ordered the deposition to be held at the Bridgeport, Connecticut, office of the families' lawyers, instead of Austin, Texas, where it was scheduled last week. Austin is home to Jones and Infowars.

The judge, however, again denied a request by lawyers for the Sandy Hook families to order Jones arrested and detained until he could appear at a deposition. The attorneys first made the request last week.

Jones' lawyer, Norman Pattis, criticized Bellis' ruling and planned to appeal to the Connecticut Supreme Court on Thursday.

"The judge's order is shocking and an insult to the medical doctor who advised Alex not to attend court proceedings," Pattis said in an email to The Associated Press. "We regard the order as lawless and unprecedented."

Christopher Mattei, a lawyer for the Sandy Hook families, said during the hearing that the families were

seeking penalties because Jones violated court orders and appeared to be attempting to avoid the deposition.

"So what we've tried to do ... is change that calculus, make it clear to Mr. Jones that the penalties that will accrue to him as a result of his further noncompliance are not worth it and that he should sit for deposition in order to avoid them," Mattei said.

A new deposition date was not immediately set. Cameron Atkinson, another Jones lawyer, said Jones would next be available to testify on April 11.

Twenty first-graders and six educators were killed in the December 2012 shooting in Newtown, Connecticut. The gunman, 20-year-old Adam Lanza, killed his mother at their Newtown home before the shooting, and killed himself at the school as police arrived, officials said.

The families of eight of the victims and an FBI agent who responded to the school sued Jones, Infowars and others in Connecticut, saying they have been subjected to harassment and death threats from Jones' followers because of the hoax conspiracy promoted on his show. Jones has since said he believes the shooting did occur.

On Tuesday, Jones' lawyers filed court documents that offered to pay \$120,000 per plaintiff to settle the lawsuit and offered an apology for "any distress his remarks caused." The families' lawyers rejected the offers.

Jones was found liable for damages to the families in the Connecticut lawsuit as well as to some Sandy Hook families who sued him in Texas. Judges in both states found Jones liable by default without a trial, saying he repeatedly refused to abide by court rulings and provide requested evidence to the families' lawyers.

Jones and his lawyers said he has turned over thousands of documents to the families' lawyers and sat for depositions in the Texas cases.

Trials are scheduled later this year in Connecticut and Texas to determine how much Jones should pay the families.

Brain condition sidelining Bruce Willis has many causes

By CARLA K. JOHNSON AP Medical Writer

A brain disorder that leads to problems with speaking, reading and writing has sidelined actor Bruce Willis and drawn attention to a little-known condition that has many possible causes.

A stroke, tumor, head injury or other damage to the language centers of the brain can cause aphasia. A brain infection or Alzheimer's disease can trigger it.

Former U.S. Rep. Gabby Giffords, wounded in a 2011 shooting, has aphasia from that injury.

The National Aphasia Association estimates 2 million Americans are affected and nearly 180,000 get the disorder every year. Willis' family announced Wednesday that the 67-year-old actor has been diagnosed with aphasia but did not provide any details on a possible cause.

For an actor, aphasia could pose a huge challenge depending on how severe it is, said Johns Hopkins University cognitive scientist Brenda Rapp, who works with people with the condition.

"You can imagine how frustrating it is if you can't find words, if you can't organize words into sentences, if you can't get your mouth to produce the sounds you want it to produce," Rapp said. "You are still yourself ... but you may not sound like yourself."

For most, the cause is a stroke that has cut off blood to part of the brain. Without oxygen and nutrients, brain cells die, which leads to the difficulty retrieving words.

Aphasia does not affect intelligence. Some people improve dramatically in a few months. Others may need to find other ways to communicate. Speech and language therapy can help.

Researchers are looking into new types of speech therapy and noninvasive methods such as a procedure that uses magnetic pulses to stimulate brain cells.

White House: Intel shows Putin misled by advisers on Ukraine

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By AAMER MADHANI and NOMAAN MERCHANT Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — U.S. intelligence officials have determined that Russian President Vladimir Putin is being misinformed by advisers about his military's poor performance in Ukraine, according to the White House. The advisers are scared to tell him the truth, the intel says.

The findings, recently declassified, indicate that Putin is aware of the situation on information coming to him and there now is persistent tension between him and senior Russian military officials.

The U.S. believes Putin is being misled not only about his military's performance but also "how the Russian economy is being crippled by sanctions because, again, his senior advisers are too afraid to tell him the truth," White House communications director Kate Bedingfield said Wednesday.

Earlier, President Joe Biden said in an exchange with reporters that he could not comment on the intelligence.

The administration is hopeful that divulging the finding could help prod Putin to reconsider his options in Ukraine, according to a U.S. official. The official was not authorized to comment and spoke on the condition of anonymity. The war has ground to a bloody stalemate in much of the country, with heavy casualties and Russian troop morale sinking as Ukrainian forces and volunteers put up an unexpectedly stout defense.

But the publicity could also risk further isolating Putin, who U.S. officials have said seems at least in part driven by a desire to win back Russian prestige lost by the fall of the Soviet Union.

"What it does is underscore that this has been a strategic blunder for Russia," Bedingfield said of the intelligence finding. "But I'm not going to characterize how ... Vladimir Putin might be thinking about this."

Meanwhile, Biden told Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy during a 55 minute call that an additional \$500 million in direct aid for Ukraine was on its way. It's the latest burst in American assistance as the Russian invasion grinds on.

Asked about the latest intelligence, Secretary of State Antony Blinken suggested that a dynamic within the Kremlin exists where advisers are unwilling to speak to Putin with candor.

"One of the Achilles' heels of autocracies is that you don't have people in those systems that speak truth to power or have the ability to speak truth to power, and I think that's what we're seeing in Russia," Blinken told reporters during a stop in Algeria on Wednesday.

The unidentified official did not detail underlying evidence for how U.S. intelligence made its determination.

The intelligence community has concluded that Putin was unaware that his military had been using and losing conscripts in Ukraine. They also have determined he is not fully aware of the extent to which the Russian economy is being damaged by economic sanctions imposed by the U.S. and allies.

The findings demonstrate a "clear breakdown in the flow of accurate information" to Putin, and show that Putin's senior advisers are "afraid to tell him the truth," the official said.

Biden notified Zelenskyy about the latest tranche of assistance during a call in which the leaders also reviewed security aid already delivered to Ukraine and the effects that weaponry has had on the war, according to the White House.

Zelenskyy has pressed the Biden administration and other Western allies to provide Ukraine with military jets, something that the U.S. and other NATO countries have thus far been unwilling to accommodate out of concern it could lead to Russia broadening the war beyond Ukraine's borders.

Prior to Wednesday's announcement of \$500 million in aid, the Biden administration had sent Ukraine about \$2 billion in humanitarian and security assistance since the start of the war last month.

Congress approved \$13.6 billion that Congress approved earlier this month as part of a broader spending bill. Bedingfield said the latest round of financial assistance could be used by the Ukrainian government "to bolster its economy and pay for budgetary expenses" including government salaries and maintaining services.

Ukraine's presidential website says Zelenskyy told Biden: "We need peace, and it will be achieved only when we have a strong position on the battlefield. Our morale is firm, there is enough determination, but we need your immediate support."

Zelenskyy in a Twitter posting said that he also spoke to Biden about new sanctions against Russia.

Bedingfield said the administration is looking at options to expand and deepen current sanctions.

The new intelligence came after the White House on Tuesday expressed skepticism about Russia's public announcement that it would dial back operations near Kyiv in an effort to increase trust in ongoing talks between Ukrainian and Russian officials in Turkey.

Russian forces pounded areas around Ukraine's capital and another city overnight, regional leaders said Wednesday.

The Pentagon said Wednesday that over the past 24 hours it had seen some Russian troops in the areas around Kyiv moving north toward or into Belarus.

Pentagon press secretary John Kirby said in interviews with CNN and Fox Business that the U.S. does not view this as a withdrawal but as an attempt by Russia to resupply, refit and then reposition the troops.

Putin has long been seen outside Russia as insular and surrounded by officials who don't always tell him the truth. U.S. officials have said publicly they believe that limited flow of information — possibly exacerbated by Putin's heightened isolation during the COVID-19 pandemic — may have given the Russian president unrealistic views of how quickly he could overrun Ukraine.

The Biden administration before the war launched an unprecedented effort to publicize what it believed were Putin's invasion plans, drawing on intelligence findings. While Russia still invaded, the White House was widely credited with drawing attention to Ukraine and pushing initially reluctant allies to back tough sanctions that have hammered the Russian economy.

But underscoring the limits of intelligence, the U.S. also underestimated Ukraine's will to fight before the invasion, said Lt. Gen. Scott Berrier, head of the Defense Intelligence Agency, in recent testimony before Congress.

Bruce Willis, diagnosed with aphasia, steps away from acting

By JAKE COYLE AP Film Writer

NEW YORK (AP) — Bruce Willis is stepping away from acting after a diagnosis of aphasia, a condition that causes loss of the ability to understand or express speech, his family said Wednesday.

In a statement posted on Willis' Instagram page, the 67-year-old actor's family announced that Willis was recently diagnosed with aphasia and that it is impacting his cognitive abilities.

"As a result of this and with much consideration, Bruce is stepping away from the career that has meant so much to him," read the statement signed by Willis' wife, Emma Heming Willis, his ex-wife Demi Moore, and his five children, Rumer, Scout, Tallulah, Mabel and Evelyn.

"We are moving through this as a strong family unit, and wanted to bring his fans in because we know how much he means to you, as you do to him," they said. "As Bruce always says, 'Live it up' and together we plan to do just that."

There are many potential causes of aphasia. It often occurs after a stroke or head injury, but can also develop gradually due to a slow-growing brain tumor or a disease that causes degenerative damage, like Alzheimer's disease. It's treated primarily with speech therapy and learning non-verbal means of communication.

Willis' family didn't divulge what caused his aphasia. Representatives for the actor declined to comment.

The news about Willis, one of Hollywood's most beloved actors, immediately spread online as fans reacted. His four-decade career has amassed more than \$5 billion in box office worldwide.

Willis had been working steadily and frequently. Renowned for films like "Die Hard," "Pulp Fiction" and "The Sixth Sense," Willis has in recent years churned out straight-to-video thrillers. Last year, he starred in a staggering eight films. Most came and went quietly, including titles like "Cosmic Sin," "Out of Death" and "Deadlock."

Most recently, Willis starred in February's "Gasoline Alley" and "A Day to Die," released in early March. Willis has already shot at least six more films due out in 2022 and 2023, including "Die Like Lovers," "Corrective Measures" and "The Wrong Place."

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With at least one GOP vote, Jackson likely to be confirmed

By MARY CLARE JALONICK Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — Maine Sen. Susan Collins said Wednesday she will vote to confirm Judge Ketanji Brown Jackson, giving Democrats at least one Republican vote and all but assuring that Jackson will become the first Black woman on the Supreme Court.

Collins met with Jackson a second time this week after four days of hearings last week and said Wednesday that “she possesses the experience, qualifications and integrity to serve as an associate justice on the Supreme Court.”

“I will, therefore, vote to confirm her to this position,” Collins said.

Collins’ support gives Democrats at least a one-vote cushion in the 50-50 Senate and likely saves them from having to use Vice President Kamala Harris’ tie-breaking vote to confirm President Joe Biden’s pick. Senate Democratic leaders are pushing toward a Senate Judiciary Committee vote on the nomination Monday and a final Senate vote to confirm Jackson late next week.

Biden called Collins on Wednesday to thank her after her announcement, according to the senator’s office. The president had called her at least three times before the hearings, part of a larger push to win a bipartisan vote for his historic pick.

Jackson, who would replace retiring Justice Stephen Breyer, would be the third Black justice, after Thurgood Marshall and Clarence Thomas, and the sixth woman. She would also be the first former public defender on the court.

It is expected that all 50 Democrats will support her, though one notable moderate Democrat, Arizona Sen. Kyrsten Sinema, hasn’t yet said how she will vote.

Collins was the most likely Republican to support Jackson, and she has a history of voting for Supreme Court nominees picked by presidents of both parties, as well as other judicial nominations.

The only Supreme Court nominee she’s voted against since her election in the mid-1990s is Justice Amy Coney Barrett, who was nominated by then-President Donald Trump after the death of Justice Ruth Bader Ginsburg in the weeks before Trump’s election defeat to Biden in 2020. Collins, who was up for reelection that year, said she voted against Barrett because of the accelerated six-week timeline. “It’s not a comment on her,” Collins said of Barrett at the time.

In her statement supporting Jackson, the Maine senator said she doesn’t expect that she will always agree with Jackson’s decisions.

“That alone, however, is not disqualifying,” Collins said. “Indeed, that statement applies to all six justices, nominated by both Republican and Democratic presidents, whom I have voted to confirm.”

Collins said she believes the process is “broken” as it has become increasingly divided along party lines. When Collins first came to the Senate, Supreme Court confirmations were much more bipartisan. Breyer, who will step down this summer, was confirmed on an 87-9 vote in 1994.

“In my view, the role the Constitution clearly assigns to the Senate is to examine the experience, qualifications, and integrity of the nominee,” Collins said. “It is not to assess whether a nominee reflects the ideology of an individual senator or would rule exactly as an individual senator would want.”

In Jackson’s hearings, several Republican senators interrogated her on sentencing decisions in her nine years as a federal judge and in child pornography cases in particular. The senators, several of whom are eyeing a run for president, asked the same questions repeatedly in an effort to paint her as too lenient on sex criminals.

Jackson told the committee that “nothing could be further from the truth” and explained her sentencing decisions in detail. She said some of the cases have given her nightmares and were “among the worst that I have seen.”

Collins told reporters after her announcement that they discussed many of the cases that were brought up at the hearings in an hourlong meeting on Tuesday and “I had no doubt that she applies a very careful approach to the facts of the case when she is judging.”

It is unclear if any other GOP senators will vote for Jackson. Senate Republican Leader Mitch McConnell

set the tone for the party last week when he said he "cannot and will not" support her, citing the GOP concerns raised in the hearing about her sentencing record and her support from liberal advocacy groups.

Jackson is still making the rounds in the Senate ahead of next week's votes, doing customary meetings with Democratic and Republican senators. On Tuesday she met with Utah Sen. Mitt Romney, who said afterward that he was undecided about supporting her.

Romney said he had an "excellent meeting" and found Jackson to be intelligent, capable and charming. He said he probably won't decide whether to vote for her until the day of the vote.

Romney voted against Jackson last year, when she was confirmed by the Senate as a federal appeals court judge. Collins, Alaska Sen. Lisa Murkowski and South Carolina Sen. Lindsey Graham were the only three Republicans to support her at the time.

Murkowski and Graham have each indicated they might not vote for her a second time. Murkowski said in a statement before the hearings that "I've been clear that previously voting to confirm an individual to a lower court does not signal how I will vote for a Supreme Court justice."

Graham was one of several Republicans on the Judiciary panel who pressed Jackson on the child pornography cases, and he has been vocal in his frustrations that Biden chose Jackson over his preferred candidate, a federal judge from South Carolina.

He also aired past grievances in the hearing, asking Jackson about her religion and how often she goes to church, in heated comments that he said were fair game after unfair criticism of Barrett's Catholicism.

Also Wednesday, Sen. Thom Tillis, R-N.C., said he will not support Jackson, further indication that the Judiciary panel will likely deadlock 11-11 at its Monday vote on whether to recommend her confirmation to the full Senate.

A deadlocked vote means Democrats will have to spend additional hours on the Senate floor next week to do a "discharge" from committee.

Still, Senate Majority Leader Chuck Schumer said this week that the Senate is "on track" to confirm her by the end of next week and before a two-week Spring recess.

Police chief: More officers needed to fully reopen Capitol

By KEVIN FREKING Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — The chief of the U.S. Capitol Police told lawmakers Wednesday it was his recommendation to move forward with a phased-in reopening of the U.S. Capitol as his agency works to overcome attrition after the January 6 insurrection and hiring delays because of the pandemic.

The testimony before a House subcommittee underscores that persistent security concerns are playing a major role in restricting the public's access to the Capitol, an increasingly sore point with lawmakers from both parties who are urging a return to normalcy after two years of restrictions.

U.S. Capitol Police Chief Thomas Manger said the department doesn't have the personnel to staff the number of posts deemed necessary to secure the Capitol and adjacent offices. Additional posts were added after Jan. 6.

"I regret we're the chokepoint, we're the problem in terms of getting it reopened fully," Manger said.

The Capitol saw a return of more visitors this week with congressional offices limited to leading one tour weekly. The adjacent Capitol Visitor Center would reopen for limited numbers of people on May 30.

"By the end of the summer, my hope is that we can do a little bit more," Manger said.

Hundreds of officers from the U.S. Capitol Police and Metropolitan Police Department responded to the Jan. 6 attack and dozens of them were beaten and injured as the mob of former President Donald Trump's supporters pushed past them to break into the building and interrupt the certification of President Joe Biden's victory.

Congress has boosted funding for the agency after Jan. 6 to increase hiring, cover overtime costs and bolster the security of the complex itself. Hazard bonuses were paid to officers who responded to the insurrection and retention bonuses were paid to curb attrition levels that temporarily doubled their normal rate. The budget for the coming fiscal year recommends about a 17% increase in funding.

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Manger said it takes time to get in place the number of officers the agency needs, though. He said the agency has about 1,850 officers, but is about 300 short of where it needs to be. Some of those positions have already been authorized and about 130 officers are in training. Meanwhile, the agency in a typical year, loses about 75 to 80 through attrition.

"I believe at this point we are in fact getting ahead of attrition, but we've got a ways to go before we get up to where we need to be," Manger told lawmakers.

Rep. Tim Ryan, D-Ohio, who leads the subcommittee with jurisdiction over Capitol Police spending, told Manger that lawmakers understood it was a "heavy lift" to get the agency's ranks where they need to be.

"The American people want to get back here. The schools want to get back here. The tourists want to get back here," Ryan said. "Given everything going on in the world, I think we've got to do everything we can to make sure people can come and be reminded of how important America is, how important the Capitol is."

Twinkle, twinkle giant star, astronomers see how far you are

By MARCIA DUNN AP Aerospace Writer

CAPE CANAVERAL, Fla. (AP) — Astronomers have discovered the farthest star yet, a super-hot, super-bright giant that formed nearly 13 billion years ago at the dawn of the cosmos.

But this luminous blue star is long gone, so massive that it almost certainly exploded into bits just a few million years after emerging. Its swift demise makes it all the more incredible that an international team spotted it with observations by the Hubble Space Telescope. It takes eons for light emitted from distant stars to reach us.

"We're seeing the star as it was about 12.8 billion years ago, which puts it about 900 million years after the Big Bang," said astronomer Brian Welch, a doctoral student at Johns Hopkins University and lead author of the study appearing in Wednesday's journal Nature.

"We definitely just got lucky."

He nicknamed it Earendel, an Old English name which means morning star or rising light — "a fitting name for a star that we have observed in a time often referred to as 'Cosmic Dawn.'"

The previous record-holder, Icarus, also a blue supergiant star spotted by Hubble, formed 9.4 billion years ago. That's more than 4 billion years after the Big Bang.

In both instances, astronomers used a technique known as gravitational lensing to magnify the minuscule starlight. Gravity from clusters of galaxies closer to us — in the foreground — serve as a lens to magnify smaller objects in the background. If not for that, Icarus and Earendel would not have been discernible given their vast distances.

While Hubble has spied galaxies as far away as 300 million to 400 million years of the universe-forming Big Bang, their individual stars are impossible to pick out.

"Usually they're all smooshed together ... But here, nature has given us this one star — highly, highly magnified, magnified by factors of thousands — so that we can study it," said NASA astrophysicist Jane Rigby, who took part in the study. "It's such a gift really from the universe."

Vinicius Placco of the National Science Foundation's NOIRLab in Tucson, Arizona, described the findings as "amazing work." He was not involved in the study.

Placco said based on the Hubble data, Earendel may well have been among the first generation of stars born after the Big Bang. Future observations by the newly launched James Webb Space Telescope should provide more details, he said, and "provide us with another piece of this cosmic puzzle that is the evolution of our universe."

Current data indicate Earendel was more than 50 times the size of our sun and an estimated 1 million times brighter, outsizing Icarus. Earendel's small, yet-to-mature home galaxy looked nothing like the pretty spiral galaxies photographed elsewhere by Hubble, according to Welch, but rather "kind of an awkward-looking, clumpy object." Unlike Earendel, he said, this galaxy probably has survived, although in a different form after merging with other galaxies.

"It's like a little snapshot in amber of the past," Rigby said.

Earendel may have been the prominent star in a two-star, or binary, system, or even a triple- or quadruple-star system, Welch said. There's a slight chance it could be a black hole, although the observations gathered in 2016 and 2019 suggest otherwise, he noted.

Regardless of its company, the star lasted barely a few million years before exploding as a supernova that went unobserved as most do, Welch said. The most distant supernova seen by astronomers to date goes back 12 billion years.

The Webb telescope — 100 times more powerful than Hubble — should help clarify how massive and hot the star really is, and reveal more about its parent galaxy.

By studying stars, Rigby said: "We are literally understanding where we came from because we're made up of some of that stardust."

AP sources: Asylum limits at border expected to end May 23

By COLLEEN LONG, JASON DEAREN and ELLIOT SPAGAT Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — The Biden administration is expected to end the asylum limits at the U.S.-Mexico border by May 23 that were put in place to prevent the spread of COVID-19, according to people familiar with the matter.

The decision, not yet final, would halt use of public health powers to absolve the United States of obligations under American law and international treaty to provide haven to people fleeing persecution, and would apply to all asylum-seekers.

Ending the limitations in May would allow for time to prepare at the border, the people said. But the delay runs against the wishes of top Democrats and others who say COVID-19 has long been used as an excuse for the U.S. to get out of asylum obligations.

It also raises the possibility that more asylum-seeking migrants will come to the border at a time when flows are already high. The Department of Homeland Security said Tuesday that about 7,100 migrants were coming daily, compared with an average of about 5,900 a day in February and on pace to match or exceed highs from last year, 2019 and other peak periods.

President Joe Biden declined to discuss his administration's plans, telling reporters Wednesday at the White House, "We'll have a decision on that soon."

Whenever the limits are lifted, his communications director said "there will be an influx of people to the border. We are doing a lot of work to plan for that contingency." Speaking broadly, Kate Bedingfield said the administration is trying to "build up our migration system and ensure that we are restoring order at the border."

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention had extended its asylum-blocking powers for two months in late January, near the height of the omicron variant. The authority is up for renewal this week, and officials were expected to announce as early as Friday that it would be terminated, giving border authorities a few months to prepare for the coming deadline.

The people familiar with the plans saw a draft report that has not been finalized and they spoke to The Associated Press on condition of anonymity to discuss the plans.

The limits went into place in March 2020 under the Trump administration as coronavirus cases soared. While officials said at the time that it was a way to keep COVID-19 out of the United States, there always has been criticism that the restrictions were used as an excuse to seal the border to migrants unwanted by then-President Donald Trump.

It was perhaps the broadest of Trump's actions to restrict crossings and crack down on migrants. The health order has caused migrants to be expelled from the United States more than 1.7 million times since March 2020 without a chance for them to request asylum.

And restrictions took effect over the objections of CDC officials, and Dr. Martin Cetron of the Division of Migration and Quarantine refused the order to begin its use. He said there was no public health basis for such a drastic move, the AP reported. But then-Vice President Mike Pence ordered the CDC's director to

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use the agency's emergency powers and it went into effect.

As mask mandates were lifted, vaccination rates climbed and COVID-19 rates dropped among migrants crossing from Mexico it became increasingly difficult to defend the order on scientific grounds.

Biden, who has rolled back some of Trump's other more restrictive policies, has taken increasing criticism for keeping the policy.

Homeland Security officials, Senate Majority Leader Chuck Schumer of New York and other top Democrats were increasingly vocal about wanting to end so-called Title 42 authority, named for a 1944 public health law to prevent communicable disease.

Not all Democratic elected officials agreed, including some from border and swing states. Sens. Mark Kelly and Kyrsten Sinema, both Arizona Democrats, sided with Republican leaders to say Title 42 should remain until U.S. border authorities were prepared for sharp increases in new arrivals.

"The Border Patrol agents told me they expect a tsunami of humans to come across the border and the Border Patrol has said they will lose control entirely," said Sen. John Cornyn, R-Texas.

Homeland Security officials said they are planning for as many as 18,000 arrivals daily, an astounding number that they cautioned was simply to prepare for all possible outcomes, not projections.

But there have been no major changes to how migrants are processed at the U.S.-Mexico border and no increase in holding facilities for them. The immigration court backlog continues to soar to more than 1.7 million cases.

Critics say Title 42 has been an excuse to avoid asylum obligations under U.S. law and international treaty, buying Biden time to create the "humane" asylum system that he promised during his 2020 campaign.

"Title 42 is a horrific and unjustified policy that should never have been enacted and has caused grave harm to thousands of asylum-seekers over the past two years," said immigration attorney Lee Gelernt of the American Civil Liberties Union.

While there is no aggregate rate for migrants, COVID-19 test results from several major corridors for illegal border crossings suggest it is well below levels that have triggered concerns among U.S. officials.

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

In Pima County, Arizona, which includes Tucson, the seven-day positivity rate among migrants didn't exceed 1.3% in early March. The positivity rate among 5,300 migrants tested last month at the Regional Center for Border Health near Yuma, Arizona, was 0.1%.

McAllen, Texas, the largest city in the busiest corridor for illegal crossings, has a higher rate among migrants — 11.3% for the week ending March 16 — but it has been consistently lower than the general population.

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

Asylum limits have been applied unevenly by nationality, depending largely on costs and diplomatic relations with home countries. Many migrants have been spared from Cuba, Venezuela, Nicaragua and, more recently, Ukraine. Homeland Security officials wrote border authorities this month that Ukrainians may be exempt, saying Russia's invasion "created a humanitarian crisis."

Voice from the grave haunts Ronald Greene's deadly arrest

By JIM MUSTIAN and JAKE BLEIBERG Associated Press

BATON ROUGE, La. (AP) — Days before his own death, Louisiana Master Trooper Chris Hollingsworth walked into a secure room deep inside state police headquarters, swore an oath and told investigators about the night he held down Black motorist Ronald Greene and repeatedly bashed him in the head with a flashlight.

Gone was the bravado from Hollingsworth's earlier boast — captured on body-camera video — that he

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“beat the ever-living f---” out of the man before his 2019 death along a rural roadside in northeast Louisiana.

Instead, in a two-hour interrogation, Hollingsworth meekly portrayed himself as the victim in the violent arrest, saying he feared for his life even as graphic footage played over and over of white troopers swarming Greene’s car after a high-speed chase, jolting him with stun guns, punching him in the face and dragging him by his ankle shackles as he wailed, “I’m your brother! I’m scared! I’m scared!”

“I was scared,” Hollingsworth said in the never-before-released recorded interview obtained by The Associated Press. “He could have done anything once my hold was broke off him — and that’s why I struck him.”

Detectives weren’t buying it, describing the repeated flashlight blows to Greene’s head as unjustified while peppering the 46-year-old veteran trooper with questions. Why did Hollingsworth turn off his body-camera video recorder? Why did he jolt Greene with his stun gun before the motorist could even get out of his car? Why did he resort to disproportionate force with an unarmed man who was hardly resisting?

As for troopers’ initial account that blamed Greene’s death on injuries from a car crash, fueling allegations of a cover-up, Hollingsworth said he didn’t see such injuries himself but added, “I’m not a doctor.”

Nearly three years after Greene’s May 10, 2019, death with still no one criminally charged, Hollingsworth’s internal affairs interview in September 2020 stands as a defiant, haunting voice from the grave.

Widely seen as the most culpable of the half-dozen officers involved, Hollingsworth can’t face justice because he died just six days after the interrogation from a high-speed, single-vehicle, crash that came hours after he was told he would be fired for his role in Greene’s arrest.

Though his death was ruled accidental, Hollingsworth’s early morning, off-duty crash into a highway guardrail in Monroe prompted widespread speculation the trooper took his own life. Hollingsworth was sober, not wearing a seatbelt and was a state police driving instructor traveling an interstate he had patrolled for decades. Crash reconstruction experts who reviewed case reports for the AP agreed the circumstances were suspicious and the probe by local police was inadequate.

“It’s definitely consistent with a suicide but I don’t have enough information to say he didn’t fall asleep,” said Jonathan Cherney, a California-based crash reconstructionist. “But I’ll tell you what, you have a hard time falling asleep when you’re doing 100 miles per hour.”

Scott Wolleson, the lawyer who accompanied Hollingsworth to the interview and now represents his widow in a civil suit brought by Greene’s family, declined to comment.

Intentional or not, Hollingsworth’s death has complicated ongoing federal and state investigations and was particularly painful for Greene’s mother, Mona Hardin, who says it robbed her of any hope for full justice while the trooper was allowed to be buried with full honors despite his misconduct.

“It hurts me to the core that Hollingsworth isn’t here,” Hardin told AP. “He was front and center and they gave him all the bells and whistles on his burial. ... They overlooked what he did, what he confessed to.”

State police were so concerned about “unruly groups” and a “major disturbance” at Hollingsworth’s funeral, according to operational plans obtained by AP, that they kept the location of the services secret and deployed two “counter snipers” and a SWAT team to watch over the sea of blue uniforms that piled into a West Monroe church.

The bristling security was set up at a time when the public had not yet seen the body-camera footage of Greene’s arrest, but the state police leaders coordinating his funeral had.

Serving as “platoon leader” that day was Lt. John Clary, the highest-ranking officer at the scene of Greene’s death who remains under federal scrutiny for allegedly withholding his own body-camera footage from detectives.

AP last year obtained and published the graphic footage that officials from Democratic Gov. John Bel Edwards on down had refused to release for more than two years. But even before that, Hollingsworth made himself a focus of the Greene investigation by his own words on the night of the arrest, what he dismissed to detectives as “inappropriate cop talk.”

“I beat the ever-living f--- out of him, choked him and everything else trying to get him under control,” Hollingsworth told a fellow officer in a phone call picked up on his body-camera mic. “All of a sudden he

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just went limp. ... I thought he was dead."

Greene died before his ambulance reached the hospital. Hollingsworth was photographed there with flecks of Greene's blood dotting his blue uniform and brass badge.

The governor later told police commanders to investigate Hollingsworth's role in the deadly arrest. Edwards' top lawyer, Matthew Block, told AP the then-head of the state police informed him when the decision was finally made to fire Hollingsworth. Edwards has since come to describe the actions of the troopers in Greene's arrest as criminal and racist.

Asked late last year whether he feels any responsibility for the loss of public trust in state police, a spokesperson for Edwards told AP: "The troopers on the scene — particularly Trooper Hollingsworth — are responsible for what happened the night of Mr. Greene's death, period."

Federal prosecutors have been considering for months whether to charge the other troopers, including Kory York, who remains on the force after dragging Greene face down by his ankle shackles. The FBI also is investigating whether state police brass obstructed justice in part by rebuffing the detectives who pushed for criminal charges. One supervisor recently told a state legislative committee probing the case that his bosses instructed him not to give prosecutors the body-camera footage of Greene's arrest.

That was consistent with an AP investigation last year that found Greene's was among at least a dozen cases over the past decade in which state police troopers or their bosses ignored or concealed evidence of beatings, deflected blame and impeded efforts to root out misconduct.

Hollingsworth himself seemed to recognize his legal risk, refusing to provide any statement to the detectives conducting the criminal investigation in the days after Greene's death.

But he was compelled — 496 days later — to cooperate with an internal affairs investigation focused on whether he violated state police policy. That inquiry could not be used to charge Hollingsworth but would determine whether he kept his badge.

Hollingsworth's story evolved significantly during the interview. He initially told detectives he struck Greene with "a closed fist." Then he claimed he couldn't remember whether he struck him with an object.

Finally, after the investigators replayed the video and pointed out Hollingsworth's flashlight, he conceded to hitting Greene with it, even using his water bottle to demonstrate how he swung with the rounded edge down.

Detectives then showed Hollingsworth autopsy photos and asked him to describe several cuts on Greene's head.

"They're like a little half-moon," Hollingsworth said.

"You don't think your flashlight caused those cuts?"

"It could have," the trooper said.

A reexamined autopsy commissioned by the FBI last year rejected the crash theory and attributed Greene's death to "physical struggle," troopers repeatedly stunning him, striking him in the head, restraining him at length and Greene's use of cocaine.

Asked to justify his use of force, Hollingsworth repeatedly exaggerated Greene's threat and resistance.

"I did fear that he was much bigger than I was and much stronger," he said. "He had already kept two troopers from being able to handcuff him, and I was in fear at that time of him getting control of me or headbutting me."

Race did not come up in the interrogation but Hollingsworth opined on the subject decades earlier in a 2002 essay at the Louisiana State Police Training Academy, writing that "white police officers have to prove they are not racist on every complaint and in every court case involving blacks."

"Today, the first concern is if the officer is white and the suspect is black. ... Race is the issue and not the crime."

Who really needs a second COVID booster? Here's what to know

By LAURAN NEERGAARD AP Medical Writer

Many Americans now can get a second COVID-19 booster, but it's hard to tell who really needs another shot right now and who could wait.

The Food and Drug Administration authorized extra Pfizer or Moderna shots for anyone 50 or older and for some younger people with severely weakened immune systems. It's an effort to get ahead of a possible next coronavirus surge.

With COVID-19 cases low in the U.S., it's easy to ignore calls for another dose — or for those who aren't yet vaccinated or boosted to get up to date, said Dr. Erica Johnson, an infectious disease specialist at the American Board of Internal Medicine.

Her advice: If you're on the fence, use this lull to talk with your doctor about how protected you really are — and need to be.

WHO IS ELIGIBLE FOR A SECOND BOOSTER?

Anyone 50 and older can get the extra dose at least four months after their last vaccination. So can severely immune-compromised patients, such as organ transplant recipients, as young as 12.

Adults can choose either the Pfizer or the Moderna vaccine for their extra shot, but Pfizer is the only option for children.

WHAT ABOUT PEOPLE WHO GOT JOHNSON & JOHNSON?

Adults who received J&J's single-dose vaccine already were eligible for a booster of any kind -- and the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention recommends only some of them get another.

A new study found a Moderna or Pfizer second shot was superior to getting a second J&J dose. So the advice is anyone who got a second J&J shot now can choose a Moderna or Pfizer dose.

But if they already had one of those other boosters, the CDC says only those who meet the newest criteria -- age or weak immune system — qualify for another.

WHAT PROMPTED THE MOVE?

Vaccines still offer strong protection against severe illness and death, but effectiveness against milder infections wanes months later. The shots also don't work as well against new variants like the super-contagious omicron mutant as they did earlier in the pandemic.

That's why everyone 12 and older, regardless of their health, already was urged to get a first booster for the best chance at fending off omicron. Only about half of those eligible have.

With an omicron sibling causing spikes in infections in other countries, officials are nervous the U.S. is next, prompting efforts to offer extra protection to the most vulnerable.

WHAT'S THE EVIDENCE FOR ANOTHER BOOSTER?

Many scientists say it's limited, leaving public health officials to use their best judgment.

During the U.S. omicron wave, two Pfizer or Moderna doses plus a booster were 94% effective against death or needing a ventilator, according to a recent CDC study. That protection was lowest — 74% — in immune-compromised people, although most hadn't gotten the already recommended third dose.

Israel began offering people 60 and older a second booster during its omicron surge. Preliminary findings posted online last week show there were fewer deaths among people who chose another booster compared to those who skipped the fourth dose.

The FDA decided to set the age limit at 50 instead of 60 because that's when chronic illnesses like heart disease or diabetes become more common, leaving people more vulnerable to serious COVID-19.

WHO REALLY NEEDS A SECOND BOOSTER?

The CDC says an extra shot is an option — but those most likely to benefit are those most vulnerable to severe disease, including people 65 and older and 50-somethings who have multiple health problems.

WHEN SHOULD I GET IT?

Again, experts have differing opinions, partly because it's not clear how long any extra benefit lasts.

"We can never really perfectly time when the next wave is, or when someone might encounter infection," said Johnson, who sees patients at Johns Hopkins Bayview Medical Center in Baltimore. "To be as ready

as possible, I think everyone just needs to stay as up to date as possible with their vaccines.”

Another dose now may make sense for older people and the immune-compromised, but “there’s less urgency in an otherwise healthy person,” said University of Pennsylvania immunologist E. John Wherry.

At 50, Wherry said he’s healthy enough to watch if cases rise enough to prompt another booster, but he’d prefer to wait until fall. That’s because going longer between vaccinations allows the immune response to better mature and strengthen.

US sanctions Iranians after missile strikes in Iraq, Gulf

By ELLEN KNICKMEYER Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — The United States sanctioned Iranian defense companies Wednesday after a spate of ballistic missile attacks on targets in Iraq and the Gulf.

The U.S. and Iran’s neighbors blame that country for a March 13 strike on Irbil, Iraq, and for repeated missile strikes into Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates by Iranian-backed Houthi fighters in Yemen.

On Friday, a Houthi missile strike set ablaze a Saudi Aramco oil storage site, prompting warnings from angry Saudi leaders that the attacks threatened the stability of the world oil market.

Even as the U.S. carries out indirect negotiations with Iran for reviving limits on Iran’s nuclear program, it will keep up penalties against those involved in Iran’s ballistic missile production, Treasury Undersecretary Brian Nelson said in announcing the sanctions.

“We will also work with other partners in the region to hold Iran accountable for its actions, including gross violations of the sovereignty of its neighbors,” Nelson said in a statement.

The Treasury Department said Wednesday’s sanctions target an Iran-based procurement agent and his companies, which helped acquire propellant-related materials for the missile research program of Iran’s Revolutionary Guard; an Iranian defense company; and an Iranian intermediary who also helped in the development of missile propellant.

The sanctions were authorized under an existing executive order targeting producers and supporters of weapons of mass destruction. The penalties allow the U.S. to block the assets of the sanctioned people and entities, and to prosecute others who do business with them.

Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates have been at war against Iranian-backed Houthi fighters who have seized much of northern Yemen. Iran’s Revolutionary Guard claimed responsibility for the March 13 strike on Erbil, and alleged it was targeting an Israeli strategic center there.

Number of Ukraine refugees passes worst-case U.N. estimate

By BASSAM HATOUM and JAMEY KEATEN Associated Press

MEDYKA, Poland (AP) — The number of people who have fled Ukraine since Russian troops invaded has surpassed 4 million, the United Nations reported Wednesday as shelling continued in places where Moscow had vowed to ease its military operations.

“I do not know if we can still believe the Russians,” refugee Nikolay Nazarov, 23, said as he crossed Ukraine’s border into Poland with his wheelchair-bound father.

Despite Russia’s announcement during talks on Tuesday that its forces would ease their assault near Ukraine’s capital, Kyiv, and elsewhere, Nazarov said he expects “more escalation” in the country’s east, including the city he and his father fled.

“That is why we cannot go back to Kharkiv,” he said. “We are afraid of a new phase of war in eastern Ukraine.”

Nazarov, like other refugees interviewed by The Associated Press, echoed the opinion of Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy. In his nightly video address, Zelenskyy said that given what was happening on the ground, there was no reason to believe Russia’s statement about reducing military activity near Kyiv and in Chernihiv, a besieged northern city.

“We can call those signals that we hear at the negotiations positive,” Zelenskyy said in his address to the Ukrainian people. “But those signals don’t silence the explosions of Russian shells.”

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For Diana Konstantynova, a 45-year-old accountant from Vinnytsia in south Ukraine, Russia's promise to scale back its attacks is not a signal she can safely return home.

"I do not believe in a truce," said Konstantynova, who fled to Romania with her 8-year-old son a month ago. She says they will only return when "bombs stop exploding in my city" and "when Russian troops completely leave our territory."

Elena Litvinova, a 33-year-old accountant from Mykolaiv, is also skeptical of Russia's promises and will only head home with her two young children when "our president says that the war is over."

"During the negotiations, the city administration and children's educational institutions where my children studied were destroyed," she said at a refugee center in Romania's central city of Brasov, where she says they will stay until the war is over. "It's still very scary, every day we get messages from home that there is shooting and bombing."

Olha Kovalyova, who arrived in Poland with her two children, said she didn't trust Moscow because it had failed to fulfill earlier promises made in the framework of 2014 and 2015 agreements aimed at ending fighting between Russia-backed separatists and Ukrainian forces in the eastern Donbas region.

"The Minsk agreement is not working, so how can we call it peace talks if they are shooting and bombing our cities during and after the talks?" Kovalyova said. "There is no trust in Russia, but also I hope for peace and calm, but unfortunately this is the situation."

The U.N. refugee agency, UNHCR, said Wednesday that more than 4 million people have left Ukraine since Russia launched its invasion on Feb. 24 and sparked Europe's largest refugee crisis since World War II. That number exceeds the worst-case predictions made at the start of the war.

Half of the refugees from Ukraine are children, according to UNHCR and the U.N. children's agency UNICEF.

"I think it's a tragic milestone," Alex Mundt, the UNHCR senior emergency coordinator in Poland, said. "It means that in less than a month or in just about a month, 4 million people have been uprooted from their homes, from their families, their communities, in what is the fastest exodus of refugees moving in recent history."

More than 2.3 million refugees from Ukraine entered Poland, but some have since traveled on to other countries. A small number have returned to Ukraine, either to help in the defense against the Russians or to care for relatives.

More than 608,000 refugees have entered Romania, over 387,000 have gone to Moldova, and about 364,000 have entered Hungary in the last five weeks, UNHCR said, based on counts provided by the governments of those countries.

"The situation inside Ukraine is spiraling," UNICEF Executive Director Catherine Russell said in a statement Wednesday. "As the number of children fleeing their homes continues to climb, we must remember that every single one of them needs protection, education, safety and support."

U.N. High Commissioner for Refugees Filippo Grandi entered Ukraine on Wednesday and said he would be in the western city of Lviv and discuss ways to increase support "to people affected and displaced by this senseless war."

Lviv has become a destination for Ukrainians seeking a safe place to stay or are heading to bordering European countries. UNHCR teams and their partners have been working to deliver protection, emergency shelter, cash assistance, core relief items and other critical services for refugees.

UNHCR projected from the onset that about 4 million people might flee Ukraine and said it was regularly reassessing its forecasts.

Aid workers say the number of people fleeing eased in recent days as many residents awaited indications of the direction the invasion might take. The U.N. estimates the war also has displaced 6.5 million people within the country.

The International Organization for Migration, which tracks not just refugees but all people on the move from their homes, reported earlier this month that more than 12 million people are estimated to be stranded in areas of Ukraine under attack or cannot leave because of security risks, the destruction of bridges and roads and a lack of information about safe destinations and lodging.

All told, more than 22 million people are either blocked from moving or have been forced to flee, IOM

figures show.

Amazon, union organizers face off again in Alabama

By ANNE D'INNOCENZIO, HALELUYA HADERO, and JAY REEVES undefined
BESSEMER, Ala. (AP) — For union organizers at an Amazon warehouse in Bessemer, Alabama, the second time could be a charm — or not.

After a crushing defeat last year, when a majority of workers voted against forming a union, the Retail, Wholesale and Department Store Union is hoping for a different outcome in a do-over election. The National Labor Relations Board on Monday began counting mail-in ballots that were sent to 6,100 workers in early February. Results could come as early as Thursday.

If the vote goes in favor of the union, it would be Amazon's first one ever in the U.S.

Like last time, the RWDSU is driving the union campaign in Bessemer. Vaccines have made it easier for organizers to do face-to-face meetings during the pandemic as opposed to the texts, emails and phone calls they relied on the first time around.

"It's been easier to spread the message this time, and we've had more support inside the building," said Dale Wyatt, an Amazon worker at the Bessemer facility who's assisting in the union push. "For example, more people are wearing T-shirts and pins and apparel, and more people are willing to come up and talk to us this time."

Amazon has had a chance to regroup as well after the NLRB determined that the company unfairly influenced last year's election. The country's second-largest private employer continues to hammer the message that it invests in both pay and benefits for its workers. Regular full-time employees in Bessemer earn at least \$15.80 an hour, higher than the estimated \$14.55 per hour on average in the city based on an analysis of the U.S. Census Bureau. They also get health care as well as a 401(k) with company match.

Amazon has also made some changes to but still kept a controversial U.S. Postal Service mailbox that was key in the NLRB's decision to invalidate last year's vote.

Labor activists say the company is still relying on consultants and managers to hold mandatory staff meetings to talk about why unions are a bad idea. Such meetings stopped right before the ballots were sent, in accordance with labor laws.

An Amazon spokesperson said the meetings give employees the opportunity to ask questions and learn what a union "could mean for them and their day-to-day life working at Amazon."

Prior to the Bessemer union drive, Amazon hadn't faced a major union election in the U.S. since 2014 when the majority of the 30 workers at a warehouse in Delaware voted against organizing. In many European countries like France, Italy, Spain and Germany, where union membership is higher and there are fewer obstacles for labor groups, Amazon workers have long been unionized.

Amazon also faces two union elections in the more labor-friendly New York City, though they're being spearheaded by a nascent independent labor group.

Amazon's sprawling fulfillment center in Bessemer opened in 2020 just off an interstate exit where 18-wheelers painted with the Amazon logo come and go past small manufacturers, transportation companies and the city's high school.

Bessemer itself is located about 20 miles southwest of Birmingham. The once-vibrant manufacturing town of 26,000 people fell on hard times after the area's steel industry began slipping in the late 1900s. Today the city is more than 70% Black, with about a quarter of its residents living in poverty.

Workers at the warehouse reflect Bessemer's racial demographic — roughly 85% of them are Black, according to RWDSU. They drive to their jobs from as far away as metro Montgomery, nearly 100 miles to the south.

RWDSU has been working with community organizations who have helped to frame the union push in Alabama in the context of the Civil Rights movement, focusing on the dignity and treatment of Amazon workers and linking their rights with human rights.

"The community support has been essential, and it's always been a part of the civil rights struggles

in the South and other struggles in the South," said Marc Bayard, the director of the Institute for Policy Studies' Black Worker Initiative.

Erica Itheme, deputy director of Jobs to Move America, said her organization honed its message from last year, going beyond pay. It visited barber shops, beauty shops and other places where Black residents frequented and distributed 6,000 flyers.

"For this election, what we have to get people to understand is it goes beyond bread and butter issues," Itheme said. "Sometimes, your body has physical limitations. Sometimes you are tired. Sometimes you have children and you need to step away without losing your job. It's about humanity of our community."

While unions are historically a tough sell in the South, Wyatt comes from a labor family. He began working at Amazon in August, taking items off incoming trucks and placing them into pods before they shipped to customers.

"We need better working conditions, better hours, better pay," Wyatt said. "We need longer breaks and more attention from management and a better HR system."

RWDSU's first union campaign came in a year of widespread labor unrest at many corporations that has only reinvigorated the group's cause. Workers at more than 140 Starbucks locations around the country, for instance, have requested union elections and several of them have already been successful.

The pandemic spotlighted the plight of hourly workers who felt employers didn't do enough to protect them from the virus. But labor shortages have only given workers more power to push for higher wages and better working conditions.

Still, organizers are up against strong federal labor laws that favor corporations. Alabama itself is a right-to-work state, which means that companies and unions are prohibited from signing contracts that require workers to pay dues to the union that represents them.

Labor activists also battle high turnover at the Bessemer facility. RWDSU estimates that roughly half of the 6,100 workers eligible to vote are new, making it difficult to organize.

"It's an uphill fight," said Stuart Appelbaum, president of the RWDSU. "No matter what happens, we are not walking away. The first campaign initiated a global debate on the way Amazon operates. It has inspired workers all over the country and all over the world to stand up to their employers."

Police: 6 killed in Pennsylvania pileup of 80 vehicles

POTTSVILLE, Pa. (AP) — A deadly pileup involving 80 vehicles on a Pennsylvania interstate during a snow squall killed six people, state police said Wednesday.

"There were 6 fatalities involved in this crash. Identities of the victims will be released once death notifications have been made to their families," state police in Frackville said.

Police also said the crash during "an active snow squall" Monday around 10:30 a.m. and involved 39 commercial vehicles and 41 passenger vehicles, for a total of 80, which is greater than earlier estimates of 40 to 60 vehicles.

Officials said the stretch of I-81 opened at 12:30 a.m. Wednesday after crews finished clearing the crash site, state police tweeted. The southbound side had reopened hours after Monday's multivehicle wreck.

A state incident report noted 24 people were taken to four hospitals after the crash, which was captured in videos posted on social media that showed drivers and passengers lining the snowy road and jumping out of the way as the cascade of crashes unfolded.

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.

Some vehicles were mostly burned and others melted onto the highway, hampering efforts to clear the scene. Authorities also said they needed to go through each vehicle to make sure there were no human remains.

Nurses: Guilty verdict for dosing mistake could cost lives

By TRAVIS LOLLER Associated Press

NASHVILLE, Tenn. (AP) — The moment nurse RaDonda Vaught realized she had given a patient the wrong medication, she rushed to the doctors working to revive 75-year-old Charlene Murphey and told them what she had done. Within hours, she made a full report of her mistake to the Vanderbilt University Medical Center.

Murphey died the next day, on Dec. 27, 2017. On Friday, a jury found Vaught guilty of criminally negligent homicide and gross neglect.

That verdict — and the fact that Vaught was charged at all — worries patient safety and nursing groups that have worked for years to move hospital culture away from cover-ups, blame and punishment, and toward the honest reporting of mistakes.

The move to a “Just Culture” seeks to improve safety by analyzing human errors and making systemic changes to prevent their recurrence. And that can’t happen if providers think they could go to prison, they say.

“The criminalization of medical errors is unnerving, and this verdict sets into motion a dangerous precedent,” the American Nurses Association said. “Health care delivery is highly complex. It is inevitable that mistakes will happen. ... It is completely unrealistic to think otherwise.”

Just Culture has been widely adopted in hospitals since a 1999 report by the National Academy of Medicine estimated at least 98,000 people may die each year due to medical errors.

But such bad outcomes remain stubbornly common, with too many hospital staffers convinced that owning up to mistakes will expose them to punishment, according to a 2018 study published in the American Journal of Medical Quality.

More than 46,000 death certificates listed complications of medical and surgical care — a category that includes medical errors — among the causes of death in 2020, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention’s National Center for Health Statistics.

“Best estimates are 7,000-10,000 fatal medication errors a year. Are we going to lock them up? Who is going to replace them?” said Bruce Lambert, patient safety expert and director of the Center for Communication and Health at Northwestern University.

“If you think RaDonda Vaught is criminally negligent, you just don’t know how health care works,” Lambert said.

Murphey was admitted to the neurological intensive care unit on Dec. 24, 2017, after suffering from a brain bleed. Two days later, doctors ordered a PET scan. Murphey was claustrophobic and was prescribed Versed for her anxiety, according to testimony. When Vaught could not find Versed in an automatic drug dispensing cabinet, she used an override and accidentally grabbed the paralyzing drug vecuronium instead.

Such mistakes often end up in malpractice lawsuits, but criminal prosecutions are rare. After Vaught was charged in 2019, the Institute for Safe Medical Practices issued a statement saying it had “worrisome implications for safety.”

“In an era when we need more transparency, cover-ups will reign due to fear,” the statement read. “Even if errors are reported, effective event investigation and learning cannot occur in a culture of fear or blame.”

Many nurses are “already at their breaking point ... after a physically, mentally and emotionally exhausting two years caring for patients with COVID,” said Liz Stokes, director of the American Nurses Association’s Center for Ethics and Human Rights. Vaught’s prosecution gives them one more reason to quit, she said.

“This could be me. I’m an RN as well,” she said. “This could be any of us.”

Vaught was steeped in the idea of Just Culture and says she has “zero regrets” about telling the truth, but her candor was used against her at trial. Assistant District Attorney Brittani Flatt quoted from her interview with a Tennessee Bureau of Investigation agent in closing arguments: “I definitely should have paid more attention. I should have called the pharmacy. I shouldn’t have overridden, because it wasn’t an emergency.”

It is easy to judge Vaught’s actions in retrospect, Lambert said, but overrides and workarounds are an extremely common part of healthcare, he said: “This is typical, not aberrant or bizarre, behavior.”

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Meanwhile, Vaught's honesty about her mistake has already brought about safety improvements, and not just at Vanderbilt. Because vecuronium should only be used on patients who have a breathing tube inserted, some hospitals have moved it and other paralytic drugs out of automatic dispensing cabinets.

"At my hospital, they've changed their policy and put paralytics into a rapid intubation kit because of this," said Janie Harvey Garner, who founded the nurse advocacy organization Show Me Your Stethoscope. She said that because Vaught owned up to the mistake, Murphey's death "has probably saved lives."

While Murphey's death may serve as a cautionary tale for other nurses, Vaught, now awaiting a sentence of up to eight years, told The Associated Press in an interview that she thinks about her patient every day.

Vaught, 37, discovered that she and Murphey lived in the same small community of Bethpage, about an hour northeast of Nashville, and that she and members of Murphey's family have mutual friends. It would only be a matter of time before she met one of them in person.

"I've imagined so many times how I would feel if this were my grandma, my family member, my husband," she said.

Recently, while buying farm supplies, she was talking with the young man behind the counter when he recognized her, and told her he was Murphey's grandson. Instead of reproaching her, he ended up comforting her and patting her on the shoulder, she said.

"He was so kind. He was so incredibly kind," Vaught said. "I took his grandma away, and he just kept telling me to take care of myself. There are good people in this world."

US growth in Q4 revised lower to 6.9%, slower growth to come

By CHRISTOPHER RUGABER AP Economics Writer

WASHINGTON (AP) — The U.S. economy ended 2021 by expanding at a healthy 6.9% annual pace from October through December, the government reported Wednesday, a slight downgrade from its previous estimates.

For all of 2021, the nation's gross domestic product — its total output of goods and services — jumped by 5.7%, the fastest calendar-year growth since a 7.2% surge in 1984 in the aftermath of a brutal recession.

Previously, the government estimated growth in last year's fourth quarter was 7%. The small downgrade reflected a smaller increase in consumer spending and fewer exports, the Commerce Department said.

Looking ahead, however, growth is likely to slow sharply this year, particularly in the first three months 2022. Higher inflation will likely weigh on consumer spending as Americans take a dimmer view of the economy. Home sales have fallen as the Federal Reserve has started pushing up borrowing costs, leading to a sharp increase in mortgage rates. Exports may weaken as overseas economies are disrupted by Russia's invasion of Ukraine.

For the January-March quarter of this year, the biggest drag will be a sharp reduction in the amount of goods businesses restock on their shelves and warehouses. In last year's fourth quarter, companies engaged in a huge buildup of inventories, in an effort to get ahead of supply chain problems for the winter holidays.

That inventory restocking added nearly six percentage points to fourth quarter growth, a boost that wasn't repeated in the first three months of this year. And solid consumer spending likely pulled in more imports in the first quarter, economists forecast, while a stronger dollar and slower growth overseas reduced U.S. exports. The combination should also weaken the economy in the first quarter.

Economists forecast that growth could fall to as low as 0.5% in the first three months of the year and may even slip into negative territory.

Still, the first quarter will likely be a temporary hiccup. As the pandemic continues to fade, more Americans are traveling, eating out and flying. Businesses are hiring at a healthy clip and boosting pay. The higher income isn't enough to fully offset inflation but should support continued consumer spending.

Wednesday's figure represents the third and final estimate of fourth quarter growth. The government issues three estimates for U.S. GDP each quarter. Each report includes more complete source data.

The figures are adjusted for inflation, which has spiked to four-decade highs. Consumer spending rose 2.5% in the fourth quarter, down from the previous estimate of 3.1%. Economists expect spending to remain healthy in the first quarter, even as overall growth slows.

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Growth in corporate profits, which have attracted political attention as a potential contributor to inflation, slowed in the fourth quarter. Profits increased \$20 billion, or about 0.7%, in the October-December quarter from the previous one. That's down from a huge jump of nearly \$268 billion, or 10.5%, in the second quarter.

The Federal Reserve forecasts the U.S. economy will expand 2.8% this year, much lower than in 2021 but still a solid pace.

The acceleration in inflation has spurred Fed chair Jerome Powell to signal multiple increases in its short-term, benchmark interest rate this year, with one or more of the hikes possibly being a half-point, as opposed to the usual quarter-point increase. Such increases make it more expensive to take out mortgage or auto loans, and raise credit card interest rates as well.

At a meeting earlier this month, Fed policymakers raised their benchmark rate to roughly 0.375%, up from nearly zero, where it had sat since the pandemic hit two years ago. Officials forecast they will raise the rate at least six more times this year to about 1.9%, though comments by Powell suggest it could go higher, particularly if inflation doesn't show signs of cooling in the coming months.

Rapidly rising interest rates could slow growth and cool hiring. The Fed hopes to pull off a "soft landing" in which inflation comes back down closer to the central bank's 2% target, without the economy tumbling into a recession. But many economists worry that the higher rates could cause a downturn.

For climate migrants in Bangladesh, town offers new life

By JULHAS ALAM Associated Press

MONGLA, Bangladesh (AP) — The 29-year-old Monira Khatun was devastated after her husband abandoned her suddenly. She returned to her father only to face another blow: He died soon after, leaving her to shoulder three other family members' care. Without any work, she was worried about how she would feed them.

"I lost everything. There was darkness all around," Khatun said. "My parents' home was gone to the river for erosion, we had no land to cultivate."

She ended up working at a factory in a special economic zone that employs thousands of climate refugees — like Khatun — in the southwestern town of Mongla, where Bangladesh's second-largest seaport is located.

These refugees from climate-impacted areas within Bangladesh lost their homes, land and livelihood, but found a new life in the riverside coastal town about 50 kilometers (30 miles) inland from the Bay of Bengal.

Some 150,000 people now live in Mongla — many of whom moved from villages near the Sundarbans forest, the world's largest mangrove forest which straddles the border of Bangladesh and India and harbors endangered Bengal tigers.

Being forced by climate change to move, within borders or beyond, is a growing reality expected to accelerate in the decades ahead. Over the next 30 years, 143 million people are likely to be uprooted by rising seas, drought, searing temperatures and other climate catastrophes, according to an Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change report published last month by the United Nations. Leaders in Asia, already one of the hardest-hit continents, are scrambling to confront major changes taking place.

Climate scientists like Saleemul Huq, director of the Dhaka-based International Centre for Climate Change and Development, are branding Mongla as a climate-resilient town for the refugees.

"When it comes to adaptation, Mongla is a success story. Changes are coming there as an example of how climate refugees could transform their life through new opportunities, through a new approach of adaptation," said Huq, whose institute conducts environmental research.

"Mongla has offered new opportunities to them. With its seaport and an export processing zone and climate-resilient infrastructure, Mongla town has become a different story," Huq said.

"Now, we expect to replicate the Mongla model to at least two dozen other coastal towns across Bangladesh as safe home for climate refugees," he said. "Currently, we are talking to mayors and officials of almost half a dozen municipalities about the success in Mongla."

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Huq said more than a dozen satellite towns, all adjacent to economic hubs such as sea and river ports, have already been identified as potential migrant-friendly locations.

"These are all secondary towns with populations of up to half a million, which can shelter up to another half a million climate migrants each," said Huq. "Thus we can offer alternatives to at least 10 million climate migrants over next one decade."

Climate scientists say low-lying Bangladesh is extremely vulnerable to the impacts of climate change and millions are at the risk of being displaced — becoming climate refugees because of sea level rise, river erosion, cyclonic storms and intrusion of saline water. The World Bank in a new report said last year that Bangladesh will have more than 19 million internal climate refugees by 2050, almost half the projected number for the entire South Asia region.

Huq said by an approach of transformative adaptation in about two dozen small coastal towns including Mongla, at least 10 million climate refugees could be resettled, rather than forcing them to move to slums in big cities like Dhaka, the nation's capital.

"The trend is that climate migrants move to places where there are economic activities for them. We can't stop displacement, we can only offer alternatives that they will accept," he said.

The vision of transformative adaptation is to create opportunities for climate migrants to live and work in an environment where the host population accepts them.

He said the incremental adjustments, such as introducing salinity-tolerant rice varieties, have been taking place in Bangladesh for years, helping climate refugees cope with the impacts of climate change where they are living today.

"But we will not be able to do it forever. So we need to go for transformative adaptation, which is to enable them to move somewhere else and be better off," Huq said.

In recent years, the Bangladesh government has spent millions of Bangladeshi taka (tens of thousands of dollars) to protect the Mongla town with climate-resilient infrastructure, drawing at-risk people from the remotest villages.

Investments — mostly foreign — have doubled at the Mongla Export Processing Zone over last four years, creating new jobs in its factories for the climate refugees from the region. The funds, which come from the United States, Japan, South Korea and China, among others, have prevented the refugees from moving to big cities.

Nazma Binte Alamgir, spokesperson for the government regulator Bangladesh Export Processing Zones Authority, said about 10 more factories are in the pipeline to start production soon in Mongla, adding thousands of jobs.

"This is a good news for the people who are suffering in the region. They will have a chance to survive in a different way," she said.

To become resilient, Mongla raised an 11-kilometer (7-mile) embankment along a newly built marine drive designed to stop flooding, two flood-control gates, a better drainage system, a water reservoir and a water treatment plant, said Sheikh Abdur Rahman, mayor of Mongla since January.

"We need more investment to protect Mongla town from erosion and high tides. People feel safer now, but we need to do more," he said.

Rahman said the government is building new infrastructure in the seaport and dredging the Mongla river to widen its channel, allowing for big ships, while more investment is coming to the export processing zone, or EPZ. He said a new rail line is being constructed to connect the town with a major land port across the border with neighboring India.

"There was only about 2,600 workers in the Mongla EPZ in 2018, but now there are about 9,000 workers employed in different factories," he said. "The changes are visible."

Reshma Begum, 28, is one of them.

Begum used to catch fish in the river that swallowed her home, making her three-member family homeless. Now she lives temporarily on another man's land and works at a factory in the EPZ.

"Now I earn a good amount of money each month to support my family," she said, adding that her husband is a day laborer and contributes to the family's income.

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"Maybe we will build a new house in the future by saving some money," she said.

Today in History

By The Associated Press undefined

Today in History

Today is Thursday, March 31, the 90th day of 2022. There are 275 days left in the year.

Today's Highlight in History:

On March 31, 1991, the Warsaw Pact military alliance came to an end.

On this date:

In 1492, King Ferdinand and Queen Isabella of Spain issued an edict expelling Jews from Spanish soil, except those willing to convert to Christianity.

In 1814, Paris was occupied by a coalition of Russian, Prussian and Austrian forces; the surrender of the French capital forced the abdication of Emperor Napoleon.

In 1917, the United States took formal possession of the Virgin Islands from Denmark.

In 1931, Notre Dame college football coach Knute Rockne (noot RAHK'-nee), 43, was killed in the crash of a TWA plane in Bazaar, Kansas.

In 1968, at the conclusion of a nationally broadcast address on Vietnam, President Lyndon B. Johnson stunned listeners by declaring, "I shall not seek, and I will not accept, the nomination of my party for another term as your President."

In 1993, actor Brandon Lee, 28, was accidentally shot to death during the filming of a movie in Wilmington, North Carolina, when he was hit by a bullet fragment that had become lodged inside a prop gun.

In 1995, baseball players agreed to end their 232-day strike after a judge granted a preliminary injunction against club owners.

In 2004, four American civilian contractors were killed in Fallujah, Iraq; frenzied crowds dragged the burned, mutilated bodies and strung two of them from a bridge.

In 2005, Terri Schiavo (SHY'-voh), 41, died at a hospice in Pinellas Park, Florida, 13 days after her feeding tube was removed in a wrenching right-to-die court fight.

In 2009, Benjamin Netanyahu took office as Israel's new prime minister after the Knesset approved his government.

In 2019, rapper Nipsey Hussle was fatally shot outside the clothing store he had founded to help rebuild his troubled South Los Angeles neighborhood; he was 33.

In 2020, Britain's Prince Harry and his wife Meghan officially stepped down from duties as members of the royal family.

Ten years ago: Hundreds of world landmarks from Berlin's Brandenburg Gate to the Great Wall of China went dark as part of Earth Hour, a global effort to highlight climate change. Brittney Griner was named The Associated Press' women's college basketball Player of the Year, the first Baylor player to win the award.

Five years ago: President Donald Trump signed a pair of executive orders focused on reducing the U.S. trade deficit; the first order gave the Commerce Department 90 days to assemble a report on the factors behind the trade deficit, while the second sought to increase collection of duties on imports.

One year ago: President Joe Biden outlined a huge \$2.3 trillion plan to reengineer the nation's infrastructure. (Biden would sign a \$1 trillion infrastructure measure into law in November 2021.) The Pentagon swept away Trump-era policies that largely banned transgender people from serving in the military. Pfizer announced that its COVID-19 vaccine was safe and strongly protective in kids as young as 12. The government reported that the COVID-19 pandemic pushed total U.S. deaths in 2020 beyond 3.3 million, the nation's highest annual death toll; the coronavirus was listed as the third leading cause of death in 2020, after heart disease and cancer. The Wisconsin Supreme Court struck down Gov. Tony Evers' statewide mask mandate. A man went on a shooting rampage at a Southern California office building, leaving four people dead, including a 9-year-old boy whose mother was critically wounded. (The suspect, Aminadab Gaxiola Gonzalez, was found incompetent to stand trial because of injuries he suffered in a shootout with police.)

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Today's Birthdays: Actor William Daniels is 95. Actor Richard Chamberlain is 88. Actor Shirley Jones is 88. Musician Herb Alpert is 87. Sen. Patrick Leahy, D-Vt., is 82. Former U.S. Rep. Barney Frank, D-Mass., is 82. Actor Christopher Walken is 79. Comedian Gabe Kaplan is 78. Sen. Angus King, I-Maine, is 78. Rock musician Mick Ralphs (Bad Company; Mott the Hoople) is 78. Former Vice President Al Gore is 75. Author David Eisenhower is 74. Actor Rhea Perlman is 74. Actor Robbie Coltrane is 72. Actor Ed Marinaro is 72. Rock musician Angus Young (AC/DC) is 67. Actor Marc McClure is 65. Actor William McNamara is 57. Alt-country musician Bob Crawford (The Avett (AY'-veht) Brothers) is 51. Actor Ewan (YOO'-en) McGregor is 51. Actor Erica Tazel is 47. Actor Judi Shekoni is 44. Rapper Tony Yayo is 44. Actor Kate Micucci is 42. Actor Brian Tyree Henry (TV: "Atlanta" Stage: "Book of Mormon") is 40. Actor Melissa Ordway is 39. Jazz musician Christian Scott is 39. Pop musician Jack Antonoff (fun.) is 38. Actor Jessica Szohr is 37.